

Music—Drastic or Gnostic? Author(s): Carolyn Abbate

Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Spring 2004), pp. 505–536

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/421160>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Critical Inquiry*

JSTOR

Music—Drastic or Gnostic?

Carolyn Abbate

What does it mean to write about performed music? About an opera live and unfolding in time and not an operatic work? Shouldn't this be what we do, since we love music for its reality, for voices and sounds that linger long after they are no longer there? Love is not based on great works as unperformed abstractions or even as subtended by an imagined or hypothetical performance. But would considering actual performances simply involve concert or record reviews? And would musicology—which generally bypasses performance, seeking meanings or formal designs in the immortal musical work itself—find itself a wallflower at the ball?

More than forty years ago, Vladimir Jankélévitch made what is still one of the most passionate philosophical arguments for performance, insisting that real music is music that exists in time, the material acoustic phenomenon. Metaphysical mania encourages us to retreat from real music to the abstraction of the work and, furthermore, always to see, as he put it, “something else,” something behind or beyond or next to this mental object. Yet, as he wrote, “composing music, playing it, and singing it; or even hearing it in recreating it—are these not three modes of doing, three attitudes that are drastic, not gnostic, not of the hermeneutic order of knowledge?”¹ Musical sounds are made by labor. And it is in the irreversible experience of playing, singing, or listening that any meanings summoned by music come into being. Retreating to the work displaces that experience, and dissecting the work's technical features or saying what it represents reflects the wish

1. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, N.J., 2003), p. 77; hereafter abbreviated *MI*. A similar emphasis on doing characterizes Christopher Small's ethnography of music making, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, N.H., 1998).

not to be transported by the state that the performance has engendered in us. The musical work—the thing we scrutinize for supra-audible import—in less severe terms is a souvenir, one of the things taken away from the experience of playing or listening, to be “put . . . in a drawer” and contemplated as a way of domesticating that experience.²

Rather than bringing out the souvenirs and singing their praises or explaining their meanings one more time, I want to test the conviction that what counts is not a work, not, for example, Richard Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in the abstract, but a material, present event. This entails seeking a practice that at its most radical allows an actual live performance (and not a recording, even of a live performance) to become an object of absorption, which means going back for a moment to a certain fork in the road and seeing what was abandoned there. In the 1980s, Joseph Kerman argued for a disciplinary revolution in musicology, urging a focus on musical works and their meaning. This new music criticism was not music criticism as usual, and we would not be journalists, an artisan class excluded from academia. Transcending the quotidian, how Bartoli sang or whether Argerich seemed nervous, musicology would deal instead with Rossini’s *La Cenerentola* or Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit*.³ While Kerman’s aim was to divert musicology towards criticism and hermeneutics and away from composer biography, archival history, and strict formalism, something important was foreclosed when old music criticism became new music criticism. And the something was not just Cecilia Bartoli or Martha Argerich but real music: the performances that were to remain in large part as marginal to criticism or hermeneutics as they had been to formalism, biography, history, or theory. Even for scholars like Suzanne Cusick, committed in principle to an “embodied criticism” that deals with music’s materiality rather than with disembodied “texts,” writing about an actual performance has proved to be the unusual option.⁴

2. Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), p. 51; hereafter abbreviated *ISO*.

3. See Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), pp. 113–54.

4. See Suzanne Cusick, “On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex,” in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, ed. Elaine Radoff Barkin and Lydia Hamessey (Zurich, 1999), pp. 25–48.

Cusick, developing Judith Butler’s thesis that gender is performed and not essential, calls for musicology to contemplate performance itself. Yet with few exceptions, notably her analyses of

CAROLYN ABBATE is professor of music at Princeton University. She is the author of *Unsung Voices* (1991), published in French as *Voix hors chant* (2004), and of *In Search of Opera* (2001); she is also translator of Vladimir Jankélévitch’s *Music and the Ineffable* (2003). Most recently, she worked as dramaturg on the Metropolitan Opera’s new production of *Don Giovanni*, which premiered in March 2004.

This does not mean that academia has neglected classical-music performance. Far from it. The relationship (or lack of one) between musicological dicta and musical praxis has haunted the historical performance movement and the debates about it.⁵ There are music historians who write about performers of past eras and literary critics or art historians who write on performance art. There are philosophical arguments about performance, made with particular verve.⁶ There are ever more frequent references to favorite recordings and analyses of opera staging, not to mention *the performative* as catchword and object of scrutiny. Nicholas Cook, imagining a performance analyst, makes an exhaustive list that downplays only certain conventional music-historical approaches (early music performance, performer biographies).⁷ His typology includes “performance interpretation” (the performance becomes the means to bring out structural features), a staple in music theory.⁸ Under the rubric of the performative there is the “functioning of the performing body” and the restrictions culture imposes on it, which indeed reduces the body to another text to be analyzed, but might include ways in which a specific performance satirizes or travesties the script (“B”).⁹ The performative as umbrella concept could shape a post-modern approach (via Bakhtin and the dialogic) that sees the performance event as a polysemic text to be analyzed in its many conflicting domains. Cook discusses a quasi-ethnographic or sociological approach, where an authoritative observer synthesizes the performance within the cultural context of its production. He notes that “analyzing music as performance does

actual performances in “Gender and the Cultural Work of a Classical Music Performance,” *Repercussions* 3 (Spring 1994): 77–110, Cusick herself adheres to the work-centered musicological norm or documents performative elements like female vocality as they were understood in earlier historical eras.

5. Two critical gold standards are Richard Taruskin’s *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York, 1995), and John Butt, review of *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance*, by Peter Kivy, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 53 (Summer 2000): 159–64 as well as *Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance* (Cambridge, 2002).

6. See Lydia Goehr, *The Quest for Voice: On Music, Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy* (Oxford, 1998), and Naomi Cumming, *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000).

7. See Nicholas Cook, “Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance,” *Music Theory Online* 7 (Apr. 2001): <http://www.societymusictheory.org/mto/issues/mto.01.7.2/mto.01.7.2.cook.html>; hereafter abbreviated “B.” As Jonathan Dunsby writes, “Performance Studies is a burgeoning area . . . in the book and article literature” (Jonathan Dunsby, “Acts of Recall,” *The Musical Times* 138 [Jan. 1997]: 12).

8. As is typical, for instance, in arguments in Edward Cone’s *Musical Form and Musical Performance* (New York, 1968), or Edward Said’s *Musical Elaborations* (New York, 1991), two of many books by scholar-performers.

9. One instance is Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Bodily Charm: Living Opera* (Lincoln, Nebr., 2000).

not necessarily mean analyzing specific performances or recordings at all,” but considering instead the way in which performance as a phenomenon has been “scripted” into the work (“B”).¹⁰ In other words, musical works themselves take heed of the “performance network”—the channels between composer, notation, performer, material realization, and listener (*ISO*, p. 5).

Meticulous as it can be, much of this writing nonetheless misses a mark not so easy to define. And whatever its vague outer limits, that mark has a dense center that has to do with musical performance’s strangeness, its unearthly as well as its earthy qualities, and its resemblance to magic shows and circuses. Because instrumental virtuosity or operatic singing, like magic itself, can appear to be the accomplishment of the impossible, performers at that level appear superhuman to their audiences and inspire worship or hysteria. Yet musical performance challenges notions of autonomy by staging the performer’s servitude, even automatism, and upends assumptions about human subjectivity by invoking mechanism: human bodies wired to notational prescriptions. And, despite all that, it has been discussed as if it were an unremarkable fact of civilized life, and neither love nor fear is given much play.¹¹ Opera criticism offers a striking exception, yet its focus is not on performances per se but on opera singers’ voices as erotic objects, with listener rapture subsequently transcribed as prose, in a style David Levin has dubbed academic “Neo-Lyricism.”¹² Musical performance on the whole, however, has been seen, analyzed, and acknowledged, but not always listened to, and if the pleasure given by operatic singing has had a sharp profile, the consolations and disturbances attendant upon musical performance in general have not. Maybe the untroubled prose styles are analogous to ritual behavior while concert- or operagoing is a form of command and a defensive stance. But there is something about the objective mode that seems to protest too much, bypassing the uncanny qualities that are always waiting nearby in trying to domesticate what remains nonetheless wild.

10. On musical works that stare performance in the face, see *ISO*, pp. xii–iv, and Elisabeth LeGuin, “‘One Says That One Weeps, but One Does Not Weep’: *Sensible*, *Grotesque*, and *Mechanical Embodiments* in Boccherini’s Chamber Music,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 55 (Summer 2002): 207–54.

11. There are exceptions; Goehr and Cumming are exemplary in this regard. In “Acts of Recall” on the other hand, Dunsby uses less objective “poeticised” language only at the end (p. 16). In this case, the very self-consciousness that brackets that language as “poeticised”—that worries about the change in tone, calls it a fantasy—shows how ingrained the clinical voice can be, as the only proper voice.

12. David J. Levin, “Is There a Text in This Libido? *Diva* and the Rhetoric of Contemporary Opera Criticism,” in *Between Opera and Cinema*, ed. Jeongwon Joe and Rose Theresa (New York, 2002), p. 122. Linda and Michael Hutcheon, in *Bodily Charm*, strike an admirable middle ground by alternately investigating rapture from afar and responding with rapture to performed opera’s force.

Actual live, unrecorded performances are for the same reason almost universally excluded from performance studies; they, too, remain wild.

Performance has been subsidiary as well in the sense that when real performances (invariably recordings) are cited they are often being summoned for an endorsement. Thus some performer's rendition, some director's staging, is deemed revelatory when it corresponds to one's own or some historically sanctioned reading of the work, but ill-conceived or offbeat when failing to do so. Ask these questions when musical performances are discussed: Is a sonic and visual reality, all its physical force and sensual power, being hauled in to provide a pedigree for a conclusion about meaning or form, with the abstraction—the musical work per se—being the true object of interest and acclaim? Are performances treated as way stations in a total reception history, sonic inscriptions of the work's meaning over historical time? Adopting more generous terms, has a performance or staging been a goad to probe assumptions about the work's meaning, suggest others, with the work of course still ineradicable from the calculus? *Werktreue* as an ideal, never presupposing one ideal performance, means that every actual performance is nonetheless measured against a monument whose non-materiality says nothing about its capacity to inspire awe (Beethoven's fourth piano concerto, *Don Carlos*, the Schumann piano quintet, *La Mer*—one need only say or write the words). Perhaps, as Lydia Goehr has noted, contemplating musical performance beyond the immortal work means understanding a performance simultaneously as an exemplification of the work and as theater, an act in which an "expression of spontaneity, immediacy, and freedom, of feeling and breathing, of conviction and commitment" is conveyed by mute actor-musicians.¹³ Musical performance, as Elisabeth LeGuin puts it, is always also a performance of sensibility.¹⁴

An escape from Kerman's utopia would mean turning away from musical works as abstractions to be scrutinized for supra-audible meanings, or saluted in prose descriptions, and turning towards events. Because all those who are "parties to the classical music esthetic," according to Richard Taruskin, "have been imbued with loyalty to the notion of the 'musical work,'" it could be a form of infidelity.¹⁵ But this escape may be an impossibility contingent upon not turning performances or performers into yet another captured text to be examined for import via a performance science. Jan-kélévitch's distinction between drastic and gnostic involves more than a conventional opposition between music in practice and music in theory

13. Goehr, *The Quest for Voice*, p. 148.

14. See LeGuin, "One Says That One Weeps, but One Does Not Weep," pp. 209–12.

15. Taruskin, "Last Thoughts First," *Text and Act*, p. 11.

because drastic connotes physicality, but also desperation and peril, involving a category of knowledge that flows from drastic actions or experiences and not from verbally mediated reasoning. Gnostic as its antithesis implies not just knowledge per se but making the opaque transparent, knowledge based on semiosis and disclosed secrets, reserved for the elite and hidden from others. Jankélévitch explored this distinction decades before it became a commonplace in writings that describe performance as a “site of resistance to text” or as something so contingent upon present human bodies that it remains opaque (“B”).¹⁶

In Jankélévitch’s terms, fixing upon actual live performances would mean embracing the drastic, a radical step. There is no a priori theoretical armor. In practical terms, it would mean avoiding the tactile monuments in music’s necropolis—recordings and scores and graphic musical examples—and in the classroom this is nearly impossible. In some larger sense it might even mean falling silent, and this is difficult to accept because silence is not our business, and loquacity is our professional deformation.

Is the gnostic attitude precluded by performed music? This is a personal matter; thus it can be put to an individual test. Here is mine: on 27 November 2001, I was accompanying a singer in a lecture-recital that included Idamante’s aria “Non temer, amato bene” from Mozart’s *Idomeneo*, and this performance allowed me to play out the two attitudes as an experiment. “Non temer” is a bravura aria with fast runs for the pianist, calling for strict attention to the singer’s tempi.¹⁷ While playing, however, I decided to ask myself some distracting questions. They were along these lines: Where exactly is the Enlightenment subjectivity in these notes? Is the regime of absolute monarchy reflected exactly there, in this phrase? Does this arpeggio represent Idamante’s secret sexual agitation, and exactly how?

My mental inquiries were consciously bizarre. It is virtually impossible to sustain such speculations while playing or absorbed in listening to music that is materially present. But the questions are no parody. Musical hermeneutics settles such matters, as evinced by the briefest sample of celebrated domestic varieties: Susan McClary has described Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony as “drift[ing] freely through enharmonic and oblique modulations rather than establishing a clear tonic . . . in this un-

16. See José Gil, “The Body, Transducer of Signs,” *Metamorphoses of the Body*, trans. Stephen Muecke (Minneapolis, 1998), pp. 106–14, esp. p. 106: “The floating signifier relates to the body, this crucible of energy mutations. But what goes on there remains unknown—and will remain so until an adequate semiology (one that can take account of transsemiotic fields) is established.”

17. This aria and its preceding recitative (K.490) were added for a performance of *Idomeneo* in Vienna in 1786. The singer was male soprano Anthony Roth Costanzo.

cannily resembl[ing] the narrative structures that gay writers and critics are exploring today”; thus music reports Schubert’s homosexuality.¹⁸ Lawrence Kramer, describing certain rhythmic and harmonic duplications between the “Chiarina” and “Estrella” movement of Schumann’s *Carnaval*, writes: “I will shortly propose that *Carnaval* sets up musical mirror relations that belong to a larger family of mirror tropes current during much of the nineteenth century.”¹⁹

Yet, as long as I was dealing with real music in real time, I could not establish the metaphysical distance represented by such arguments. When real music is present, the gnostic can be introduced. Yet while playing “Non temer,” the procedure having been performed, the questions became absurd, as if they were being asked at the wrong moment and place about something other than the reality at hand. What, I asked, am I actually thinking about this music? Clearing my mind, I realized that words connected to what was going on did flow in, albeit rarely, but these words had nothing to do with signification, being instead *doing this really fast is fun* or *here comes a big jump*. A musicologist for decades, having made many, many statements about music’s meaning over that time, I acknowledged that during the experience of real music—by this I mean both playing and listening—thoughts about what music signifies or about its formal features do not cross my mind. They can cross it, as in this forced test case, only to be dismissed as ludicrous. While musicology’s business involves reflecting upon musical works, describing their configurations either in technical terms or as signs, this is, I decided, almost impossible and generally uninteresting as long as real music is present—while one is caught up in its temporal wake and its physical demands or effects.

There are differences between listening and performing that should not be ignored; the former hardly involves the same responsibilities and anxieties as the latter. One can more readily depart mentally from hearing music than from performing it, though mulling over the bank balance while your hands continue the sonata by themselves is not unheard of. But that, perhaps, is the point: to reflect, must one in some sense depart? Split a drastic self from a gnostic self?²⁰ Admitting the schism is certainly preferable to

18. Susan McClary, “Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert’s Music,” in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York, 1994), p. 223.

19. Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley, 2002), p. 116; hereafter abbreviated *MM*.

20. Taruskin’s arguments about performance involve the radical shock of accepting this schism. He writes,

The demand that performers be subject to ordinary scientific or scholarly standards of accountability places not only onerous but irrelevant limitations on their freedom . . . and

futile arguing for musical scholarship's relevance to performance.²¹ Yet if performing is a case weighted towards the drastic, moving to listening allows no vastly greater reflective distance or safer haven from the presence of musical sound. Listening as a phenomenon takes place under music's thumb, and acoustic presence may transfix or bewilder; it frees the listener from the sanctioned neatness of the hermeneutic.²² In more practical terms, the experience of listening to a live performance solicits attention more for the performers and the event and far less for the work than is perhaps generally admitted. Even recordings as technologically constructed hyperperformances, which we can arrest and control, are not quite safe as long as they are raining sound down on our heads.

The gnostic moment, in the presence of a performance, can become both absurd and instantaneous, going by in a flash, and, I would add, there is nothing necessarily bad about absurdity or not enduring past the moment.

But the "Non temer" episode must give pause. It may offer no answers to the dilemma *what to do?* Perhaps we should simply acknowledge once more that both formalist and hermeneutic approaches to musical works mean dealing in abstractions and constructs under the aspect of eternity, as activities that will have little to do with real music—the performance pro-

places arbitrary obstacles in the performer's path that can frustrate the goal of performance . . . that of pleasing the audience in the here and now. [Taruskin, "Last Thoughts First," pp. 22–23]

Performers can and should overrule or ignore "the oracle" (intention, historical evidence). Musicologists should consult it; that is their business. Musicological and performer attitudes are separable and not melded into a single, natural act, like "exhaling and inhaling" (Taruskin, "On Letting the Music Speak for Itself," *Text and Act*, pp. 55, 52).

21. Fred Maus (echoing Taruskin) argues that technical music analysis, whose relevance to performance has been recommended in many music-theoretical writings, in fact seems useless for the purpose of performing something well, concluding that this is because performance itself is not an analytical but a compositional act; see Fred Maus, "Musical Performance as Analytical Communication," in *Performance and Authenticity in the Arts*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 129–53. This argument does, however, certify performance's value by smuggling some bigwigs—composer creativity and the immortal works it produces—back in through a side door.

22. Roland Barthes and Roland Havas famously associate one form of listening with the hermeneutic and the religious injunction to heed oracular speech, in "Listening," *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1985), pp. 245–60. Immediately after the separation of the human species from the animal, human listening entailed "deciphering: what the ear tries to intercept are certain signs" and thus listening was "henceforth linked . . . to a hermeneutics: to listen is to adopt an attitude of decoding what is obscure" (p. 245). Yet "modern" human listening transduces the semiotic, "does not aim at—or await—certain determined, classified signs: not what is said or emitted, but who speaks, who emits" (p. 246). This form of listening, along with its attentiveness to corporeality and presence both in the listening subject and the sound source, does not produce "the advent of a signified, object of a recognition or deciphering, but the very dispersion, the shimmering of signifiers" (p. 259). Barthes's debts to Jankélévitch are everywhere evident in his writing, with this—a distinction between gnostic and more drastic listening—being only one minor example.

duced and absorbed, which then disappears. And continue as usual. But musicology's ancillary credo that its insights are relevant to musical performance, as a basis for producing or judging a good performance, will not be abandoned, even in part, without certain agonies.

What the minor personal anecdote signals, however, is not that musicology has misplaced its proper object but that performances themselves could give rise to engagement and need not remain a protected half-hour, something beyond social determination or human limitations about which one can either say, "bliss!" or remain mute. A taste for the drastic need not dictate silence. Yet performances with all their allure need not become just another object awaiting decipherment, a recordable text subject to some analytical method yet to come. To treat them this way would be to transfer the professional deformations proper to hermeneutics to a phenomenon or event where those habits become alien and perhaps useless. If speaking of live performances and thus embracing classical music as drastic means dissecting the gnostic attitude, this is not to dismiss hermeneutics or formalism but rather to say that a great deal remains to be thought about performance, which, with infrequent exceptions, is inaudible to both in practice.

Because live performances give us pause, we must consider the exclusions and stratagems entailed in reverting to souvenirs, to musical works in the abstract and their forms or meanings. It is to ask why the academic discourse devoted to music, whether hermeneutics' search for musical traces of, say, post-Kantian subjectivity or formalism's search for tonal patterns, is comfortable with the metaphysical and abstract and uninterested in the delivery systems that bring music into ephemeral phenomenal being.²³ Turning towards performance means scrutinizing the clandestine mysticism involved in musical hermeneutics (more on this below) because clandestine mysticism could itself be seen as a reaction to forces in play during musical performance. That, at least, is Jankélévitch's diagnosis. Music's effects upon performers and listeners can be devastating, physically brutal, mysterious, erotic, moving, boring, pleasing, enervating, or uncomfortable, generally

23. These delivery systems include not just live professional performance but amateur performances (often of transcriptions or reductions), practicing and rehearsing, playing in the studio while the machines are listening, as well as mechanical musical devices, and of course recording and sound technology as acoustic delivery systems. Jeffrey Masten, Peter Stallybrass, and Nancy Vickers point out that similar exclusions work even in the reception of unperformed arts like literary texts and in language itself because "the idealist tradition has constantly attempted to separate language from its machines . . . from the adulterations of materiality, and consequently from writing itself, which, as the work of the hand, is seen as a debased activity" (Jeffrey Masten, Peter Stallybrass, and Nancy Vickers, introduction to *Language Machines: Technologies of Literary and Cultural Production* [New York, 1997], p. 2).

embarrassing, subjective, and resistant to the gnostic. In musical hermeneutics, these effects in the here and now are illicitly relocated to the beyond, through a passionate metaphysics that postulates the others for which musical gestures or forms, with the sounds they stand for, are media.²⁴ Turning towards performance means considering music's ability to inspire talk of inscription devices, deciphering, and hieroglyphic traces, a metaphorical language that relocates the labor and carnality of performance in the physical motion and material products of machines. Finally, above all, embracing the drastic is to react to being given pause by finding out what might follow the resolve to write about vanished live performances, musicology's perpetually absent objects.

One great merit attached to musical hermeneutics, to the sociological approach to music in general, does need to be paid full due. That high classical music was shaped by social and cultural forces, by national ethos, and that musical works were molded by their maker's psychic individuality are all truisms. In those terms music's social contingency and nonautonomous messiness are patent. Were this not the case, as has often been noted, then why would early Wagner sound like early Wagner and not Schumann, why would nineteenth-century music not be the same as seventeenth-century music, and why would German music not be the same as Italian music? So let us take the broad social formation of musical composition as incontestable. Let us also take it as given that individual composers may aim to convey a discrete sense via musical configurations (for instance, by using musical topoi) and may aspire to affect their audience's beliefs or perceptions by such means. Or may not. Having dealt with Richard Wagner, I have close-up experience with a composer for whom ideology and politics, poetry, philosophy, and theories about theatrical representation were preconditions for efficacious musical results and have lingered over such connections, both in Wagner's music and in opera in general.

But musical hermeneutics refines these unremarkable precepts. Seeking the marks that intention or social formation leave within musical works, we require faith in specificity and legibility and above all the conviction that music's value is defined by connections between individual musical gestures or forms and what they reflect, with a concomitant resistance, sometimes

24.

A metaphysics of music that claims to transmit messages from the other world retraces the incantatory action of enchantment upon the enchanted in the form of an illicit relocation of the here-and-now to the Beyond. Sophism gets extended by means of a swindle. . . . I would conclude, therefore, that music is not above all laws and not exempt from the limitations and servitude inherent in the human condition. [*MI*, p. 15]

nobly overcome, to leftovers beyond this imposed limit. Faith in specificity and legibility means believing that musical artifacts at later points can be read for exact localizable traces, that once upon a time something left a mark, and that reading such traces for the facts they reflect accesses the proper meaning that one should attach to musical sounds. Only in its crudest forms does hermeneutics treat music as strictly analogous to discursive language or musical works as tantamount to other art forms and minimize the differences. To claim that musical configurations express or paint was common coin in Europe in the eighteenth century, when doctrines of mimesis and representation governed aesthetic production. To say the same thing now, however, without any historical awareness, as Janet Wolff does in writing that music does not present “special problems” as a decodable representational language, is not just quaint.²⁵ It shows that contemporary music-hermeneutic writings can present their faith as a truth that terminates history by deeming it wrong, permanently false to think, for instance, that musical works are neither ciphered media nor decipherable text or that music’s beauty is an aspect of its humane value. Yet the forms assumed by hermeneutic faith are culturally and historically contingent and, because the historical pendulum of musical aesthetics has swung between embracing mimesis and barricading music from signification, this motion, this state of unrest, should tell us that music presents some very “special problems.” Precisely because music presents special problems, not least of which is live aural presence, it remains philosophically engrossing.

Musical hermeneutics right now is culturally contingent, for instance, in the sense that it could be seen as one minor byproduct of classical music’s slow-motion death in the twentieth century. To the very degree that musical hermeneutics is promulgated as growth hormone, something that can revive the classical music industry, its consequence upon classical music’s moribund status is made more evident. Classical music, packaged as a transparent social text, will no longer seem a pernicious object that encourages detachment from the world. Realizing this, buyers will be enticed to the cash registers.²⁶ In cold light, such claims seem naïve at best. Utopian longing

25. Janet Wolff, “Foreword: The Ideology of Autonomous Art,” in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppart and McClary (Cambridge, 1987), p. 12.

26. Kramer, reacting to formalist Charles Rosen, writes that there is no “permanent separation between what is musical and what is cultural or historical,” that “denying music discursive meaning mystifies rather than enhances it,” and that “this attitude has increasingly encouraged people to believe that classical music has nothing to say to them” (Kramer, letter to the editor, *New York Review of Books*, 22 Sept. 1994, p. 75). Cusick wrote along similar lines that we are faced with the “dissolution of musicology as a discipline” due to a “global crisis of authority” and waning appreciation of high-art music in the U.S., but that fresh attention to music’s social implications

runs deep within the nostalgia that would bring back, in some new form, the lost delights of a bourgeois era when this now-ossified and marginal repertory was still alive and nearer the center. The aggrandizement of academic musicology, imagined as a major player in the music industry, is painful to behold. What would executives at Sony Classical say? Fresh audiences for opera and classical music will not be conjured up via disciplinary upheavals in elite universities. If they can be conjured up at all at this point, it will be as a fringe benefit of things like the Three Tenors or Andrea Bocelli—middling singer, avid horseman, and tireless recording artist.

Claims for hermeneutics as classical music's savior are shared by what might be called *low hermeneutics* and *soft hermeneutics*. This distinction separates a musical hermeneutics craving the blessing of history or the dead and seeing immanent supra-audible content in musical artifacts from the past (low) from that which acknowledges such content as a product born in messy collisions between interpreting subject and musical object (soft). In soft hermeneutics, where trickle-downs from skepticism and postmodernism have had their effect, correspondences between musical configurations and their attributed meanings are recognized as having been created by a particular subject's behavior towards music, not embedded or encoded in musical configurations per se—that is another truism, but it does bear repetition. Penumbrae like intention and belief are paid their due, as is music's not being a language. The vocabulary characteristic of low hermeneutics on the other hand includes words like *trace* or *mark*, implying the indelible inscriptions left by cultural data upon a permanent recording medium. But, in fact, soft hermeneutics inevitably becomes low as well; hermeneutics' fundamental gesture is determining and summoning authority, not leaving open or withdrawing.

Leaving things open is in fact difficult to do in practice without compromise or backpedaling. For Jankélévitch, music unleashes potential meanings in high multiples, and its promise is that of a "vast future that has been given to us" (*MI*, p. 72). Music, he writes, has "broad shoulders" to bear whatever specific meaning we ascribe to it and "will [never] give us the lie" (*MI*, p. 11). Jankélévitch defines music's ineffability (for some, an uncomfortable word) at times rather neutrally as music's indeterminacy, its mutability when submitted for contemplation, its range of effects, which include seeming to be strange or beautiful noise as well as firing up social or poetic or visual or other associations. It is this that frees us. A coherent

and its specific links to gender, class, and race, along with consciousness of our colonizing position as historians or critics, could address such malaise; see Cusick, "Response," in *Musicology and Sister Disciplines Past, Present, Future*, ed. David Greer (New York, 2001), p. 195.

stance towards the situation would involve not taking advantage of it, hesitating before articulating a terminus, or restricting music to any determinate meaning within any declarative sentence. And, perhaps, drawing back. At least, a coherent stance might mean not saying what musical configurations mean without simultaneously signaling a deficit in seriousness or without proposing too many alternative meanings at the same time. Why repay the freedom we are given by putting the gift-giver in a cage, doing so continuously or without regrets, without wondering what this activity may say? Such statements anthropomorphize musical works, making them into living things towards which we must develop an ethical position. They are not, of course, but the way we cope with them may reflect choices about how to cope with real human others or how not to. Intersections between the philosophy of music and moral philosophy were Jankélévitch's lifelong preoccupation, and these intersections may well seem inscrutable or worthless to Anglo-American scholarship.

Yet musical works are of course always being used or exploited; real ones are used in film and advertising because they are good at doing certain things, sometimes subliminal things, and as unperformed abstractions they are conscripted in scholarship for similar duties. Though musical hermeneutics emphasizes the social contingency of musical works and "hence" (although the one does not at all in fact necessitate the other) delegitimizes mystery and ineffability, hermeneutics itself often involves a profound but clandestine mysticism.

In what sense? Any argument that discovers legible meanings or significations within music is granting music certain grandiose powers. Ironically, music is granted these powers at the very moment that it is delimited, perhaps as compensation for captivity. Behind every hermeneutic act is a sense that when musical configurations are said to carry messages or express cultural facts or release a specific association or construct a particular subjectivity, these become more authoritative—more signally important, more persuasive—than the same cultural facts or associations or constructed objects as conveyed or released by any other media. When I wrote of *The Magic Flute*, "[Mozart's music] imagines what the stage drama does not: the possibility of a nocturnal sun," I was trying to guarantee that the "nocturnal sun" idea (doubts about Enlightenment) would be convincing (*ISO*, p. 103). And saying that the idea was there in music and not the happy-end libretto ensures just that. Such logic depends on what could be called an opera or soundtrack gambit. Music is being used in exactly the same way as operatic music and film music in operas and films themselves. Music's correspondence to, or relationship with, certain words or ideas or images takes things that might in themselves seem unremarkable (whether doubts about En-

lightenment or Gene Tierney walking on the beach in *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*) and, by decking them out with acoustic aura and sonic gift wrap—in the case of the hermeneutic argument, by locating them within music—making them less banal than they are by themselves. The ordinary becomes a revelation.

Ascribing revelatory force to music is a legacy from nineteenth-century musical aesthetics, but it found one outlet in twentieth-century psychoanalytic theories, which wholeheartedly embrace romanticism's hypostatization of musical sounds, paradoxically seen as at once transcendent (therefore all-powerful) and nicely decodable. Perhaps this tack is so familiar that noting how its opera gambit works will seem unnecessary, but marking its clandestine mysticism is nonetheless still worthwhile. This is, for instance, the path Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe follows when, after identifying a preference in "theory of the subject" for visual metaphors and mirrors, he challenges such preferences by addressing the "hither side" of the subject. This implicitly deeper, more a priori "side" to subjectivity expresses itself in acoustic metaphors; it is the "pre-specular" domain to which music belongs.²⁷ Nietzsche, who spoke of listening to language "with the third ear,"²⁸ of getting to the fundamental musicality of language and what is above or below words, is progenitor to what in psychoanalysis becomes the sound of the unconscious. And a good analyst listens transverbally, for the phonic or musical element in the analysand's speech and narratives reveals the "substructures of the soul."²⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe carefully lays out this genealogy without becoming all that suspicious about the way in which music has been exploited in arguments that have dubious "substructures" to spare. Because the musical element is so open to interpretation, so unable to contest whatever supra-audible import it is assigned, conceptions about the psychic ill drawn from outside the musical domain become what the music is saying or revealing.

But specifying the exact revelation made by music and bringing musical configurations into concord with the social world can assume many different guises. In the case of Richard Wagner, a belief in legible correspondences between works of music and the cultural phenomena they encode and expose is the basis for his most notorious political essay, "Judaism in Music"

27. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "The Echo of the Subject," trans. Barbara Harlow, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Poetics*, trans. Christopher Fynsk et al., ed. Fynsk (Stanford, Calif., 1998), p. 145.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 161, 162; the phrase "substructures of the soul" is quoted from Theodor Reik, who, as Lacoue-Labarthe points out, saw the grainy musical component in speech and narrative as that which betrays, being more true. Barthes and Havas also rehearse the musical aesthetics of psychoanalysis; see Barthes and Havas, "Listening," pp. 252–57.

(1850). What exactly separates this scurrilous document from musical hermeneutics right here and now? Wagner is playing musicologist (as he often did) by reading certain formal conventions in music by Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer as ineradicable signs, and truths by the basketful are discovered embodied in musical configurations. That these “truths” are anti-Semitic slanders, and the social or psychological truths Mendelssohn’s music might be said to reveal nowadays would be something more palatable, does not erase a kinship. Wagner’s is simply musical hermeneutics on the side of the devil, and, to the extent that we remain liberal and unprejudiced, we are the angels instead.

Yet any argument that gives musical configurations the power to reveal something concrete about human nature, the human subject, nations, races, or cultures is embracing or at least flirting with the not-so-clandestine Germanic mysticism that Wagner himself, loathed progenitor of musical-ideological evil, did so very well. Leo Treitler has made this point with regard to Richard Eichenauer’s *Musik und Rasse* (1932), a book that

comments how limited music’s representation is; it is never concrete but is connected to stirrings of the human soul and to moods and changes in mood. We can certainly agree with him about this important condition that sets music apart from the figurative and literary arts. But then he asks: “Are there nevertheless ways and means to read out of the disembodied lines of a musical work the face of a particular racial character?” Of course he thinks there are.

Treitler argues that the “question [of race] itself . . . deserves answers of [low] quality,” but this does not go far enough.²⁹ Implicit in his example is the radical point that while one can distinguish devils from angels based on liking or loathing the social conclusions they have drawn out of musical works, the hermeneutic process is the same on both sides. Neither the process nor the global conviction about musical legibility it supports can separate the scurrilous or low quality answer from the acceptable answer.

To juxtapose an argument on the side of the angels with Wagner’s is hardly to discount a multitude of differences, but rather to put pressure on the hermeneutic process per se. Taruskin has written that Stravinsky’s music is the sonic trace of a “stripdown” from humanism to biologism in early twentieth-century Europe.³⁰ *The Rite of Spring* (1913) and *Svadebka* (*Les*

29. Leo Treitler, “Gender and Other Dualities of Music History,” in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 40–41; see also pp. 33–35 on other sociological readings of art in Nazi Germany.

30. Taruskin, “Stravinsky and the Subhuman,” *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, N.J., 1997), p. 382; hereafter abbreviated “SS.”

Noces, 1923) reflect the composer's "lifelong antihumanism" and anti-Semitism, a "celebration of the unquestioned subjection of human personality to an implacably demanding . . . social order—one important precondition for totalitarian states ("SS," p. 391). Musical configurations themselves are mustered in the argument, alongside biographical facts, political history, and scenario analysis. But music is best: "Rigorous music analysis of a professional caliber must have a place of honor in any such investigation, for the music plays the primary role in carrying whatever cluster of values and ideas *The Rite* or any other Stravinsky composition may embody to our minds and hearts" ("SS," pp. 387–88).

The question is not whether the culture-to-music highway runs straight and true or whether the argument is suasive or the documentation overwhelming. What interests me is once more a sense that the historical patterns (the emergence of fascist states) and cultural force fields (biologism and utopianism) and biographical data (Stravinsky's anti-Semitism) will seem less mundane and more securely affirmed when *music* is seen to express them. Again, the point is not that musical works are being explained as reflecting cultural values or biographical facts. It is not even that musical works are being said to reveal something inaccessible, some social truth not conveyed by any other medium, though this is an idea well worth scrutinizing in greater detail. The point is that these ideas and truths are being made monumental and given aura by music.

Mysticism incognito, apart from that phrase about music's "primary role" in delivering ideas, appears in a preparatory reference to the unconscious. Taruskin writes, "Composers were responding to circumstances that, one can only presume, lay below the threshold of their conscious intending."³¹ Freudian romanticism? The political circumstances speak directly through the unconscious to the musical imagination, which conceives these circumstances in sound and gets the hand to inscribe the staff paper. Associating music with the unconscious has that rich history, and associating the unconscious with occulted truth an even richer one. At issue, however, is not even the psychoanalytic moment in the argument. That is a specific instance of the generic norm, the implication that music knows best. This same assumption can be found in Greil Marcus's account of rock music, *Lipstick Traces*, subtitled *A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*—in music, of course, though this history, were it not being discovered in disguise as musical sound, would seem less remarkable.³² Gary Tomlinson

31. Taruskin, "Others: A Mythology and a Demurrer (by Way of Preface)," *Defining Russia Musically*, p. xxxi; hereafter abbreviated "O."

32. See Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

writes about operatic music tracing “the deepest shifting of envoiced hidden worlds” over historical time.³³ In Jacques Attali’s *Bruits*, the original dust-jacket blurb says as much: “To understand the history of societies in terms of the history of their music. The West itself here submitted to analysis. Or, how the matrix of sounds explains the structures of power.”³⁴

What seems important and worth noting, what does matter, and what characterizes devils and angels alike, is the paradox at work in the system. Hermeneutics argues for music’s efficacy in a particular way, seeing musical configurations either as sonic media for embedded signification or, more subtly, as points of departure wherein cultural or poetic associations are released in listeners during their contemplation of the work, upending their sense of self in the process. And yet hermeneutics relies upon music’s aura and strangeness, its great multiplicity of potential meanings, the fact that music is not a discursive language, that musical sounds are very bad at contradicting or resisting what is ascribed to them, that they shed associations and hence connotations so very easily, and absorb them, too. Hermeneutics fundamentally relies on music as *mysterium*, for mystery is the very thing that makes the cultural facts and processes that music is said to inscribe or release (therein becoming a nonmystery) seem so savory and interesting. Music’s ineffability—its broad shoulder—is relied upon so thoroughly and yet denied any value and even denied existence. This is the mysticism that will demonize mystery at every turn.³⁵

Juxtaposing the politically infamous Wagner with liberal academia in the here and now does not suggest that the differences are not obvious or do not matter. Not every writer who makes music speak a supra-audible message is doing so to harm or to mock, and it could well be argued that there is an insuperable species difference between scrupulous documentation and mere assertion. If clandestine mysticism is hermeneutics’ involuntary reaction to music as performed, then even if it does involve illicit relocations into the metaphysical or unexamined convictions that music holds the highest cards, it nonetheless has that sympathetic point of origin. But I am convinced that as long as the genealogies are underplayed and embarrassing

33. Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, N.J., 1999), p. 6.

34. Jacques Attali, *Bruits* (Paris, 1977), dustjacket; translation mine.

35. Allergies to the word *mystery* are endemic to musical hermeneutics:

Formalist thinking . . . offers a comforting sense of mystery to those (mere amateurs or non-initiates) who know very well how music can influence their deepest feelings and convictions, but who don’t want to think that such effects can be obtained through any kind of conscious or social-manipulative grasp. . . . Putting music firmly back into its socio-political context [means] resisting any form of that mystified appeal to its supposedly metaphysical, transcendent or timeless character. [Christopher Norris, introduction to *Music and the Politics of Culture*, ed. Norris (New York, 1989), pp. 8–9]

ancestors put aside, all those fantasies about racial essence embodied in music or the romanticism that genuflects whenever music “speaks,” as long as its mysticism is unacknowledged, then musical hermeneutics is being practiced on quicksand. Conjuring authority out of beautiful noise involves a ruse, and giving music the capacity to convey the best truth remains a romantic cliché and need not be accepted at face value.

For instance, it would be rare to find an opera analysis that does not treat music as a sign or expressive bolus whose decoded significance, understood as going beyond libretto or drama, serves in turn to determine their sense. To cite Katherine Bergeron’s discussion of “clues” in Debussy’s music for *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which “solve the problem” of Mélisande’s character, is to allude to an elegant example of a pervasive assumption that can assume inelegant forms.³⁶ But this is the opera gambit right at the source, and musical statements arise in less enticing ways. When the Countess pardons the Count in act 4 of *The Marriage of Figaro*, it is not that Mozart’s music simultaneously gives voice to some more profound statement of or about forgiveness. Rather, it is the fact that there is a Countess, a Count, a specific dramatic situation, and ordinary words like “Contessa, perdono” sung out loud that has in quite precise ways predetermined the meaning to attach to Mozart’s musical moment. These mundane, visible things feed a conviction that transfigured forgiveness—that specifically—is being conveyed by some very beautiful noise. Hermeneutic faith does not arise in a vacuum, and just as its clandestine mysticism has roots in romantic ideologies musical hermeneutics per se has roots in operatic aesthetics. In that opera both prescribes and affirms music’s emotional power and signifying capacity by attaching musical gestures to specific human situations or passions, it might be seen as a very effective means to ground musical sound in sensible discursive realities.

In *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, Cook puts this point differently: there is no classical musical work that is not inevitably a coproduct, allied to an album cover, or a particular concert and the experience, the situation in which we hear it, to a TV commercial, an image track.³⁷ These cannot be winnowed away. But it is necessary to go further, and not just for the purpose of remarking that media are not transparent and that multimedia should not imply some neutral assemblage of music plus other arts, as if, once more, the delivery systems were unimportant. Beyond opera, contemporary media refresh the old operatic idea that supra-audible others shim-

36. Katherine Bergeron, “Mélisande’s Hair, or the Trouble in Allemonde: A Postmodern Allegory at the Opéra-Comique,” in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton, N.J., 2000), p. 161.

37. See Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (New York, 1998), pp. 81–82.

mer within musical shapes. That idea, with its many postscripts—that these things were branded as those shapes were composed, preforming their composition, immanent for good, hanging on for centuries thereafter, subject to perpetual rediscovery—is also consequent upon a hundred years' experience with another total work of art, the movies. One must thus raise the possibility that a saturation of such total works of art, along with the effects of their technologies, has itself produced and fortified contemporary academic hermeneutic faith. And if rhapsodies to music's autonomy or pure abstractness deny that music gets sticky out of sheer fear of stickiness, one would have to say that rhapsodies to, say, the Enlightenment reflect concerns of another sort. Perhaps a Citroën commercial, where a speedy goal-directed sports car zips down the road to music from *The Marriage of Figaro*, inspired or affirmed one's ideas about a breathless new telos in music around 1786.³⁸ To exclude this as a possibility, to flourish serious documents and music-tracing-the-French-Revolution at every turn, is to demonstrate the glum hegemony of the respectable.

Consuming a diet rich in cinema with musical accompaniment and, no less importantly, being exposed to the technological delivery systems whereby film brings music into being continues to nourish a deep conviction that musical configurations convey information; this along with the softer view that music unleashes proliferating semiotic explosions derives at least in part from both operatic and cinematic experience. Contemporary sensoria have been re-formed by modern technological multimedia, and this leads to amplified convictions about correspondences. The original sensorial transformation—with attendant new multimedia competence, new mastery of polysemic situations—is projected onto pretechnological high art objects (like symphonies), with correspondence becoming those works' *raison d'être* and the only legitimate diagnosis of their import. Perhaps hermeneutics was reborn of cinematic kitsch and manipulation, with the academic platform, like our still-powerful emotions upon hearing sublime classical works, now being in part a Hollywood by-product. Is there anything wrong with that?

Standing back from all genuflecting, one might say that music is stickier and less important than the romantics—including the many still with us—want to imagine. It is at once ineffable and sticky; that is its fundamental incongruity. Words stick to it, as anyone who has tried to get the “lyrics” for Schubert's Unfinished Symphony out of his head knows all too well. Images and corporeal gestures stick as well. Thus claims for music's absoluteness or autonomy, which recur throughout the history of musical aes-

38. On Mozart in the Citroën commercial, see *ibid.*, pp. 6–9.

thetics, deny our oculocentric and logocentric nature, deny that physical grounding and visual symbolism and verbal content change musical sounds by recommending how they are to be understood. This capacity is exploited by film music composers writing or employing so-called anempathic music, which can depend upon the image field's ability to make sound ironic, to write over the mood or significance that the music suggests on its own. During the torture scenes in Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974), *Magic Flute* is being played on a gramophone. The images are not just antithetical to Mozart's beautiful music or to *Magic Flute's* enlightened sentiments. They corrupt the music, and will continue to do so long after the movie is over, because the beautiful music cannot assuage or erase the violence we see, and the violence, in memory, becomes a part of the music. Such phenomena undermine romantic notions about music's overriding force, seen as the power to do more than the verbal and the visible, convey something beyond them, to transcend and survive their limits. The unromantic view would be that music exists in a state of unresolved and subservient alterity in relation to the visible world, or to language and words, as it does to culture or society.

But mysticism vis-à-vis music manifests itself in direct ways, and the clandestine aspect can evaporate almost entirely. Suppose music really does know best ("the matrix of sounds explains the structures of power") and gives access to otherwise lost information, revelations about humankind or its societies that no other art can transmit. Suppose music has important secrets pouring from it and our enigma machine with the correct cylinder merely needs to be put in place; that is a tempting vision.

So tempting, in fact, that it deserves a name: musical works induce the cryptographic sublime. The more impenetrable or complex the mechanism by which it is assumed something important has been encoded by a medium, the deeper the fascination commanded by that medium becomes and the stronger the emotional and erotic charges it exerts.³⁹ Either you "drink in the cryptogram" and suspend desire (*MI*, p. 151), or, because disclosing secrets is a potent gesture, you give in and proceed as usual.⁴⁰

39. Objects that are present but lack or resist meaning are fundamentally erotic, as Peter Brooks has argued. Eros produces the desire to comprehend these objects, despite their resistance, as signifiers. Human bodies are thus semioticized by the desire to know their assumed secrets; see Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), pp. 8, 23–24.

40. For Brooks, this ability to disclose stands in for erotic conquest. But it can also be the power of a religious elite to reveal God's intentions, as indicated by Frank Kermode in *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).

While musical hermeneutics seems by and large unaware that it is in thrall to the cryptographic sublime, popular movies regularly exploit and poke fun at this *mélange* of mysticism and information science that assigns music a starring role. Josef von Sternberg's *Dishonored* (1931), which deals satirically with music as a code for Russian invasion plans, is one early instance of a genre that includes Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), where a melody bears a message that foils German devilry,⁴¹ and even *The Matrix* (1999), where a character named Cypher, with a musicological penchant for seeing concrete information behind beautiful cryptograms, turns out to be a lascivious villain. Musicological preferences for code metaphors have their amusements, not least of them wondering why humanists harbor such affection for technological artifacts and inscription systems that imply inhuman objectivity and accuracy or perfect translatability. The typical prelude, the soft disclaimer about music's indeterminacy that cedes to a *nonetheless* that calls for codes to be cracked, is the admirable remnant of doubt and uneasiness. In Adorno's *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, whose authority is biblical, this is quite a leitmotif:

The method of deciphering the specific social characteristics of music has lagged pitifully and must be largely content with improvisations.

He who would decipher the central content of music cannot use too delicate a touch.

In a sociological deciphering of music its definition [as mime] should not be neglected; vernacular language, in which the word "play" is used to define the mime's work as well as the instrumentalist's, recalls that kinship.

But what the sociology of music promises to the unbiased, what no single inquiry fulfils and the synthesis that keeps getting postponed is not likely to fulfill either—this would be the social deciphering of musical phenomena as such.

Social reception is not one with musical content, not even with the social [content] for which the musical [content] serves as a code.

41. Both movies may be alluding to a genuine musical code language, Solresol, invented by music teacher Jean-François Sudre during the 1820s and 1830s. Solresol allowed verbal language to be translated via elaborate mappings into musical configurations. In the 1830s, Sudre toured France demonstrating his language on musical instruments and interested the French military in its potential intelligence applications. One particular procedure, in which complex strategic commands were trumpeted via music across great distances, was dubbed *téléphonie musicale*. On Sudre, see David Whitwell, *La Téléphonie and the Universal Music Language* (Northridge, Calif., 1995).

Concrete deciphering [of the history of ideas] in music is an essential task of musical sociology.⁴²

Following upon this pasticcio any boxed assortment will seem bland: McClary's "means of deciphering socio-political agendas in apparently self-contained music" (praising Attali);⁴³ Rose Subotnik's "Chopin's oeuvre itself was . . . an extreme in which the cultural values at work can be most clearly deciphered";⁴⁴ Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin on opera that "encodes homosociality and homosexuality" through its "musical signifiers";⁴⁵ or Raymond Knapp writing with approval about bird-calls in the *Pastoral Symphony* as "cryptic" prophecies that have been "partly deciphered."⁴⁶ There are the distinct verbal signatures produced by clandestine mysticism—music reveals things "below . . . conscious intending" ("O," p. xxxi), "deeply hidden things," "secrets," "genuine social knowledge."⁴⁷ Words like *code* and *cryptogram* and *decipher* usher this chthonic discourse into broad daylight because hieroglyphs are at once material objects visible to the naked eye and the enigma these objects promise so persuasively as a hidden secret beyond their surface. But the words are objectivist set dressing that occlude the mysticism they nonetheless help conjure into being.

Perhaps subjectivity arises when one "decipher[s]" oneself as an amalgam of recognized knowledge.⁴⁸ Yet as Roland Barthes put it, decipherers and disentanglers belong to very different subject species, one wishing for an end, the other tolerant of impermanence, even nescience.⁴⁹ And thus the

42. Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York, 1976), pp. 62, 69, 109, 194, 204, 209. In his exegesis of Adorno's writings on music, Richard Leppart notes that Adorno acknowledges music as something "distinctly mystical" while "at the same time, it is a concrete, material practice," stressing Adorno's point that "music is not constituted by a sign system" but a syntactical one. Again and again, as Leppart indicates, Adorno must reconcile his belief in music as cryptogram (which implies signification, in that musical gestures, syntax, forms, or procedures reference their supra-audible social truths and reveal them) with his knowledge of music's indeterminacy and its differences from language (Leppart, "Commentary," in Adorno, *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, ed. Leppart [Berkeley, 2002], pp. 85, 86).

43. McClary, speaking of Attali, in "The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during the Bach Year," in *Music and Society*, p. 17.

44. Rose Rosengard Subotnik, "On Grounding Chopin," in *Music and Society*, p. 129.

45. Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin, introduction to *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference*, ed. Dellamora and Fischlin (New York, 1997), pp. 10, 12.

46. Raymond Knapp, "A Tale of Two Symphonies: Converging Narratives of Divine Reconciliation in Beethoven's Fifth and Sixth," *The Journal of the American Musicological Society* 53 (Summer 2000): 292.

47. Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, p. 62; Elizabeth Wood, "Lesbian Fugue: Ethyl Smith's Contrapuntal Arts," in *Musicology and Difference*, p. 164; and McClary, *Conventional Wisdom* (Berkeley, 2001), p. 5, italics mine.

48. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1990), p. 5.

49. See Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), p. 147.

distinction between low and soft hermeneutics disappears. Soft hermeneutics makes disclaimers, acknowledges epistemological limitations, or repeats the truism that meaning is produced by and within the subject and is not immanent in the object and is thus variable and contingent. But—and this cannot be overstressed—the decipherer's habit is ineradicable from musical hermeneutics. Neither dialectical foreplay, nor the soft caveat that, as Kramer puts it, “meaning is not the cause of the interpretation, but its effect” or that “what is objectively ‘present’ in the work . . . is not a specific meaning but the availability or potentiality of meanings,” can compensate for statements wherein a specific import is indeed ascribed to some aspect of or configuration within the work, in acts of academic authority (*MM*, p. 118). In other words, you cannot hide the nature of the hermeneutic act, no matter how eloquent and well-meant your framing disclaimers. It is built into the very bone, into the moment when the notes are said to be something other (a “nocturnal sun,” perhaps?). One could say it is built into the business, untranscendable, and one must decide whether to make peace with that or not.

Musical hermeneutics' specifically technological swerve, its embrace of codes and mechanisms, has a mixed ancestry based partly in linguistics and in jargon like *semiotic code*. Historically, however, the move from musical hermeneutics as silly frivolity or alluring *jeu d'esprit* (as in the nineteenth century) to musical hermeneutics with laboratory standards should once again be credited to Adorno.⁵⁰ Jankélévitch, sardonically, imagines the hermeneutical stethoscope, a scientific instrument to be placed on a musical work in the right place in order to hear important information. But when (in 1928) Adorno described Schubert's music as a seismograph, an exemplary move was made towards the technomysticism that is now commonplace.⁵¹ That technology, codes, inscription metaphors, and mechanisms flow into musical hermeneutics is not, however, just an entertaining foible. They represent the excluded presence of real music, the material and carnal as displaced onto technology.

Consider the seismograph, a suave metaphor. Stethoscopes amplify

50. Several such hermeneutic *jeux d'esprit* are discussed in *Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism*, ed. Ian Bent (Cambridge, 1996). When German musical hermeneutics became the sociology of music, however, the name change signaled respectability. Sociology differentiated Adorno from such fringe figures or seeming eccentrics as Arnold Schering and Hermann Kretschmar, who popularized the term *musikalische Hermeneutik* in the 1920s, fitting poetic texts under the melodies in Beethoven piano sonatas or discovering concrete narrative explanations for his symphonies. In part to differentiate himself from them, in part to mark his lineage, Adorno chose *Soziologie*. And still, despite immense personal differences between these figures, there were several domains in which their beliefs and tactics converged.

51. See Adorno, “Schubert” (1928), *Musikalische Schriften*, 4 vols., ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main, 1982), 4:18–33.

nearly inaudible sound into louder sound, without crossover from one medium or phenomenon into another. What was sound remains sound, just closer or more clearly heard. Seismographs measure earthquakes, yet also record the earth's murmured groans and imperceptible shifts below the threshold of perception with acuity that far outdoes the human senses. But more than this, their product—the trace they leave on paper, the product perceptible to our senses—is no amplification or direct transportation, not simply motion for motion. The product is motion translated into another medium: graphic inscriptions on paper that will remain abstract or illegible as long as they are taken as themselves.

This is what makes the metaphor so good. In any music-sociological project, music's lines or contours, the sounds that remain inscrutable in mere material-acoustic form, are thus declared to be the incorruptible recording medium for some other. With the seismograph, a strong symbolic nexus goes to work; seismograph equals below, buried, underground, tectonic vastness, the danse macabre of archeological time, inscribed as if by magic, and legible to privileged eyes only. Such notions resonate across several decades and academic cultures with structuralist or Foucauldian givens that what is least transparent to individual consciousness, least intended or calculated, is both most important about a given cultural or historical biosphere and most likely to leave fingerprints on cultural artifacts.

The allure of measuring devices is that they tell the truth without human bias; saying that music is them (or is like them) implies that music is a measuring device, too, and from there it is a short leap to reading it for results. Adorno anticipates this fault, the fault of seeming definitive, saying though music is a seismograph, the cipher it places before our eyes cannot yet be read because our eyes are still flooded by the tears it has inspired.⁵² Because his oeuvre is rich in decryptions of musical texts, the belletristic legerdemain may seem either irritating or scrupulously honest. There is a subversive note sounded nonetheless: what if music were a machine, but one whose mechanism and products remain permanently inscrutable? That Adorno makes the flanking move, citing the still-incapable eye, is at once a symptom of his reservations about the music-sociological project's premises or potential weakness and a preemptive strike from his Judaic side, which rejects vulgar representation and embraces technomysticism as antidote.

Why all the machines? Why the repressive and exclusionary regime of the secret? The gnostic habit aims to expose something imperceptible to the

52. See *ibid.*, p. 33, translation mine: "In irregular jerks, like a seismograph, Schubert's music transcribes a qualitative change in humankind . . . we cannot read it, but it sets ciphers of the reconciliation that will finally come before our failing, tear-filled eyes."

untutored or uninitiated, hidden from the profane. The machines, codes, inscription devices, and anything that sounds like a science fair should thus give pause. Adorno's seismograph is ancestor to Attali's magnetic tape: music "reflects the fabrication of society; it is the audible tape of the vibrations and signs that constitute society . . . prompting us to decipher what is a sonorous form of knowledge,"⁵³ as it is to my photographic "double-exposure" (*ISO*, p. 96), where music is both what it is and the ghostly hidden truth captured simultaneously by an apparatus. Yet if invoking mechanical devices constitutes blatant self-endorsement—music qua machine traces what is there without subjective bias, thus when music and my argument run along the same lines my argument cannot be assailed—there is a less obvious benefit as well.

And this less obvious benefit returns us to the initial quandary: where are material presence and carnality, where has live performance gone, when it produced our love for music to begin with? One answer is that technological images act as their surrogates. According to Jean-François Lyotard, *techné*—the action and labor of machines, the material reality implicit in technology, and the temporality attached to that action—carries implications of concreteness, physicality, and embodiment.⁵⁴ When hermeneutics invokes technology, it reaps those implications of physicality and labor as diversions from its concern with bodiless musical works whose mute value lies in their social or cultural import. Music induces the cryptographic sublime. But reacting to that sublimity by rushing to technological metaphors means relying on false Eros and synthetic carnality for persuasive impact.

The carnal and the material are, it would seem, immensely desirable, even in their displaced form as mechanisms and inscription machines. Yet the carnal and material in their evident and common form, as actual live performances, seem somehow too hot to handle. Music in performance affects us physically, but, as Jankélévitch points out, its physical action can engender spiritual conditions, grace, humility, reticence. Anyone with allergies to words like *spiritual* will reject this point like a bad transfusion. For Jankélévitch, however, the relationship between real music and its action upon performers and listeners—at a nonrepeatable moment and place, in a context that will exist only once and not again—becomes so fundamental, so viscerally powerful and ephemeral, so personal, contingent, fugitive to understanding, that it elicits the unfashionable. Embarrassing reversions may be necessary, to Neoplatonic philosophy, for instance, or its stepchild,

53. Attali, *Bruits*, p. 13; translation mine.

54. See Jean-François Lyotard, "Oikos (1988)," *Political Writings* (Minneapolis, 1990), pp. 96–107; see also Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Form without Matter vs. Form as Event," *Modern Language Notes* 111 (Apr. 1996): 590–91.

apophatic theology (see *MI*, pp. 111–19, 130–55). Embarrassment and reversion are difficult and, like understatement and silence, to be entertained for precisely that reason. Jankélévitch's argument acknowledges music's precious humanity and social reality, not by insisting that musical works trace historical facts or release specific sanctioned cultural associations, but by emphasizing an engagement with music as tantamount to an engagement with the phenomenal world and its inhabitants. For instance, playing or hearing music can produce a state where resisting the flaw of loquaciousness represents a moral ideal, marking human subjects who have been remade in an encounter with an other.

One can react to performed music not just by imagining machines or mechanical processes as forms of explanation but by translating the relationship between sounds and performer or listener into safe forms, as connections between the musical notes and human facts: sexuality, subjectivity, the body, political faiths, cultural habits. The heat added when the human factor is adduced masks a sanitizing impulse in the enterprise, but to point this out does not mean that the impulse to retreat or translate is without appeal. But it does indicate that, in the case of music, formalism (music theory and analysis) and hermeneutics should not be glaring at each other because they are twins.⁵⁵ Formalism and hermeneutics are not simply two celestial bodies occupying an otherwise empty discursive universe. Rather, their trajectories have been determined by a powerful object, the antagonist visible in the very distortions its presence has engendered. This antagonist is performed music's action, as opposed to an abstract musical work's formal shapes or representational implications.

Moreover, music theory and formal analysis, while they have solid merits, do not get at what used to be called the music itself, though this has been both touted as their advantage and condemned as their flaw. On the condemning side, Ruth Solie argues that formalism's affection for technical musical detail among other things pays homage to immediacy as an intellectual placeholder for an unmediated musical experience, which, one could imagine, is tantamount to a performance. And immediacy as a category is to be suspected because it can become a pretext for excluding certain political understandings of music.⁵⁶ One can fully agree with her diagnosis of

55. A synthesis between the two attitudes can be arranged, as it has been by Taruskin, who relies "on close technical analysis precisely because hermeneutics and musical analysis have so often and so complacently been declared, from both sides of the presumed divide, to be antagonistic" ("O," p. xxx). The synthesis is smooth because the attitudes are not antithetical, and it is logical that they marry in a global *explication de texte*.

56. See Solie, "What Do Feminists Want: A Reply to Pieter van den Toorn," *Journal of Musicology* 9 (Fall 1991): 399–410.

formalism's ideological aims without at all agreeing that formalism deserves the one backhanded compliment it is being paid. Formalism's rush to descriptive taxonomies or technical analyses is just as distancing as hermeneutics' rush to metaphysical signifieds, tandem flights from music as performed. A resistance to taking performance and performances seriously should thus be disentangled from distaste for formalism and its ideologies because formalism, though it may cite immediacy and the music itself, has no business doing so. Like hermeneutics, it is routinely fixated upon works and inattentive to actual performances. And because neither camp talks all that much about real performances, there is no basis for deciding that one or the other is reacting more (or less) powerfully to real music.

Adopting a deconstructive apparatus and scoffing at presence like a man can truly seem perverse when real music is at issue. Unlike another aural phenomena—language or literature in oral form—real music does not propose a “simultaneity of sound and sense” that in thus positing a signifier and signified can itself be “convincingly deconstruct[ed].”⁵⁷ Real music is a temporal event with material presence that can be held by no hand. So why assume that musical sound made in time by the labor of performance is well served by recourse to a philosophical tradition that indeed deconstructs presence, but does so easily because it traffics exclusively in metaphysical objects? This is not to say that metaphysics has no relevance to music as a philosophical concept. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has nonetheless pointed out that phenomena that are events may not be particularly susceptible to a philosophical tradition in which the metaphysics of the subject or insights of Saussurean linguistics are basic sustenance. For such phenomena, philosophies of action, labor, and *techne*, as he puts it (elaborating upon Jean-Luc Nancy), and a critical discourse accounting for the “movement, immediacy, and violence” in events being “born to presence” prove more fertile.⁵⁸ What Gumbrecht calls meaning culture and presence culture do not gain legitimacy by excluding each other. One of them is perpetually in danger of appearing illegitimate in the academy—presence culture. Yet meaning culture—scholarship's privileged culture—is inadequate to deal with certain aesthetic phenomena, events like performed music in particular.

57. Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago, 1989), p. 15. This is the basis on which, for instance, Sayre argues that verbal performances are deconstructable: oral poetry relocates “meaningful signification” to the “vernacular moment, the voiced utterance.” He argues that “in this scheme experiential presence merely supplants textual presence, and oral poetry falls victim to . . . the notion of *s'entendre parler* which Derrida so convincingly deconstructs in *Of Grammatology*” (ibid.).

58. Gumbrecht, “Form without Matter vs. Form as Event,” pp. 586–87. Here too, as in Jankélévitch, a hint of medieval theology makes an appearance.

If immediate aural presence has gotten some votes of no confidence in contemporary musicological discourse, this may reflect unspoken uneasiness about performed music as an ephemeral object, subject to instantaneous loss, but equally importantly as something that acts upon us and changes us. When it is present, it can ban logos or move our bodies without our conscious will. This uneasiness leads to what Jankélévitch calls “bearing a grudge against music,” the intellectual’s grudge par excellence (*MI*, p. 7). For him, this is the grudge of false moralists, reflecting certain antihedonist pathologies. This grudge rejects the idea that forces unleashed in performance count more than immortal works and the elaborate readings or formal descriptions that musicology assigns such abstractions. Prescribing a critical distance from the performance experience, ever since Brechtian estrangement, has seemed to guarantee liberal credentials. Yet this can foreclose much that is of value, both intellectually and morally, in encountering a present other at point-blank range.

Thus general suspicions of aural presence need themselves to be resisted. Presence can be demonized for reasons that seem programmed, for not all those who argue for its worth are vulgar. And reflexive scorn for music’s ineffability is equally contestable. Ignoring real music—the musical event—and scorning ineffability go hand in hand because they are interdependent. It is real music, music-as-performed, that engenders physical and spiritual conditions wherein sound might suggest multiple concrete meanings and associations, conflicting and interchangeable ones, or also none at all, doing something else entirely. Real music, the event itself, in encouraging or demanding the drastic, is what damps down the gnostic. And some florid antiarias to gnostic proscriptions against the drastic attitude are very much in order. Freeing oneself from the “devastating hegemony of the word” in experiencing performed music does not mean that the human subject has lapsed into sensual idiocy (*MI*, p. 140). Aesthetic pleasure, the apprehension of beauty, is not evil, nor is it just a hedonist consolation.⁵⁹ Doubting that musical works spell out cultural data or simply mulling over the mysticism inherent in arguments that they do is not naturally appalling. Musical hermeneutics’ most coercive aspect is exemplified in claims that acknowledging or valuing music’s ineffability constitute, as Kramer has put it, a “destructive

59. In *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, N.J., 1999), Elaine Scarry writes, “The banishing of beauty from the humanities in the last two decades has been carried out by a set of political complaints against it. But . . . these political complaints against beauty are themselves incoherent” (p. 57). Beauty neither makes us inattentive towards injustice (because, far from distracting us from the phenomenal world, it makes us more aware), nor, in being stared at, or listened to, does it wreak damage either upon the beautiful object or the individual who apprehends it; see *ibid.*, pp. 58–68.

irrationalism” typical of those who “justify unspeakable things” (*MM*, p. 5). Note the slippage, which must not go unrebuked. Somehow, philosophers like Stanley Cavell, Lydia Goehr, and Naomi Cumming, who suggest (echoing Jankélévitch) that music’s implications proliferate against discipline, or who point to performed music’s presence as a promise of life, are suddenly out there with unnamed villains and unspeakable historical crimes.⁶⁰

So, after being given pause, why not take intellectual pleasure from music not as a work but as an event? Why not disentangle some virtues from a situation wherein the words explaining music are these: *doing this really fast is fun*. Between the score as a script, the musical work as a virtual construct, and us, there lies a huge phenomenal explosion, a performance that demands effort and expense and recruits human participants, takes up time, and leaves people drained or tired or elated or relieved. Philosophical treatises, the Bible, novels, memoirs, paintings, poems, these texts (and even plays, consumed on paper) lack that really big middle term, that elephant in the room. Any argument that throws music’s exceptional phenomenal existence into some convenient oubliette in order to get over distinctions and difficulties is made in bad faith.

Would attending to performances entirely damp down the gnostic, as my performance of the aria from *Idomeneo* seemed to suggest? No. The experience of musical performance is generous, above all in opera or music theater (indeed, all sung music), where verbal and visual aspects furnish a simultaneous ground under the sonic circus, the ground where these other strata shape one’s sense of a music that cannot be detached from them. For this reason—but more important, to see what follows upon the resolve to speak of ephemera—I want to turn to three operatic performances, first to Laurie Anderson in her performance piece *Happiness* on 15 March 2002. That performance raised questions about secret knowledge—the object of hermeneutics—and its loss. And, with my second instance—two performances of *Meistersinger* in 2001—it suggests that a gnostic moment can arise in unexpected ways.

At one point in *Happiness*, Anderson put on eyeglasses with tiny built-in microphones, which amplified not her voice but the anatomical sounds made by her head. When she clicked her teeth together, there was a loud boom with no reverberation. It was an uncanny moment. Guided by earlier references to the World Trade Center’s destruction, I marked that sound as a musical translation. The original of this translation was recorded in the Naudet brothers’ documentary about the disaster, the sound of bodies hit-

60. See Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994); Goehr, *The Quest for Voice*; and Cumming, *The Sonic Self*.

ting the ground from great heights.⁶¹ No one who has seen the documentary forgets the sound, which the filmmakers chose not to censor or cut. Anderson imitated it. My secret knowledge of the hidden signified (because I had seen the documentary) is what triggered real terror at that moment in her performance.

We so often deal hermeneutically with the past and its artifacts, yet seldom do we reflect upon artifacts we have right now and what they will mean in the future. Here is a chance. Will some audience years hence see a pirate videotape of *Happiness* and hear the sound and, without the secret, find themselves perplexed? And, even if some spectator were told by a musicologist of the future what the historical reading of the sound should be, would he or she find that knowing no longer means what it did in 2002? That knowing means loss of the perhaps equally terrible aura the sound now engenders only as long as it remains undefined? The very fact of recording—as any future audience can experience this event that came into presence (to echo Gumbrecht) only via its repeatable surrogate—does that not alter a basic alchemy, making the event an artifact, handheld and under control, encouraging distance and reflection? Gnostic satisfactions can become pale. What may be left in Laurie Anderson's recorded sound is a remnant whose force approaches the force once predicated on a rare amalgam—live presence and secret knowledge—but do so precisely because the secret knowledge has been lost, as has what was once alive. To believe that original signification can become quasi-permanent, or to value nondetermination for the freedom that allows alternatives to arise and to exist? That is the choice when confronting artifacts from the past as well, and perhaps that choice depends on which loss is regretted more deeply.

Music's cryptographic sublimity is a contributing force in the clandestine mysticism that appears as a bystander in musical hermeneutics, just as music's ineffability is what allows musical hermeneutics to exist. Music is ineffable in allowing multiple potential meanings and demanding none in particular, above all in its material form as real music, the social event that has carnal effects. The state engendered by real music, the drastic state, is unintellectual and common, familiar in performers and music lovers and annoying nonmusicologists, and it has value. When we cannot stare such embarrassing possibilities in the face and find some sympathy for them, when we deny that certain events or states are impenetrable to gnostic habits, hence make them invisible and inaudible, we are vulnerable. For, denying mystery, the perplexing event, the reticence such things may

61. See *9/11*, DVD, dir. Jules and Gedéon Naudet (Paramount, 2002).

engender, means being prey to something that comes to call at its nocturnal worst, as coercive mysticism and morbid grandiloquence.

Words like “coercive mysticism and morbid grandiloquence” do bring Richard Wagner back to mind and with him my two *Meistersingers* at the Met in December 2001, which, like *Happiness*, put drastic and gnostic attitudes on a collision course. At the first performance, on a Wednesday night, Ben Heppner lost his voice spectacularly. This became evident when he cracked on the high Gs and As while singing the first strophe in the first verse in the preliminary version of the Prize Song, and at that point I made a quick calculation that he had five more strophes in two full verses in the preliminary version, and nine strophes in three verses in the final version in the last scene, in short lots more high Gs and As not even counting the act 3 quintet. This was when my eyes closed in despair. But I told myself to open my eyes and pay attention because what we were witnessing was extraordinary raw courage and sangfroid. Heppner would go on singing knowing what lay ahead. Now the other performers seemed, somewhat psychotically, still to inhabit their roles in Wagner’s jolly Nuremberg, while Heppner became a unique human being in a singular place and time, falling from the high wire again and again.

I was transfixed not by Wagner’s opera but by Heppner’s heroism, and what was important was not the apperception of concealed meaning through hermeneutic alchemy (as in *Happiness*) but the singular demonstration of moral courage, which, indeed, produces knowledge of something fundamentally different and of a fundamentally different kind. Perhaps one could call it drastic knowledge. But the schism on 5 December—essentially, a split where the performance drowned out the work—caused something to happen in the second performance three days later, when Heppner had recovered his voice. What happened followed upon the scene-change music in act 3, a passage full of candy-store delights: the curtain flies up, the sunny meadow is revealed, the banners wave, onstage trumpets are unmuffled, and the male chorus sings Guild theme songs at the top of its lungs. But when the curtain went up on 8 December 2001, I experienced a momentary optical hallucination, a genuine neurological misfire. I saw stage figures not as they were, in Technicolor Germanic finery, but shrouded in black with white faces and tragic eyes under bright white lights.

On one level what had happened was that secret knowledge had decided to restage the performance for me. I know the literature on *Meistersinger*. I know the unspoken anti-Semitic underside to the comedy. I know Wagner’s essays, and I know the opera’s reception history in twentieth-century Germany. Finally, I know the claims that above all in the music, in the non-signifying discourse whose secrets are for that reason so much more im-

portant, something appalling is given voice.⁶² But what triggered the neurological restaging, the necessary condition for the gnostic mentality to appear as a hallucinatory symbol, was the earlier performance, where, in someone obsessed by Heppner's courage, the drastic attitude had prevailed. The second performance would not have fractured had my experience of the first not been so radically attentive to what was taking place, so inattentive to Wagner's *Meistersinger* and what its music means or conceals.

But there is the problem. This first person, this I who isn't going to forget, must be willing to walk onstage once what counts is the live performance that once took place, experienced only by those who were present. That is the reason why casting one's lot with performance and the drastic has seemed so difficult; there is no place to hide. There is the irony that, however responsive and attentive we are to the presentness of performance, the present pastness it must have to make possible any act of writing is not negotiable. There is no hideaway in the universalizing endemic in academic discourse. For here is a final question: Once the autobiographical tidbits have been passed around, how long and how hard is history or intention used to erase their taste, which is the humble and unadulterated taste of the subjective? There is no place to hide behind formalism's structural observations about works or texts. And not even behind academic majesty, because once absorbed by things that are present no longer we acknowledge that our own labor is ephemeral as well and will not endure. A performance does not conceal a cryptic truth to be laid bare. But accepting its mortality, refusing to look away, may nevertheless be some form of wisdom.

62. See Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1995), pp. 117–35.