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Wesleyan University

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(THE EXPERIENCE OF)  
MUSIC  
AS  
AUTONOMOUS PARTIAL OBJECT

By

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Middletown, Connecticut

May 2019

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## Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude is extended to Dr. Paula Matthusen, as well as to Drs. Roger Grant and Daniel Smyth, who agreed to read this paper and to question it in examination. My discussions with each of them have been truly illuminating and personally edifying. I would also like to thank the music faculty generally, in particular Profs. Neely Bruce, Ronald Ebrecht, Ronald Kuivila, and Tyshawn Sorey.

Many thanks are due to Alvin Lucier, whose work has been an inspiration and without whose encouragement I may not be where I am today.

My writing and thinking on the various topics addressed in this paper were helped given shape through many lively conversations with colleagues and fellow-musicians, whom it is my great fortune to number among my friends, namely Judith Berkson, Laura Cetilia, Ian Davis, Jordan Dykstra, and Morgan Evans-Weiler.

For Z. M. P. B. – my most heartfelt thankfulness of all.

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## Foreword

The notion of the autonomy of music initially became of interest to me less as a concept related to the value of music generally than as one helpful in understanding the relationship between the composer/musician and the composition or other musical output. For I had internalized something of this sensibility and consciously held it in my own mind with regard to my own music and music-making. When playing a piece of music, I did not feel that I was bringing out something of myself – that necessarily something of me was being presented in my playing – nor did I feel that I was bringing something out from or even on behalf of the composer or songwriter, *etc.* Rather, what I felt I was connecting to was something in (the) music itself.

The notion of expression in music, what it is and how and to whatever extent it functions, is clearly relevant here, and I attempt to address this in my paper. Counterposed, but by no means entirely opposed, to these concerns is an approach to musical understanding that is more purely formal. I stress not entirely opposed, because by a certain perspective, these sets of concerns, of expression and form – and similarly, of form and content – are intimately related, insofar as form itself is an aspect of expression. Much writing on music operates within this, at the least implicit, assumption, and this is not to disparage the value of such scholarship, which continues to emerge in such fields as topic theory, and so on. This emphasis on the formal aspect of music, however, with its ever new modes of analysis, however

genuinely insightful, remains nevertheless an essentially descriptive apparatus – that is, as if constituting an *apparatus criticus*, which is to say, as of an appendix, that which is appended or hangs on to (*appendere*) an independently existing work or body of work.

Accordingly, in attempting the thinking-through of music and the experience of it as something unto itself, I felt it was necessary to think of it and to write about it, as if around it, in the broadest possible terms. The manner of the writing is intended to reflect the nature of the issue itself as I have come to understand it. There is perhaps something musical about this way of thinking.

It is by adopting this stance that I hope to better understand my own work and to be able to contextualize it effectively. Thus, by hoping to understand what it means to conceive of composition as the act of realizing something external to oneself and whether this is even a valid notion to begin with, I felt it necessary to frame music in broader and more general terms than even the mere composer/musician to work relation. In short, I wanted to know what I was doing. While it may seem counterintuitive, such far-ranging and speculative theorizing informs my musical practice directly. It marks how I come to terms with music's function in relation to my own individual function as a realizer of music. I want to understand, so as neither to mislead nor be misled.

This paper is not intended as an endorsement of a specific aesthetic program. The notion of the autonomy of music as discussed is not correlated to a set of either

pro- or pre-scriptive conditions. Such a project would be of dubious value, if not outright dangerous. Rather, what is presented is something of a meta-commentary on the critique of musical autonomy as it was initiated by the New Musicology and which I believe remains a fertile ground for discussion today. This critique of the Hanslick-Dahlhaus model of musical autonomy was a thoroughly important, vital, and necessary development in the history of musical thought. My aim is merely to take a view at what might point beyond this particular trajectory of thought in an effort to understand what music is in some fundamental and general sense.

Obscurantism and mystification are qualities to be avoided in all fields and are particularly dangerous in the arts in that they give rise to elitism, unjust cultural degradation, and a generalized state of pained confusion. A will to obscurity attributes value to a quality where it does not lie or at least cannot be said to lie with transparency, while at the same time doing a disservice by failing to adequately address those attributes of a thing perhaps worthy of such attention. If my writing comes off as obscure, I hope it is merely out of cumbersomeness of construction. I would rather be found glib than obscure.

*Absit iniuria verbis.*

§1 – “The Heaviest Weight”

I can't give you, specifically, in a sense, some of my compositional strategies. And I have them. I have a *lot* of them. But Sigmund Freud said that the best way – or the only way – to really understand something, is to first generalize. And I always generalize the problem to myself, before I begin. And the problem is usually very realistic. There's so much given to us, before we really *begin* . . .

— Morton Feldman<sup>1</sup>

New means change the method; new methods change the experience, and new experiences change man. (And particularly in the field of music, because the sound waves penetrate very deep into the molecular and atomic layers of ourselves.)

Whenever we hear sounds we are changed: we are no longer the same after having heard certain sounds, and this is the more the case when we hear organized sounds, sounds organized by another human being: music.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps most interesting in this statement, with which Stockhausen opens his lecture “Four Criteria of Electronic Music” before going on to relate the origins of electronic music to the Second Viennese School, is the juxtaposition of an admirably reductive clarity in tracing the trajectory of progress in music and a type of wildly speculative thinking, which invokes a pseudoscientific vocabulary. One would

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<sup>1</sup> Feldman, Morton. (1997). *Morton Feldman: The 1986 Darmstadt Lecture*, Vienna: Universal Edition. Transcription by Ivan Ilić, pp. 3-4. Available at: [www.cnvill.net/mfdarmstadt1986dvd.pdf](http://www.cnvill.net/mfdarmstadt1986dvd.pdf)  
<sup>2</sup> Stockhausen, Karlheinz. (1972). “Four Criteria of Electronic Music,” lecture delivered at the Oxford Union, 6 May. Transcript published in (1989). *Stockhausen on Music: Lectures and Interviews*, compiled by Robin Maconie. London: Marion Boyars, pp. 88-111. The sentence in parenthesis is omitted in the published transcription. Cf. the film produced by Allied Artists (London), available on-line: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xyGtI7KKIY> (Accessed 24 April 2019)

understand his point all the better without the mystical scientism. In the case of Stockhausen, one feels the inexorable, almost onerous weight of history, decked in ominous, Spenglerian tones. One is left to ask: Which means? Which method(s)? Which experience(s), and do these truly change humankind generally? It seems fair to say, in the context of the development of electronic music in the early-middle 20<sup>th</sup> century, one can speak of the genuinely new. Is it really necessary, let alone valid, to connect its emergence to the Second Viennese School, as Stockhausen does? At the same time, with a sense of humility, it is valuable to bear in mind the words of Ecclesiastes, “there is no new thing under the sun.” These considerations are all the more interesting in relating them back to a figure who advanced the notion of an historically contingent *Nullpunkt* in culture, in the wake of the global socio-political catastrophe of the Second World War, *etc.*

Better still, perhaps – and is it not the ideal, in fact? – to appreciate every moment, here especially the creative moment, in its genuine singularity. No generation was as ours, and so too was no one generation alike any other. Every generation is as any other, therefore, insofar as they are all unlike.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This sentiment is refracted microcosmically by Wittgenstein: “No cry of torment can be greater than the cry of one man. Or again, *no* torment can be greater than what a single human being may suffer. A man is capable of infinite torment therefore, and so too can stand in need of infinite help.” Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1977). *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, Georg Henrik von Wright, ed. (1980). Peter Winch, trans.; G. H. von Wright, Heikki Nyman, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 45e. *Vermischte Bemerkungen* is literally translated, “Assorted Remarks.” This would have avoided the loftily bloated implications of “Culture and Value.” The particular remarks cited here are dated to 1944.



This is not to advocate some posture of naïve and willful ignorance of the past, to abrogate the legacy of history, nor to invalidate the means and methods of tradition as received. We may well say with George Santayana that “Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness . . . Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”<sup>4</sup> What is to be strived for is a relativization<sup>5</sup> of the value and weight placed upon history, not merely of the role which history itself plays, but just as well of individual historical objects, notions, *etc.*

Today the composer, and all the more so for the young and emerging composer, when considering the course or direction his or her work should or even could take, is confronted by a dizzying panoply of viable influences, possible techniques and practices, possible or otherwise worthwhile touch-stones, launching-off points, *etc.* Taste is the final arbiter, and yet of course there is no accounting for it. Half a century has passed since the publication of such books as Slonimsky’s *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* (1947) and Cage’s *Notations* (1969). These books now sit comfortably on the shelves of many musicians and composers of manifold aesthetical stripes and have served as vade-mecums for over a generation. This is a happy state of affairs, indeed. “The superior artist is the one who knows how to be influenced.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Santayana, George. *The Life of Reason* (1905-1906); Volume I, *Reason in Common Sense*; Chapter XII – “Flux and Constancy in Human Nature.” Beneath the heading, “Continuity necessary to progress.”

<sup>5</sup> Relativization is an anagram of revitalization.

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, Clement. “Influences of Matisse” (1973), exhibition catalog essay, Aquavella Gallery, New York City: On Henri Matisse.

Nevertheless, a feeling of exhaustion can be sensed – as of exhausted possibilities, or even still of exhausted potential. “It’s all been done before – where to go from here? – Whither new music?” It is an understandable response, but a mindset to be avoided. It is, at the very least, unproductive, not to mention pessimistic.

It is possible, and hopefully so – that only now that there has been some critical distance from all that has transpired and thereby implied by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whether in terms of geopolitical horrors or groundbreaking transformations and upheavals in the arts and in aesthetics – it is possible to begin to perspectivize this period and the events, people, and ideas that are (inter)related to it. This of course brings us back to Stockhausen and to his notion of a sort of cultural zero-point. There is no eschatology, however – no meta-narrative in Jean-François Lyotard’s sense – that can guarantee the, however genuinely felt experience of, *new*. There seems to be little going on around us that resembles a conceptual breathing space akin to what Nietzsche sought in the “transvaluation of all values.”<sup>7</sup>

Rather than the feeling of exhaustion associated with the rhetoric of an end to a culture, it is worth the risk to at least attempt imaging the possibility of (a) new beginning(s) is made open to us. The present age may be in a position to envisage a genuine, if only ideally-theoretically approachable, as if asymptotic, engagement with that which is eternal, universal. One might even speak more appropriately in this day

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One is brought to mind of the typical English rendering of the term, central to the Yìjīng (I Ching) or Book of Change, 君子, junzǐ, as “superior man,” or more ideally, being gender-neutral in the Chinese, “person.” Greenberg’s comment in fact resonates with the ethical attitude of the Yìjīng.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich (1895). *The Antichrist*. This phrase is sometimes rendered into English as the “revaluation of all values.”

and age of the multiversal. The historically informed creative nexus may be found in a state of dereliction, in the sense of an inefficacy leading to abandonment, but by a figurative linguistic transformation, a dereliction in the sense of the leaving dry of the land by the sea. In a further implication by concretion, through a metaleptical leap verging on the ‘pataphorical, of “Lands newly created . . . by the alluvion or dereliction of the sea.”<sup>8</sup>

The overall socio-cultural experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – between two World Wars, the Cold War and the really perceived possibility of global annihilation, the rapid and not infrequently coercive convergence of disparate cultures and previously isolated peoples, the expansion of globalized capital on all fronts, the ever increasing rapidity of communication, *etc.* – has been marked by a certain experience of trauma. Insofar as artistic output is reflective of social experience, whether or not it is fully or consciously acknowledged by the artist, the musical developments and aesthetic movements that arose over the course of the last century, may be seen and understood, to whatever extent, in the light of a certain response to this trauma.

If one were to find one’s house suddenly on fire, one can imagine a number of different responses. On one hand, one might react wildly, overcome by the situation, beside oneself. On another hand, one might withdraw, suddenly focused, and fixated upon finding the simplest possible means of navigating an otherwise disordered, immediate infusion of chaos, as if in accordance with an apotropaic tendency. Regardless of the outcome, the mark of the trauma will be left upon a

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<sup>8</sup> Blackstone, Sir William (1765-1769). *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Volume II, p. 261.

person. There is an element of this line of thinking in the way that Wittgenstein proposes that “A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about.’”<sup>9</sup>

The sort of classical dissonance of 12-tone, born out of everything *post-*, Post-Romantic, etc., straight through serialism and all that follows from it, etc., certainly bears a quality of the first sort of response described. The feeling of overcoming – of feeling overcome, overwrought – is often palpable in this music. So much of what sounds and feels “modern” to us is still colored by this association, as well as by its correlated textures. This is in no way to diminish or otherwise discredit the efforts of systematization inherent in this music and the breakthroughs in technical theory to which this music pertains. This alternate perspective sheds a different light on the expressiveness, the expressionism, of this music and of just what it is that it may be said to express. This more so the case when one considers it alongside of, or even in spite of, its recourse to a highly intellectualized technicality, and of the associations of “difficulty” and “strain” implied by it. This is a “hard music,” a “difficult music.” The striving for technical mastery and for intellectual rigor is, in some sense, often belied by the music’s ultimate result – often most for the perception of the audience, in any case. This musical spirit attains new heights in the work of Brian Ferneyhough and in the whole of the New Complexity movement.

Proceeding with this analogy, the tendency to withdraw, to take a step back before proceeding, with a sort of heuristics of caution and directedness, can be seen in

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<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1953). §123, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.  
“Ein philosophisches Problem hat die Form: ‘Ich kenne mich nicht aus.’”

certain tendencies that have been termed minimal in contemporary music. A proactive tendency, in certain respects, although, particularly when thinking to the music of so-called Holy Minimalism, Avro Part, John Tavener, *et al.*, it is perhaps fair to identify a type of more passive response, in terms of a truly inward retreat. Interesting to note is the work of some scholars regarding a connection between certain aspects of minimalist music – repetition, stasis, *perpetuum mobile*, etc. – and the classical psychological notion of the death drive, or *Thanatos*. Jacques Lacan is insightful here, particularly in his conception of drive and the manner in which it is correlated to *jouissance*, or “enjoyment,” and desire through the structural apparatus of *objet petit a*.

Emerging out of a paradoxical reformulation of Descartes’ *cogito* – “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I think not” – Lacan argues that the subject can only assume his or her fundamental fantasy, and thus approach the Real, by undergoing “subjective destitution.” The notion of trauma is again crucial here, as it dovetails with the experience of the Real. It may be argued, that many composers in the domain of titularly minimal music – from Terry Riley and Steve Reich to Éliane Radigue or Hauke Harder – have sought to develop musical and performative strategies to confront and to integrate the experience of this void in their music, not unlike an experience of “losing one’s self.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. McKeon, Ed. (2011). “Musical Performance and the ‘Death Drive,’” *Interference: A Journal of Audio Culture*; Issue 1 – *An Ear Alone is Not a Being: Embodied Mediations in Audio Culture*. Lancaster, UK: Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts. Journal available on-line: <http://www.interferencejournal.org>

Theodor Adorno, of course, associated repetition in music in an explicitly negative fashion, taking recourse to the same psychological vocabulary. His assessment is an unfair one, it may be argued, based on an imprecise understanding of either what repetition means in music and of what *Thanatos* is. The death instinct is, among other things, an escape from, again among other things, the horrifying prospect of interminable life or the baneful nausea of an endless playing-out of the passions. The nineteenth century concept of “endless melody” in Romantic music comes to mind. Adorno, writing in the late 40’s on the subject of Stravinsky’s music, describes the rhythmic sensibility involved as “closely [resembling] the schema of catatonic conditions. In certain schizophrenics, the process by which the motor apparatus becomes independent leads to infinite repetition of gestures or words, following the decay of the ego.”<sup>11</sup>

How far have we come as a listening public? How much terrain has been traversed since Stravinsky’s time? It is doubtful how many listeners today would immediately associate the music of Stravinsky with “the schema of catatonic conditions.” Likewise, it could be wagered the types of criticism levied against Philip Glass’s music a generation ago – “the record’s skipping,” *etc.* – wouldn’t seem to have the same pertinence if uttered today (in spite of the anachronistic technological reference). On this note, in a sort of metaleptical leap, it would be productive for a composer working today to intentionally imitate/replicate the sonic experience of a

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<sup>11</sup> Adorno, Theodor (1948). *Philosophie der neuen Musik*. Anne G Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster, trans. (1973). *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, New York: Seabury Press.

mediated play-back “skipping” or other such glitch – say, as when streaming audio content fails to load properly. At any rate, Bernhard Lang has perhaps already achieved this, if not surpassed it, for instance, in *The Stoned Guest*.<sup>12</sup>

To return to Adorno’s comment – why is the decay of the ego being held here in low regard, at least insofar as seems to be implied? Indeed, there is something to be found in celebrating it. This very aspect of music can contribute so much to what is liberating in music. Of course, it follows that Adorno was critical of Cage. Is there not some element of ego-death present to some extent in all aspects of music and its performance? There may be something of value in a music which allows us to be less ourselves, to escape ourselves, and in so doing find ourselves in the context of a broader human experience. An “infinite repetition of gestures” might just as well describe the natural order as it stands.

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<sup>12</sup> *Monadologie XXIV*

## §2 –Allusion to Infinite Regress as Infinite Regress to Allusion

There is no solution because there is no problem.

— Marcel Duchamp<sup>13</sup>

Susan McClary opens her book, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* by alluding to the famous “Turtles all the way down” parable, which concerns the problem of infinite regress. Typically, this parable is invoked to illustrate the futility of this a manner of thinking. The phrase serves as the title of the book’s first chapter, with the appended parenthetical, (On the “Purely Musical”). In a footnote, she acknowledges that she came to find only after having delivered the lectures that form the basis of the book three instances of this expression, described as a sort of “*locus classicus*,” throughout the scholarly literature: Stephen Hawking,<sup>14</sup> Clifford Geertz,<sup>15</sup> and “A Brief Note on Turtles, Claptrap, and Ethnomusicology” by

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<sup>13</sup> Perhaps apocrophal although widely cited. Cf. Schwartz, Arturo. (1969). *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, New York: Harry N. Abrams (Second rev. ed., 1970), p. 201. Also, cf. Naumann, Francis M. (1990). “Marcel Duchamp: A Reconciliation of Opposites,” in *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, Rudolf E. Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann, eds., Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Hawking, Steven. (1988). *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, New York: Bantam Books, p. 1. As cited in McClary (2000). *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, footnote to p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Geertz, Clifford. (1973). *The Interpretation of Culture*, New York: Basic Books, pp. 28-29. As cited in McClary (2000), footnote to p. 1.



Judith Becker and Lorna McDaniel.<sup>16</sup> The trope of “Turtles all the way down” is interesting not merely for its insight into the thinking-through of the “Purely Musical” and its placement at the intersection of modes of thinking concerned with infinite regression and models of recursion. It is further illustrative of the ambiguity by which conceptual examples *mise en abyme* may alternately be either celebrated or castigated.

An old legend tells of an earnest youth who went to a holy man seeking the meaning of life. In response to the disciple’s questions about the world and its foundations, the guru explained that the earth sits on the back of a huge tiger, which stands on the flanks of an enormous elephant, and so on. When the cosmological series reached a giant turtle, the sage paused. His enraptured pupil – believing he had arrived finally at the ultimate truth – exclaimed, “So the universe rests on that turtle!” “Oh, no,” replied his mentor. “From there, it’s turtles all the way down.”<sup>17</sup>

McClary uses this analogy to upset “conventional wisdom” concerning unquestioned assumptions about musical aesthetics, both in terms of practice and of spectatorial<sup>18</sup> appreciation. In short, she embraces what *prima facie* seems to be the absurd, impossibly redundant logic of the “guru.”

Describing her work, and by extension the project of those affiliated with “the New Musicology,” as “a quest for cultural interpretations,”<sup>7</sup> she is not content with explanations for musical phenomena that simply find recourse to the “purely musical,” “‘natural’ evolutionary processes,” or convention. “By ‘convention’ we usually mean

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<sup>16</sup> Becker, Judith and Lorna McDaniel. (1991). “A Brief Note on Turtles, Claptrap, and Ethnomusicology,” *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 35, pp. 393-398. As cited in McClary (2000), footnote to p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> McClary (2000), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Spectatorial is an anagram of poetastrical.

a procedure that has ossified into a formula that needs no further explanation . . .

IT'S JUST A CONVENTION! Which translates – Don't ask.”<sup>19</sup> “I have found it impossible to accept any kind of bedrock certainty, anything natural or purely formal in the realm of human constructs.” Whichever position McClary takes in her work as cultural interpreter, this very program always returns her “to the conviction that ‘it’s turtles all the way down’”<sup>20</sup>

The infinite Droste effect of turtles stands in for McClary for the vast regression of conventions, stylistic assumptions, and preconceived notions with form the basis for much of historical musicology. Crucially, however, they are taken to be meaningful by, to be bearers of meaning for, McClary, nevertheless. For such cultural interpretation to be possible at all, these conventions, stylistic devices, *etc.*, must be taken to contain positive, definitively interpretable content.

In “The Limits of Analysis,”<sup>21</sup> Lydia Goehr points to just what the shortcomings of these conventional however astutely reframed apparatus of interpretation are. While maintaining her central argument concerning the work-concept, Goehr nevertheless allows her questioning to range freely, indicating just how broad the scope of approaches could be in addressing “the larger concept of music,” perhaps “more quickly lead[ing] one to interesting aesthetical problems.”<sup>22</sup> Just as it is absurd to limit the scope of scholarly discourse on music to Central

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<sup>19</sup> McClary (2000), pp. 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> McClary (2000), p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Goehr, Lydia. (1992). *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century, an understanding that is nowadays fortunately a practical commonplace, one is compelled to ask further: “why not focus on the concept of music in as broad a sense as it can be understood?”<sup>23</sup>

The type of scholarship undertaken by McClary is undoubtedly of great value in terms of relativizing and re-contextualizing particular constructs in historical musicology, and yet accordingly it must necessarily limit itself to a specific understanding of what music is in a particular context. However, in order to “focus on the concept of music in as broad a sense as it can be understood,” one must set aside those aspects which pertain to contingencies of individual biography, stylistic conventions, *etc.* and not merely accept as a matter of course those parameters as defined by such historically and biographically contingent constructs on their own terms. By this turn, such a critical shift in perspective returns to the spirit of the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, as when he asks,

Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important? (As it were all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand.<sup>24</sup>

In her paper, “Musical Idiosyncrasy and Perspectival Listening,”<sup>25</sup> Kathleen Marie Higgins offers a way forward in this direction that explicitly seeks an understanding of “the concept of music in as broad a sense as it can be understood.”

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<sup>23</sup> Goehr, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>24</sup> Wittgenstein (1953), §118.

<sup>25</sup> Higgins, Kathleen Marie. (1997). “Musical Idiosyncrasy and Perspectival Listening,” in *Music and Meaning*, Jenefer Robinson, ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

As both a musicologist and a Nietzsche scholar, the emphasis on perspective is much to the point. Higgins opens with a passage from *The Genealogy of Morals*, which critiques the philosophical “quest for objectivity”<sup>26</sup> in its demand

that we should think of an eye . . . in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking. . . There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective “knowing”; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing, our “objectivity,” be.<sup>27</sup>

Higgins uses the term idiosyncrasy “to refer the whole range of responses that depend on the individual listener’s particular character and background.”<sup>28</sup> Idiosyncrasy is taken here in the sense closest to its etymon, ἰδιοσυγκρασία, *idiosunkrasía*, pertaining to “one’s own temperament<sup>29</sup> or habit.” Higgins’ advocacy for this perspectival, idiosyncratic approach celebrates the varied multiplicity of equally valid, individual engagements with the listening experience. Perhaps most interestingly, what keeps this approach from sliding into either solipsism or relativism is Higgins’ conjecture that just such a way of thinking in fact points toward a view on music in terms of “a common humanity” or in the very least a “more general common vitality.”<sup>30</sup>

Both McClary and Higgins share a disappointment with the conventional mode of musicological discourse, namely that of purely formal analysis. McClary

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<sup>26</sup> Higgins, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1967). *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, trans. New York: Random House, p. 119.

<sup>28</sup> Higgins, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>29</sup> The Greek does not, unfortunately, have the additional implication of the musical sense of this word.

<sup>30</sup> Higgins, *op. cit.*, p.102.

identifies specific issues she finds problematic in the prevailing narratives of musicology and takes them to task. Basically, her project is either to correct or amend interpretations she finds flawed or to draw attention to interpretations that she feels have been wrongfully ignored. Higgins's stance is to open the conceptual space whereby there are, practically speaking, as many valid modes of listening as there are listening subjects. To paraphrase Nietzsche, the *more* ears attuned to the *more* affects, the more complete will our concept of music itself be, even if objectivity *stricto sensu* does not exist.

What room there is left for objectivity is obviously comparatively slight and yet this space draws us in all the more compellingly, because it seems possible to define it. It is not merely that every stylistic convention, interpretive legacy, musico-formal paradigm be re-evaluated, re-interpreted, challenged. Outside the limited scope of a particular system of signification, such considerations have no meaning.

Not merely is our understanding of music enriched by the willful recognition of the many and varied modes of listening but in fact one comes to acknowledge that this proliferation of experiences is first and foremost precisely what music does – that this is its truest function. The sound is pleasing or exciting or interesting or all of these things – a generalized intensity is felt – or perhaps some association is invoked in the mind. Following a shared listening experience, only one thing is certain – every-one has experienced some-thing. *Suum cuique*<sup>31</sup> – yet, to each it is nevertheless

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<sup>31</sup> “To each his own.”

very much one's own. Here, outside of mere interpretation, one might follow on

Deleuze's remark to Claire Parnet:

Other becomings will link up here, molecular-becomings in which the air, sound, water are grasped in their particles at the same time as their flux combines with mine. A whole world of micro-perceptions which lead us to the imperceptible. Experiment, never interpret.<sup>32</sup>

The human is a social animal, and the social element is impossible to ignore here. As Higgins states,

Openness to idiosyncratic responses is also an aspect of what . . . is an optimum way of relating to music – specifically, that of developing full personal relationships with music in a manner that resembles the development of personal relationships with other people.<sup>33</sup>

To return to McClary, her embrace of recursive infinitude, in a sense, does not go far enough, or rather, it is misplaced. It is one thing to say that there is nothing “natural or purely formal in the realm of human constructs,”<sup>34</sup> and this is a point on which one may readily agree. However, the very insistence on narrative and definitive meaning for musical constructs becomes the conceptual space that forms the bedrock upon which she identifies them rest.

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<sup>32</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Claire Parnet. (1977). *Dialogues*, Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, trans. (1987). New York: Columbia University, p. 48.

<sup>33</sup> Higgins, *op. cit.*, p.102.

<sup>34</sup> McClary (2000), p. 2.

### §3 – Of Paradoxography

Perhaps I have staked too much on music, perhaps I have not taken all my precautions against the acrobatics of the sublime, against the charlatanism of the Ineffable . . .

— Émile Cioran<sup>35</sup>

Particularly in the case of instrumental music, with which this paper is primarily concerned, the issue of meaning is difficult to articulate. What is the meaning behind this art-form, which is found to be so moving and yet which seems to defy any precise and reliable understanding of what the nature of this movement of the mind is and how it functions? These questions are brought to a head in the case of instrumental music or, in conceptually broader terms, music in its autonomous state, which is to say, “music alone,” *i. e.*, not explicitly in the service of a text or as program music, *etc.*

Such a historically problematic line of inquiry invites one to humility. It is probably for this reason that in the philosophical literature on music one frequently encounters long recitations of rhetorical questioning. This is a sort of modern aesthetical paradoxography. The humility with which one meets this topic is perhaps best understood in the philosophical sense as affording due recognition to the limits of reason in these regards. As found in the writing of Kant, scholars have elaborated

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<sup>35</sup> Cioran, Emil. (1952). *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, Richard Howard, trans. (1999). New York: Arcade Publishing, p. 118.

upon this notion in various ways, among them Jeanine Grenberg, who explains this position as “that meta-attitude which constitutes the moral agent’s proper perspective on herself as a dependent” but nevertheless “capable and dignified rational agent.”<sup>36</sup> This notion of humility doubles back to the discussion earlier in connection to an “unserved” subjectivity in the context of musical experience in relation to ego-death.

The notion of meaning in music is correlated, on the one hand, to expression, and on the other, to value. It is obviously beyond the purview of this paper to recount the history of perspectives on meaning. Nevertheless, this simple distinction is worth establishing, since it is infrequently made explicit and oftentimes results in confused reasoning *ex homonymia*.<sup>37</sup> For instance, a statement along the lines of “What he means to say . . .” *etc.*, in a sense, marks an attempt to arrive at “What he is really saying” or otherwise the intent of expression.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, “This is meaningful” is equivalent to saying, “This is of value.”<sup>39</sup>

Herein the discussion of paradox will shift to one of parallax in the context of expression. In the following section, a look at the connotation of meaning as value in music addresses concerns as to what is properly aesthetical. In following the line of Higgins’ thought, along with that of others, among them Michael Gallope, as far as musical ontology is concerned, this paper will embrace a broad understanding of the

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<sup>36</sup> Grenberg, Jeanine. (2005). *Kant and the Ethics of Humility*, Cambridge University Press, p. 133.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Schopenhauer, Arthur. (1896). §II. *The Homonymy*, “Chapter 3 – Strategems,” *The Art of Controversy*, Thomas Bailey Saunders, trans.

<sup>38</sup> Consider, in French, the standard use of *vouloir dire* for “to mean” – translated literally, “to want to say.”

<sup>39</sup> There are of course other homographic but still more semantically distinct uses of *mean*. This is illustrated by the phrase, “To mean meanly mean meaning,” which could be rephrased, “To intend rudely average significance.”



musical work and of the experience of music, considered generally. In this way, it is hoped that a perspective on music can be articulated that is as close to objective as is possible and a stance adopted that is conscientiously ecumenical.

The question of whether expression takes place at all in music, however, stands out as regards all others in stark relief. The situation is marked by entanglement. From the standpoint of technique, musicians are instructed in various approaches to play “expressively” or “with expression” in a manner which essentially addresses modes of articulation. Through association, these gestures of articulation may be employed to represent certain feelings, sentiments, *etc.*, but there is no objective criterion to link the set of one to the other. Roger Scruton addresses this situation in this way:

It may be said of a performance that a certain passage is played “with expression.” When it is said of a piece of music (say, of Schubert’s *Erkönig*) that it has “expression,” it seems natural to ask: what does it express? There is thus a presumption that expression in music is transitive: to have expression is to express something (in this case a feeling of terror). The piano teacher (or the critic), however, seems to be talking of expression in some intransitive sense, that is, in a sense which forbids the performer’s question: “what am I expected to express?” That there are two senses of the term “expression” is made clear by the example of a face: a face may bear an expression of anguish, grief *etc.*, or simply the “particular expression” visible in its features. Two faces with an expression of anger would, in the transitive sense, have the same expression, since they express the same thing; but in another sense they might have a quite different expression, and in this intransitive sense it is impossible to give rules of expression. It is impossible to say which physical features in a face are responsible for its expression. If any feature is responsible then all are.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Scruton, Roger. §1. Understanding of the term “expression,” “Expression – II. The Nature of Expression.” *Grove Music Online*. Oxford University press. Article published in print and online 20 January 2001.

The composer or performer who wishes to engage this mode of “transitive expression” is thus always ever undertaking something of a *salto mortale*.<sup>41</sup> There exist two poles, along which stretches a continuum whereby such a gesture of transitive expression may run the risk of failure. On the one extreme, the gesture may entirely fall flat, and although perceived by the audience, be deemed extreme or inappropriate, entirely slipping over into unintended *bathos*.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, it could pass entirely unrecognized by the audience, the moment of transitive expression passing unnoticed. In either case, the negative consequence of such a move speaks to a lack of a common vocabulary for just such gestures.

Scruton’s discussion of the distinction between the transitive and intransitive aspect of expression appears both in his *Aesthetics of Music* and the collection of essays, *Understanding Music*.<sup>43</sup> Both this distinction and its recourse to illustration by the example of facial expression are derived from and based upon elaborations of certain remarks by Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein’s thought is helpful not merely for his insights on music *per se* but also for the spirit in which the broader discussion conducted here unfolds. Unfortunately, Wittgenstein’s writing on music is too scattered and fragmentary as to constitute a singular, unified argument. Nevertheless, as Scruton observes, “that doesn’t distinguish them from his remarks about virtually

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<sup>41</sup> Or perhaps more mildly, in the very least a a leap of faith.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Alexander Pope’s essay of 1727, “*Peri Bathous*, Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry,” available in *The Major Works*, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 195-238.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Scruton, Roger. (2016). “Wittgenstein on Music” and “Expression,” *Understanding Music*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

everything else.”<sup>44</sup> It is also worth noting that Wittgenstein held a deep, personal engagement with music, Scruton describing him as “probably the most musical” and perhaps “the most musically educated” of philosophers “after Al-Fârâbî.”<sup>45</sup>

The following remarks from Wittgenstein’s posthumous volume, *Culture and Value*, inform Scruton’s discussion:

What does it consist in: following a musical phrase with understanding? Contemplating a face with a feeling for its expression (*mit dem Gefühl für seinen Ausdruck*)? Drinking in the expression on the face?

Think of the demeanour of someone drawing a face in a way that shows understanding for its expression. Think of the sketcher’s face, his movements – what shows that every stroke he makes is dictated by the face, that nothing in his drawing is arbitrary...?

Is that really an *experience (Erlebnis)*? What I mean is: can this be said to express an experience?

Once again: what is it to follow a musical phrase with understanding, or to play it with understanding? Don’t look inside yourself. Consider rather what makes you say of someone else that this is what he is doing. And what prompts you to say that he is having a particular experience? For that matter, do we actually ever say this? Wouldn’t I be more likely to say of someone else that he’s having a whole host of experiences?

Perhaps I would say, “He is experiencing the theme intensely,” but consider how this is manifested.<sup>46</sup>

This passage is illustrative of Wittgenstein’s “‘third-person’ approach to philosophical psychology.”<sup>47</sup> From this line of thinking, the understanding of musical

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<sup>44</sup> Scruton, Roger. (2016). “Wittgenstein on Music,” *Understanding Music*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> Scruton (2016), p. 33.

<sup>46</sup> Wittgenstein (1977), p. 51e. The particular remarks cited here are dated to 1946. In the previous year, Wittgenstein had completed Part One of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

<sup>47</sup> Scruton (2016), p. 35.

validity for the composer or performer, of the sense of legitimating the musical experience as offered, is not entirely dissimilar to Charles Cooley's notion of "the looking glass self." As expressed in the formula, "I am who I think you think I am," this can be rephrased to fit the context, "What I express as musical is musical insofar as I think it will be music to you." Describing this "interweaving and interworking of mental selves," Cooley elsewhere writes, "I imagine your mind and especially what your mind thinks about my mind and what my mind thinks about what your mind thinks about my mind."<sup>48</sup> The composer-performer-listener are thus intertwined in a nexus of which not one alone is a guarantor of musical meaning. The listener who engages with open ears is an active participant in this process.

At another level of remove, one may ask, is the experience of hearing music at all meaningful, or, in a sort of lateral move, is the experience of hearing one music instead of another meaningful? To consider this in terms of its radical correlativity, one cannot merely look inside oneself, but rather, to return to Wittgenstein, "Consider rather what makes you say of someone else that this is what he is doing," *i.e.*, understanding or otherwise finding meaningful his, her, or their own musical experience.

The distinction effable/ineffable, disclosive/non-disclosive is found to problematize this question in an unhelpful way, insofar as the effable is equated to expression (the expressible) is equated to meaning (of value). For then, we dissolve

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<sup>48</sup> Cooley, Charles. (1927). *Life and the Student: Roadside Notes on Human Nature, Society, and Letters*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., p. 200.

the risk of music being deprived of meaning, reduced to little more than “a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing.”<sup>49</sup> Doubling back to Deleuze and Parnet, the experience is marked by the injunction to experiment, rather than merely to interpret.

It may be objected that the effable/ineffable disjunction in no way hurts the claim of those who would argue that it is precisely this quality of the ineffable that speaks to the profound emotional depth at the heart of musical experience. Such a view may be expressed, perhaps, by a partisan of the romantic or of the sensualistic. Cloaking an obscure argument in uncertain language, however valid its underlying experience, in no way serves to develop the understanding and in fact only does a disservice to that however valid underlying experience.

It is for these reasons that this paper holds that claims concerning the positively expressive dimension of music, its “transitive” aspect, are to be viewed from a stance of radical skepticism. The way forward is neither to be found in a reversion to rigid formalism in the worn out Hanslick-Dahlhaus model nor in a New-Agey re-envisagement of a sort of neoromantic mystification. Speaking of music as “a medium that participates in social formation,” McClary controverts the interpretation that “protect[s] music as a sublimely meaningless activity that has managed to escape social signification. . . . It is too important a cultural force to be

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<sup>49</sup> Shakespeare, William. (1606). *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene 5, lines 26-28.

shrouded by mystified notions of Romantic transcendence.”<sup>50</sup> The critical efforts of McClary and others of the New Musicology are foreshadowed, for example, in the view expressed by Hans Haacke in the sphere of the visual arts, with expressed reference to Greenberg’s formalism:

For decades now [formalist doctrine] has managed to have us believe that art floats ten feet above the ground and has nothing to do with the historical situation out of which it grew. It is presumed to be an entity all to itself [and] viewed as . . . unresponsive to the pressures of historical society.<sup>51</sup>

The “Prelude” of Michael Gallope’s *Deep Refrains*, “A Paradox of the Ineffable,” opens by posing a set of rhetorical questions.

Does music speak to us independently of concepts and signs? Does it speak to us at a level of deep reality beyond our world of ordinary language? It is a challenge even to form such a question without engendering a paradox. For if music were to “speak” to us beyond language, by what criteria and idiom is it speaking, and does this speaking . . . still entail some process of signification? And how exactly would the “speaking” of a nonreferential medium like music get translated into a referential medium like language without sacrificing the specificity of one’s own musical experience?”<sup>52</sup>

Speaking, expression, the effable, signification – are these to be treated as more or less synonymous terms, and correspondingly, must referentiality be linked to the linguistic faculty? Whence this notion of a “deep reality,” lying beyond the pale of ordinary language? By “specificity of one’s own musical experience” may be

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<sup>50</sup> McClary, Susan. (1994). “Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert’s Music,” in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, Philip Brett, et al., eds. New York: Routledge, p. 211-212.

<sup>51</sup> Haacke, Hans. (1980). “Hans Haacke: Interview by Margaret Scheffield,” *Studio International* Vol. 191, No. 980 (March-April), p. 117.

<sup>52</sup> Gallope, Michael. (2017). *Deep Refrains: Music, Philosophy, and the Ineffable*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 33.

understood two principle sets of concerns. On the one hand, there is that aspect of musical experience on the part of the listener, perhaps best described as an interpretative capacity, which is primarily intellectual, involving an evaluative judgment driven by a search for meaning, however idiosyncratic. On the other hand, there is a more affective dimension, that of being moved by or drawn to or away from a particular musical experience.

This last issue, of preserving the individual musical experience as if threatened by the however possible irreality of its referential signification, touches upon a nexus of seemingly mutually exclusive understandings of music's capacities and the role of expression. The aporetic rhetoric of Gallope's "Prelude" and the anxiety surrounding a paroxysm of paradox testifies to this, and there are innumerable examples of this kind and tenor of writing on music. It is argued that the proper move in regards to this stance is to shift the perspective from one of paradox to parallax, the very term itself implying an apparent shift in the position of objects relative to one's perspective.

The central concept at work in Slavoj Žižek's *The Parallax View*, for Žižek parallax entails that critical shift in perspective which allows one to see for what it truly is "the irreducible gap" or "purely structural interstice"<sup>53</sup> between seemingly, completely incompatible and irreducible modes of conception. This very gap or interstice is conceived as "the point of "radical critique" and not "a certain determinate position as opposed to another position." Thus antinomic

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<sup>53</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. (2006). *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, p. 20.

incompatibility itself is asserted as irreducible. The objects of such problematized thought fall along the lines of the four classic examples of antinomy in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, those problems which are equally rational as framed and yet ultimately contradictory. The notion of the "parallax view" plays a vital role in Kōjin Karatani's *Transcritique*, which is a reading of Kant with Marx and *vice versa* as well as an attempted rethinking of both of these authors, together with Hegel, from a materialist perspective.<sup>54</sup> Žižek was to write an influential article on Karatani's book under the same title before publishing *The Parallax View* two years later.<sup>55</sup>

Among the topics Žižek addresses in the text is a rehabilitation of Kant's notion of the infinite judgment. This parallax perspective on the infinite judgement informs a rethinking of the effable/ineffable dichotomy, a crude and seemingly inescapable binary in the context of music. The matter is one of a judgment of quality, in the Kantian sense. In the generations preceding Kant, logic underwent a perspectival shift as a fundamental play of ideas. Kant elaborates upon this, casting the material of knowledge as having no pre-established unity. However, there is a mechanism, Kant asserts, inhering in the mind and which provides the "forms" whereby thought, perception, and reason are possible. These forms are his famous Categories; there are twelve of them.

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<sup>54</sup> Karatani, Kōjin. (2003). *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, Sabu Kohso, trans. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

<sup>55</sup> It is surely no mere felicitous accident that this is also the shared title of the 1974 political thriller starring Warren Beatty and produced and directed by Alan J. Pakula, Žižek being the film buff that he is. The second in Pakula's political paranoia trilogy, between *Klute* (1971) and *All the President's Men* (1976), *The Parallax View* follows an investigation into a secret organization involved in the recruitment and training of political assassins.



Kant's mania for symmetry is legendary. The arrangement of the Categories is frequently criticized for its seeming arbitrariness, *e. g.*, by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, among others. The principle of hendiatriis<sup>56</sup> is said to force Kant to invent such artificial categories as the infinite judgment, for example. This arrangement should not be dismissed too promptly, however, and special attention be reserved for the infinite, that judgment of quality correlated to limitation.

Kant's illustration of the infinite judgment concerns the mortality of the soul. While "the soul is mortal" is an affirmative judgment, the tripartite division of judgments of quality implies that this statement can be negated in either of two ways. This is as negative judgment proper, whereby a predicate is denied the subject – "the soul is not mortal" and thus immortal – or as the affirmation of a non-predicate – "the soul is non-mortal" and thus wholly outside of the very distinction mortal/immortal itself. To further demonstrate, Žižek adds,

the difference is exactly the same as the one, known to every reader of Stephen King, between "he is not dead" and "he is un-dead." The indefinite judgment [*sic*]<sup>57</sup> opens up a third domain which undermines the underlying distinction: the "undead" are neither alive nor dead, they are precisely the monstrous "living dead."

The conceptual potential of this tertiary qualitative aspect is further illustrated by example of

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<sup>56</sup> ἓν διὰ τρεῖς, *hen dia treis*, "one through three"

<sup>57</sup> Throughout this passage in Part I, Chapter 1, Žižek errs by using the two terms interchangeably. Indefinite and infinite are properly speaking two different categories of judgment. Depending upon one's interpretive orientation, the indefinite judgment, which goes back to Aristotle, maybe be considered a hyponym or subtype of infinite judgment. It is in part this quibble with the indefinite/infinite distinction that led Schopenhauer to hold Kant's conceptualization of it in low regard.

the changed status of the notion of the “inhuman.” [. . .] “[H]e is not human” is not the same as “he is inhuman” – “he is not human” means simply that he is external to humanity, animal or divine, while “he is inhuman” means something completely different: the fact that he is neither human nor inhuman, but marked by a terrifying excess which, although it negates what we understand as “humanity,” is inherent to being-human.<sup>58</sup>

Consider the poetic signification of the phrase “Man’s inhumanity to man,” as first attested in Robert Burns’ poem *Man was made to mourn: A Dirge* (1784). The “inhumanity” the poet bemoans is not merely that of bestial instinct nor hardly either of some sort of divine rage. Rather, it is the “many . . . sharp [and] num’rous ills / Inwoven with our frame!” that “Makes countless thousands mourn.”

Another literary example, from Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, is Grete Samsa’s use of the term *Untier* to describe her brother Gregor’s monstrous insectoid transformation. *Untier* is typically and not altogether incorrectly translated as “monster,” although its construction is radically different from the connotation of portentous fear and warning, which the Latin *monstrum* implies and also which, along with the form *Monster*, has been borrowed into the German lexicon. Rather, *ein Untier* is

an inanimal, in strict symmetry to inhuman . . . the opposite of inhuman: an animal which, while remaining animal, is not really animal – the excess over the animal in animal, the traumatic core of animality, which can emerge ‘as such’ only in a human who has become an animal.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Žižek (2006), pp. 21-22.

<sup>59</sup> Žižek (2006), p. 22.

In what way are we to understand such judgments as "infinite?" A statement such as "The soul is non-mortal" covers an infinite set in distinction to the strictly limited sets of either of the two genera mortal souls and immortal souls. This third domain is limitless, infinite, in being fully open-ended, neither strictly speaking mortal nor immortal.<sup>60</sup>

This conceptual apparatus is invoked to open up thinking concerning music's expressive/disclosive dimension. It is not that music is either expressive in some capacity or, alternately, in a formally negated sense in- or not(-)expressive, but rather non-expressive, of a domain wholly outside the distinction of being either expressive or not, standing in no relation to (quasi-)verbal narrativity as a system of referential signification. In this way, we may come to terms with what music is and how it functions outside of and in contradistinction to "the constraint of language."<sup>61</sup>

Following this phrase from Nietzsche further, one may term this linguistic analogy

the philosophy of gray concepts. Language depends on the most naïve prejudices. Now we read disharmonies and problems into things because we think only in the form of language . . . We cease to think when we refuse to do so under the constraint of language; we barely reach the doubt that sees this limitation as a limitation. Rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme that we cannot throw off.<sup>13</sup>

In this way, music points towards, if not a thinking, in the very least a movement of the mind, which operates outside this "form of language." The very

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<sup>60</sup> For a fuller elaboration of this distinction, cf. Chapter 3 in Žižek, Slavoj. (1993). *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>61</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. (1968). §522 (1886-1887), *The Will to Power*, Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, trans. New York: Vintage, p. 283. Frequently rather dramatically misquoted as "the prison-house of language." Cf. the book by Fredric Jameson of the same title.

notions of limitlessness, openness, open-endedness – the indefinite, in-definition, or even of in(de)finitude – form the very core of what the musical experience is.

Resisting any tendency to impose a definitive interpretation upon it, the musical object and the correlative experience thereof are only understandable in this radically open-ended dimension. It is only genuinely understood without reading back into it some overblown Romantic notion of a mystified Beyond, spoken of in fuliginous tones and in purple prose.

That which is non-linguistic is by no means necessarily mysterious. Of mystery, one may well say with Cioran, “*Mystery* – a word we use to deceive others, to convince them that we are ‘deeper’ than they are.”<sup>62</sup> By viewing music in the light of the infinite judgment, the expressive/associative dimension of music becomes no less real, despite its inherent arbitrariness. What music does perform as a *psychological function* is to allow the self-reflective listener to consider how this really felt but nevertheless idiosyncratic experience is itself reflective of one’s own inner life *in abstracto*.

It comes as no surprise that, at the present moment, object-oriented ontology should find among its most adamant adherents practitioners and scholars in the arts. Without going too far afield into this exciting new domain of philosophical discourse, the emphasis within its perspective on asserting the independent existence of objects shares certain affinities to the perspective developed in this paper, although highly qualified by this parallaxic shift to a network of co-relative perspectives, which is

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<sup>62</sup> Cioran, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

thus more properly speaking conventionally transcendental. In fact, one might imagine a rehabilitation of Hanslick-Dahlhaus formalism that could fit neatly into the framework of object-oriented ontology, certain key cultural constructs strategically omitted. The notion of autonomy and its connection to music as an independently existing but partial object is addressed later, in connection as well to the abovementioned *psychological function*.

The understanding of expressivity and of the expressible is not to be limited to the direct analogy of verbal expressiveness, which is itself tied to the old notion of music as non- or pre-conceptual. To return to the philosophy of Kant, whose *Critique of Judgment* held instrumental music in an ultimately poor regard, he was unsure whether to place music as, at most favorably, the lowest of the fine arts or as the highest of the merely decorative arts. For Kant, instrumental music is at best pleasing but ultimately of little to no aesthetic value, since it fails to obtain to conceptual thought and thus neither engage moral purpose.

This argument is essentially echoed/recasted by Hegel, who characterizes music as being born out of the “unhappy consciousness” – “consciousness, *divided in itself*.”<sup>63</sup> Correspondingly, in the evolution of Spirit, the condition of thought in the state of unhappy consciousness is essentially musical, that is, effectively pre-conceptual. Hegel’s aesthetics is concerned primarily with content, over and above formal considerations, and it is clear that music poses a particular problem in this

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<sup>63</sup> Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. (1807). §207, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. (1977). Arnold V. Miller, trans. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 126.

regard. If music is to retain the capacity for representation, that is, a mimetic dimension, and a great number of theorists in the early modern era insisted that it did, it can only be said to do so in a diminished capacity when compared to visual depiction or verbal recount, *etc.* The content of music, outside of its purely formal, material, analyzable elements, is inherently ambiguous.

By acknowledging that there is in fact a conceptual dimension to music, a rethinking of the nature of the conceptual itself is called for. Clearly, instrumental music is not as thoroughly inscribed in the symbolic order as is narrative poetry or drama or figurative painting, *etc.* – in other words, those forms of expression which are more properly mimetic, representational, and/or narrativistic. This dichotomy, of one art-form being conceptual *versus* another being un- or anti-conceptual, only does a disservice to an ultimately unrelated dichotomy, which is namely that of the mimetic/diegetic – an emphasis on content over form, in so many words, of what over how. “Systems music,” for instance, or “music as a (gradual) process” testify to a properly diegetic music.

Over the course of sketching this arc which delineates however periphrastically the shift from paradox to parallax, the object fixed on the horizon is that of “the concept of music in as broad a sense as it can be understood.”<sup>64</sup> This entails conceiving the musical experience without invoking the mechanism of another mode of thought or expression as of speech *etc.* and the stilted metaphorical conundrums that such invocation implies. Also, relying on a purely formal, socio-

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<sup>64</sup> Goehr, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

historically contingent discourse of a specific analytical framework, such as of Western functional harmony or something similar is equally dissatisfying. Insofar as it is the condition of (instrumental) music that it is of need to call on this parallax shift speaks to the nature of what is inherent to music itself. This is by no means the only, or let alone best, response either to what makes a piece of music effective or aesthetically successful, or to what should in some prescriptive sense inform the motivation for composing or otherwise making music. It does explain, however, a rationale, an apology even, for a particular music which sees such questioning as the fundamental question itself, in so marking an attempt to understand what is the inherently musical.

#### §4 – Must We Say What We Mean?

I have nothing to say  
and I am saying it

— John Cage<sup>65</sup>

*The Man Without Content*, a set of essays by Giorgio Agamben concerning aesthetic practice and the status of art in the modern era, opens with a lengthy citation from the third essay of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. In this passage, Nietzsche subjects Kant's "definition of the beautiful as disinterested pleasure to a radical critique."<sup>66</sup>

Kant thought he was honoring art when among the predicates of beauty he emphasized and gave prominence to those which established the honor of knowledge: impersonality and universality. This is not the place to inquire whether this was essentially a mistake; all I wish to underline is that Kant, like all philosophers, instead of envisaging the aesthetic problem from the point of view of the artist (the creator), considered art and the beautiful purely from that of the "spectator," and unconsciously introduced the "spectator" into the concept "beautiful." It would not have been so bad if this "spectator" had at least been sufficiently familiar to the philosophers of beauty – namely, as a great *personal* fact and experience, as an abundance of vivid authentic experiences, desires, surprises, and delights in the realm of the beautiful! But I fear that the reverse has always been the case; and so they have offered us, from the beginning, definitions in which, as in Kant's famous definition of the beautiful, a lack of any refined first-hand experience reposes in the shape of a fat worm of error. "That is beautiful," said Kant, "which gives us pleasure

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<sup>65</sup> *Lecture on Nothing* (1949).

<sup>66</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. (1970). *L'uomo senza contenuto*, Georgia Albert, trans. (1999). *The Man Without Content*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p.1



*without interest.*" Without interest! Compare with this definition one framed by a genuine "spectator" and artist – Stendhal, who once called the beautiful *une promesse de bonheur*.<sup>67</sup> At any rate he *rejected* and repudiated the one point about the aesthetic condition which Kant had stressed: *le désintéressement*.

Who is right, Kant or Stendhal?

If our aestheticians never weary of asserting in Kant's favor that, under the spell of beauty, one can *even* view undraped female statues "without interest," one may laugh a little at their expense: the experiences of *artists* on this ticklish point are more "interesting," and Pygmalion was in any event *not* necessarily an "unaesthetic man."

Agamben proceeds by declaring, "The experience of art that is described in these words is in no way an *aesthetics* for Nietzsche."<sup>68</sup> *Prima facie*, this might come across as a counterintuitive assessment. It does nevertheless seem clear that Nietzsche is advocating a transvaluation of the very field of aesthetics itself. His stance "is in no way an *aesthetics*" only in so far as we turn to the very origin of the phrase itself, as Agamben in fact does. He understands Nietzsche's shift in perspective as a move "to purify the concept of 'beauty' by filtering out the αἴσθησις [aísthēsis], the sensory involvement of the spectator, and thus to consider art from the point of view of its creator."<sup>69</sup>

Nietzsche could justifiably claim himself to be a philosopher of beauty who experienced art "as a great *personal* fact . . . as an abundance of vivid authentic experiences," *etc.* Nearly his entire body of work testifies to this, from *The Birth of*

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<sup>67</sup>"A promise of happiness."

<sup>68</sup> Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

*Tragedy* through the numerous texts addressing his relationship to Richard Wagner.<sup>70</sup> Nietzsche was also the composer of a significant body of music, mostly for piano, which, though having never found a wide audience, is of more than a passing, incidental or biographical, interest. “Without music, life would be an error [*Irrtum*].”<sup>71</sup>

Although not addressed by Nietzsche directly and only alluded to by Agamben, the very origin of the term aesthetics as it has come to be used today is marked by confusion – in a sense, as of conflation. The philosophy of antiquity made a great distinction in the objects of cognition into αἴσθητα και νόητα – *aísthēta* and *noēta*, the former from sense perception, entering the mind from the external world, and the latter inhering within the mind itself. Kant initially rejected Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s adoption of the term aesthetic to refer to the critique of taste, retaining its use, for instance, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to describe the Transcendental Aesthetic as

the science of all the principles of sensibility *a priori* . . . The Germans are the only people who at present use this word to indicate what others call the critique of taste. At the foundation of this term lies the disappointed hope . . . of subjecting the criticism of the beautiful to the principles of reason, and so of elevating its rules into a science.<sup>72</sup>

Within a couple of generations, however, the new use of the term had become widespread. The Scottish metaphysician Sir William Hamilton continued to object to

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<sup>70</sup> Consider also “From the Soul of Artists and Writers” In *Human, All Too Human*, and so on.

<sup>71</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1888). §33, “Maxims and Arrows,” *Twilight of the Idols*.

<sup>72</sup> Kant, Immanuel. (1781). *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 21.

the term, describing it as “the doctrine which we vaguely . . . demoninate the Philosophy of Taste, the Theory of the Fine Arts. . .” He suggests, “The term Apolaustic would have been a more appropriate designation.”<sup>73</sup> *Apolaustic* would have implied something along the lines of the science of the pleasurable, being derived from the Greek ἀπολαύειν, *apolauein*, “to enjoy.” Later in the nineteenth century, *apolaustic* would be used in English in a manner similar to how the word “hedonistic” is used today.

Aesthetics is thus caught between a will towards objectivity and an area of subject matter that is perhaps more vague, impressionistic, and idiosyncratic than any other – pleasure, enjoyment, the beautiful, *etc.* A crucial point of Agamben’s text is drawing attention to the slippage which occurs between perceptions of good and bad taste. Identified as a thoroughly modern phenomenon, if not a defining feature thereof, examinations of this dynamic stretch back at least as early as Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*. To summarize, as well as simplify, Agamben’s assessment, modernity is marked by affording prestige to good taste while at the same time valuing and privileging the new – novelty, innovation, the current, “the latest thing,” *etc.* There is an inherent conflict, however, between the idea of good taste, with its origins in the early modern era, and an ever increasing emphasis on novelty. In short,

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<sup>73</sup> Hamilton, William. (1858). “Lecture VII. Philosophy – Its Divisions,” *Lectures on Metaphysics*, Rev. Henry Longueville Mansel and John Veitch, eds. New York: Sheldon and Company, p. 87.

where can more good taste come from? “[G]ood taste is essentially made of bad taste.”<sup>74</sup>

The concern for fraudulence, as characterized by Stanley Cavell, speaks to this situation. “[W]hat the modern puts in question is not merely, so to speak, itself, but its tradition as a whole.”<sup>75</sup> This seems to be logical maturation of the dynamic Agamben describes. Cavell’s writing shows great concern for what “count[s] as art at all.”<sup>76</sup> He goes so far as to say that “fraudulence is endemic in the experience of contemporary music; that its full impact, even its immediate relevance, depends upon a willingness to trust the object, knowing that the time spent with its difficulties may be betrayed.”<sup>77</sup>

Endemic to whose experience? This could only be the case for someone concerned with operating in the paradigm of good taste – of wanting to know that one is in the right. Cavell is no fool, and it is worth mentioning that he was highly trained as a musician, even studying composition for a time at the Julliard School. His warmest musical reflections are typically reserved for great classical works of the past. One can certainly relate to the experience he is describing, provided that the fraudulent is simply substituted by whatever qualifier one chooses for “not to my liking.”

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<sup>74</sup> Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>75</sup> Cavell, Stanley. (1969). *Must We Mean What We Say?* Updated edition, (2002). New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 222.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

Cavell, though a perspicuous cultural commentator, is very much an aesthete in the model of the Kantian spectator who seeks the beautiful “without interest.” Much of the unease he feels concerning the state of modern art generally and of music in particular would be obviated by adopting the Nietzschean stance of the thoroughly engaged, interested spectator. This is of course not to say that Cavell fails to observe, to perceive, the situation keenly, even astutely. Rather, that he has ceded his interest in the matter is palpable.

The artist/composer-musician must necessarily adopt a different stance in hearing new works by others. Everything is an experience from which the greatest advantage must be gleaned. The experience of betrayal that Cavell speaks of is unknown to the artist with a genuinely open mind. “Betrayal” sounds like, “I want my money back.” The spectator fears being duped, that what is being experienced is not “the genuine article.” The artist must be open to any possible experience, any given object – for fear of missing out! For the artist knows, as does any perceptive sympathetic art-lover, that what is designated as bad taste may suddenly be transformed into its opposite at any given moment. The

inexplicable inclination of good taste towards its opposite has become so familiar to us moderns that we are not even surprised by it anymore, and we no longer even wonder (although it would be natural to do so) how it is possible that our taste is divided between objects as incompatible as the *Duino Elegies* and Ian Fleming’s novels, Cézanne’s canvases and knickknacks with floral patterns.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

Cavell's concern for fraudulence implies that there are those who promote or create contemporary music who are disingenuous, that they "do not mean what they say." To whatever extent either he himself felt this sentiment keenly or was merely attempting to describe what he believed to be a broader cultural perception is subject to conjecture. In music in particular, because of its inherent ambiguity, one is free not to say what one means.

## §5 – The Autonomous Partial Object

The notion of the autonomy of music, of music considered in its own terms without reference to concepts outside of it, is fraught with challenges. It is haunted by the twin specters of its nineteenth century cultural legacy: obscurantism and supremacism. However, if one is to approach “the concept of music in as broad a sense as it can be understood,”<sup>79</sup> the concept of musical autonomy cannot entirely be avoided. By rehabilitating this concept, a way forward may be found which can account for the shared richness of musical experience with a view towards what is common to the variety musical experiences generally. The stultifying grandiosity of “pure” or “absolute music” must be shuffled off.

Eduard Hanslick is widely considered to be the ideological forebear of absolute music, through his influential book of 1854 *On the Musically Beautiful*, although the term is in fact first attested to Richard Wagner.<sup>80</sup> The phrase was coined by Wagner in a program note he had prepared for a performance he was conducting of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in Dresden in 1846. Wagner, with his aim of uniting music and drama in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, holds the idea of absolute music in a negative light and introduced the term as a way of identifying what he felt was wrong in music. In 1851, Wagner’s view of *absolute Musik* is summarized by one of

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<sup>79</sup> Goehr, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>80</sup> Pederson, Sanna. (2009). “Defining the Term ‘Absolute Music’ Historically,” *Music & Letters*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (May). Oxford University Press, p. 241.

his contemporaries, the critic Theodor Uhlig: “he finds it inhuman precisely because it is unsatisfying, because it is *necessarily infinite* in expression.”<sup>81</sup> Hanslick does of course advocate for an ideal of absolute music, seeing formal, instrumental music as the essence of the purely musical itself.

Before Hanslick’s time, it is fair to trace the stirrings of the idea even earlier, to the dawn of German Romanticism at the turn of the nineteenth century. For writers associated with this movement, such as J. G. Herder and E. T. A. Hoffman, “the Absolute was a key concept.”<sup>82</sup> Foreshadowing Schopenhauer to a certain extent, Herder held music as the highest form of artistic expression precisely on account of its inherent abstraction, which he directly equates to its spiritual dimension. In his supremely high estimation of the value of music, Schopenhauer perhaps disagreed with Kant in this point more so than in any other.

Before the ascendancy of Hanslick’s critical conception, for the early German Romantics it was the infinite nature of music in its autonomous dimension that compelled it is an ideal. In one sense, the infinite is essentially a poetic formulation of the ambiguous – more specifically, in the sense of the un-predetermined. It was this quality of the infinite that Wagner found so abhorrent. E. T. A. Hoffman, writing in 1813, gives something of a proto-definition of absolute music:

When we speak of music as an independent art should we not always restrict our meaning to instrumental music, which, scorning every aid, every

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<sup>81</sup> Uhlig, Theodor. (1851). “Richard Wagner’s Schriften über Kunst. III,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 34. As cited in Pederson (2009), p. 245.

<sup>82</sup> Pederson (2009), p. 250.



admixture of another art . . . gives pure expression to music's specific nature, recognizable in this form alone? It is the most romantic of all the arts – one might almost say, the only genuinely romantic one – for its sole subject is the Infinite.<sup>83</sup>

Hoffman, in true Romantic fashion, exploits the multiple connotations of the term infinite – in fact highlighting its ambiguity. “Infinite” shares resonance with indefinite, undefined, or indeterminate, but also implies limitlessness, eternity, the unbounded, *etc.* Infinite regression leads us back to the discussion of “Turtles all the way down.”<sup>84</sup>

The infinite judgment of course relates to this theme. Allowing for both the autonomy of the musical object itself and for the autonomy of the listener's experience and the interpretation thereof, what is under consideration is a thing both self-determined and yet at the same time not fully complete – partial, as if not fully formed. The Lacanian notion of the autonomous partial object, as developed by Žižek, serves as a conceptual model for how musical thinking may be understood.

In Classical Greek, *αὐτονομία* *autonomía* implies independence, in the sense of the freedom which a polity attains by making its own laws, from its components *αὐτός* *autós*, “self” and *νόμος* *nómos*, “law” – in other words, self-legislating. Notably, in later Byzantine Greek, the term was also used in the sense of “poetic license,” *αὐτονομία ποιητική* *autonomía poiētiké*. In English, the term was used in its

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<sup>83</sup> Hoffman, E. T. A. (1813). “Beethoven's Instrumentalmusik.” Strunk, trans. As cited in Goehr, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

<sup>84</sup> “Infinite” or “circular canon” is an infrequently encountered synonym for the perpetual canon, in which each part, upon coming to the end of the melody, returns to the beginning and repeats.

earlier, socio-political sense, until the introduction of Kant's philosophy. In the most specific sense described by Kant, autonomy characterizes the freedom of the will, particularly that capacity which enables the adoption of the rational basis of moral law as the precondition for one's actions. In other words, autonomy is the capacity of reason for moral self-determination – that is, free-will at a noumenal level for the human subject despite operating in a phenomenal realm governed by strict cause-and-effect determinism. The subject, through reason, is responsible for establishing the basis for this self-imposed law.

The autonomous partial object characterizes not merely the musical experience generally but also the (notated) musical work (in particular). The in-finite state of the musical score is also the source of music's interpretational dynamism, always ever encouraging, demanding, and necessitating reevaluation and reinterpretation. Broadly conceived in this way, music is reflective of a Heraclitean notion of being. Just as one never sets foot in the same river twice, so too does one never hear the same piece of music twice. This provides the basis of understanding for a certain approach to music, one that is unconcerned with teleonomic, representational, or narrativistic frameworks, but rather, which leads the awareness to the more immediate, more purely material concerns of musical perception itself. James Tenney's notion of ergodic music comes to mind, for instance.

Brian Massumi offers another perspective on autonomy. While “The Autonomy of Affect” does not define either term precisely, the connection to affect bears obvious ramifications to the philosophy of music. Massumi defines affects as

*virtual synaesthetic perspectives* anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them. The *autonomy* of affect is its participation in the virtual. *Its autonomy is its openness*. Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is... Something remains unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any *particular*, functionally anchored perspective.<sup>85</sup>

The autonomy of music might be described in a nearly identical manner. In listening as well as in making music, several different modes of perception are activated at the same time, each with varying degrees of intensity and at different temporal unfoldings, depending upon the idiosyncrasies of the individual.<sup>86</sup> The necessarily *virtual* interconnection of multifarious perspectives is a fundamental aspect of music in its autonomous sense, as well as its *openness*.

The notion of autonomous partial object is directly related to one of Lacan’s key concepts, *l’objet petit a*. Lacan insisted the term be left untranslated, “thus acquiring the status of an algebraic sign,”<sup>87</sup> similar in concept to his “mathemes.” The “*a*” is a stand-in for “*autre*,” distinguishing it from the Freudian “object” and putting it in relation to Lacan’s wider conception of otherness.

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<sup>85</sup> Massumi, Brian. (1995). “The Autonomy of Affect,” *Cultural Critique*, No. 31, *The Politics of Systems and Environments*, Part II (Autumn), University of Minnesota Press, p. 96.

<sup>86</sup> It is assumed that something like this is meant by “*virtual synaesthetic perspectives*.”

<sup>87</sup> Lacan, Jacques, *Écrits*

Also referred to as “the object-cause of desire,” Jacques-Alain Miller points to the origins of *objet petit a* in Freud’s “lost object,” which he

discovered in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, and that Karl Abraham made the crux of his theory of development from which he derived the first premises of the “partial object;” Melanie Klein, his student, located the partial object at the center of psychic economy... That is what Lacan sums up, condenses, justifies and constructs with object *a*.<sup>88</sup>

Žižek has analogized *l’objet petit a* to the function performed by the “MacGuffin” in Alfred Hitchcock’s films. The MacGuffin is a plot device, for instance the plans for a silent plane engine in *The 39 Steps*, that the protagonist pursues but with little or no explanation. The MacGuffin is not so important to the plot itself as it is in its effect on the individual characters and their interrelation. The MacGuffin allowed Hitchcock “to assert that his films were in fact not what they on the surface seemed to be about.”<sup>89</sup> He once recounted to François Truffaut,

You may be wondering where the term originated. It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says, “What’s that package up there in the baggage rack?”

And the other answers, “Oh, that’s a MacGuffin.” The first one asks, “What’s a MacGuffin?”

“Well,” the other man says, “it’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.”

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<sup>88</sup> Miller, Jacques-Alain. (1990). “Microscopia,” in Jacques Lacan, *Television*, Jeffrey Mehlman, trans. New York: Norton & Company, p. xxxi.

Georges Bataille is mentioned in this connection, as well, by virtue of his paper, “Heterology.”

<sup>89</sup> Gottlieb, Sidney. (2002). “Early Hitchcock: The German Influence,” *Framing Hitchcock: Selected Essays from the Hitchcock Annual*, Sidney Gottlieb and Christopher Brookhouse, eds. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

The first man says, “But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,” and the other one answers, “Well then, that’s no MacGuffin!” So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.<sup>90</sup>

*L’objet petit a* is a component of many aspects of the psychic framework “the true object-cause of desire is the Void filled in by its fantasmatic incarnations.”<sup>91</sup> It is “an object which is originally lost, which coincides with its own loss, which emerges as lost ... while in the case of *objet petit a* as the object of drive, the ‘object’ is directly loss itself.”<sup>92</sup> The role of *objet petit a* as the object of fantasy is perhaps more clearly illustrated by example. Fantasy analyzed in this way “does not mean that, when I desire a strawberry cake and cannot get it in reality, I fantasize about eating it; the problem is, rather, *how do I know that I desire a strawberry cake in the first place?*”<sup>93</sup> In other words, *objet petit a* is at the center of the structure of one’s desire and, as an object of fantasy, the fantasy is constitutive of the desire itself. It is not any particular, definitive object of desire, but rather, like a black hole in space-time, it is what warps, shifts, or otherwise distorts desire towards any ultimately arbitrary object.

The autonomous partial object appears to the individual as part of one’s own very subjectivity, and yet it exceeds the individual. Its very nature is excessive. Hence the feeling of it as of losing control. It exceeds the subject.

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<sup>90</sup> Truffaut, François. (1984). *Hitchcock*, rev. ed. New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 138.

<sup>91</sup> Žižek (2006), p. 61.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

This quality of being both autonomous and partial, while at the same time being conceived of in its excessive dimension, returns us to the notion of ambiguity in the face of a profoundly felt, idiosyncratic musical experience. Music is inherently ambiguous, and absolute music is ambiguous absolutely. The extent to which a piece of music can elicit a response at all in the listening subject is the extent to which it succeeds – is effective. The nature of that response will inevitably vary from one individual to another. It is precisely this capacity for achieving multiple, equally valid responses that is inherent to an enduringly effective piece of music.<sup>94</sup>

Semir Zeki, Professor of Neuroesthetics at University College London, is a pioneer in the neurobiology of ambiguous states. His paper, “Neurology of Ambiguity,”

gives us some insights into how activity at different stations of the brain can result in a micro-consciousness for an attribute, and also tells us something about interactions between different cerebral areas that result in several potential micro-conscious correlates, though only one predominates at any given time. . . [T]he study of ambiguity also gives us insights into the neurological machinery that artists have tapped to create the ambiguity that is commonly a hallmark of great works of art.<sup>95</sup>

Zeki makes a critical reversal in the way of conventionally thinking ambiguity that is invaluable to the field of aesthetics: a “neurobiologically based definition of ambiguity is the opposite of the dictionary definition; it is not uncertainty, but certainty – the certainty of many, equally plausible interpretations, each one of which

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<sup>94</sup> Cf. Melanie Lowe, *Pleasure and Meaning in the Classical Symphony*.

<sup>95</sup> Zeki, Semir. (2004). “The Neurology of Ambiguity,” *Consciousness and Cognition*. 13, p. 173.

is sovereign when it occupies the conscious stage.”<sup>96</sup> While Zeki primarily discusses works of visual art, the implications for music are powerfully salient. It is music operating on autonomous terms that most engages the neurology of ambiguity.

The situation is thus rather like that described by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* through the thought experiment of The Beetle in a Box. Each one of us knows we experience some feeling and accept it as plausible that the Other experiences some feeling or other as well. Exactly what the Other feels, we can never know for certain, but this is precisely what is so interesting.

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<sup>96</sup> Zeki, Semir. (1999). *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. As cited in Zeki (2004), p. 175.

## §6 – Josef Matthias Hauer: Inventor of the Twelve-Tone Technique

From a technical-musical standpoint, perhaps the single most original idea of Josef Matthias Hauer was to maintain methodically an equal distribution of all twelve pitches of the equal-tempered chromatic scale in his composition. Above and beyond this innovation, Hauer viewed music in a manner as radically unconventional for its own time as it would be received today, and this innovation was a direct by-product of his philosophy of music. Fundamentally opposed to the concept that music should serve an idea external to the music itself, including any notion of self-expression of either the composer or performer, Hauer believed that music could only be raised to its highest level, and thus fully embrace its most spiritual dimension, by being composed according to wholly impersonal rules. In this way, he undertook a non-tonal aesthetic program that consciously subverted functional harmony. Also, the majority of his works explore a notion of athenatic music to an extent greater than any which had preceded it.

It was not long of course before Hauer came in contact with Arnold Schoenberg and those who would go on to form the Second Viennese School. After an initial phase of conviviality, aesthetic differences began to cause Hauer to drift away from what was rapidly becoming the pre-eminent trajectory of the twelve-tone technique. Despite being prolific as both a composer and theorist of music, the rise of the Third Reich and his subsequent branding as a “degenerate artist” by the National



Socialist regime only served to cement Hauer's obscurity. Hauer forever clung to his claim of priority in authorship of the twelve-tone technique, in his later years even going so far as having a rubber stamp specially made with which he would accompany his signature, bearing the legend, "The spiritual Originator and (despite many Imitators!) still the sole Expert and Practitioner of twelve-tone Music."<sup>97</sup>

Josef Matthias Hauer was born 19 March 1883 in Wiener Neustadt, a small city just south of Vienna, which became a significant industrial town over the course of the nineteenth century. Hauer's father, Matthias, was an amateur musician, and the young Josef received his initial musical instruction from his father, primarily on the zither. Hauer would later assert that all that was essential to music he had learned from his father, and that he had learned it between the ages of five and ten.<sup>98</sup>

Hauer trained as an elementary school teacher, earning his certificate in 1904. While attending the Wiener Neustadt Teacher Training Institute, he became close friends with the philosopher Ferdinand Ebner (1882-1931), whose work in dialogical thinking shares a certain affinity with the Christian existentialism of Gabriel Marcel, among others. The reciprocal exchange of ideas between Hauer and Ebner would have a profound impact on the creative and theoretical output of both men.

Hauer taught at a handful of schools throughout Lower Austria over the course of his teaching career before being given medical retirement in 1919. The

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<sup>97</sup> Simms, Bryan R. (1987). "Who First Composed Twelve-Tone Music, Schoenberg or Hauer?" *Journal of the Schoenberg Institute*, Vol. X, No. 2 (November), p. 109.

<sup>98</sup> Hauer, Josef Matthias. (1923). *Deutung des Melos*. Vienna: E. P. Tal und Co. Verlag, p. 10. Cited in Covach, John Rudolph. (1990). *The Music and Theories of Josef Matthias Hauer*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, p. 7.

official reason for Hauer's retirement is given as "pronounced neurasthenic condition,"<sup>2</sup> neurasthenia being a rather ill-defined and now outmoded term for a condition entailing symptoms of, among other things, fatigue, anxiety, headache, neuralgia, and depressed mood. Whether or not Hauer's experience of The Great War, in which he served in a clerical capacity in Vienna, may have contributed to this condition is left to speculation. Even prior to being called into service, Hauer provided medical documentation testifying to his poor health. Nevertheless, he was put to work as a clerk for the High Command, partly at least, "on account of his beautiful hand-writing."<sup>99</sup>

Throughout his teaching career, Hauer remained active as a musician "and is reported to have been a masterful cellist."<sup>100</sup> During this time, he also served as an organist and choral conductor.<sup>101</sup> Despite receding from the public sphere following the rise of the Third Reich, after the ensuing World War, Hauer reemerged as an influential figure within Viennese music circles, continuing to teach composition privately and to publish a number of his writings. He was made an honorary member of the Vienna *Konzerthausgesellschaft* in 1953 and was granted the title of professor in the following year. He was awarded the Major Austrian State Prize in 1955, just four years before his death.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Harvey, Dixie Lynn. (1980). *The Theoretical Treatises of Josef Matthias Hauer*. Doctoral dissertation, University of North Texas, p. 9.

<sup>100</sup> Covach (1990), p. 7.

<sup>101</sup> Covach, John Rudolph. "Josef Matthias Hauer." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford University press. Article updated and revised as of 1 July 2014.

<sup>102</sup> Covach (1990), p. 11.

Hauer was neither content nor inclined to surround himself solely with musicians. Artists, poets, architects, philosophers, *etc.*, were among those drawn to Hauer by his unique personality and far-ranging theoretical mind. This is only fitting in that Hauer viewed his work not merely as a novel compositional enterprise, but in a grander way, as laying claim to a broad spiritual mission – “the revealing of the regulation of the world in the Melos.”<sup>103</sup>

The eclectic nature of Hauer’s intellectual interests, however, the zeal and single-mindedness of his musical efforts notwithstanding, did little to aid the longevity of his legacy. His private students of composition were never great in number, and he was never attached to any institution outside of the elementary schools where he taught general education. To say the least, he was not a pedagogue of the legendary stature of Schoenberg.

Perhaps most significant of Hauer’s pupils is Hermann Heiss (1897-1966), a character whose idiosyncratic nature certainly shares certain affinities with Hauer’s own. Like Hauer, Heiss always maintained that he was essentially self-taught as a musician, but after studying with Hauer from 1924 to 1926, he became dedicated to Hauer’s methodology. Later in life, Heiss would go so far as to claim to have collaborated with Hauer in the authorship of the treatise *Twelve-Tone Technique: Theory of the Tropes*.<sup>104</sup> Be that as it may, the work is in the very least dedicated to Heiss, and it is acknowledged that the work grew out of their shared investigation

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<sup>103</sup> Hauer’s terminology for his method of composition. As cited in Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>104</sup> Dubinsky, Gregory S. “Hermann Heiss.” *Grove Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Published in print 20 January 2001.

together.<sup>105</sup> Heiss is perhaps the only composer to have actively built upon Hauer's techniques. His elaboration of Hauer's twelve-tone system, which incorporates rhythmic principles in conjunction with other parameters, is an important – and itself a largely undiscussed – precursor to the later developments that would become “total serialization.”<sup>106</sup> Heiss's later career was largely devoted to pursuits in electronic music.

There is no book-length text written on Hauer available in English. There are three doctoral dissertations on Hauer by academics in the U. S., two of which are primarily translations of Hauer's theoretical writings. Roger Stanley Gustafson<sup>107</sup> and Dixie Lynn Harvey<sup>108</sup> both translate three of Hauer's most important treatises: *The Essence of the Musical*, “From the Melos to the Kettledrum: An Introduction to Twelve-Tone Music,” and *Twelve-Tone Technique: Theory of the Tropes*.<sup>109</sup> In the abstract of his dissertation, Gustafson states that “until now, [these works] have never been translated either in part or *in toto*.”<sup>110</sup> However, “From the Melos to the Kettledrum” and *Twelve-Tone Technique* are both translated in a Master's thesis by

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<sup>105</sup> Stuckenschmidt, Hans Heinz. (1971). *Twentieth Century Composers: Volume II – Germany and Central Europe*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, p. 71.

<sup>106</sup> Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>107</sup> Gustafson, Roger Stanley. (1977). *The Theories of Josef Matthias Hauer: An English Translation of Selected Writings with Critical Commentary and a List of Works*. Doctoral dissertation. Michigan State University.

<sup>108</sup> Harvey, *op. cit.*

<sup>109</sup> *Vom Wesen des Musikalischen* (1920). “From the Melos to the Kettledrum” originally appeared as part of a larger collection, *Theoretical Writings*: “Vom Melos zur Pauke: Eine Einführung in die Zwölftonmusik,” *Theoretische Schriften*. Vienna: Universal Edition (1925), and *Twölftontechnik: Die Lehre von den Tropen* (1925).

<sup>110</sup> Gustafson, (1977), without page number. Pagination begins on page four of the Abstract/Preface with lowercase Roman numeral “iii,” making this, perhaps, p. 0.

Horace H. Work III dating to 1964.<sup>111</sup> Interestingly, in at least one estimation, this particularly difficult to access translation is perhaps the “most readable of the three.”<sup>112</sup> It is safe to assume that both Gustafson and Harvey were entirely unaware of Work’s prior translation, much as they were likely unaware that they themselves were translating the same texts at effectively the same time.

Perhaps the single most informative and comprehensive treatment of Hauer’s theoretical constructs and composition is John Rudolph Covach’s doctoral dissertation. Covach is currently a professor of music theory at the Eastman School of Music. He does a fine job of contextualizing the more airy philosophical aspects of Hauer’s thinking, which verge not infrequently on the mystical, within the broader intellectual milieu of the Vienna of the turn of the last century.

An important article concerning Hauer appears in the *Journal of the Schoenberg Institute*, pertaining directly to the question of historical priority in developing the twelve-tone technique.<sup>113</sup> Simms’ article also brings forth important documents, among them correspondence between Schoenberg and Hauer, “hitherto unpublished.”<sup>114</sup> Simms presents sensitive and informed analyses of Hauer’s pieces, however, perhaps unsurprisingly, writing in the *Journal of the Schoenberg Institute*, not always sympathetically.

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<sup>111</sup> Work, Horace H. III. (1964). *Josef Matthias Hauer’s Vom Melos zur Pauke and Zwölftontechnik: Translation and Commentary*. Master’s thesis. Colorado College. It is only through Covach (1990) that I became aware of this text. I am currently waiting on Interlibrary Loan for a copy of the thesis. Curiously, Covach incorrectly cites the author as Horace Werk.

<sup>112</sup> Covach (1990), p.14.

<sup>113</sup> Simms, *op. cit.*

<sup>114</sup> Simms, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

There are two books which give chapter-length or near chapter-length assessments of Hauer's ideas and works. Writing in 1945, Karl Eschman, under the heading of "New Systems of Differentiated Materials," gives equal footing to the ideas of Hauer and Schoenberg in his discussion of twelve-tone music, in fact beginning to address the topic by outlaying Hauer's conception first. Eschman, however, refuses to engage with the controversy, contextualizing it in the following:

This chapter . . . is concerned with two attempts to utilize *all* twelve notes of the duodecuple scale without reference to what might be called modality or tonality. These are the work of two composers, Josef Matthias Hauer and Arnold Schoenberg. At the time the two systems were devised, both Hauer and Schoenberg were living in Vienna. There have been some questions raised concerning priority rights, rivalry, interrelation or influence in both directions, but these need not concern us here.<sup>115</sup>

Eschman's *Changing Forms in Modern Music* is significant in that it marks quite possibly the first sustained, analytic, academic treatment of twelve-tone music by a musicologist in the U. S. He provides a thoughtful overview of the work of both composers. While his discussion of Hauer's techniques does largely focus on the 44 tropes, he nevertheless acknowledges that Hauer more frequently than not maintains an orderly and systematic treatment of his twelve-note series. This fact is all-too-often overlooked by more perfunctory assessments of Hauer, which tend to give a false impression of the trope concept as something of a mere fluid chromatic

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<sup>115</sup> Eschman, Karl. (1945). "New Systems of Differentiated Materials." *Changing Forms in Modern Music*. Boston: E. C. Schirmer Music Company, p. 83.

modalism. Eschman also provides proof of the mathematical basis for the 44 tropes to exhaust all of the 479,001,600 combinations of the twelve pitch-classes (12!).<sup>116</sup>

In the short Foreword that begins Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt's *Twentieth-Century Composers*, "the ideological sectarian Josef Hauer and the promethean genius Arnold Schoenberg" are already counterposed, yet each admitted to exert "a considerable influence."<sup>117</sup> Stuckenschmidt, who had known Hauer in Vienna, describes him in this way:

Hauer was a tall, strong man of peasant build. He was vigorous and demonstrative in conversation and prone to outbursts of rage against both real and imagined enemies. He had a sense of humor and was as openly pleased by success and encouragement as a child. His face was broad, with a high forehead and he had a squint which sometimes worried those he was speaking to.<sup>118</sup>

Stuckenschmidt does state that Hauer "probably wrote atonal melodies before Schoenberg and his pupils."<sup>119</sup> This is a more tepid statement than the one he made forty-three years earlier – one which infuriated Schoenberg – in discussing the work of Hans Eisler, by saying, "Arnold Schoenberg and some of his students discovered the twelve-tone system, the last refuge of atonality, shortly after Josef Matthias

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<sup>116</sup> Eschman, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-87.

<sup>117</sup> Stuckenschmidt, (1971), p. 11.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, caption to photograph 15 on plate facing p. 57.

Hauer.”<sup>120</sup> In his own copy of the article, preserved in his estate, Schoenberg scrawls in the margin, “*before* Josef Matthias Hauer!!”<sup>121</sup>

The nature of Hauer’s output presents certain challenges to establishing a finite catalogue of works. Hauer was, by almost any estimation, a prolific composer, with 92 works bearing opus numbers and literally hundreds without.<sup>122</sup> Hauer’s output can be categorized with a fair degree of neatness into three distinct periods. The first includes his earliest compositional forays through op. 18, a setting of Aeschylus’<sup>123</sup> *Prometheus Bound (Der gefesselte Prometheus)* for voice and piano. Dating from 1919, this is Hauer’s last piece before his discovery of the Law of the Twelve-Tones, which directly informed his work from that point forward. His works prior to this are already quite far removed from a traditional tonal idiom. Hauer would later republish earlier pieces in a special twelve-tone notation of his own devising – in essence a species of tablature notation (see Fig. 1) – with the obvious aim of underscoring their atonality. Hauer’s twelve-tone notation, based essentially on the layout of the keyboard, had the advantage of doing away with accidental signs. “In order to make the flow of the lines clearer he used colored crayons.”<sup>124</sup> Op. 19 of

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<sup>120</sup> Article in the *Musikblätter des Anbruch* (1928), as cited in Simms, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>121</sup> Simms, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>123</sup> As traditionally attributed, of course. Aeschylus’s authorship of the tragedy has been disputed has early as the nineteenth century.

<sup>124</sup> Stuckenschmidt (1971), p. 78.



that same year, *Nomos*, the Greek for “Law,”<sup>125</sup> is the first piece consciously written in the style of the twelve-tone technique.

Hauer’s middle period extends from 1919-1939, inclusive of opp. 19-92. All organized according to twelve-tone principles, the pieces, often in multiple movements, are in a great diversity of genre, including opera, orchestral works, string quartets, and solo pieces for piano, voice, ‘cello, *etc.* The middle-1920’s to 1930’s constitutes a high-water mark in terms of the public reception of Hauer’s work. The landmark Donaueschingen Festival of 1924, in which twelve-tone music was presented there for the first time, saw the performance of works by Hauer, alongside

**N O M O S .**

Josef Hauer, Op. 19.

From Agathe Karafoid gewandert

**NOMOS**

JOSEF MATTHIAS HAUER. op. 19  
(1882 - 1968)

Figure 1. Josef Matthias Hauer, *Nomos*, op. 19 (1919), in both Hauer's twelve-tone notation and conventional notation.

<sup>125</sup> Also, incidentally, the Greek word for “name.” Although it is quite likely Hauer’s intention is the implication of “law,” it is not impossible that he is playing with the ambiguity of the homonym.

those of Schoenberg, Anton Webern, and others.

With the *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938, Hauer and his music came into conflict with the cultural policies of the new regime. Along with a great number of artists of his generation, during what Stuckenschmidt terms “the cultural barbarization of the musical life of Germany and Austria,”<sup>126</sup> Hauer was branded as a “decadent and degenerate . . . dangerous to the state.”<sup>127</sup> Hauer was thus forced to publish little during this period and he almost entirely disappeared from public view. Nevertheless, he composed somewhere around one thousand pieces<sup>128</sup> – his “musical output reach[ing] almost immeasurable proportions”<sup>129</sup> – during this final twenty-year period before his death. These pieces, without opus numbers and with haphazard cataloging conventions at best, almost entirely fall under the category of what Hauer termed *Zwölftonespielen*, “Games with (‘from’ or ‘of the’) Twelve-Tones,” and later *Zwölftonspielen*, simply “Twelve-Tone Games.” Here Hauer’s music attains a certain pinnacle of abstraction. In lieu of a numerical scheme, Hauer simply dated these pieces by month and year or, in certain cases, with a special holiday, *e.g.*, “Christmas, 1945.”<sup>130</sup> Stuckenschmidt vividly recounts a meeting with Hauer during this late period of the composers’ life, just four years before he died:

A tall old man with white hair . . . opened the door. He was dressed in a nightshirt, for it was that day of the week which he used to spend in bed,

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<sup>126</sup> Stuckenschmidt, (1971), p. 78.

<sup>127</sup> Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. also Covach (2014).

<sup>129</sup> Stuckenschmidt (1971), p. 79.

<sup>130</sup> Gustafson, Roger Stanley. (1979). “Josef Matthias Hauer: A List of Works.” *Tempo*, No. 161/162 (...*An Austrian Quodlibet*...), June – September). Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 13.

thinking and composing . . . Then he showed [Stuckenschmidt] piles of compositions and manuscripts which he was to take with him. It wasn't music, he said, music had died long ago. It was a game with mathematics. But if everyone would only learn to read, hear and write it, there would be no more problems. Of these new pieces, hardly anything had been printed; only a few pages had been published by Fortissimo, the firm belonging to his son, who was a composer of popular songs . . . "When you have looked through them, throw them away," said Hauer, "I write a new one everyday."<sup>131</sup>

A great deal of the pieces from this period are, as one might imagine, lost. Of Hauer's total body of work, 577 pieces are attested.

Hauer serves as the model for a number of literary characters in works of fiction. Perhaps most notable of these is the figure of Jocator<sup>132</sup> Basiliensis in Hermann Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel* (*The Glass Bead Game*.) The far-reaching theorization and crystalline stasis of Hauer's music, originating out of a life lived in poverty and virtual isolation, is an obvious source of inspiration for the novel's depiction of a society austere devoted to the life of the mind, where material concerns for daily life are kept to a bare minimum. The novel's narrator describes Jocator Basiliensis as a

musicologist with a passion for mathematics [who] . . . invented for the Glass Bead Game the principles of a new language . . . of symbols and formulas, in which mathematics and music played an equal part, so that it became possible to combine astronomical and musical formulas, to reduce mathematics and music to a common denominator . . .<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Stuckenschmidt (1971), pp. 78-79.

<sup>132</sup> *Jocator* being the Latin for "jester" or "joker."

<sup>133</sup> Hesse, Hermann. (1943). *The Glass Bead Game*. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969, p. 36.

The writers of the *Frankfurter Schule*, however, were less than inspired by Hauer's efforts. Adorno in particular can be credited with helping to secure Schoenberg's place as the legitimate author of the twelve-tone system, at Hauer's expense. Writing in 1929, Adorno describes Hauer's music as "that other attempt, which in addition to Schoenberg's method, wears the name, 'Twelve-tone Composition,' and is not only mistaken for it, but indeed disputes his [Schoenberg's] right to the priority."<sup>134</sup> Elsewhere, Adorno refers to Hauer dismissively as a "Perpetual Motion Composer."<sup>135</sup>

The question of priority is a small matter when compared with the vastly contrasting view the two men held regarding the fundamental nature of music itself. Hauer repudiated the notion of "genius" and decried all forms of "materialistic" sensualized expression.

Absolute music is a link with eternity, it is ... intellectual reality as opposed to all the different denominations, philosophical systems and political ideologies. Music and mathematics are of one and the same stamp! If they develop away from their origins and from each other, then there arises on the one hand emotional dreariness and musical nonsense, and on the other a sense of contrivance... Organically developed, true twelve-note music must be discernible from twelve-note composed humbug and fashionable noise devised for entertainment and edification.<sup>136</sup>

Hauer's conception of the dodecaphonic idea is irrefutably distinct from Schoenberg's, and ultimately "the idea of a twelve-note pattern was born with

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<sup>134</sup> Adorno, Theodor. (1929). *Musik-blättern des Anbruch*, as cited in Szmolyan, Walter. (1965). *Josef Matthias Hauer: eine Studie*. Vienna, p. 49, which is in turn cited in Harvey, *op. cit.* p. 29.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Stuckenschmidt (1971), p. 79.

Hauer.”<sup>137</sup> Both composers were treating a problem that dealt with the same material, but approached it from radically different perspectives. What is more, the implication and subsequent ramifications of the twelve-tone idea, however similar in its purely technical, theoretical treatment of material, could not have varied more between two artists. Once he set his mind upon it, Hauer immediately began putting his twelve-tone methodology into practice, albeit with a varying degree of rigor that only eventually solidified – one might even say ossified – over time.

The same can be said of Schoenberg, of course, to a certain extent. The Suite for Piano, Op. 25 marks his first formal use of twelve-tone technique, written two years after Hauer’s *Nomos*, Op. 19 was published. To whatever extent Schoenberg’s musical thought, particularly the *Harmonielehre (Theory of Harmony)* of 1911, laid the groundwork for Hauer’s discovery of the twelve-tone law is a matter of conjecture. Hauer himself puts it this way: “Schoenberg once said to me: ‘We have both found the same diamond, but you look at it from one side and I from the opposite.’ I answered him: ‘Many can view the diamond from all sides.’”<sup>138</sup>

The question of what direction European concert music would take in the wake of the extremes of Late Romanticism was an issue anxiously felt by effectively anyone involved in music at the turn of the last century. Schoenberg’s famous claim to have ensured “the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>138</sup> Szmolyan *op. cit.*, p. 49. Cited in Harvey, *op. cit.* p. 28

<sup>139</sup> Stuckenschmidt, Hans Heinz. (1977). *Schoenberg: His Life, World and Work*. Translated by Humphrey Searle. New York: Schirmer Books, p. 277.

speaks volumes to his concern for continuing and building upon an established tradition. Hauer's "severe objectivity and primitivization of texture"<sup>140</sup> in fact attuned him to aesthetic directions already afoot in the Europe of the 1920's. A simplifying trend was exhibited in the French Impressionists of a generation before and a move towards classicization gave rise to *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*, The New Objectivity, in Germany. Paul Hindemith, perhaps the clearest musical embodiment of that movement, notoriously derided Schoenberg's art as "sonic orgies" informed by "decadent intellectual efforts."<sup>141</sup> Hauer is thus situated in a middle ground between these two developments – dodecaphony on the one hand and an objective, consciously restrained texture on the other, that in certain respects anticipates the various minimalist approaches of the latter part of the century.

Despite the radical departure from the past that his work is often regarded to represent, Schoenberg never repudiated the concept of tonality outright, maintaining that there was still much work to be done in the matter. Hauer, on the other hand, railed against the conventions of functional harmony, going so far as to say that the tonal concept was not only outmoded, but in fact, "even in its own time . . . a misguided and ill-conceived system upon which to construct a piece of music."<sup>142</sup> It is fitting too that both composers disagreed fundamentally about the use and abuse of the term "atonal," heartily taken up by Hauer, but thoroughly rejected by Schoenberg. Hauer's Op. 20 (1919), comprising two volumes of piano music, is straightforwardly

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<sup>140</sup> Simms, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>141</sup> Petropoulos, Jonathan. (2014). *Artists Under Hitler*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 94-95. Hindemith, too, was to be labelled a "decadent artist" by the Nazi Regime.

<sup>142</sup> Gustafson (1977), p. 8.

entitled *Atonale Musik* – even though there can be found certain aspects of its material that bear something of the flavor of conventional harmony. It is in part the logical inconsistency of the term “atonal” that lead Schoenberg to reject it, arguing against the concept in the *Harmonielehre*.<sup>143</sup> The term “atonic,” as introduced into the musical vocabulary by Milton Babbitt, more precisely describes what is commonly understood by the word. For Hauer, however, embracing the term atonal underscores his broader musical philosophy, which is concerned above all else with absolute music, that is, music free of any external or “extra-musical”<sup>144</sup> associations.

In Hauer’s conception, music, by virtue of its inherent abstraction, is a pure art; going further, the composition of music, which is solely music *qua* music, is the only composition of any value. Questions of historical priority aside, Hauer and his twelve-tone technique is of lasting interest primarily for his contribution to speculative music theory and to the philosophy behind absolute music, to which his body of work testifies. While it is unlikely to see a rehabilitation of Hauer’s music, he nevertheless remains an important historical figure, who presaged certain developments in later experimental music, as in, for instance the use of chance in determining twelve-note sequences. At the time of his death, Hauer, having sold or given away all that remained of his one extensive library, retained merely his copy of the *I Ching, The Book of Change*.

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<sup>143</sup> Pp. 487-488 of the third edition, as cited in Hervey, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>144</sup> Gustafson (1977), p. 10.

§7 – Eva-Maria Houben, Among Others

Why? Why sound, why composition (you could add: why improvisation)? –  
One answer: Sound is given. There is sound, there are sounds. It's becoming  
more and more silent. That's all I may answer to the question, Why  
composition?

— Eva-Maria Houben<sup>145</sup>

Eva-Maria Houben, born 1955, has been lecturing at Dortmund University's  
Institute for Music and Musicology since 1993. To date, she has published two dozen  
books on a variety of topics concerning contemporary music and composition as well  
traditional/classical music listened to, as she would say, with “new ears.” Her  
instruments are the organ and the piano. She is a member of the Wandelweiser-  
Group of composer-performers. The English translation of her most recent book,  
*Musical Practice as a Form of Life*, will be published in September 2019.

Wandelweiser is a name which bears no meaning. It serves as a term of  
designation for a collective of musicians/composer-performers with a certain shared  
aesthetic but within a considerable degree of variation. This shared aesthetic is  
generally marked by quiet dynamics, periodic silences, and an approach to score-  
writing that is open-ended.

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<sup>145</sup> Houben, Eva-Maria. (2010). “Presence – Silence – Disappearance,” Lecture at i and e festival,  
Dublin, Ireland. Text available online: [https://www.wandelweiser.de/\\_eva-maria-houben/texts-e.html#Houben\\_Presence](https://www.wandelweiser.de/_eva-maria-houben/texts-e.html#Houben_Presence) (Accessed 24 April 2019).



Two further concepts are central to Wandelweiser: an attitude of radical acceptance and an attempt to come to terms with the experience of time as limitless, even approaching “the disappearance of perceived time altogether.”<sup>146</sup> These two stances are interrelated, insofar as both underscore the experience of (making) music as inherently open-ended, as an opening up of possibilities, they both provide certain challenges. A Wandelweiser piece often takes shape as a minimal gesture of composition. In so doing, it pushes the limits of what may be said to be composition in the first place. Likewise too, in pieces of extended duration incorporating long silences punctuated by exceedingly soft sound, the listener is often uncertain whether a piece has ended or not. The genuine Wandelweiser composer acknowledges dutifully that there is no implied performance practice, no expectation of how a piece is to be realized, outside of the few explicit instructions or suggestions accompanying a score. Accordingly, many pieces are text scores.

Houben is a close friend of Antoine Beuger, who founded Wandelweiser with Burkhard Schlothauer in 1992. My friend and colleague, Morgan Evans-Weiler, has told me that Beuger impressed upon him the simple guiding principle that negative injunctions, prohibitions, proscriptions, *etc.*, be avoided in writing a piece. Prescription is one thing; proscription is entirely another. Rather, find a way to open up possibilities for the performer using positive language.

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<sup>146</sup> Pisaro, Michael. (2009). “Wandelweiser.” Text available online: <http://erstwords.blogspot.com/2009/09/wandelweiser.html> (Accessed 24 April 2019).

The Rogerian concept of unconditional positive regard comes to mind in thinking about Wandelweiser, both on the part of the performer and the composer. The listener is enjoined to adopt this same perspective. In this way, the socio-political dimension of Wandelweiser, and of that aspect of the musical experience generally which it brings to the fore, together with its implications, becomes apparent.

Houben related to me<sup>147</sup> one occasion where she and Jürg Frey were being interviewed by Dutch radio. The interviewer asked whether they believed there was a political aspect to the work they were doing in Wandelweiser. Frey began by saying that, no, he felt there was no such dimension to their music, but that it was merely about the music itself, *etc.* In so many words, essentially a *l'art pour l'art* kind of mentality. Houben, who of course is a good friend of Frey's and the two share a high regard for each other's work, describes how she felt she could not but interject and insisted that, yes! there is an important political aspect to this work and that for her this was a vital aspect of the meaning that this music bears.

All of these considerations are brought together in Houben's work. A particularly illustrative example is a piece for open instrumentation, *unter anderen*, from 2017. In this piece, Houben creates a texture of simultaneous variation, what might also be described as heterophonic. Of perhaps even greater significance, however, is the manner in which the score is constructed and the instructions for how it is to be read, which invite a mode of interaction among the performers involving

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<sup>147</sup> In a conversation of October 2018.

close mutual listening and a sense of cooperation while also retaining a great deal of independence.

As can be seen in the accompanying score, Houben designates the sequence in which the pitch-content is to unfold on two conventional staves. The duration of the given note-values, however, are relatively open, ranging from “rather short” to “even very long.” Each performer moves through the score freely. Pitches can be repeated, even multiple times. Octave transpositions are acceptable, but under certain conditions, which will be addressed later. Pitches may be omitted.

As a member of the ensemble Ordinary Affects,<sup>148</sup> I had the honor of playing this piece with Houben in a string of concerts in October 2018. She had changed some of her thinking about the piece since writing it the year previous, and these changes, not present in the accompanying notes for the score, will be discussed here along with additional points of clarification.

While retaining the freedom of variation described above, the pitches as they are notated in the score are to sound first *loco* before they may sound in octave transposition. For instance, the fourth pitch, D#3, is out of range of the vibraphone. If the ‘cellist has already played D#3, then the vibraphone may transpose it to another octave.

The tied notes are meant to draw emphasis to moments where different pitches are to overlap. Nevertheless, this need not be so. The notes within parentheses

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<sup>148</sup> In tribute to the book of the same name by Kathleen Stewart.

indicate other possible equally acceptable registers for the first sounding of that note-event. In the context of this music, the breath mark indicates a fairly lengthy pause.

In this way, we find a piece where much is given and yet much is left open to the individual vicissitudes of a particular instance of performance. The performer is truly one *among others* (“unter anderen”). Houben creates a musical atmosphere where one is essentially free, but one must also recognize where one stands in relation to the others. In Ciceronian terms, “*sunt omnes pares inter se*” – they are all equals among themselves.

Close, active listening lends an excitement to the act of performing this piece, and none the less so for a palette of subdued dynamics and long tones. One can attempt to bring about a particular sonority with another player. Suddenly an unforeseen overlap occurs. Perhaps a player to whom one is listening decides to omit a pitch or more in the sequence – perhaps you have misunderstood where they are in score entirely.

Whether or not these aspects of realizing the performance are perceptible to the audience are subject to conjecture and are ultimately not of fundamental importance. The emphasis is on making a collective, however varying, ensemble sound. In a piece such as this, Houben actually synthesizes the two understandings about music as discussed in the Dutch radio interview. It is not a performance piece, meant to illustrate interpersonal dynamics. It is a piece of music, with the intention to

be appreciated as such. In *unter anderen*, she has succeeded in incorporating a particular view of human interrelations into the very realization of the music itself.

Such dynamics are in play in all music, of course. Houben has does so explicitly and from a positive frame of mind. Close connections can be drawn to Christian Wolff's work in particular.

An epigraph from Martin Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian* appears at the beginning of the score:

¶26. This [the preceding] is generally said of works and of those that a Christian should practice for his own body. Now let us discuss the other works, which he does for other people. For a person does not live alone in his own body, but rather among others [*unter anderen*] on the Earth. As he cannot be without works in regard to these others, so must he speak to and establish relations with them, even though these same works are not necessary for his own good and salvation. Therefore, his intention in all works should be free and directed only towards the service and benefit of other people. He thinks to no other thing but to the needs of others – this is a true Christian life, and there with it is the faith to which so many are drawn. What is more, it is good to work out of joy and love, as St. Paul teaches the Galatians.<sup>149</sup>

In this way, Houben signals the spiritual dimension of her work. It is worth noting that this was not something we discussed when we were performing together. One can perhaps assume that this spiritual or religious element is a purely private matter for her. This is all the more interesting in that in our conversation, she rather emphasized this social or political dimension.

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<sup>149</sup> *Caveat lector*: the translation is my own. Luther composed the texts in Latin and German separately. The German version is shorter and the Latin version longer and more elaborate. There is no scholarly consensus as to which version Luther composed first. Houben cites Luther's German version. It is seemingly customary to translate the Latin version into English, although, in this instance, for example, the Latin and German texts diverge significantly.

unter anderen

ensemble (var.)

eva-maria houben

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catalogue number ew16.284

Figure 2. Eva-Maria Houben, *unter anderen* (2017), page 1 of 8.

Zum sechsundzwanzigsten. Das [Vorhergehende] sei von den Werken im allgemeinen und von denen gesagt, die ein Christenmensch gegenüber seinem eigenen Leibe üben soll. Nun wollen wir noch von den Werken reden, die er gegenüber anderen Menschen tut. Denn der Mensch lebt nicht allein in seinem Leib, sondern auch unter anderen Menschen auf Erden. Darum kann er ihnen gegenüber nicht ohne Werke sein; er muß ja mit ihnen zu reden und zu schaffen haben, wiewohl ihm von diesen Werken zur Frommheit und Seligkeit keines not ist. Darum soll seine Absicht in allen Werken frei und nur dahin gerichtet sein, daß er anderen Leuten damit diene und nützlich sei, nichts anderes sich vor Augen stelle als das, was den anderen nötig ist. Das heißt dann ein wahrhaftiges Christenleben, und da geht der Glaube mit Lust und Liebe ins Werk, wie St. Paulus die Galater lehrt (Gal. 5,6).

Martin Luther: Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen (1520)

Figure 2. Eva-Maria Houben, *unter anderen* (2017), page 2 of 8.

alle folgen gemeinsam als ensemble (instrumente und/oder vokalstimmen) der partitur in leserichtung.

resonanz als *mitschwingen* und *nachschwingen*.

töne können verdoppelt (verdreifacht, vervierfacht etc.) werden: gleichzeitig oder nacheinander gespielt, in derselben oktavlage oder in alle möglichen oktaven transponiert.

alle klänge können einander überlappen.

klänge, die keinem instrument im ensemble zugänglich sind (oder die nicht gesungen werden können), können ausgelassen werden.

frei im tempo.

insgesamt langsam und ruhig, still und nachdenklich. jeder einzelne: mehr hörer als spieler.

● : eher kurz, kürzer.

○ : eher lang, länger und auch sehr lang.

vorzeichen gelten jeweils nur einmal vor der betreffenden note.

Figure 2. Eva-Maria Houben, *unter anderen* (2017), page 3 of 8.



all follow together as ensemble (instruments and/or voices) the score in the reading direction.

resonance as simultaneous vibration and post-oscillation.

tones can be doubled (tripled, quadrupled etc.): played simultaneously or one after the other, in the same octave or transposed into all possible octaves.

all sounds can overlap.

sounds which cannot be played by an instrument of the ensemble (or which cannot be sung), may be omitted.

free tempo.

on the whole slow and quiet, silent and pensive. each single player: more listener than performer.

● : rather short, shorter.

○ : rather long, longer and even very long.

key signatures count in each case only once next to the note concerned.

Figure 2. Eva-Maria Houben, *unter anderen* (2017), page 4 of 8.

The image displays a musical score for a vocal and piano piece. It is organized into four systems, each consisting of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (bass clef). The music is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The score includes various rhythmic values such as quarter and eighth notes, as well as rests. There are several slurs and accents throughout the piece. The score is written on a white background with black ink.

1

Figure 2. Eva-Maria Houben, *unter anderen* (2017), page 5 of 8.

The image displays a musical score for voice and piano, organized into six systems. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment line (bass clef). The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and chords. The first system begins with a vocal line starting on a flat key signature and a piano accompaniment. The second system features a vocal line with a long note and piano accompaniment with chords. The third system has a vocal line with slurs and piano accompaniment. The fourth system shows a vocal line with slurs and piano accompaniment. The fifth system has a vocal line with slurs and piano accompaniment. The sixth system features a vocal line with slurs and piano accompaniment with chords.

Figure 2. Eva-Maria Houben, *unter anderen* (2017), page 6 of 8.

The image displays a musical score for piano, consisting of six systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef). The music is in 2/4 time and features various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. Fingerings are indicated by numbers in parentheses below notes. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

Figure 2. Eva-Maria Houben, *unter anderen* (2017), page 7 of 8.

The image displays a musical score for a piece by Eva-Maria Houben. It is organized into four systems, each consisting of a treble staff and a bass staff. The notation is as follows:

- System 1:** Treble staff contains a whole note chord, followed by a half note, and then a quarter note with a slur over it. Bass staff contains a whole note chord.
- System 2:** Treble staff contains a quarter note with a slur, followed by a quarter note with a slur, and then a half note with a slur. Bass staff contains a half note with a slur, followed by a quarter note with a slur, and then a quarter note with a slur.
- System 3:** Treble staff contains a quarter note with a slur, followed by a quarter note with a slur, and then a quarter note with a slur. Bass staff contains a quarter note with a slur, followed by a quarter note with a slur, and then a quarter note with a slur.
- System 4:** Treble staff contains a quarter note with a slur, followed by a quarter note with a slur, and then a quarter note with a slur. Bass staff contains a quarter note with a slur, followed by a quarter note with a slur, and then a quarter note with a slur.

Figure 2. Eva-Maria Houben, *unter anderen* (2017), page 8 of 8.

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