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White Musical Mythologies:
Modernism and the Ontology of Sound from Paris to New York

By

Edmund Mendelssohn

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Mary Ann Smart, Chair

Professor Nicholas Mathew

Professor Suzanne Guerlac

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Abstract

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This is a history of the idea of presence in modern music. Its opening hypothesis is that, whereas in nineteenth-century contexts the performed presence of music in concert halls inspired critics and scholars to write, during the twentieth century writing began to supersede performed music. My narrative follows a series of modernist composers who sought to intensify the presence of sound in their moment, yet who wound up creating what Jacques Derrida termed a “written being” (*l’être écrit*) of musical presence, a linguistic double or “written echo” that would henceforth play a central role in how Euro-American art music would be understood, created, and even experienced. I then examine the ethical valence of the composerly bid to produce presence. Each of these composers took cues or appropriated forms of expression from non-European others as they adopted what may be termed an ontological disposition toward sound, believing that sound has a deeper metaphysical reality than what had previously been conveyed in western music. Describing Erik Satie’s fascination with medieval Catholicism (Europe’s pre-modern other) and the unconscious states revealed in occult practices like hypnosis (Chapter One), Edgard Varèse’s creation of a fantasy-primitive Mayan soundscape in his 1933-4 composition, *Ecuatorial* (Chapter Two), Pierre Boulez’s endeavor to recreate in sonic form the spirit possession rituals that he witnessed during travels to Bahia (Chapter Three), and John Cage’s appropriations of “Eastern” ideas (Chapter Four), I approach these musicians in dialogue with contemporaneous French writers (such as Bergson, Bataille, and Artaud) in a narrative that extends from fin-de-siècle Paris to Derrida’s day. My main contention is that the idea of presence in twentieth century music was always a *white mythology*: a Euro-American ideal of sonic “purity” and autonomy that privileged “the West” over its others.

To Xiansheng and Furen

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I am indebted to Mary Ann Smart’s mentorship for the past seven years at Berkeley. She was the first in whom I confided my past struggles, and the first to support me to be the best student and scholar I can be. As my dissertation advisor, she has gone above and beyond what one could ever expect, reading multiple drafts of crucial documents right up to the deadline, diving deep into my unformed prose to suggest new ideas, new ways of phrasing and formulating what I am trying to say, and offering invaluable guidance on the structure, content, and flow of every chapter included here. She was (and is) always there to push me through any complacency, to urge me to think deeper about my assumptions and to question the connections I take for granted, and is always ready to productively challenge me during my headstrong moments. She patiently guided me through my master’s and qualifying exams, sent me to London to present my first conference paper and sat with me to work on my French pronunciation before my first AMS paper. She cooked dinner for me and a group of her other advisees during regular writing group meetings at her home. Mary Ann has patiently read and re-read every page of this document and her voice is intermingled with mine. She also gave a seminar during my last year on sound, sensation, and meaning in twentieth-century France, partly out of her own openness and curiosity, but also, I think, to support me. I would not have become the writer or thinker that I am now without her.

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* *
*

It is sometimes said in acknowledgment sections that anything that one may find valuable in the following work is owed to the influence and insights of others while any misprisions or oversights are strictly my own. Despite how clichéd this phrase may appear, only those who know me the best understand how true this aphorism is in my case.

Rocklin, CA. July 2021

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But bid life seize the present?
 It lives less in the present
 Than in the future always,
 And less in both together
 Than in the past. The present
 Is too much for the senses,
 Too crowding, too confusing—
 Too present to imagine.

Robert Frost¹

* *
 *

Prelude: A Silence Filled with Speech

An oft-recounted event. The audience entering the Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock, New York, on 29 August 1952 came to hear a program of new music by members of the budding New York School. To start the penultimate piece on the program, pianist David Tudor walked onstage, sat before a piano, and quietly held a stopwatch. He turned the pages of a blank score (that was both titled and copyrighted), opening and closing the piano lid to mark the three precisely timed movements of John Cage's "silent prayer." "What they thought was silence," said Cage of the audience, who, as he chided, "didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds."¹ As the story goes, wind stirred outside during the first movement; rain began to patter the roof during the second; and once it was too clear that Tudor would not play a note, audience members began to whisper and walk out during the third.

In the decades following the premiere of 4'33", a flood of ink has filled Cage's silence. 4'33" demands that one make sense of it, perhaps by reading the composer's well-known reflections about his experience the previous year in an anechoic chamber at Harvard University: hearing his blood flowing with the tinny ringing of his nervous system, Cage proclaimed there is no such thing as silence.² One can also read, in his book called *Silence*, Cage's affirmation that any listener is free to unite the hodgepodge of sound around them into their own perceptual composition.³ Anything can

¹ John Cage, in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2003), 70; David Nicholls, *John Cage* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 58-60.

² John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 134.

³ "Here we are concerned about the coexistence of dissimilars, and the central points where fusion occurs are many: the ears of the listener wherever they are. This disharmony, to paraphrase Bergson's statement about disorder, is simply a harmony to which many are unaccustomed." John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 12.

be music when so heard. Thus 4'33" has been read to anticipate many discursive threads in the arts and philosophy, including the "Death of the Author" that signaled the "birth of the reader," since, as Roland Barthes famously wrote in 1967, "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."⁴

The legacy of Cageian silence depends on an endless murmuring flow of speech, narratives and questions about what music is, what "the musical work" is, and about the status of the author and of traditional aesthetics.⁵ Whole books have been devoted to 4'33".⁶ It has been read as a symbol of the blurring of "art" with "life," or of aesthetics with banality, that art and music critics have traced backwards at least to Cage's predecessor Erik Satie, and forward through Marcel Duchamp toward conceptual art.⁷ It has been read as a liberation of sound on par with Cage's French correspondent (who spent most of his life in New York), Edgard Varèse, and as a quest for a music made of "all sound" akin to early electronic music à la Pierre Schaeffer.⁸ While some affirm that Cage flattened music into sound, thus flattening the composer's ego, Richard Taruskin (citing Lydia Goehr) claims contrariwise that Cage elevated sound into the traditional aesthetic realm of the concert hall, ultimately affirming the composer's own writerly authority.⁹ Still others locate this authority in the inner space of the listener. Philip M. Gentry reads 4'33" as a "window into the tense

⁴ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," from *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 148; for the connection between Cage and Barthes's "Death of the Author," see G. Douglas Barrett, *After Sound: Toward a Critical Music* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 22.

⁵ In her discussion of 4'33", Lydia Goehr remarked that although "Cage's 'work' reflects an attempt to shed music of its institutionalized constraints imposed by composer, performer, and concert hall," Cage nevertheless "maintained control (however minimal) over the music" by using the traditionally established framing of score, piano, and venue. Cage "aims to bring music back into the real or natural world of everyday sounds," but despite "whatever changes have come about in our material understanding of musical sound" upon listening to a performance of 4'33", "the formal constraints of the work-concept have ironically been maintained." Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, revised edition (Oxford University Press, 2007), 264.

⁶ Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010); Dieter Daniels, Inke Arns, eds. *Sounds Like Silence; John Cage, 4'33"*, *Silence Today: 1912, 1952, 2012* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2012).

⁷ For the connection between Cage and Satie, see Alan M. Gillmor, *Erik Satie* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 36, and Cage's own essay, "Defense of Satie," from Richard Kostelanetz, ed. *John Cage: An Anthology* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1970), 77-84; for Satie and the everyday, cf. Nancy Perloff, *Art and the Everyday: Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) and Steven Moore Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian: From Cabaret to Concert Hall* (Oxford University Press, 1999); for the collapse of aesthetics and banality vis-à-vis Duchamp and conceptual art, see Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁸ Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: The MIT Press, 1999).

⁹ Richard Taruskin, "Ne Plus Ultra (Going As Far As You Can Go)" from *Music in the Late Twentieth Century; The Oxford History of Western Music* vol. 5 (Oxford University Press, 2010), 67-73.

negotiations between one's private sense of self and one's relationship with the world."¹⁰ This refrain echoes others who take Cage's silence to have been a reaction against the intense and bombastic expressions of, say, avant-gardist Pierre Boulez, another of Cage's French correspondents, or even a "queer resistance" to the abstract expressionist ego.¹¹

4'33" has been read to anticipate now-current questions of identity politics, of self-formation and sexuality. It has also been read as a denial of any overt questioning, a "Beat Zen" resistance to meaning.¹² It has been read, in short, as both an affirmation and denial of authority and of romantic aesthetics, as a refusal and profusion of meaning, and as an effacement and disclosure of selfhood.

It has been read...

* *
*

Musical presence: a dichotomy

Despite appearances, John Cage (1912-1992) is not the subject of this dissertation. To re-tell a re-telling, with all the possible ironies inherent in "reading" a piece like 4'33", is to perform the kind of problem that the following pages will examine. To speak of "reading" a piece of music (especially a strange one like 4'33") is already, borrowing a phrase from Paul de Man, to "allegorize" reading. In 4'33", the act of interpretation is presupposed as a central feature of the Work, cleaving an "outside" from an "inside" by separating the observer from whatever interior world or hidden meanings the Work contains. The act of interpretation is therefore foregrounded at the same time that a definitive "reading" becomes impossible. The Work "deconstructs" itself.¹³ The problem

¹⁰ Philip M. Gentry, *What Will I Be: American Music and Cold War Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 121.

¹¹ Jonathan D. Katz, "John Cage's Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse," *GLQ* 5/2 (1995), 231-252.

¹² Caroline A. Jones, "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego," *Critical Inquiry* 19/4 (1993), 628-665.

¹³ De Man described the "allegory of reading" in Proust, noting that while the narrator of *À la Recherche du temps perdu* invites the reader, through lush descriptions of various phenomena that engage multiple senses, to plunge right into Marcel's world, Proust nevertheless foreground the act of reading—since Marcel's love of novels is what compels his imagination—and therefore imposes a distance. An "allegory of reading," in this sense, refers to the self-reflexive nature of *À la Recherche*, to the fact that the work is, in some sense, "about" reading. For de Man, Proust's novel thus "deconstructs" itself, since it is impossible, by nature, to experience Marcel's sensory world naively and simply *and* to take these phenomena, as Proust seems to imply, as a meta-reflection on the very act of reading, creating, and interpreting literature. For Gumbrecht, therefore, de Man's "allegory of reading" describes literary works that foreground the inadequacy of language's referential power. Literary "deconstruction" in de Man's sense occurs when a work demonstrates, through its own narrative logic, that "language cannot refer." Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), see esp.

described in this dissertation involves the increasing importance of reading and writing, of allegorization and mythologization, for twentieth century musical modernism. 4'33" is perhaps the all-too-easy exemplar of this problem—in fact, the only all-too-easy exemplar to be found here.

This problem has to do with a dichotomy of musical presence. Music is alive for its moment and then vanishes; ephemerality is its nature. Every special experience, the goosebumps, the shock, the reverie, comes after the moment in which sound is created. Like the “now” moment, music constantly slips away—or as Henri Bergson had it, “nothing is less [present] than the present moment.”¹⁴ One can only account for the present (from French *le présent*, or Latin *praesentem*, “immediate” or “in sight”) in retrospect. Since many traces of absent pasts linger in every experience of the performed present, music embodies a dual temporal structure. It is here and then gone, and every movement of a finger on a key or of breath through a horn is afforded by, and is only thinkable in relation to, whatever one retains from the past.

The experience of music “in the present” may be termed the *performed presence of music*, music’s transient life in a specific space for a time. This sense of presence aligns with the usual connotation of the term in and beyond music scholarship. Presence usually refers to that which is beyond meaning, or, to paraphrase Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, that which is beyond meaning-based modes of interpreting any particular object, whether a work or even an experience.¹⁵ Presence has a lot to do with sensation, immediacy, and with discarding modes of interpretation that would privilege textuality, discourse, *écriture*. This is the sense of presence that Carolyn Abbate invoked when she called, in “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?,” for a new ethics of musical interpretation that would direct our scholarly gaze toward the transient, or “drastic,” effects of music in performance as opposed to the abstract meanings that may be summoned through “hermeneutics”—that is, through the exegetical “reading” of Works as texts.¹⁶

Yet the performed presence of music is already gone. As soon as one recalls a musical moment, and especially as soon as one speaks or writes about it, music is but a lingering trace: an echo, a memory that is shaped (in part) by how one wields words. A basic—though perhaps counter-intuitive—premise of this dissertation will be that this lingering trace of music, whatever one grasps or refers to when one writes, is *another form of presence*—in fact, it is the only “presence” we can really know. This claim is counter-intuitive because to speak of “presence” is usually to infer that we can wade backward through the lingering traces of absent music to recapture something of that one-time-only event. Presence means being in touch with phenomena in their spatial and temporal specificity. However, since the “now” in which music occurs is always outside itself, hollowed out by its relation to the near future while already shot through with traces of many pasts, it is apparent that *presence cannot be said actually to exist*. There literally “is” no presence other than the leftover trace, the echo or double that one may grab, reshape, and mould through words to become something else.

57-78; Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Presence Achieved in Language (With Special Attention Given to the Presence of the Past),” *History and Theory* 45, no. 3 (2006), 318.

¹⁴ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 150.

¹⁵ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Carolyn Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004), 505-536.

In contrast with the performed presence of music, this other form of presence, which is somewhat like a “linguistic double,” is what might be termed the *written presence of music*. This is to paraphrase Jacques Derrida, who claimed that Being or presence, a central notion of western philosophy, had only ever been a “written being” (*l’être écrit*).¹⁷ This claim was part of Derrida’s deconstruction of foundational metaphysical beliefs that had structured Euro-American (i.e. “Western”) philosophical thought. He derived the term deconstruction from Martin Luther, who used the Latin *destructio* to connote a method of questioning and de-constituting the theological heritage of the Church, and from Martin Heidegger, whose *Destruktion* carried Luther’s quest further, referring to an unravelling of the founding concepts of *ontology*—the discourse, science, or knowledge (*logos*) of being (*on*).¹⁸ The most significant part of Derrida’s deconstruction for the purpose of this study will be his conviction that western thought in general rested on a faulty ground because every form of Idealism—whether one thinks of Christian belief or of philosophies having to do with existence—presuppose that the “now” moment, the present, is somehow stable and self-sufficient. If the “now” is the general form of any idea or percept—any referent—then “now” is no longer a spatio-temporal specificity, but rather a general form: Being. This is what is meant by “presence” in the sense of *praesentia*, an abstract form of “being there,” of *there-ness*, that is the condition for any ideality to be plausible. Even to speak of “Being” is already to presuppose that there is something enduring, even transcendental, that exists beyond the particular “now,” a kind of Divine Presence that, Derrida argued, had been produced within the frame of a particular metaphysical “epoch” (an idea to which I will return).

The distinction between the performed presence of music and the “written being” of music may be understood, along these (dense) Derridean lines, as a modulation of the Heideggerian distinction between lowercase “being” (in German *Seiend*, or French *l’étant*, often translated as “entity”) and uppercase “Being” (*Sein* or *l’Être*). “What do we mean by saying ‘this is a being’? What does it mean to be? *Être/Sein* is nothing. You can never find anything anywhere that we can call *Sein*, and yet *Sein* is presupposed each time we say ‘this is a being.’”¹⁹ Being/*Sein* is not an entity: it is something of a mirage created by a language built on the distinction between ideal and sensible, between signified and signifier.²⁰ Derrida’s intervention was to contend that the difference between “Being” and “beings” had sprung from the same metaphysical structure that had bolstered western philosophy. This was a dualistic and hierarchical metaphysics according to which the intelligible subordinates the sensible as mind subordinates body, man subordinates woman, and “the West” subordinates “the rest.” Derrida’s deconstruction of the “metaphysics of presence” can be restated (in a less modish way) as a critique of the supposed self-sufficiency and endurance of presence, a critique which exposes, and (in Derrida’s words) thus “de-sediments” and “de-constructs,” all the binary oppositions that had structured what he termed *logocentric* metaphysics, literally a metaphysics centered on the Logos—the Word of God or principle of Reason, an Ideal linked with speech.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), esp. 31-37.

¹⁸ Derrida, quoted in Ning Zhang, “Jacques Derrida’s First Visit to China: A Summary of his Lectures and Seminars,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 2, no. 1 (2002), 153.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁰ The lessons Derrida derived from Saussurian linguistics in this regard will be discussed below; Cf. “Linguistics and Grammatology” from *De la Grammatologie*.

From here the Derridean weeds may quickly spread. It suffices to say, for now, that this dissertation will attend to the historical forms that the dichotomy of musical presence took during the twentieth century by following a series of modernist composers who each sought to intensify the performed presence of music. By seeking to produce shock, violence, or even boredom, and by foregrounding the novel effects of sound in its moment, however, these modernists wound up propagating and intensifying certain metaphysical beliefs about sound. They sought music “in the present,” yet ended up creating a “written being.” I therefore begin from a heuristic. Whereas in nineteenth-century contexts the performed presence of music in concert halls came conceptually before music’s discursive elaboration—inspiring composers and their critics to write about what music can mean and what music is (and also to write more music)—by the twentieth century it became possible for this relationship to be reversed. In short, *whereas music once came before writing, in the twentieth century, writing began to efface music.*

This is not to presume that music was ever neatly separable from “writing” during romanticism. Rather, the very idea of music’s autonomy with respect to forms of writing was partly an affordance of writing itself: Thomas Christensen has demonstrated, for instance, that four-hand piano transcriptions allowed musicians and critics, in the words of Austrian piano pedagogue Eugen Eisenstein, to “awake[n] the spirit and breath dormant in these forms”—that is, in transcriptions of Haydn or Beethoven playable by a pair of friends at a piano. “A meaningful, radiant performance” may bring this spirit to life, giving the listener a sense—maybe a fantasy—of the event that was to occur in the concert hall.²¹ Similarly, when E. T. A. Hoffmann wrote his famous essay about Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, the philosopher and poet contemplated this music in solitude, consulting a four-hand transcription and re-living the grand sounds of the concert hall while reflecting on his own spiritual condition. He then articulated a notion of musical metaphysics, claiming that abstract instrumental music may take listeners “out of the everyday into the realm of the infinite”: “Music reveals to man an unknown realm, a world quite separate from the outer sensual world surrounding him, a world in which he leaves behind all precise feelings in order to embrace an inexpressible longing.”²² This “inexpressible longing” became emblematic of romantic musical thought, poised between the sacred and the secular.²³ Beethoven’s sounds—or, more precisely, Rossini’s—echoed in Arthur Schopenhauer’s ears, too, when he remarked that music allows a listener, through the paradoxically immediate medium of sound, to experience a torrent of emotions—joy, anger, striving, and melancholy—without attaching these feelings to a specific worldly

²¹ “It is for this purpose that a four-hand performance of well-arranged works is to be most highly recommended.” Eugen Eisenstein, *Die Reinheit des Clavier Vortrages: Dem Idealismus in der Tonkunst* (1870), quoted in Thomas Christensen, “Four-Hand Piano Transcription and Geographies of Nineteenth-Century Musical Reception,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52, no. 2 (1999), 266.

²² Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann, “Beethoven’s Instrumental Music,” from *E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism*, ed. David Charlton, trans. Martyn Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 96, 237.

²³ Karol Berger, *A Theory of Art* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. 133-138.

situation.²⁴ By *presenting* emotions in their pure form, music could directly “copy” the Will, which lies beyond a specific individual, yet is deeply embedded in every individual’s psychic life.

In Hoffmann’s day as in the twentieth century, therefore, the performed presence of music was only knowable through music’s lingering traces. The idea of music’s profound presence in the concert hall was as much a creation of music criticism as the sudden “surprise” chord in Haydn’s “Surprise” Symphony was the product of a clever composer’s play with musical convention. In either case, presence is already discursive: the performed presence of the concert hall is presupposed by a four-hand piano transcription; the presence of Haydn’s “surprise” chord is already writerly.²⁵

However, even if the immediacy and profundity of romantic music was something of a writerly conceit, at least this music was accorded “spirit and breath”: if Eisenstein really believed that a transcription could awaken the spirit or breath of a piece, then the performed presence of music, whether on a piano or in a concert hall—or on a piano as a means to imagine the concert hall—was given priority. Where was the spirit and breath in the Maverick Concert Hall? The well-known notions of music’s metaphysical existence that Hoffmann, Eisenstein, and company articulated were perhaps the first modern formulations of the written being of music, or the metaphysical “double” of music that compels philosophers, composers, and musicologists to write, and which takes form as we write. After the turn of the twentieth century, however, as French modernists brought listeners down deliberately from Hoffmann’s “infinite realm” to the everyday, and as avant-gardists laughed in the face of meaning, things changed. Which leads us back to where we started. Not specifically to that all-too-easy exemplar, 4’33”, but to a dichotomy that characterizes perhaps all music—a dichotomy that Cage seems to have exploited for all it was conceptually worth in 1952.

The present study begins from the conviction that the performed presence and the written presence of music comprise a shifting historical ratio, and while different actors in specific contexts gave more weight to one side of the dichotomy or the other, the written achieved predominance

²⁴ “[Music] does not ... express this or that particular and definite joy, this or that sorrow, or pain, or horror, or delight, or merriment, or peace of mind; but joy, sorrow, pain, horror, delight, merriment, peace of mind *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without accessories, and therefore without their motives. Yet we completely understand them in this extracted quintessence.” Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. I, trans. R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1909), 338; for Schopenhauer the Rossini-loving flautist, see Yael Braunschweig, “Schopenhauer and Rossinian universality: on the Italianate in Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of music,” in Nicholas Mathew and Benjamin Walton, eds. *The Invention of Beethoven and Rossini: Historiography, Analysis, Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 283-304.

²⁵ As Nicholas Mathew suggests, the Haydn’s “surprise” chord is a musical “*reductio ad absurdum* ... inasmuch as it consists of parameters as elementary as contrast, loudness, suddenness, and textural repleteness, all compressed into a split second.” It is “barely more than an abstract template for what makes something interesting at all, since its identity is almost entirely dependent on the background of seriality from which it stands out—the successive iterations of what would rapidly become one of his most reiterated tunes.” In other words, the surprise is only a surprise when a listener already knows basic eighteenth-century composerly norms. Nicholas Mathew, “Interesting Haydn: On Attention’s Materials,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 7/3 (2018), 673.

through the twentieth century.²⁶ This is to nuance Michael Gallope's assertion that music is philosophically compelling because it presents a "paradox of the ineffable"—in his own words, "music appears as a sensuous immediacy at the same time that it is mediated by forms and techniques."²⁷ Depending on context, the ratio may shift: musicians and critics do not always value "sensuous immediacy" as much as "forms and techniques."

But while the narrative that follows begins from this heuristic, it ends by emphasizing the ethical valence of the composerly endeavor to intensify the presence effects of music. In distinctive ways and through different means, the figures studied here—Satie, Varèse, Boulez, and Cage—took cues, arrogated ideas, and appropriated forms of expression from non-European others. "Presence" was, as we will see, almost an ethnographic category. Boulez, for instance, positioned himself as a master of "forms and techniques," participating in a flurry of technical discourse about advanced music, even as he believed that "sensuous immediacy" was something one could perceive in certain non-European ritual practices. The shock, the "delirium," and the "collective hysteria and enchantment" of the ethnographic other—in his case, the writhing body of a Candomblé practitioner in the throes of spirit possession—needed to be re-mediated through forms and techniques, hence Boulez's method and concept of writing (*écriture*), as I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, was a technique to give form to sensuous immediacy—to write presence. Much of the dissertation will trace these exoticist tendencies across modernist musical practice: the fascination exerted on Satie and fin-de-siècle mystics in his circle by medieval Catholicism (Northern Europe's pre-modern other, ever since the early Romantics) and by the unconscious states revealed through hypnosis and other more occult practices (Chapter One); Varèse's obsession with Miguel Angel Asturias's surrealistic novella, *Legendas de Guatemala*, and his repurposing of Asturias's translation of a Mayan text for his 1933-4 composition for small orchestra, *ondes martinot*, and bass voice, *Ecuatorial* (Chapter Two); Boulez's journey to Brazil with the Compagnie Renault-Barrault (Chapter Three); and Cage's haphazard appropriations of words and ideas from various "Eastern" sources as he expatiated about sound (Chapter Four). I place these musicians in dialogue with contemporaneous French writers and other contemporary oddballs in a narrative that extends from fin-de-siècle Paris to Derrida's day, pairing Satie with Bergson, measuring Varèse by Georges Bataille, listening with Boulez to the exoticist vocal gymnastics of Antonin Artaud, and finally turning a Derridean lens on Cage. The process of learning moves in both directions: approaching musicians' neo-orientalist fantasizing via contemporary French philosophy affords a new, musically inflected view of the now venerable Derridean critique of presence.

²⁶ This is to take another cue from Gumbrecht's suggestion that "every human contact with the things of the world contains both a meaning- and a presence-component, and ... the situation of aesthetic experience is specific inasmuch as it allows us to live both these components in their tension." Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 109.

²⁷ And again: "if music is a sensuous immediacy, it cannot be immediate to our experience without taking recourse to some form of mediation." Michael Gallope, *Deep Refrains: Music, Philosophy, and the Ineffable* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 10, 246.

The claim

White Musical Mythologies: Modernism and the Ontology of Sound from Paris to New York argues that foundational modernist beliefs about musical presence—specifically, the notions that music has a metaphysical status “beyond words” and that sound allows an intuitive grasp of a deeper reality—arose through a kind of sonic colonialism. Explicitly, the idea of presence in twentieth century music was always a *white mythology*: a Euro-American ideal of sonic purity and autonomy that assumed the ideological privilege of “the West” over its others. I thus draw from Derrida’s contention that western metaphysics (poorly) concealed a fundamental ethnocentrism, and I endeavor to demonstrate that the composers described here adopted, in their own distinct ways, an ontological disposition toward sound, positing that sound has a deep metaphysical reality.

This signaled a major change in how musicians understood sound in relation to the exotic. Whereas European composers of past centuries occasionally borrowed musical styles from “the Orient,” infusing certain operas or instrumental works with an exotic flavor by imagining the other, I suggest that twentieth-century modernists began to think of the Other *as* sound: the noise or vibration outside “the West,” present beyond what one can represent. In other words, these composers no longer endeavored to re-create other musics, but sought instead to incorporate the Other into the Same, precisely by *writing* the sonic other.

Writing—in practice and in theory—played a central role in these composers’ endeavors to produce ever more potent effects of presence and to think of “sound” as something more real or powerful than the outworn norms of European music. Whether in Satie’s half-winking *phonométopgraphie*, Varèse’s “spatialized music,” Boulez’s concept of *écriture*, or Cage’s philosophy of sound, non-European expressions and “Oriental” spirituality were construed, implicitly or explicitly, as fodder for new forms of musical writing, new ideas of sound, and new means of musical production.

Derrida’s phrase “written being” therefore functions for this study as a means to approach the idea of sonic ontology from a historical perspective, keeping Derrida’s own ethical orientation in view. As he claimed on the first page of *De la Grammatologie*, logocentrism, or “the metaphysics of phonetic writing (for example, of the alphabet),” amounted fundamentally to “the most original and powerful ethnocentrism.”²⁸ These words are worth re-reading, since it seems that Derrida—or at least “deconstruction”—has been frequently dismissed as apolitical, or at least wielded in a way that neglects Derrida’s ethics.²⁹ Musicology has certainly borne this out. Certain scholars applied Derridean terms to music analysis during the 1990s—finding, for instance, the Derridean *suppléments* or minor grammatical elements that make a Mahler symphony resound, or the “deconstructive play with unity and plurality” in works by Beethoven or Schumann that, in Lawrence Kramer’s words,

²⁸ “... le *logocentrisme* : métaphysique de l’écriture phonétique (par exemple de l’alphabet) qui n’a été en son fond—pour des raisons énigmatiques mais essentielles et inaccessibles à un simple relativisme historique—que l’ethnocentrisme le plus original et le plus puissant, en passe de s’imposer aujourd’hui à la planète.” Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 11. All translations mine unless otherwise indicated.

²⁹ See Terry Eagleton, “Marxism without Marxism,” in Jacques Derrida, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, et al., *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 83-87.

“model a general cultural practice: a practice that resists as well as pursues, challenges as well as embraces, the nineteenth-century ideology of organic unity and subjective wholeness.”³⁰ In recent decades, meanwhile, from “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?” onwards, music scholars have by and large held that music’s ineffable presence fundamentally resists French obsessions with “grammar”—music is always outside the text.³¹ When deconstruction enters music studies, in other words, it most often functions either as a tool to re-describe musical structures, or is taken, along with so-called poststructuralism in general, as a threat to music’s actual sounds. To date, however, Derrida’s critique of metaphysics, and specifically his contention that ontology itself was a white mythology par excellence, has not been adequately acknowledged—which is to say that the ethical imperative of deconstruction has been overwritten.

As Robert Young wrote: “if one had to answer... the general question of what is deconstruction a deconstruction of, the answer would be, of the concept, the authority, and assumed

³⁰ Martin Scherzinger, “The Finale of Mahler’s Seventh Symphony: A Deconstructive Reading,” *Music Analysis* 14, no. 1 (1995), 69-88; Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice: 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), these words quoted from 212-213, see esp. 178-215; for a (lengthy) synopsis of Derridean terms culminating in a deconstructive reading of Chopin’s A Major Prelude, see Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Deconstructive Variations: Music and Reason in Western Society* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 39-147; and for general reflections on music and deconstruction during the 1990s, cf. Martin Scherzinger, “Music in the Thought of Deconstruction / Deconstruction in the Thought of Music,” *Musicological Annual* 41, no. 2 (2005), 81-104; Christopher Norris, “Music Theory, Analysis and Deconstruction: How They Might (Just) Get Along Together,” *IRASM* 36, no. 1 (2005), 37-82.

³¹ See Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?” and Gallope, *Deep Refrains*, esp. 252-258. Since Abbate’s call for a musicology attentive to the “drastic” bodily experience of music in its moment appeared in 2004, some have responded by examining drastic experience as a means to re-think the phenomenology of vocal or operatic performance, while others have attended to the historical conditions that made ideas of “drastic” immediacy or “the body” thinkable in specific moments of the past. Two examples of the former phenomenological camp are Michelle Duncan, “The Operatic Scandal of the Performing Body: Voice, Presence, Performativity,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3, (November 2004), 283-306; and Clemens Risi, “Opera in Performance—In Search of New Analytical Approaches,” *The Opera Quarterly* 27, no. 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2011), 283-295. Scholars in the latter “historicist” camp argue, in Elisabeth Le Guin’s words, that “what a bodily sensation is, as an experience, can only be approached through what it means within the culture that introduced that body to itself in the first place,” or as James Q. Davies put it in a deceptively simple phrase, “all physical truths require cultivation.” Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini’s Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 6; James Q. Davies, *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 7. For two very different approaches to musical performance that focus especially on bodies, see Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015); and Atau Tanaka and Marco Donnarumma, “The Body as Musical Instrument,” from *The Oxford Handbook of Music and the Body*, ed. Youn Kim and Sandler L. Gilman (Oxford University Press, 2019), 79-96.

primacy of, the category of ‘the West.’”³² Evidently, we have not recognized that certain beliefs about sound—beliefs that developed as modernists imagined and appropriated forms of non-European expression—continue to shape how music scholars think about the ontology of sound today. *White Musical Mythologies* suggests that crucial twentieth-century attitudes toward sound, including the very belief that sound *has* an ontology which a composer (or a scholar) might reveal, are historically entangled with “the West’s” ethnocentrism. Though ontology is typically used as a neutral term for the “being” of something (like sound), I will contend that ontology remains, to quote Emmanuel Lévinas, a “philosophy of power”: an intellectual “imperialism” that imposes a historically “western” way of understanding existence on whatever object is studied.³³

“What happened to music?”: the scaffold

Before sorting through more Derridean weeds, some context might help. Around 2010, as a bright-eyed and naïve jazz student who had left sunny California for the east coast during his late teens, I found a spirit and feeling in the prestigious New York jazz scene quite unlike what I thought I heard from the great jazz albums produced by Impulse or Blue Note records during the 1950s and ‘60s. Not only was the jazz scene dominated by institutions that pumped out hundreds of talented (or not) student performers every year into a jobless market, but the academicization and specialization of “contemporary improvised music” made it seem that one needed to be dry and cerebral to be hip.³⁴

At a certain point along the jazz school road, I stopped loving what I was doing. In hindsight, I see that while my experience was in many ways idiosyncratic, my (limited) time in the jazz world (such as it was in Manhattan in the early 2010s) reflects an overall disenchantment that had already occurred in classical genres. What I did not know was that the story of the over-intellectualization of twentieth-century Euro-American art music was already familiar to musicologists. “Advanced” music in the United States became, more and more, an intellectual pursuit by specialists in ivory-tower enclaves after the inauguration of the first PhD programs in music composition post-World War II. In Taruskin’s words, this was an “age of technocrats.”³⁵ It is well known (by now) that the academic

³² Robert J.C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 51.

³³ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l’extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 33.

³⁴ See Eitan Y. Wilf, *School for Cool: Academic Jazz and the Paradox of Institutionalized Creativity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

³⁵ According to Louis Menand, the Golden Age of American higher education (1945-1975) saw “the adoption of a self-consciously scientific model of research” as federal money poured into universities to fund scientific research during the Cold War era. “The idea that academics... could provide the state with neutral research results on which pragmatic public policies could be based was an animating idea in the 1950s university.” The rise of the “research professor,” who denied explicit political “ideology” so as not to offend his grantors, coincided with the inclusion of music composition in the university. In this context, Taruskin wrote, “it was successfully argued that technically advanced music composition could be regarded as a form of scientific research,” which

field of music composition became ever more specialized during a Cold War era in which the American academy placed high value on personal autonomy—an autonomy that composers like Milton Babbitt sought through aesthetic autonomy.³⁶ In Europe, though the composers associated with Pierre Schaeffer’s *musique concrète* studio at the Radiodiffusion Française or with the *Studio für elektronische Musik* in Cologne did not have academic pedigrees like Babbitt in the U.S. or like Wolfgang Steineke at Darmstadt, nevertheless the competition for ever more technological innovation in the context of the Cold War and for ever more theoretical sophistication following music’s increasing specialization fueled these early electroacousticians’ researches in sound.³⁷ Cage and Tudor, meanwhile, read Norbert Wiener hand-in-hand with Marshall McLuhan, and their use of new technologies—contact microphones, homemade oscillators, and computers—inspired generations of composers in academic settings to make the medium central to music’s message.

Studying this pre-history gave me some solace that the difference I sensed between the old records and the “technically advanced” jazz of this century—prolix and impressive yet often, to my mind, vapid—was not altogether unjustified. The lengthy road leading to this dissertation therefore began with a simple question (which then required a great deal of help to articulate and to pursue). *What happened to music?* And less simply: how and why did twentieth-century musical modernism, based in an ethos of being heroically of the present (as Michel Foucault said of Baudelaire’s modern attitude), and composed of musicians who constantly sought to amplify the momentary effects of sound in *le présent*, tossing off the discursive norms of the past, evolving through tense relationships with many pasts, often through a restive and self-reflexive spirit that we can call *avant garde*—why did this heroic modern tradition wind up giving so much weight to discourse after all?³⁸

amounted to “giving up all pretense to the kind of subjectivity normally associated with the arts.” Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 73-75; Richard Taruskin, “Et in Arcadia Ego; Or, I Didn’t Know I Was Such a Pessimist until I Wrote This Thing,” from *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 8-9.

³⁶ Cultural pluralism—an attitude of “Who Cares If You Listen?”—went hand-in-hand with a positivistic view of knowledge—hence “The Composer As Specialist” (the original title of Babbitt’s infamous essay). Martin Brody, “‘Music for the Masses’: Milton Babbitt’s Cold War Music Theory,” *The Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 162-164.

³⁷ Jennifer Iverson, *Electronic Inspirations: Technologies of the Cold War Musical Avant-Garde* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 23-48; Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

³⁸ “Modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to ‘heroize’ the present.” Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” from *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 40. As in Benjamin Piekut’s use of the term, “avant-garde” will be used in a conceptual register in this dissertation, not to refer to specific movements (like Dadaism, surrealism, or the like), but rather to the “revolutionary ethos” that, in Matei Calinescu’s words, characterizes the “sharp sense of militancy” and “heroic ... struggle for futurity” that many twentieth-century artists shared. Benjamin Piekut, *Henry Cow: The World is a Problem* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 2; Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 95-97.

Rather than re-tell the story of this over-intellectualization, however, I endeavor instead to examine the philosophical implications of the dichotomy of musical presence, keeping this history in view. The “historical closure of metaphysics” (an idea I return to below) had occurred, for Derrida, by his own day, the 1960s, and the “historical closure” or waning of modernism is often dated to this period, too. According to Perry Anderson, the advent of the color television, the supreme technology of simulation, announced a new cultural logic in the early 1970s—one that Fredric Jameson famously described as a superstructural expression of a late capitalist economy driven by the multinational corporation.³⁹ Nevertheless, it is difficult to say exactly when modernism ended, and hard to name what happened after. “Postmodernism” seems no longer in vogue, perhaps because the term lacks specificity: as Jean-François Lyotard conjectured even before the term became an academic shibboleth, postmodernity perhaps “is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state,” a “state [which] is constant.”⁴⁰ Otherwise said, any given stage of modernism can give way to a “post”-modern moment, which becomes the basis for a new modernism, and so on. There are always “counter”-modernisms within modernism.⁴¹ Some now prefer the term “contemporary” to refer to the period—anywhere from 1945 to the present—in which modernism became historical.⁴²

I understand modernism as a self-contradictory project that aimed to recuperate a form of non-alienated experience, but which also required an advanced critical apparatus—music criticism, academic and technological jargon, specialized elite knowledge, etc.—that led to a different kind of alienation. The modernists studied here sought, for instance, to convey through shock, revelation,

³⁹ Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1998); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁴⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 79. Calinescu, too, included “postmodernism” as one of his “five faces of modernity”: indeed, the “post”-modern is another species of the modern. Cf. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*.

⁴¹ Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?”

⁴² A “contemporary” artist, according to Paul Rabinow, is fully conscious of the afterlives of modernism, taking up modernist forms and attitudes at a second order level of engagement. For Amir Eschel, this historical distance grants both contemporary artists and their audiences the ability to reflect upon, to better understand, and to productively work through certain traumas and forms of estrangement particular to the era after the holocaust. “Poetic thinking,” in the contemporary, is a means of personal autonomy. Sianne Ngai, meanwhile, has argued that “our” contemporary time, far from the avant-garde battle cries of the past, has committed itself to a range of banal “aesthetic categories”—the cute, zany, and interesting—hence “our” aesthetic experience today is primarily shaped by the low-level generated by “cute” advertising and commodity culture, “zany” slapstick comedy and the bustling bodies of corporate life, or the “interesting” information put forward on the internet, in news, in contemporary art criticism, in academic books, etc. Personal autonomy is, at best, a dull thrill. Paul Rabinow, *Marking Time: On The Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008); Amir Eschel, *Poetic Thinking Today: An Essay* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2012).

boredom, violence, or any number of abrasive affects, an abiding sense that something is wrong with us, and that the estrangements of modern society, of consumer culture, capitalist ideologies, what have you, might be shorn in a profound moment of presence. This is necessarily the story of an irony, however, since while modernists sought to amplify the performed presence of their music—to create shock, to open up new forms of non-alienated experience, and to convey something far beyond “meaning”—they wound up with an ontological discourse about music. The “presence” that they sought, after all, is dichotomous.

In a sense, the dichotomy of presence is at the heart of musicology, or music as an *-ology*, a *logos*: a discourse or science. “How does one write about music?” That is, how does one write about something that vanishes seemingly without leaving a trace, that seems to resist language even as it moves like language and invites language? Moreover, this dichotomy of musical presence, with the related questions of music’s metaphysical status and the increasing importance of writing in the twentieth century—all of this has to do with a broader dilemma that has haunted many humanistic fields for a half century.

A dilemma of metaphysics

If one takes a Derridean view of presence (as I do), then everything—every experience, every observable phenomenon in the world—can be taken to be a construction, of a sort. This line of thought leads back toward Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy, which maintained, in Suzanne Guerlac’s words, that “we cannot know things in themselves (the absolute) but we can know phenomena, nature as representation, because we construct it according to the operation of our cognitive faculties.”⁴³ These cognitive faculties act, to quote Jacques Barzun’s succinct precis on Kant, like a waffle iron on batter.⁴⁴ The Derridean response to this Kantian sense of “construction” would be that, since Kant’s *a priori* representational faculties already presuppose consciousness in the form of presence, then even this sense of construction is born of logocentrism—the metaphysic that separates an inside (the realm of the mind, the creative cognitive power of the subject) from an outside (the noumenal, whatever is really there in itself). Ultimately this metaphysics is born of phonetic language, which already assumes that speech is the living breath of the mind, the “inside” of language, whereas writing is the body exterior to the soul. So “construction,” in a Derridean sense, would refer to the power of language to shape how reality is parsed according to faulty metaphysical presuppositions. Everything comes down to language, to the metaphysics presupposed by the structure of language, since, in Derrida’s own words, “western metaphysics, as the limitation of the meaning of being within the field of presence, is produced as the domination of a linguistic form.”⁴⁵ With this kind of reasoning, as Gumbrecht recounted in *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, a hoard of so-called poststructuralists and longwinded Derrideans imposed a “soft terror”

⁴³ Suzanne Guerlac, “Duration,” from Mark Sinclair and Yaron Wolf, eds. *The Bergsonian Mind* (forthcoming from Routledge). Cited with the author’s permission.

⁴⁴ Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present; 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 508.

⁴⁵ Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, 37.

on the humanities for decades, determined as they were to destabilize anything and everything resembling metaphysics.⁴⁶ The flood of ink continues.

By claiming that presence does not actually exist except in the form of a “linguistic double” or lingering trace—the “written presence” of music—I do not mean to simply echo the post-linguistic-turn refrain that, *hélas!*, language is ultimately powerless to refer to anything at all, and that everything one might describe as being “there,” present in the world, is in fact some kind of construction reducible (in some sense) to pen scratches. Rather, *language carries a power to produce presence*, to have an enduring sway over what music may be taken to mean or to be. This power is not simply the power to forge “meaning”: as Steven Rings pointed out, language has a “deictic” power to shape how one even hears music in the first place.⁴⁷ Fundamentally, Derrida *had a problem with* the occlusion of things under the heavy weight of language—though Derrida was somewhat (though not completely) unique in his insistence that this occlusion came by virtue of the nature of phonetic language itself. As cultural theorist Fuoco B. Fann has demonstrated, Foucault, too, shared Derrida’s basic view that phonetic writing—which Derrida called “the medium of the great metaphysical, scientific, technical, and economic adventure of the West”—was always bound up with ethnocentrism and with the very idea of ontology.⁴⁸

Derrida seems to have been subtler than Gumbrecht’s “soft terrorists.” He set out, once again, to deconstruct—which did not necessarily mean to “destruct,” but rather to expose the premises of—what he termed an “epoch of metaphysics,” or “the age of the sign,” which was

⁴⁶ “Despite all its revolutionary claims, and its confidence that it has the intellectual potential to bring ‘the age of the sign’ to ‘closure,’ deconstruction has ... to a large extent relied on soft terror to shore up the existing order in the humanities.” Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 54.

⁴⁷ Rings defines this deictic power as the “attention-directing (or ‘pointing’) character” of language about music, noting that Vladimir Jankélévitch’s descriptions of the music of Ravel or of Fauré, for instance, may sway a reader’s apprehension of this music. Philosophical writing is not simply descriptive; it is also transformative. Steven Rings, “Talking and Listening with Jankélévitch,” from Michael Gallope and Brian Kane, “Colloquy: Vladimir Jankélévitch’s Philosophy of Music,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 218-223.

⁴⁸ Fann demonstrates that Foucault’s 1963 essay “Language to Infinity” anticipated Derrida’s own critique of the metaphysical privilege granted in western thought to phonetic writing in *Grammatology*. Since, as Foucault wrote, “writing, in Western culture, automatically dictates that we place ourselves in the virtual space of self-representation and reduplication” “since writing refers not to a thing but to speech,” phonetic writing had been thought to carry “an ontological status” unknown in cultures that use non-phonetic written systems (like China). In a similar way, the fact that a phonetic text is a “double” of speech, representing things through the medium of speech, meant, in Derrida’s view, that “alphabetic writing is ‘representing a representer, supplement of a supplement,’ which indeed ‘increases the *power* of representation.’” Observing this similarity in Foucault and Derrida’s thought regarding phonetic language, Fann writes: “while Derrida and Foucault argued over [other] issues, they had one thing in common: the question of phonetic language, specifically, the privilege granted [in western thought] to phonetic language.” Fuoco B. Fann, *This Self We Deserve: A Quest after Modernity* (Berkeley: Philosophy and Art Collaboratory, 2020), 37, 133, and 140.

“essentially theological.” But even as he did so, he acknowledged that this epoch of metaphysics “may never end. Its historical *closure* is, however, outlined.”⁴⁹ An end is not the same as a historical closure. I cannot say I do much to recuperate or “reconstruct” metaphysics in this dissertation; instead, I describe the musical outlines of its historical closure. For musicians had already been hard at work “deconstructing” the metaphysical façade of western reason decades before Derrida wrote his books. Perhaps deconstruction was “always already” musical.

My impression that a “written being” became ever more central in twentieth century music is a transposition of Derrida’s (rather elusive) argument that the historical closure of metaphysics came about as the concept of writing (*écriture*) “comprehended” or overwhelmed domains that had previously been gathered under the sign of “language.”⁵⁰ The idea of language to which Derrida referred famously derived from Ferdinand de Saussure, for whom all western languages, precisely because phonetic writing doubles the sounds of speech, presuppose a metaphysical distinction between the written signifier—the word as it appears on a page—and the signified idea that a word represents—an idea best actualized in the voice during the act of speaking. This distinction between signifier (writing) and signified (voice) defined the difference, for Saussure, between western phonetic languages and “ideographic” systems, the “classic example” of the latter being Chinese—a system in which writing can depict things and ideas independently of a phonetic system.⁵¹ For Saussure the phonetic system was indeed the “inner system” of western languages, hence writing was exterior, merely a “supplement” to speech. Derrida’s intervention was to point out that the very idea of the signified, with its ideal metaphysical status, is actually produced by “the play of signifying references [*renvois*] that constitute language.” Playing on the dual meaning of *renvois*—a reference and also a return—Derrida stated that “there is no signified that escapes” this play: every signified is constituted by a play of references, and hence returns to writing, “eventually falling there [*éventuellement pour y tomber*].”⁵² To return is thus to fall. In effect, Derrida claimed that metaphysics had already fallen into writing.

For some time now, ... here and there, by a gesture and according to profoundly necessary motives, ... we have said “language” for action, movement, thought, reflection, consciousness, unconsciousness, experience, affectivity, etc. We tend now to say “writing” for all that and more...⁵³

⁴⁹ “L’époque du signe est essentiellement théologique. Elle ne *finira* peut-être jamais. Sa *cloture* historique est pourtant dessinée.” Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, 25.

⁵⁰ “In all meanings of the word, writing *comprehends* language.” Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, 16.

⁵¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 2009; originally published 1986), 26; Cf. Fann, *This Self We Deserve*, 38.

⁵² “Il n’est pas de signifié qui échappe, éventuellement pour y tomber, au jeu des renvois signifiants qui constitue le langage.” Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, 16.

⁵³ “Depuis quelque temps, en effet, ici et là, par un geste et selon des motifs profondément nécessaires, dont il serait plus facile de dénoncer la dégradation que de déceler l’origine, on disait « langage » pour action, mouvement, pensée, réflexion, conscience, inconscient, expérience, affectivité, etc. On tend maintenant à dire « écriture » pour tout cela et pour autre chose.” Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 19.

I have wondered about the “we” (“on”) implied in this passage, since Derrida gestures toward a larger context without making it clear. This “we” might simply refer to Derrida himself, a rhetorical tack to make his claims seem inevitable, as if suddenly, *aujourd’hui* (in the 1960s), the concept of writing arose to encompass “not only the physical gestures of literal inscription, but also the totality of what makes [inscription] possible.” Not only “the signifying face,” but also “the signified face itself.”⁵⁴ If this is the case, the reader remains in Derrida’s text, sorting through his notorious rhetorical flourishes and perhaps learning to “apply” the deconstructive apparatus to other texts. It is well known that the deconstructive method aimed, first, to arrest binary oppositions—like “writing” versus “language” or, more precisely, “writing” versus “voice”—and then to collapse these formerly opposed metaphysical pairs, revealing what makes the opposition possible.⁵⁵ In this case, Derrida contends that a game (*jeu*) of difference and deferral (*différance*) made both “writing” and “voice” possible, the former associated with exteriority and materiality, the latter with interiority and ideality.⁵⁶ Once the metaphysical premises are exposed, *voilà*, the very difference between “writing” and “language” becomes an epiphenomenon of a “primary writing,” the “archi-trace” or foundational structure of deferral, delay, return, etc., that metaphysics (now rendered fictional) had long concealed. Hence “we” can use the word writing (in Derrida’s expanded sense of the term) to describe more or less anything.

However, if we take Derrida’s “we” in a more local or restricted sense to refer to a milieu or to a moment in the mid 1960s, then a specifically historical set of questions emerge. If a number of factors—not just one philosopher—contributed to this sudden “overwhelming” of the concept of writing, what role might other thinkers—and particularly artists—have played in uncovering this “archi-writing”?

And thus we say “writing” for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural “writing”.... All this to describe not only the system of notation secondarily connected with these activities but the essence and the content of these activities themselves.⁵⁷

As I will suggest, writing indeed came to encompass “the essence and content” of music in the twentieth century. The main thread of the “historical closure” of modernism addressed here will be the increasing centrality of the concept of writing for how “presence” was understood and produced, since modernists in Paris and New York began to think of music as primarily a written form, something produced by and in writing. My primary aim will be to show that, even as these modernists “deconstructed” metaphysical illusions—or, simply, the illusion of metaphysics—that had

⁵⁴ “... pour désigner non seulement les gestes physiques de l’inscription littérale, pictographique ou idéographique, mais aussi la totalité de ce qui la rend possible ; puis aussi, au-delà de la face signifiante, la face signifiée elle-même.” Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, 19.

⁵⁵ See Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” *Diacritics* 11, no. 2 (1981), 3-25.

⁵⁶ “The advent of writing is the advent of this play; today, this play reveals itself.” Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 16.

⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 9.

seemingly blinded a past epoch, they also did a fair amount of construction, too. By casting the ethnographic other as sound, they ultimately affirmed the metaphysical stability of “the West” and of the “Being” of sound. This Being arose to dwarf the performed presence of music in its moment, a kind of “ontological imperialism.”

Many ontologies; one Ontology

What is metaphysics? A white mythology which assembles and reflects Western culture: the white man takes his own mythology (that is, Indo-European mythology), his *logos*—that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that which it is still his inescapable desire to call Reason.⁵⁸

As the composers studied here drew from non-European sources—and, hence, as they constructed a “non-west” as opposed to “the West”—they advanced ideas about sound that can best be termed “ontological.” Precisely by disavowing prior *metaphysical* understandings of western music, each of the composers studied here endowed sound with its own life and autonomy—sound thus *became ontological*. The words metaphysics and ontology are therefore intended in this dissertation to refer primarily to specific historical understandings of musical presence, the former associated with nineteenth-century musical aesthetics, and the latter with mid-to-late twentieth century attitudes toward sound. By *metaphysics* (from *meta*—after, behind, or beyond; *physica*—natural things) I mean a set of ideals that can properly be called theological, spiritual, or romantic, as in Hoffmann’s or Schopenhauer’s claims on behalf of music’s ineffable presence and its power to take listeners beyond the physical everyday world toward another more ideal world, whether deep inside the mind or upward toward the divine.⁵⁹ By contrast, *ontology* was coined circa 1600 to refer to an originally Greek idea, Aristotle’s “science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature.” This idea of a science of being assumed that specific sciences—Aristotle mentions “special sciences” like “the mathematical sciences”—focus on only a small part of being. Ontology, the study of “being qua being,” is a “first philosophy” because it provides a foundation for other sciences devoted to specific regions of being.⁶⁰ While metaphysics and ontology are therefore close in meaning, each referring to a discourse that reaches beyond or behind specific entities toward a broader kind of unity, I distinguish them here because musical modernists by and

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974), 11.

⁵⁹ The Greek term *ta meta ta physika* referred to the works “after the Physics”—the name given by a first century C.E. editor of Aristotle’s works to denote the work that one was to study, literally, “after” the philosopher’s other treatises devoted to natural things. The modern sense of metaphysics as “the science of what is beyond the physical” came from a Latin mistranslation or appropriation of the Greek. This latter sense of metaphysics has become part and parcel of musicological discourse, itself linked to nineteenth-century German idealism. From Etymology Online and the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Book IV Part 1

large reacted against the metaphysics of romantic music, and, through the emphasis they placed on the autonomy of sound, wound up recapturing something of that original Greek “essence” one may read in Aristotle. They studied sound qua sound, taking sound as the foundational “Being” that makes our various experiences with music possible.

These modernists anticipated the notion, recently articulated in Christoph Cox’s *Sonic Flux: Sound Art and Metaphysics*, that sound allows us (scholars) to imagine a supra-audible reality, a realm of vibration that comes before and exceeds the actual sounds produced when one makes music.⁶¹ This claim on behalf of the ontology of sound echoes that of other writers in the field of sound studies, including Steve Goodman, whose *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* claimed that an “ontology of vibrational force” lingers below everything we can consciously perceive about music—hence sound can act violently on us, creating fear at a gut level before we have a chance to think.⁶² In *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*, Nina Sun Eidsheim put forward a less frightening but similarly premised argument that musical performance is, first and foremost, an engagement with a primordial reality of vibrating matter.⁶³ *White Musical Mythologies* will show that these authors share two premises with Satie, Varèse, Boulez, and Cage. First, they believe that sound reveals something like Hoffmann’s “realm of infinite yearning,” but without the yearning, without the lingering presence of God, and even without human beings at all. Second, each author claims that this vibratory realm is detectable only through new technology and is revealed only by the most cutting-edge avant-garde musical practices. However, these authors differ fundamentally from their modernist forebears because musicians and scholars operate with different ethical imperatives. Artists are usually aware of making fictions. When scholars explore sound, however, the line between reality and fiction is often blurred. It is conspicuous, for instance, that when Cox, Goodman, and Eidsheim write about sound, they rely (sometimes covertly but usually quite explicitly) on their own experiences with *music*—the art produced, after all, by humans who sing underwater or install loudspeakers in art galleries. It is musical practice that is ultimately made to uncover—and to provide evidence for—a “revealed” ontology. In short, for modernists, as for certain scholars in sound studies, ontology-making is a power move.

White Musical Mythologies actually does not take issue with the scholarly endeavor to think imaginatively about sound—and I share a basic conviction held by each of the authors previously mentioned that one’s attitude toward sound always implies an ethical orientation. The problem I sense has to do with the big term, Ontology, the central philosophical idea that leads scholars down the windy discursive path toward sonic purity. No matter which historical understanding of ontology one takes up—and I will address the question of ontological relativism in a moment—it is worth reiterating that ontology is a Greek science first of all, a specifically *western* way of understanding presence, that which is real, solid, here and now. Ontology assumes that philosophy might close the gap between appearance and reality, or might use words to make transience permanent.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Christoph Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

⁶² Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: The MIT Press, 2010), 81.

⁶³ Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁶⁴ Cf. Fann, *This Self We Deserve*, 12-16, 33-34.

Some objections can be raised to the use of the term ontology proposed here. Proponents of the “anthropology of ontologies,” for instance, could argue that the sense of ontology examined by Heidegger and by others in the phenomenological vein is only one historical understanding of ontology. Ontology, for anthropologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, is not a specific science, but rather an ethical orientation adopted as one apprehends many possible ways or modes of being beyond Europe and North America.⁶⁵ To make sense of this “ontological turn” in anthropology, David Graeber patiently distinguished what he termed *Ontology₁*, the philosophical discourse on being that stretches from Heidegger backward toward the Greeks, from *Ontology₂*, a newer and relativistic use of the term. *Ontology₂* is not a *discourse about* being, but rather a substitute term for “mode of being” or “way of being”—as if the term directly connotes what really is, “beyond words.” Otherwise said, any person or people might have or belong to an ontology, hence there are many ontologies out there.⁶⁶

This is not the right place, and nor am I the right author, to recount the full scope of this anthropological debate.⁶⁷ I wonder, though, how different “*Ontology₁*” and “*Ontology₂*” really are. Whether one tries to understand Heidegger or whether one attempts to fathom *How Forests Think*⁶⁸, one still reaches “beyond the human” toward fundamental conditions beyond what we can experience or even speak—is this not how an ontology, any ontology, works? Again, the problem I see is not with the ethical thrust of the ontological turn, but rather with the basic conviction that “ontology” can ever be other than a *white science*. How could many ontologies be possible without the old uppercase *Ontology*? We can write over it but cannot really get outside of it. A repertoire of discursive sleights of hand is available to support this relativistic flattening, however, including Viveiros de Castro’s affirmation that the anthropologist’s job is not to “[explain] the world of the other,” but instead to “[multiply] our world”—that is, to expand the discursive worlds of anthropology by letting the other remain other. “The Other [is] the expression of a *possible* world.”⁶⁹ Even if there is a great big virtual world out there for us to discover, the philosophical terrain does not change much. As Graeber put it, while cultural relativism puts people in boxes not of their own making, ontological relativism substitutes a deeper box. The difference between “us” and “them” is not only held, but made deeper. Yet the “being” of the other is still “our” fabrication.

White Musical Mythologies upholds a single and strong view of ontology. However the term might be understood, ontology presupposes a specific relation between the knower and the known—

⁶⁵ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Who is Afraid of the Ontological Wolf?: Some Comments on an Ongoing Anthropological Debate,” *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 33/1, Special Section—Remaking the Public Good: A New Anthropology of Bureaucracy (Spring 2015), 2-17.

⁶⁶ While Graeber remains generous to Viveiros de Castro, he is skeptical (as I am) of what the “OTers” have done to ontology, since *Ontology₂* is not “a discourse (*logos*) about the nature of being,” but instead is a blanket term for one’s “way of being” or “mode of existence.” David Graeber, ‘Radical alterity is just another way of saying “reality”’: A reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5/2 (2015), 15.

⁶⁷ To read the right author, see Eduardo Kohn, “Anthropology of Ontologies,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015), 311-327.

⁶⁸ Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

⁶⁹ Viveiros de Castro, “Who is Afraid of the Ontological Wolf?”, 11.

a relation that was, for Lévinas, more than a mere analogy for actual political situations of inequality and injustice. As the knowing subject comprehends the known object, illuminating and thus subsuming whatever is other, the alterity of the latter vanishes as it becomes an object of philosophical thought and a figure of western writing. Lévinas described this process in the abstract, but his political implications were clear enough. As Europe asserted its “Being” through colonialism, through vast systems of military domination and economic exploitation, European philosophers laid down an intellectual machinery that would legitimize western dominance, an ontological thinking machine that is more abstract, purportedly pure, but no less imperialist in orientation. Ontology is a “philosophy of power” because it assumes the priority of Being over beings, hence of European thought over the rest of the world, since only western thinkers have a discourse devoted to this special “first philosophy” of Being. Ontology is a “philosophy of injustice” that “does not place the Same in question.”⁷⁰

This “injustice” is what more recent users of the term seem to either omit or overwrite, and precisely by doing so, we risk re-inscribing the same Self-Other or West-Rest distinctions that we often wish to get beyond. Since ontology remains a keyword across various humanistic fields, it is high time to (re-) examine its history.

Despite the risk of redundancy, it seems necessary to restate that to imagine an “ontology” is to give a temporal privilege to the present, since an ontology affirms *what is*, that something exists in the form of “now.” Writing in and against the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Derrida took issue with the belief, simply put, that there is something *there*—whether Plato’s forms; the divine Being of medieval theology; the pure speech of Rousseau’s imagined primitive communities before the advent of writing; Descartes’s *cogito*; Kant’s *a priori* representations; Hegel’s *Geist* or World Spirit; or Heidegger’s Being—something ideal beyond the sensible, some transcendental signified beyond the material and ephemeral signifier.

We are sitting here now getting older. Every second slips out of our fingers and there is nothing we can do about it. That’s the very nature of life. But since Plato, Western philosophy has taught us that we have to hold on to it because we can make it *ontologically* permanent. We must *philosophize* it so that it becomes permanent. This particular inquiry develops into written philosophy, namely Ontology.⁷¹

Perhaps music is an ideal medium through which to contemplate the philosophical question of the always-vanishing “now,” since the temporal “rub” between music in its moment and the reflection after the fact—the difference between the performed presence and music’s written presence—seems to inhere in music by its very nature. The dichotomy of musical presence can be restated in Derrida’s words: “each element that is said to be ‘present’ ... is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element.” Unlike a painter’s paint or a sculptor’s stone, the sonic material of music is elusive. Its ephemerality is part of what makes it meaningful for philosophers as for musicians and their listeners. It can seem so close, so present. We chase its trace down many curves of a pen impressed in paper, through grooves dug in a record, through movements trained in a

⁷⁰ Lévinas, *Totalité et infini*, 38.

⁷¹ Fann, *This Self We Deserve*, 34.

musician's muscles, and distant memories impressed in one's self. And then, looking back, we see a pile of words in place of the absent sounds, a specter that threatens musical presence. By chasing music's presence, we inevitably create more traces, more writings. Perhaps, after all, "the present" can only ever be a figment or mirage of writing, something we can only recognize after the fact, once the game of references, deferrals and differences has begun. When we return to the present, we have already fallen. The *real* present, the fleeting here and now, is, to paraphrase Robert Frost, perhaps too crowding, too confusing—too present to imagine.

About method: fieldwork in musical philosophy

I trust it is apparent by now that the present study is meant to be both historical and philosophical. This is a challenging pair, since one seems to always want to "sublate"—or dominate, or simply refuse—the other. Rather than subsume music into a pre-given Theory (which would be my own brand of "ontological imperialism"), I endeavor to examine historical actors on their own terms while also presenting concepts that seem appropriate to each composer individually, and to the greater historical span that this dissertation will narrate. In other words, I will discuss what ontology "is" in philosophical terms as I examine specific philosophers and musician's ideas about sound, aiming to use music history to critique the idea of ontology as applied to sound. But while describing pieces of music, the focus will never be on what these pieces reveal about an "ontology"—since music is useless to "reveal" an ontology, and ontology is useless to study music. Instead, I aim to recuperate a specifically modern stance toward musical experience.

One might call this endeavor a *fieldwork in musical philosophy*—with full acknowledgment that I am not doing "fieldwork" in any literal sense.⁷² Instead, the term "fieldwork" is meant to capture a commitment to the specificity of actors in their contexts, following them on their own terms, and also a conviction that we can re-live their works in creative ways that go beyond laborious decoding. Therefore, while I describe specific works, I wish to keep technical jargon to a minimum. And while re-telling parts of these composer's biographies will be a crucial part of the narrative to unfold, biography, strictly speaking, is beside the point (since multiple biographies already exist for each of these composers). Finally, as already indicated, none of the music "examples" in the pages to come are really meant as "examples." Instead, each piece is taken in its historical specificity as a *vehicle of possible experience*. Less emphasis will be placed on completing the hermeneutic circle, returning the work to its context (or vice versa), and more on describing how the composers *might* have engaged—and how we today can engage—with music as a means to imagine a self and a way of feeling that is, indeed, beyond what meaning can convey.

Examining music as a vehicle for possible experience is a way to re-engage with what music can do to the self without falling into what I see as the main pitfall of the "drastic" musicology that Abbate called for in 2004. Prior forms of hermeneutics—or simply the laborious decoding of hidden musical meanings—were dismissed, yet a new form of analysis was lacking. We were left with first-

⁷² The phrase "fieldwork in philosophy," and the idea of bridging empirical observation with "concept work," or the creation of philosophical concepts apropos to what is observed, is owed to Paul Rabinow. See Rabinow, *The Privilege of Neglect: Science as a Vocation Revisited* (Berkeley: Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory, 2020), 41-44.

person narrative descriptions of “what I felt and thought about during *x* performance”—including Abbate’s accounts of watching Ben Heppner as he cracked his high G’s during a performance of *Der Meistersinger*, or suddenly seeing Wagner’s chorus as if they had emerged from a Holocaust documentary. Instead, I will endeavor to think of the subject, the “I” experiencing music, as something of a “virtual” subject—one that is not actualized, but possible.⁷³ This is meant to shift the focus away from the more limited terrain of what “I,” the specific narrator, experienced inside myself to the possible modes of experience that music can afford for us, as listeners and scholars.

A fieldwork in musical philosophy, therefore, takes a cue from the ethical orientation of “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?,” which, though it failed to provide a lasting method, nevertheless touched on something that musicians always know, yet scholars tend to forget. Music is meaningful not because it is a work, an object of laborious decoding or a revealer of ontology—this is what music becomes when we write. Rather, music is a compelling object of study because it can always become a *medium*. Music lets us dive in. Yet scholarly habit seems to divert us away from the obvious.

The road ahead

While in his writings Bergson linked the movements of a hypnotists’ pendulum with the mysterious effects of musical rhythm and measure, Satie wrote hypnotic music to accompany meetings of Joséphin Péladan’s Rosicrucian order: for both, oscillating rhythm invoked a deeper, truer condition. Though the composer and philosopher likely never met, Chapter One suggests that Satie and Bergson began their careers in fin-de-siècle Paris fascinated by musical *illusion*—a term that connotes the deceptive and charming sensory effects through which music may seem to reveal enduring truth. In section one, I listen to Satie through a Bergsonian earpiece, using Bergson’s notion of duration to account for some of the effects and techniques of Satie’s early “mystico-liturgical” style. I tell the story, however, of a gradual musical disillusion. During the interwar years Satie disavowed his early mystical influences and re-imagined sound as inert vibrating matter, a bid to oust “illusion” in favor of “reality” that mirrors Bergson’s twentieth-century reception. Section two distinguishes Bergson, for whom music was perhaps the perfect embodiment of temporal invention, from Gilles Deleuze, whose “Bergsonism” grasped at an absolute and ultimately static ontological condition. By attending to the differences between early and late Satie, and between Bergson and Bergsonism, I narrate an origin story for certain convictions about sound that have been influential in recent musicological thought. Specifically, the conclusion positions the old Satie’s *Furniture Music* and Pierre Souvtchinsky’s late-Bergsonian “ontological time” as musical pre-figurations of Cox’s “sonic flux.”

Chapter Two takes up another moment of the disavowal of musical illusion in favor of “real” sound, borrowing a phrase from Bataille to describe Varèse’s creation of musical “ontological

⁷³ This perspective is informed by Paul Rabinow and Anthony Stavrianakis’s discussion of what Foucault termed *foyers d’expérience*, or crucibles of experience and experimentation. See Rabinow and Stavrianakis, *Inquiry After Modernism* (Berkeley: Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory, 2019), 5-21; and Rabinow, *The Privilege of Neglect*, 2-22.

machines.”⁷⁴ I describe how Varèse created his “ontological machines” by focusing on three specific aspects of his compositional aesthetics: (1) his spatial approach to sound—as in his conception of “sound masses” or “harmonic planes”; (2) his poetics of intensity—that is, his obsession with combining sound masses to produce ever-more-intense climax moments, a central structural feature of all of his works; and (3) his concept of “the purity of sound.” After focusing on Varèse’s New York phase, paying particular attention to *Amériques* (1918-22) and *Arcana* (1926-7), I follow the composer as he moved back to Paris in the late 1920s and conceived *Ecuatorial*. Throughout I will use Bataille as a foil for Varèse since he and the composer were each fascinated by various forms of “base matter,” a phrase Bataille applied to expressive forms that resist the dialectical reasoning that characterizes Hegelian thought. “Base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations,” he claimed, “and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations.”⁷⁵ However, while Bataille wielded base matter to destroy western ontology, Varèse’s compositions bespeak an even more absolute and more abstract kind of idealizing logic. The composer took the fantasied-primitive Mayan landscapes described in Asturias as fuel for a musical aesthetic that would, through shock, through utter sonorous impurity, paradoxically disclose a higher understanding of “real” sound. In short, Varèse the “art-scientist” was all about ontology.

Chapter Three, about Boulez and Artaud, is perhaps the heart of this narrative. Boulez sometimes acknowledged the influence of “extra-European” sounds in his music, but also insisted that music should not be a “simple ethnographic reconstruction.” Artaud, who explicitly “reconstructed” the ethnographic other in a 1947 radio broadcast, will become my foil to show how Boulez’s philosophy of writing (*écriture*) hinged on an East–West dualism. I follow Boulez to South America with the Compagnie Renaud-Barrault to suggest that he took cues from Afro-Bahian Candomblé when he wrote *Le Marteau sans maître*. I read a movement of *Le Marteau* as a “sonic allegory” for the spirit possession rituals that Boulez witnessed in Bahia during his formative years, and in the conclusion, I reflect on the lessons that Boulez and Artaud might teach us about sound; namely, that recent musicological claims on behalf of the ontology of sound have modernist origins. Specifically, I take Boulez’s efforts to efface his ethnographic sources as a foil for studies of sonic ontology, since these studies privilege (by default) a historically western way of understanding being or essence.

Chapter Four begins with a discussion of Cage’s tactic of “double negation,” his way of placing himself in the middle of various inconsistencies or binds, suggesting that the very idea of presence, torn between “pure” in-the-moment effects and discursive mediation, is itself a double negation. Describing two events (the 1952 *Black Mountain College Untitled Event* and a 1963 concert at the Berlin Konreßhalle) I examine Cage’s endeavor to recapture the essence of “composition itself” by disavowing composition in the Boulezian sense. The Derridean idea of the expansion of “writing” returns as a frame through which to understand Cage’s expansion of “composition” to include all possible sounds in a space for a time. By looking backwards at the road traversed, I argue that Cage, like his French predecessors, believed in “ontological sound,” and the penultimate section describes how Cage conceived of sound and of “composition itself” by appropriating various “Eastern” ideas by way of D. T. Suzuki. In the Postlude, I describe Cage’s chance meeting with John

⁷⁴ Georges Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” from *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 45-52.

⁷⁵ Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” 51.

Lennon and Yoko Ono in 1972 to listen for the echoes of Cageian sound, and the afterlives of Cage's expanded sense of "composition itself," in the late twentieth century.

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The Ontology of the Ineffable: Bergson and Satie

Music is a time art: the experience of music occurs with music's passing. Alive for a moment and then gone, music may nevertheless seem to recall or suggest something that does not die, whether memories, images, or ideas. This temporal play between transient "presence effects" and enduring meaning may be understood as a "paradox of ineffability," Michael Gallope's phrase to account for the fact that music always involves layers of mediation, yet its presence may seem ineffable (from Latin *ineffabilis*, un-utterable), affecting the senses immediately.⁷⁶ Though the effects of musical sounds go beyond what words can capture or convey, music's very fleetingness nevertheless invites many words to flow.⁷⁷ Its presence is shaped by the language one uses to recall or describe music, by the techniques and technologies of its production, as well as the very consciousness that experiences music. This apparent tension between transience and endurance accounts for the fascination that music has exerted for philosophers. When Pythagoras heard universal harmonic laws echoing in the tones of his monochord, for instance, it was as if musical sounds had offered a glimpse of an unseen reality—sounds vanish, but timeless knowledge remains.⁷⁸ By the nineteenth century, philosophers found this enduring reality in the soul. As Schopenhauer avowed, music presents a copy of the Will, allowing one to experience profound emotions in their pure form.⁷⁹ During the twentieth century, philosophers in a phenomenological vein followed this line: musical sounds vanish, but their very disappearance draws us toward a condition more real and more lasting than transient vibrations and goosebumps. Precisely *because* music vanishes, it opens the door for possible meaning while also

⁷⁶ "Music appears as a sensuous immediacy at the same time that it always remains mediated by forms and techniques. It is this paradoxical structure that allows music to serve as a magnet for philosophical conundrums." Musical presence is therefore never wholly "ineffable." Michael Gallope, *Deep Refrains: Music, Philosophy, and the Ineffable* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 10. This play may be understood as an "oscillation" between "presence effects" and "meaning effects" that defines, according to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, our aesthetic experience in the most general sense. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁷⁷ Whence comes Vladimir Jankélévitch's oft-quoted quip that music has "broad shoulders" to bear the weight of many possible meanings and will never "give us the lie." Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 11.

⁷⁸ Flora R. Levin, *Greek Reflections on the Nature of Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6-16.

⁷⁹ As the well-known passage reads: "music is as *immediate* an objectification and copy of the whole *will* as the world itself is, indeed as the Ideas are, the multiplied phenomena of which constitutes the world of individual things." Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will and Representation* Vol. 1, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969, the German original from 1818), 257.

escaping and deferring its meaning, a temporal play that Jacques Derrida would later capture with his term *différance*.⁸⁰

This chapter will attend to a philosopher who was especially attuned to the mysterious sensory effects of the time art of music and to the truths that these effects might reveal. In his 1889 *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Henri Bergson (1859-1941) avowed that “rhythm and measure [may] suspend the normal circulation of our sensations and our ideas by oscillating our attention between fixed points.”⁸¹ He sought to put his readers in touch with an experience that he trusted they already knew. By moving one’s attention to and fro, it is as if music can arrest the normal flow of time. Bergson thus invoked the work of the hypnotist: think of a rhythm, he suggested; follow its oscillations back and forth; recall a melody moving with your own breath, mimicking your voice. Stating that music recreates “in an attenuated form, refined and in some sense spiritualized, the processes by which one ordinarily attains the state of hypnosis,” Bergson averred that rhythm and measure may lull our conscious resistance, allowing us to perceive more and to feel more, finally “seizing us with such force that the imitation, even infinitely discreet, of a voice that moans suffices to fill us with extreme sadness.”⁸² Music can make us sigh.

⁸⁰ Derrida described *différance* as “the movement that makes signification possible,” referring to the Saussurian premise that a language is constituted by differences and that linguistic signifiers—which are in themselves arbitrary—are only intelligible according to their relations within a system of differences. Seeking the conditions of possibility for this linguistic sense of difference, Derrida stated that *différance* is “the movement of play that ‘produces’ ... these differences.” Attending to this movement allowed him to observe that signifiers and signifieds are never contemporary, and their interplay functions to delay and defer the “full presence” of any particular referent. This sense of *différance* as the perpetual deferral of presence, a game of “temporalizing,” is reminiscent, I suggest, of musical temporality, since “each element that is said to be ‘present’ ... is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element.” Jacques Derrida, “Differance,” from *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 138-142.

⁸¹ “Ainsi, en musique, le rythme et la mesure suspendent la circulation normale de nos sensations et de nos idées en faisant osciller notre attention entre des points fixes.” Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2013), 11-12. All translations mine unless otherwise indicated.

⁸² “Dans les procédés de l’art on retrouvera sous une forme atténuée, raffinés et en quelque sorte spiritualisés, les procédés par lesquels on obtient ordinairement l’état d’hypnose.” In the same passage, Bergson avowed that art could render us docile, “[putting] to sleep the active or rather resistant powers of our personality” and allowing us to sympathize with whatever ideas or sentiments that an artwork seems, as if on its own, to convey. “[L]’objet de l’art est d’endormir les puissances actives ou plutôt résistantes de notre personnalité, et de nous amener ainsi à un état de docilité parfaite où nous réalisons l’idée qu’on nous suggère, où nous sympathisons avec le sentiment exprimé.” Rhythm and measure, in particular, “s’emparent de nous avec une telle force que l’imitation, même infiniment discrète, d’une voix qui gémit suffira à nous remplir d’une tristesse extrême.” *Ibid.*

In the pages to follow, I will pair Bergson with a composer whom he likely never met, yet who shared the philosopher's interest in the seeming magic of music's oscillating rhythms. More so than Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, or other better-known contemporaries, Erik Satie (1866-1925) used repetition as a structural and poetic crux throughout his career. While Ann-Marie Hanlon has examined the connection between Bergson and Satie via their shared ideas about humor, my study begins instead from their mutual fascination with mystical practices.⁸³ During the 1880s, Satie encountered Joséphin Péladan, the novelist and occultist perhaps best known for his Salons de la Rose+Croix, exhibitions of symbolist artwork attended by poets, painters, and musicians active in the Montmartre hotbed. During the fin de siècle, Satie forged what he called a "mystico-liturgical" musical style to accompany meetings of Péladan's Rosicrucian order. Bergson, meanwhile, observed hypnotized patients and, in his writings, linked the mysterious effects of musical time with hypnotic trance and with other aberrant psychological states. For the young composer and philosopher, the illusory experiences of musical time recalled a truer, deeper condition.

This chapter argues for the central status of *illusion* in philosophies that address the sensory effects of (maybe all the arts, but particularly) the time art of music. Illusion (from the Latin *illusionem*) refers to a deceptive appearance, a guise or an apparition, and also a play (*illudere*). The term may connote plays of perception like optical illusions, or, more generally, the illusion that events on a stage or two-dimensional figures on a screen may seem to invite us in, becoming multi-dimensional. Illusion is a transient effect. Though not often mentioned in relation to music, in a recent study of Ravel, Jessie Fillerup demonstrates that illusion may occur as a composer simulates the sound of a trumpet through just the right combination of winds or recalls a harp glissando through cascading arpeggios across an orchestra. A trick of perception ensues when one instrument (or group) imitates another. Beyond tricks of timbre, musical illusions also include the Eureka-like moments in which we, led through a gradual ascent toward a climax or propelled by rhythmic repetition, experience transformation along with the characters portrayed in a ballet or an opera.⁸⁴

⁸³ In 1916 Alexis Roland-Manuel linked Satie with Bergson via the philosopher's essay on laughter, *Le Rire*, suggesting that Satie's use of repetition, especially in humoristic works of his later period, were the composer's means to satirize the "mechanisms" of banal bourgeois life. Hanlon focuses primarily on Bergson's sense that laughter erupts when one witnesses "the mechanical encrusted upon the living," and that laughter therefore is a corrective to something absurd or dehumanizing, as in Satie's infamous jibes at the bourgeoisie in his *Memoires of an Amnesiac*. Alexis Roland-Manuel, *Erik Satie: Causerie faite à la Société Lyre et Palette* (Paris: Roberge, 1916); Ann-Marie Hanlon, "Erik Satie and the Meaning of the Comic," from *Erik Satie: Music, Art and Literature*, ed. Caroline Potter (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 19-48; see also Caroline Potter, *Erik Satie: A Parisian Composer and His World* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016), 43.

⁸⁴ Fillerup delineates various Ravelian strategies for creating musical illusion, including perpetual ascent—"the impression that the music follows a steady upward curve that seems to culminate in a sonic apex" (76); transformative ascent—moments of character transformation often accompanied by a harp to "mark inward or outward metamorphosis" (225); the illusion of mechanization, which is perhaps the form of illusion closest to Bergson in *Le Rire* since Fillerup attends to the peculiar sense of humanity that is both at odds with, yet evoked by, the illusion of mechanical motion (111-116); and, finally, the illusions of motion or stasis. Jessie Fillerup, *Magician of Sound: Ravel and the Aesthetics of Illusion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), 9-10; see esp. 50-92.

Illusion therefore involves real sensory stimuli, not mere fantasy, as when music suggests motion or stasis, or seems to mimic the churning of mechanism—as in Satie’s many *ostinati*.

For Fillerup “illusion” has to do primarily with musical features that fool and guide the ears, but the term also has philosophical connotations. While Oscar Wilde’s belief that art is a lie, a “telling of beautiful untrue things,” seems to sum up a central refrain of nineteenth-century aesthetic theory, Friedrich Nietzsche pushed a step further to posit that art’s status as a lie, a beautiful semblance (*Schein*), is the very condition that allows it to reveal Truth.⁸⁵ Extrapolating the Nietzschean idea that illusion and truth are two sides of the same coin, Jean Baudrillard inferred (in a characteristically sweeping manner) that “the world ... is a radical illusion”: the “real” world is only comprehensible “through ... the play of appearances,” thus the play of reality and appearance, even of objectivity and subjectivity, amount to a “twofold illusion.”⁸⁶ I will focus on this interplay between “illusion” and “reality,” taking illusion in music to connote the charming and deceptive effect of being drawn toward something more real: the sadness behind a musical groan or a real temporal condition evoked by repetitive rhythms.

This will be the story, however, of a gradual musical disillusion. The aged Satie, cynical and alcoholic, holed up in his “closet”-apartment in Arcueil-Cachan writing endlessly repetitive musical loops, disavowed his earlier “mystical” influences and re-imagined sound as inert vibrating matter—he quipped to Jean Cocteau in 1917 that “‘Furniture Music’ creates vibrations; it has no other aims; it fulfils the same role as light, heat and *comfort* in all its forms.”⁸⁷ This half-winking gag, typical of Satie, signaled the composer’s endeavor to banalize his music and to think of sound as something impersonal, inexpressive, and hence more “real.” In the pages to follow, Satie will become a precursor to certain beliefs about sound that have been influential lately in musicological thought, such as Christoph Cox’s contention that a supra-sensible vibrating realm is the condition of possibility for music.⁸⁸ This contention, as we will see, takes certain cues from Bergsonism, yet casts illusory experience by the wayside.

Satie and Bergson represent two distinct historiographical lineages that lead from the *fin de siècle* toward more recent studies of sound by way of a shift from “illusion” toward “reality.” Satie’s repetitive loops have been taken to presage many twentieth-century moments, such as Dadaism or surrealism, the “dehumanized” churning of American minimalism, John Cage’s penchant for composing according to intervals of time, Muzak, or the collapse of art with the everyday or of aesthetics with banality.⁸⁹ The main thread I draw through Satie’s life and music will be his search

⁸⁵ Oscar Wilde, *Intentions* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1945, originally published 1891), 47; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Robert Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967); Cf. Fillerup, *Magician of Sound*, 20.

⁸⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Ames Hodges (New York and Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2005), 112-113; and *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 9, 17; Cf. Fuoco B. Fann, *This Self We Deserve: A Quest after Modernity* (Berkeley: Philosophy and Art Collaboratory, 2020), 152-156.

⁸⁷ Satie, quoted in Potter, *Erik Satie: A Parisian Composer*, 145.

⁸⁸ Christoph Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

⁸⁹ For Satie the minimalist, see Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 124-134; for Satie the proto-surrealist, see Daniel

for “real” sound from under the baggage of the romantic tradition. This story runs parallel to well-known narratives of the “dehumanization” of interwar French art.⁹⁰ Rather than re-tread these narratives, I join Satie with Bergson to narrate an origin story for sonic ontology, since this change in Satie’s style and persona mirrors Bergson’s twentieth-century reception.

For while the philosopher never completely lost touch with the illusory experiences provoked by the arts, Bergson nevertheless put forward an absolute understanding of real time—articulated through his notions of duration and virtual memory—that went beyond any specific experience. He set the stage for later Bergsonians like Pierre Souvtchinsky to conceive of “ontological time,” a rigidly metered and depersonalized temporal flow that runs beneath the expressive “psychological time” of music’s surface, and especially for Gilles Deleuze, who contended that duration, in Bergson, had less to do with “psychological” experience and more to do with the impersonal, “virtual” ground for all experience, a kind of timeless Time.⁹¹ Otherwise said, while Bergson insisted throughout his career that reality is always in motion, and while music was perhaps the perfect embodiment, for him, of heterogeneity, change, and invention, Deleuze sought an ultimately static ontological condition beyond the poetic sensory illusions that originally inspired the Bergson of the fin de siècle—a “virtual” ground that (the Deleuzian) Cox calls “sonic flux.” Ontology silences musical “moans.”

My contention will be that while Satie and Bergson began their careers as “illusionists”—they found the illusory nature of the arts, and particularly music, compelling as they imagined profound realities—they ended their careers as “ontologists.”⁹² In section one, I will listen to Satie’s early music through a Bergsonian earpiece, using Bergson’s ideas of duration and virtual memory to account for some of the effects and techniques of Satie’s fin-de-siècle musical “mysticism.” Section two will distinguish Bergson from Deleuze’s Bergson, and by the conclusion, the differences between early

Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), esp. 185-197; for Cage’s Satie, see John Cage, “Defense of Satie,” from Richard Kostelanetz, ed. *John Cage: An Anthology* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1970), 77-84, and Alan M. Gillmor, *Erik Satie* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 36; for Satie and the everyday, cf. Nancy Perloff, *Art and the Everyday: Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) and Steven Moore Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian: From Cabaret to Concert Hall* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹⁰ Richard Taruskin places Satie’s 1919 *Socrate* along with Stravinsky’s *Symphonies d’instruments à vent* (1920) or his *Octet* (1923), Poulenc’s *Les biches* (1924), and Darius Milhaud’s kitschy and parodic *Chamber Symphonies* (1917-1923) as episodes in a post-World War I “dehumanization of art,” the phrase coined by Jose Ortega y Gasset to refer to an interwar endeavor, primarily but not exclusively French, “to purge art of all those ‘human, all too human’ concerns that threaten to turn it into a sweaty, warty human document of only ephemeral value (since emotions are fleeting and desire can be satiated) instead of an elegant or exquisite object of pleasure. ‘Frivolous!’ comes the German retort; to which the French, unperturbed, come right back: ‘Pretentious!’” Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, *The Oxford History of Western Music* vol. 4 (Oxford University Press, 2010), 60.

⁹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

⁹² On ontology and illusion, see Fann, *This Self We Deserve*, 11-17, 34, 49.

and late Satie, and between Bergson and Bergsonism, will become foils for scholarly endeavors to uncover the “reality” (i.e. ontology) of sound.

Apropos to Satie, I end with an irony. The scholarly endeavor to dig sonic ontology out from under music’s sensory illusions is usually inspired, after all, by actual experiences with music or sound art—that is, by the illusions that an artist might conjure. “Illusion” and “the real” are inextricable. Somewhat like a modernist who places a urinal in the art gallery or who turns music into “furniture,” Cox follows Bergsonians of the twentieth century who leveraged the ineffable—literally the unspeakable—in order to outline an ontology. But basing an ontology on the ineffable, making a Logos out of something that cannot be spoken, is perhaps the ultimate “paradox of the ineffable”—really a failure of the ineffable. For as we dispel illusion, we also dispel the real. We are left instead with a pile of words—though we, unlike Satie, tend to forget our sense of humor.

A pendulum swings: Satie in mystical Montmartre

The pianist’s left hand shifts in a serene back-and-forth, as if a vaudeville stride pattern in slow motion, a dance turned into an exploration of chordal color. Satie’s *Trois Gymnopédies* (1888, 1895) and four of his seven *Gnossiennes* (1890-1893) feature an oscillating left-hand accompaniment pattern, partly an affordance of their generic ties to dance forms. The Greek title aside, the *Gymnopédies* (from *gymn*—naked; *pais*—child; one of Satie’s many nods to antiquity) are like any number of *valse lents* that Satie must have accompanied at the Chat Noir or the Auberge du Clou. After escaping the Paris Conservatoire by opting for military service, and after escaping the military by exposing himself to the cold and taking to his bed with bronchitis, the itinerant young Satie found solace amid a crowd of fellow night-owls and misfits in Montmartre. One can imagine the composer churning out repetitive loops on a piano to accompany any number of then-popular chansons before a hodgepodge of bourgeois Parisian onlookers and their alluring demi-mondaines, symbolist poets and introverted painters, violent anarchists and smoke-shrouded mystics. Strangely, in works like the *Gymnopédies* there are echoes of an ascetic ideal, the stripped-bare simplicity that would characterize the composer’s whole oeuvre, but which took form in Satie’s early years through his dabblings with Catholic mysticism. I would suggest that these blocks of literal repetition for Satie were, at this time, both a generic habit learned in the *boîte à chanson* and a grasp at the kind of mystical effects that one might experience through hypnotic induction, a bid towards a purer state of being.

A stride pattern oscillates between fixed points, and in the *Trois Gymnopédies*, the oscillating rhythms allow for an increased sensitivity to slowly unfolding harmonic changes across longer forms—the kind of musical aesthesia that so charmed Bergson. In the *Première Gymnopédie*, for instance, the accompaniment moves from bass note to triad and back again to undergird Satie’s sparse melodic phrases: the first phrase arches downward, unfolding slowly in stepwise motion; the next repeats and then extends the first phrase by a note or two; the next moves upward in minor, almost a mirror-image of the opening phrase. As is well known, this movement divides into two nearly identical halves, and Satie affirms the relationship between F# and the tonic D major throughout—the opening chords, vacillating between the subdominant and tonic, share an F# in common. But by the end of the first half, as the melody climbs up a minor scale over a lengthy pedal on D, the tonality becomes ambiguous. The first half of this *Gymnopédie* culminates in a melodic

gesture that will gain significance with its repetition in the second half: as the lengthy bass pedal ends, the melody leaps to a high G and then steps downward a semitone, the highest and lowest voices together arriving at F# to foreshadow the coming cadence:



Figure 1. Toward the end of the first half of the *Première Gymnopédie*.

Satie's downward-stepping melody anticipates the return six bars later to the D major tonality. Then pause, and then repeat. The stride pattern restarts; the arching melody recommences. When the melodic leap comes around a second time, however, a sudden dissonance rings out as the high G steps downward to an F natural:



Figure 2. Towards the end of the *Première Gymnopédie*.

The gesture recalls a sigh. But where sigh figures in nineteenth-century repertoires typically step downward to resolve a dissonance, here—as if with a smirk—Satie lands on a dissonance. The sudden minor ninth (separated by three octaves) between the low E in the bass and the high F-natural in the melody anticipates the cadence to D minor, the aberrant melody note settling in as the new mode's defining pitch. This “sigh” lends the *Première Gymnopédie* an arc, as if the turn to minor was always meant to be the destination of all this colorful wafting. The repetitive rhythms move from major to minor; through bright naivete to melancholy, ceasing with a final cadence that rings somberly only after we've been lulled, through all this repetition, into a trance.

Around the time of Satie's convalescence after his discharge from the army and in a much different domain, Bergson prepared to publish the *Essai*, which includes this query:

When the regular oscillations of the pendulum invite us to sleep, is it the last sound heard, the last movement perceived that produces this effect? No, undoubtedly not, because one would not understand why the first did not have the same effect.⁹³

The movement of a hypnotist's pendulum is an apt analogy not only for Satie's oscillating left hand, but also for Bergson's notion of duration. The philosopher affirmed that a pendulum's repetitive motions can lull our consciousness through an inexplicable effect of accumulation. It is neither the final sound nor the final swing of the pendulum, captured like a still life, that sends our consciousness away. Rather, it is the accumulation (in Bergson's term, the contraction) of the past into the present, of multiple pendulum swings and copious sounds, that produces an effect that is more than the sum of its parts. An effect like Satie's sigh. His F-natural conveys more than a momentary dissonance since so many preceding oscillations affirm, again and again, the association of F# with D major, re-introducing the tonic, circling always back to it.

Listening to Satie's *Gymnopédies* through a Bergsonian earpiece allows for a kind of aural transformation. Fillerup describes the illusion of musical movement as an effect brought about as seemingly static repetitive musical features nevertheless create a feeling of propulsion—like the relentless left-hand ostinato in the first movement of Poulenc's *Trois mouvements perpétuels* (1918) or the music-box-like repetitive motives that Stravinsky used to depict the hustle and bustle of the Strovétide Fair in *Petroushka* (1911).⁹⁴ There is a curious interplay between repetitive motives or ostinati that basically stay the same and the feeling of change. In Satie, the left-hand ostinato and the long pedal over D seem static yet allow for an illusion of forward propulsion while, conversely, it is during moments when we *should* move—as when the D major tonality suddenly breaks—that we might feel the mysterious pause, the “sigh.” Stasis paradoxically allows for a sense of motion while abrupt changes like in harmony or feeling might beckon, paradoxically, for certain moments to linger.

Bergson's notions of duration and virtual memory are philosophical lenses through which to understand such temporal illusions. When one is truly alive, he claimed, one “does not juxtapose the actual [present] state as one point or another” along a succession, but rather one “organizes [these many points] with oneself, as happens when we recall the notes of a melody melting, so to speak, together.”⁹⁵ Bergson thus evoked musical experience to outline a temporal reality: music moves like “pure duration.” *La durée toute pure* was a phrase he used to describe the play of future becoming present and present becoming past, a movement that is irreducible to the static words or images with which a philosopher—or anyone—might try to capture stable meanings. Deriding “language [for demanding] us to establish between our ideas the same neat and precise distinctions, the same discontinuity, as between material objects,” Bergson contended that time cannot be adequately measured quantitatively since the actual qualitative experience of becoming is irreducible to whatever one may measure or graph.⁹⁶ In other words, the sense that time may seem to slow or speed up and the fact that these effects may happen coterminously, with a static feature affording the experience of motion or vice-versa, demonstrates that time is multiple and hence fundamentally

⁹³ Henri Bergson, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), 71.

⁹⁴ Fillerup, *Magician of Sound*, 44-48.

⁹⁵ Bergson, *Oeuvres*, 67.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

ungraspable by word and image. Whence comes the oft-quoted line from the *Essai*: “pure duration is the form taken by the succession of our conscious states when our ego [*moi*] is allowed to live, when it refuses to establish a separation between the present and previous states.”⁹⁷

This temporal play is already familiar to those who play music. In *Matière et mémoire* (1896), Bergson recalled how “each note of a tune learned by heart seems,” as one listens to or plays a melody, “to lean over the next to watch its execution.” The notes of a melody take place *in*, not after, the melody notes that precede, since music is a multi-temporal flow in which “the part virtually contains the whole.”⁹⁸ Describing melody allowed Bergson to attend to the concrete qualitative experience of the passing present, a flow that characterizes conscious life in general. Whereas language seems to impose a set of demands and limits regarding the form that thought can take, to think in music is to move more quickly—intuitively—from tonal color to melodic line, and to compare, as if looking at a landscape, the recollection of the opening chords of the *Première Gymnopédie* with the feeling left over after the eventual turn towards melancholy minor. In a sense, consciousness for Bergson was inherently musical since this multi-temporal play makes us who we are: as he later stated in *Duration and Simultaneity* (1922), “when we are seated on the bank of a river, the flowing of the water, the gliding of a boat or the flight of a bird, the ceaseless murmur of our life’s deeps are for us three separate things or only one, *as we choose*.”⁹⁹ Human free will—choice—comes by virtue of the indeterminacy of our temporal experience, and by the intervention of the soul that synthesizes and projects our many pasts toward an unknown future.

For Bergson, temporal experience seemed fundamentally as open-ended as musical experience, hence music scholarship that invokes the philosopher tends to wield his ideas to affirm the self-creative magic of musical time. Keith Salley and Arved Ashby, for instance, suggest that however fixed and predictable music can seem, certain moments escape the familiar context in which they are situated. Salley pairs Bergson’s sense of pure duration with Arnold Schoenberg’s notion of “developing variation” to outline a mode of listening in which the lines between author, listener, and sound become blurred. Disavowing the idea of “an unchanging listener-as-subject who recognizes the development of a musical object,” Salley claims that the musical object (or idea) changes us and changes with us; thus we move from a solid, singular “I” to a dispersed subjectivity.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁹⁸ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 94.

⁹⁹ Henri Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity with Reference to Einstein’s Theory*, trans. Leon Jacobson (Indianapolis, New York, and Kansas City: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), 52. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ “Duration invites us to consider an inverted scenario,” Salley writes, “where apparent changes to a musical object actually represent the attempts of a listener-subject to remember a basic idea within an infinitely variable flux of interpenetrating conscious states.” For Kent Cleland, meanwhile, Bergson’s emphasis on the indeterminateness of time and the interpenetration of past moments paved way for Cage and his circle to compose indeterminate works. Keith Salley, “On Duration and Developing Variation: the Intersecting Ideologies of Henri Bergson and Arnold Schoenberg,” *MTO: A Journal of the Society for Music Theory*, 21, no. 4 (2015); Kent Cleland, “The Temporalist Harp: Henri Bergson and Twentieth-Century Musical Innovation,” *The European Legacy*, 16, no. 7 (2011), 953-967.

This partly accounts, in Ashby's view, for why even the most rigidly inscribed forms of musical reproduction—whether Beethoven's scores, the grooves of the long-playing record, or the mp3 file—may nevertheless allow for what Bergson termed a free action: a spontaneous and un-repeatable act of free will. In any number of "Beethoven moments," he writes, whether "the six-bar, fermata-ridden cadential delay that threatens to derail the very end of the Fourth Symphony, the delightful diminished-seventh aporia of the E-flat Piano Sonata, op. 31, no. 3, or the disruptively avant-garde *piano* chords in the opening movement of the first 'Razumovsky' quartet," the effects of these special moments "somehow escape again and again from multiple enforcements of linearity."¹⁰¹ In other words, though we listen to the same tracks over and over again, it is always possible to sigh. Each of these moments involves an abrupt change in rhythmic character—a fermata (in the Fourth Symphony), a cadenza (in opus 31), and a series of discrete chords bouncing antiphonally between the low and high strings (in the Razumovsky)—that might have struck Bergson as evidence of music's power to expand and contract the flow of time.

Ashby's "Beethoven moments," like my own sense of Satie's "sigh," affirm that musical repetition allows the listener to take the plunge into the ambiguous space opened up between the oscillations of Satie's left hand, as time stretches, seeming almost to stop. What I have called Satie's "sigh" is a marginal, subtle moment, and discerning readers may be wary of the kind of interpretation indulged here. It would be difficult (and rather silly) to try and locate other sigh moments in Satie's music; the sigh is not a strange Satiean topic. Rather, by listening through Bergson's words, that is, by opening oneself to what Steven Rings termed the deictic power of philosophical language, I would suggest that simple singsong melodies like the *Gymnopédies* may become vehicles for possible Bergsonian experience.¹⁰² Bergson not only described temporal experience but also hoped to *shape* how his readers would apprehend time. Perhaps the illusions of musical experience are always deictic—dependent on context and on prompting—since no matter how "ineffable" certain illusory effects may seem, a composer can only play with perception from within assumed (i.e. historically specific) parameters. The young Satie, as we will continue to see, structured his musical language around contrasting musical features like a flowing melody and a swaying left-hand ostinato. In Bergson's terms, these features correspond to distinct qualitative experiences of temporality that may be brought into relation, and in works of Satie's "Rosicrucian" phase, the composer's endeavor to lull listeners into a more sensitive state through the pairing of contrasting features took on explicitly spiritualistic overtones.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ "Each of these Beethoven moments—and there are many more—persists as a 'free action.'" Arved Mark Ashby, *Absolute Music, Mechanical Reproduction* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010), 74.

¹⁰² Rings defines this deictic power as the "attention-directing (or 'pointing') character" of language about music, noting that Vladimir Jankélévitch's descriptions of the music of Ravel or of Fauré, for instance, may sway a reader's apprehension of this music. Philosophical writing is not simply descriptive; it is also transformative. Steven Rings, "Talking and Listening with Jankélévitch," from Michael Gallope and Brian Kane, "Colloquy: Vladimir Jankélévitch's Philosophy of Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 218-223.

¹⁰³ Patrick Gowers dates Satie's "Rosicrucian phase" to a roughly four-year span from 1891-95, but, as we will see, the seeds were planted several years earlier. Gowers, "Satie's Rose Croix Music (1891-1895)," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 92nd session (1965-1966), 1-25.

During the late 1880s and early '90s, Satie relied on a poetics of opposition, casting contrasting musical features as different characters that one may imagine, considering the influence Satie is known to have drawn from Péladan, as personae in spiritually inflected mini-narratives. Pitching his *Quatre Ogives* (1889) to the Chat Noir crowd, Satie described “a suite of melodies conceived in the mystico-liturgical genre that the author idolizes,” which he “suggestively titled *Les Ogives*” (a term for Gothic arches).¹⁰⁴ Each of the four *Ogives* begins with a simple subdued melody in parallel octaves in the manner of a medieval plainchant incipit, and upon its repetition in the next system, the melody explodes with homophonic chordal harmony.



Figure 3. Opening of Satie’s second *Ogive* (1889).

The simplicity and slowness of the monophonic passage lulls the listener in, allowing for what Fillerup terms a transformative ascent, the simulation of an eye-opening spiritual shift that Satie figured in the music, and, by implication, sought to elicit in his listener’s inner self.¹⁰⁵ Quiet monophony gives way to grand church homophony: each *Ogive* develops from monastic restraint to ecstasy.

In the *Ogives*, Satie depicted the kind of catharsis for which Péladan yearned. In *La Décadence latine*, a series of novels in which Péladan told the tales of (fictional) sages walking a fetid path of sin on the way to mage-hood, he invoked the opposition of sensuality and purification as a metaphor

¹⁰⁴ Erik Satie, from *The Chat Noir Journal*, 9 February 1889, quoted in Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, 77.

¹⁰⁵ Fillerup describes the illusion of transformation in *Les Entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête*, a movement of Ravel’s ballet *Ma mère l’Oye* (1912) in which the Beast’s transformation into a Prince occurs as two themes—the high-register Beauty theme and the growling contrabassoon Beast theme—play around each other at first until a harp glissando marks an abrupt transition. A cello reiterates the Beast theme in a higher register and with a more refined manner, signaling that Beast has changed form. Fillerup, *Magician of Sound*, 51-53.

for the kind of spiritual journey walked by a true “mage” in his sense.¹⁰⁶ Péladan’s brand of mysticism was also structured by a poetics of opposition, the dualism of body and spirit, which took form in various characters portrayed in his narratives. In the first novel of the series, *La Vice Suprême*, which Satie read (as Steven Moore Whiting suggests) even before his convalescence from bronchitis—and thus even before he composed the *Gymnopédies*—Péladan opens with a vignette of a Princess lying lonely in her boudoir. In a state of “sweet somnolence” upon her purple velvet bedding, the Princess is an image of perfect allure—“with a mouth half-open and green for a kiss, she dreams”—and perfect docility: “she thinks of nothing, not a person, not of herself. This absence of all thought enamored her eyes and parted her thin lips with a happy smile.”¹⁰⁷ The Princess is an illusory double: she symbolizes the very sensual desire that demands to be mastered, and thus is something of a fetish through which a mage-in-training might achieve self-mastery.¹⁰⁸

In Péladan’s mysticism, a true mage would explore, and finally purge himself of, the trap of sensual craving—we might call it pulp truth. While the Princess’s somnolent stupor represents, in Péladan’s words, “the awakening of immortal being,” another figure, the Rabbi Sichem, seeks immortal being through fire and brimstone. In a later section of *Le Vice*, the elderly Rabbi—an image of Hebraic otherness—states the main thrust of Péladan’s message. Lamenting the “metaphysical inertia [that] intoxicates the West,” an inertia brought on through the supreme vice—greed for flesh or money—Sichem imagines that sin can be burned like a heretic at the stake. “When I contemplate the modern world with its theological indifference, focusing only on industrial activity, I, the Jew, miss the stake.”¹⁰⁹ He goes on to imagine “the auto da-fé” as the ultimate proof of a society’s faith, analogous to the mage’s inner quest. “Passion is a spinning wheel, sinking into evil,” he concluded: “It must be turned to good.”¹¹⁰

Perhaps the moments of ecstasy figured in Satie’s *Ogives* were the composer’s effort to turn the spinning wheel, and his own poetics of opposition can be heard as a musical transposition of the tension between passion and purification that ran through Péladan’s work. The contrast between a lone restrained melody and an impassioned ensemble, figured in the *Ogives* as a contrast between

¹⁰⁶ Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, 132-133.

¹⁰⁷ Péladan compares the Princess, a projection of lustful desire and of purity, to a Venus painted by “primitives” like Botticelli, “who, with a still mystical brush, try their hand at reviving paganism,” or to “a mad virgin of Dürer, ... made elegant by a mixture of Florentine thinness where there is no bone and Lombard flesh where there is no fat.” Joséphin Péladan, *Le Vice suprême* (Paris : Librairie des Auteurs Modernes, 1884), 2.

¹⁰⁸ The misogyny of Péladan’s Rosicrucianism thus becomes apparent, not only in *La Vice suprême*, but also in an 1892 tract in which the mystic insisted that “in submission to the man, resonating, the woman becomes his equal, in that she is his double;” yet the hierarchical arrangement is still clear: “In dominating the man, she disdains him; a woman only loves one who is her master.” Joséphin Péladan, *How to Become a Mage: A Fin-de-Siècle French Occult Manifesto*, trans. K.K. Albert and Jean-Louis de Biasi (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2019), 73.

¹⁰⁹ Péladan, *Le Vice suprême*, 327.

¹¹⁰ “L’auto da-fé, même criminel, prouve la foi des bourreaux, et la foi des victimes; et la foi est le levier qui fait l’œuvre de Dieu.... La passion est une roue qui tourne, à senestre dans le mal; imbécilité de l’arrêter. Il faut la faire tourner à dans le bien. C’est la roue du Tarot, c’est le cœur de l’homme.” Ibid.

a lone vocal line (a duet in parallel octaves) and its repetition in chorale, for instance, reappeared in music that Satie composed after meeting Péladan in the Montmartre hotbed and becoming the chapel composer for Péladan's Ordre de la Rose+Croix et du Graal in 1891. In the *Sonneries de la Rose Croix*, a series of short piano works written as ceremonial music for meetings of Péladan's Order, Satie shaped each movement around a contrast between a chant melody and an accompanying ostinato composed of discrete and plodding quarter notes. In the *Air de l'Ordre*, the first *Sonnerie*, he posed long chains of quarter notes, "slow and detached without dryness," against moments of legato "connected song." Regular pulsed rhythm, like the marching-forward of an occult order, contrasts with another chant-like melody, arching repeatedly through neighboring triads.

Air de l'ordre

Leut et détaché sans sécheresse

Figure 4. The discreet, steady quarter notes contrast with chant-like melody in the *Air de l'Ordre*, first part of the *Sonneries de la Rose Croix* (1891).

Finally, these opposing characters meet, the pulsing quarter notes lending a regular pulse to the connected song:

Figure 5. The "connected song" and "detached accompaniment" meet.

Once joined with the steady ostinato, the flowing melody conveys the unity of an imagined Order, the lone chanting voice connecting the steps of an otherwise faceless and subdued procession. The ascetic and austere mood of this *Sonnerie* illustrates (perhaps *too* clearly) the composer's fascination with Péladan's mysticism, voiced through Satie's simplistic chant, up and down, up and down, and his chordal accompaniment that marches onward, going nowhere. The joining of these two forces depicts a kind of mystic transformation.

However, there was always an inner tension in Satie's aesthetic position and persona, a tension at which my earlier discussion of the *Gymnopédies* may have already hinted. One may not feel charmed: if, when listening to the *Première Gymnopédie*, one refuses to move to and fro and indulge in the nuances of French color, one is left with a simple—if not simplistic—café song. And if, following the same logic, one refuses to take works from Satie's Rosicrucian phase seriously, the ecstasy or mysticism figured in the composer's scores might backfire. Satie's *Sonneries* are perhaps too "pure" to trust, and when the audience at Péladan's Salon encountered Satie's austere Rosicrucian style, their annoyance and impatience indicate that Satie's "mystico-liturgical" style was as much an outright parody of mysticism as it was a sincere bid at it. These opposing stances seem to coexist, a tension that defines, I would suggest, Satie's earlier style as he developed a public persona.

Thousands of Parisians, including Émile Zola, Paul Verlaine, Pierre Puvis de Chauvannes, and Gustave Moreau, attended Péladan's first Salon held at the Galerie Durand-Ruel during March of 1892.¹¹¹ The exhibited works depicted a set of themes already familiar from Péladan's writings: one painting in particular, Jean Delville's (1867-1953) *The Idol of Perversity* (*L'idole de la perversité*), depicts the duality of vice and purification, of eroticism and spiritism, familiar from *La Décadence latine* (figure 6).¹¹²

¹¹¹ Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France: Joséphin Peladan and the Salons de la Rose-Croix* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976), see esp. 217-223.

¹¹² Vivien Greene, *Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose Croix in Paris, 1892-1897* (New York: Guggenheim, 2017), 36-46, 72-73, and 78-79.



Figure 6. Jean Delville, *The Idol of Perversity* (*L'idole de la perversité*), 1891, exhibited at the First Salon de la Rose+Croix.

The milieu assembled around Péladan enjoyed a pared-down neo-medievalist aesthetic as much as they delighted in pulpifying the sacred, and when Péladan gave Satie his first major public premiere on 22 March during an opening gala, the composer responded by producing an appropriately austere score. Originally a three-act drama, at the First Salon Satie premiered only the instrumental preludes to each act of *Les Fils des étoiles* (1892), the first prelude beginning with chords like Greek columns, moving homophonically in a repeating rhythm, short-short-short-long (figure 7).

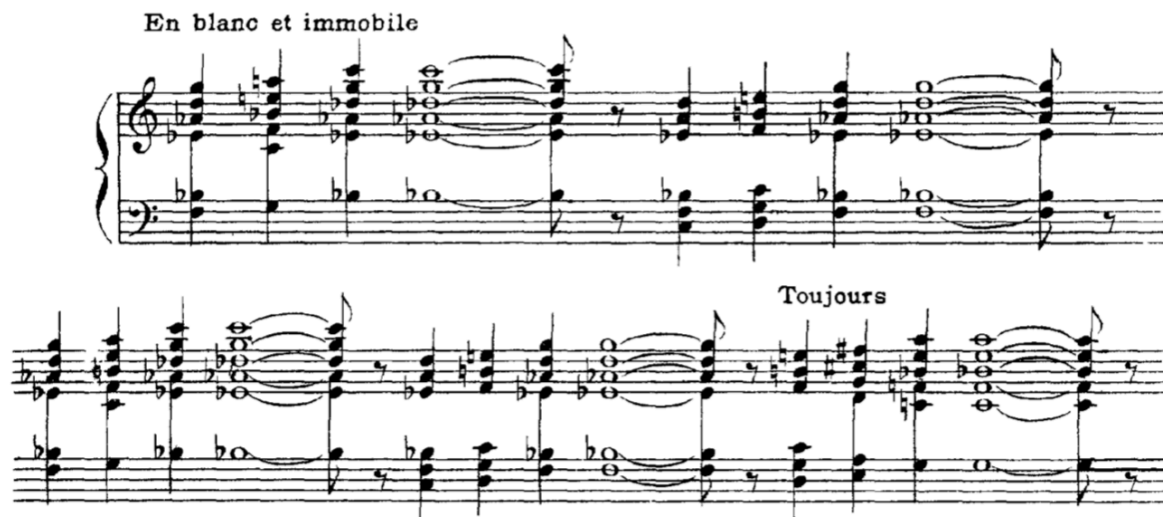


Figure 7. The opening of *Les Fils des étoiles* (1892).

Two perfect fourths a tritone apart comprise each of these chordal columns, and one can hear a medieval austerity mixed with a mock-Greek flavor as fourths and major sevenths move crudely in parallel along a pentatonic pattern.

His Greekishly medieval primitivism made Satie's music particularly appealing to Péladan, an adamant Wagnerite who wanted the music of his Salons to resound with the kinds of atmospheric harmonies that had joined audiences at Bayreuth in an aesthetic-religious fervor. The reception at the Salon, however, was lackluster, confirming what a listener might already intuit: the composer delighted to irritate as much as to mystify. One of Satie's opponents, the music critic Willy (aka Henry Gauthier-Villars) claimed, as Whiting accounts, that *Les Fils* "gave me but mediocre Satisfaction," while critic Francisque Sarcey wrote that the music compelled "a slumber that the angels would have envied": according to biographer Pierre-Daniel Templier, "the music proved to be far above [the audience's] heads and was met by an icy silence."¹¹³ Satie's cynicism thus had another—and more specifically political—edge to it: *Les Fils* was his bid at an anti-Wagnerian Wagnerism. Complex chordal colors waft and wane ambiguously, creating an atmosphere of austere medieval grandeur, yet Satie staunchly rejected the long-developing harmonic drive of a *Tristan und Isolde* or the thematically driven musical narratives of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. A near absence of cadences, a near refusal of melody, and an absolute refusal to develop musical ideas into a longer progression mark *Les Fils*, waxing and waning for waxing-and-waning's sake.

The conflict within Satie's style and persona also came to the fore in his writings. In an 1893 "Epistle" to Catholic artists, the composer parroted Péladan's orotundity to lament the decadence of Western artistic expression and spirit. Since "Western society, daughter of the Apostolic Roman Catholic Church, is invaded by the shades of ungodliness," Satie envisaged a new "temple worthy of the Saviour, LEADER and redeemer of peoples," a "refuge where Catholicism, and the Arts which are indissolubly linked to it, shall grow and prosper, sheltered from all profanation, and at the full

¹¹³ Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, 150-151; Pierre-Daniel Templier, *Erik Satie*, trans. Elena L. French and David S. French (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1969), 13-14.

expansion of their purity, which the efforts of the Evil One cannot sully.”¹¹⁴ Satie’s delight to bore his audiences, however, indicates that his religious rhetoric was likely parodic even as he appropriated Péladan’s rhetoric to make his name. He wrote in an open letter to the editor of the Parisian newspaper *Gil Blas* that “good Master Joséphin Péladan, Whom I greatly respect and hold in deference, has in no wise exercised authority on my Aesthetic independence; his relationship with me is not that of my master, but of my collaborator.”¹¹⁵ Refusing to follow any then-established “LEADER” of either aesthetic or religious import, Satie was only willing to lead himself, though he closed his letter of independence with more lofty religious rhetoric, “[swearing] before the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church” that he did not mean to offend Péladan, calling himself “a poor man with thought for nothing but his Art.”¹¹⁶

Yet while Satie’s writings from this phase—in fact, from any of his phases—were always at least minimally satirical (*Satierikal?*), his efforts to infuse his early music with a kind of spiritual mystery also cannot be easily cast aside as “mere” satire. His friend Alphonse Allais called him “Esotérik Satie,” and he must have delighted in self-posturing this way, mocking Péladan by holding onto his “Aesthetic independence” while also dabbling in the kinds of spiritualistic fantasies that one can read in Péladan’s texts or see in the art of the Rose+Croix painters. After all, why use chant motifs? Why spend so much effort to self-mystify?

Just as the young bohemian lacked the commitment necessary to be seriously religious, he lacked the pedigree and work ethic necessary to join the serious musical establishment. Thrice rejected when he applied to positions at the Institut de France or the Academy, Satie locked himself away scribbling—with obsessively ornate penmanship—about a fantasied Church of Art of Jesus Christ the Leader, in which the composer alone was founder and high priest leading a sect of billions of people.¹¹⁷ His attempts to compensate for his lack of formal study by filling his resume with fictional compositions, a grandiosity on par with his Catholic writings, failed to impress the academy, just as his mystical meanderings failed to impress the public. He was neither a “true” adherent of a particular religious sect, preferring to imagine his own, nor a member of the musical elite, imagining himself as his own elite.

In reality Satie was alone. By 1898 he moved to an unheated apartment in Arcueil-Cachan south of Paris. He would return from time to time to Montmartre to accompany songs and see

¹¹⁴ Erik Satie, “Epistle the First of Erik Satie to Catholic Artists and to All Christians,” in Ornella Volta, ed. *A Mammal’s Notebook: The Writings of Erik Satie*, trans. Antony Melville (London: Atlas Press, 2014), 103.

¹¹⁵ Erik Satie, “To the Editor of the Parisian Newspaper ‘Gil Blas,’” in Nigel Wilkins, ed. *The Writings of Erik Satie* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1980), 150.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ “There is extant a strange document in the composer’s ornate calligraphy which outlines the ‘program’ of the new church.... He had in mind a figure of 1,600,000,000 [people] for his black-robed and gray-hooded ‘Peneants noirs converts,’ while the ‘Peneants noirs profès,’ robed in black and white, would number 8,000,000, the ‘Peneants gris,’ a mere 40,000, the ‘Peneants blancs,’ 200, the ‘Cloistriers,’ 50, and the ‘Définitours,’ 10... with Satie himself in the triple role of founder, high priest, and sole adherent of the sect.” Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 90-91. See Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France; 1885 to World War I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968, originally 1955), 113-144.

friends, but then would disappear again on an hours-long nighttime walk back to his lonely lodging, a manuscript in one hand and a hammer for self-defense in the other. We are not sure what Satie did in his closet-apartment in “Arcachan” (as he called it)—other than drink, play piano, and continue to scrawl upon his manuscript—but I imagine he asked himself certain “ontological” questions. What is the point of being, after all? His answer, upon his re-emergence and the beginnings of his fame after 1904, was to kill profundity, and thus to move away from music’s profound illusions.

* *
*

Just as Satie’s “mystico-liturgical” style may be viewed as either a serious bid to recreate Péladianian mysticism in musical form or as a gag, one may choose to experience musical repetition as a vehicle for a possible Bergsonian experience... or not. A tension between illusory experience and the invoked “reality,” between mystery and banality, seems to characterize Satie’s style and persona, and I wager that this tension also inflected Bergson’s philosophy. For if we refuse to oscillate with musical rhythm and refuse the magical sighs evoked through musical sympathy, we are left with a rather boring scene. What could be more banal, after all, than the bare ticking of a clock? To and fro it goes but to no avail.

This tension between mystery and banality is, in a sense, the conflict inherent in Satie’s life and work, and is an apt metaphor, too, for how a scholar might think of Bergson. The philosopher was, during the first decade of the twentieth century, worshipped as something of a philosopher-mystic at the same time that detractors such as Bertrand Russel called him a poet rather than a philosopher.¹¹⁸ Looking back, Satie and Bergson allowed for different reactions in face of similar temporal illusions. Now we oscillate and plunge into mystery; now we wake up and soberly listen to a simple and banal mechanism—either way, back and forth, back and forth we go. Bergson believed there *must* be something more, insisting that the seeming magic of sensory experience affirms our freedom in face of any dull clod who might limit it.

Though allured by Péladan’s mysticism, Satie does not seem to have made up his mind too clearly about what kind of experience his music was to evoke. This seeming inconsistency, as I have suggested, was the heart of Satie’s aesthetic, an internal conflict that might lead one to think of the composer as having two faces, one looking upward toward mysterious ineffable heights, and the other sneering, daring to bore or to annoy with meaningless loops, harmonic colors that go nowhere,

¹¹⁸ Stories exist of his followers making pilgrimages to Bergson’s summer home in Switzerland, where they collected locks of his hair left over at the local barber’s; of women fainting during his lectures, delivered in an overpacked auditorium at the Collège de France; of students crowding outside the doors and infiltrating windows to listen to Bergson’s rapturous monologues every Friday at 5pm. R.C. Grogin, *The Bergsonian Controversy in France 1900-1914* (Calgary: The University of Calgary Press, 1988), 123-124; Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 4-5; for Russell’s critique of Bergson, cf. Antliff, *Inventing Bergson* and Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 13.

and musical ambience that just... vibrates. While each of his faces were present from the start, the jeering and mocking face won by the end.

While Satie escaped the Parisian scene to seek inspiration elsewhere, Péladan and the symbolists in his circle sought this elsewhere in faraway religious states. Keeping in view the work of Péladan and his Montmartre circle, and Satie's cloistered existence in Arcachan, one might speculate that for these fin-de-siècle artists, illusion *was* the other: that which allures the spirit toward another path, hinting of something truer and deeper beneath cold western calculation. As I will argue in the next section, for Bergson this realm of otherness was to be found in the liminal states exposed through clinical practices. While Satie ventured on his nighttime walks, the philosopher drew inspiration from hypnotics, catatonics, hysterics, and other aberrant personalities in Parisian clinics, and ultimately offered an ontological notion of time that went beyond any specific experience.

Bergson's illusions

Let us try to remember a moment of the past, something distant that we do not often recall. At first this moment is indistinct; we seem to leave the present in order to grasp whatever event or image we seek, yet we cannot at first find it. Then, slowly, the past begins to take form. Bergson led the reader through an internal contemplation. When we attempt to remember, he suggested, "we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves, first in the past in general, then in a certain region of the past—a work of adjustment, something like the focusing of a camera."¹¹⁹ Observing this difference between "the past in general" and a "specific region" requires a certain sensitivity. Slowly the features of the memory come into focus, but before the picture takes shape "our recollection still remains virtual; we simply prepare ourselves to receive it by adopting the appropriate attitude." This attitude of openness or receptivity to something indeterminate is already familiar: it is akin to the sensitive state one must adopt in order to be moved to sadness by the musical imitation of a groan. This state is like a pause, a moment between breaths. "Little by little [the memory] comes into view like a condensing cloud," Bergson continued; "from the virtual state it passes into the actual."¹²⁰

In *Matière et Mémoire*, Bergson visualized this play between past and present in the form of a cone:

¹¹⁹ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 134.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

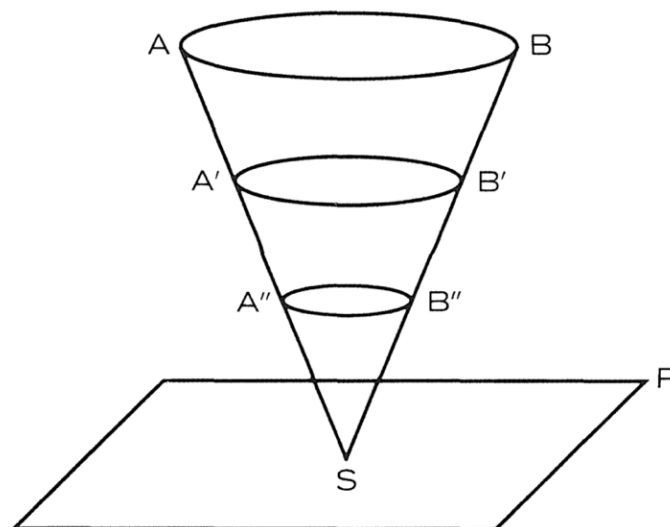


Figure 8. Bergson's "memory cone."

The point "S" signifies the present moment, and each curve moving upward from the point represents moments of the past receding further and further backward in time. The entire past is therefore always with us, an invisible and unconscious infinity that Deleuze called a "virtual coexistence."¹²¹ The "now" moment results from the downward pull of these many-layered pasts into the present. The self connects with the past anew in each moment; this is the self-creative power of the human being, what Bergson would term *élan vital* in *L'Évolution Créatrice* (1907).

The curious thing about Bergson's memory cone is that the highest and widest part of the cone, the most distant layer of the past, is represented as much larger than the present moment. The further "up" the cone one travels, reaching further backward in time, the larger "the past in general" becomes. We are *not sensitive enough* to ever be fully aware of how strong a hold the virtual past has on us since we can only ever stand on the tip of the cone. Though the past is not actual, it is never really absent—far from it. Beyond the specific feelings, moments, or images that we might recall or actualize, the very act of remembering indicates that a virtual past exists beyond the individual psyche. As Deleuze observed in his study of Bergson, this virtual past is, in a sense, "identical with being in itself," and hence when we try to remember, "*we leap into ontology.*"¹²²

In fin-de-siècle Paris, it did not require a "leap into ontology" to understand that the past was always present and tangible. Anyone who experimented with hypnosis could have seen and felt this, since the hypnotic effects that Bergson found so compelling had a brutal counterpoint in Parisian clinics. Beginning in 1877 Jean-Martin Charcot had used magnets and doses of amyl nitrate,

¹²¹ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 51-72. For a helpful musicological take on Bergson's memory cone, see Daniel M. Grimley's description of Frederick Delius's 1911 *Song of the High Hills*. A rhapsody, idyll, and hill song follow one after another, and in each subsequent repetition of each section, Delius introduces variations and rhythmic elaborations on prior motives. Each section of Delius's piece, Grimley asserts, functions like a new layer of the cone: every variation co-exists (virtually) with its theme. Daniel M. Grimley, "Music, Landscape, and the Sound of Place: On Hearing Delius's *Song of the High Hills*," *The Journal of Musicology*, 33, no. 1 (2016).

¹²² Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 55, 56-57.

colored images and tuning forks on female patients at the Hôpital Universitaire La Pitié-Salpêtrière to provoke gestural responses that corresponded with his patients' mental states.¹²³ Charcot's well-known images of cataleptic faces and contorted physiognomies suggested that the conscious self was subject to an unconscious that, precisely because it was not there—not present—could exert a frightening influence.¹²⁴ Reports of such practices may have led Bergson to describe music as a “refined and in some sense *spiritualized*” version of the process commonly used to invoke hypnotic trance: unlike Charcot, Bergson regarded the existence of the unconscious as affirming rather than undermining the idea of free will.¹²⁵

The discovery of the unconscious was not the only factor motivating Bergson's affirmation that the human being is something more, not merely a “mechanism” subject to unseen psychological forces. As my earlier discussion suggested, the philosopher also took issue with idealism in the most general sense: as Suzanne Guerlac writes, “instead of directing intuition towards an absolute that transcends time (Kant's noumenal realm) as other philosophers in the Western tradition have done,

¹²³ Fae Brauer, “Capturing Unconsciousness: The New Psychology, Hypnosis, and the Culture of Hysteria,” from Michelle Farcos, ed. *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Art* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2019); Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 121-122; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

¹²⁴ In her study of various images of Charcot's lethargic and hysterical patients—all women—pictured next to tuning forks, Carmel Raz argued that the experiments at the Salpêtrière indicated “that specific kinds of sounds had privileged access to the nerves, a motif that haunts the long nineteenth century and continues to resonate into the present day.” The vibrations of tuning forks could, in frighteningly “drastic” fashion, ban the mediation of words and affect the body immediately. Carmel Raz, “Of Sound Minds and Tuning Forks: Charcot's Acoustic Experiments at the Salpêtrière,” from *Musicology Now*, October 2015. Accessed 18 September 2017. <http://musicologynow.ams-net.org/2015/10/of-sound-minds-and-tuning-forks.html>

¹²⁵ It is therefore easy to indulge in the critical image of Bergson as a thinker of real *durée* who fought against the forces of mechanism and materialism invading French life towards the close of the nineteenth century. Suzanne Guerlac, Robert Grogin, and others describe various changes to the Parisian landscape and to everyday life—the train, the implementation of World Standard Time, the rapid industrialization transforming Paris's cityscape—that all in all imposed a mechanistic view of life, and they contextualize Bergson as a philosophical resistor to these forces. Grogin recounts, for instance, that Herbert Spencer's brand of Darwinian evolutionary theory cast the human being as a mere mechanism developing along pre-determined lines, meanwhile art historian Fae Brauer describes how the implementation of World Standard Time meant that a whole pastoral world of farmers, rural shopkeepers, and merchants across the French countryside, who previously lived according to the imprecise tolling of local church bells, suddenly became obedient to The Clock. “During the 1890s,” in Guerlac's words, “the universe could confidently be compared to a smoothly functioning machine,” one in which every part could be measured and nothing left uncertain.” Guerlac, *Thinking in Time*, 15; Grogin, *The Bergsonian Controversy in France*, 24; Brauer, “Capturing Unconsciousness,” 242.

[Bergson] directs it toward the happening of time in the concretely real world of actual becoming.”¹²⁶ This world of actual becoming could be apprehended only by keeping in view the always-fleeting movement of consciousness through time. This was the only way, in Bergson’s view, to dispense with the illusion of an abstract world—that is, the illusion that the world *does not* move, that it is as static as what can be represented in words and images.

In this section, I will suggest that illusion has a dual sense when thought in relation to Bergson’s philosophy. On one hand, Bergson was against the illusion of an abstract world—the world constructed by static absolute concepts—and was perplexed that these kinds of illusions are inevitable. In Deleuze’s words, “Bergson borrows an idea from Kant though he completely transforms it: it was Kant who showed that reason deep within itself engenders not mistakes but *inevitable* illusions, only the effect of which could be warded off.”¹²⁷ We constantly mistake our representations for things themselves; we cannot *not* make this error, and the role of intuition (in Bergson’s sense) is to sort out these inevitable category errors by re-orienting thought toward the concrete real, the qualitative experience of *durée*.¹²⁸ On the other hand, as the earlier description of the moan of sadness and Bergson’s use of melody suggested, the illusory experiences of the arts served as a means for the philosopher to invoke aesthetic experience directly, a crucial part of his intuitive re-orientation.

While the time art of music seemed to yield a direct experience of the concretely real, duration in its movement, Bergson also used examples drawn from psychological experiments such as hyperaesthesia, which was the subject of his first published philosophical essay. Describing an experiment at the Académie de Clermont in which Bergson and a colleague (a M. Robinet) induced a hypnotic trance in four 15 to 17-year-olds (apparently through prolonged eye contact and the placing of hands upon the participant’s heads), Bergson described how the teenagers “[plunged] instantly into a state of stupor that characterizes the most pronounced hypnotism: the eyes [remained] disproportionately open and fixed, the physiognomy losing all intelligent expression.” This trance state was accompanied by “all the usual cataleptic phenomena: general insensitivity, obstinacy to retain the attitudes suggested by the magnetist.”¹²⁹ By “general insensitivity,” Bergson

¹²⁶ Suzanne Guerlac, “Duration,” from Mark Sinclair and Yaron Wolf, eds. *The Bergsonian Mind* (forthcoming from Routledge). Cited with the author’s permission.

¹²⁷ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 20.

¹²⁸ For Bergson, “we make contact with duration by considering how time happens in us—how we feel it pass—and we do this by attending to the workings of our own consciousness. ‘The truth is,’ Bergson writes, ‘that an existence can only be given in an experience.’ When it is a question of a material object, this experience will be one of external perception; when it concerns the mind or spirit [*esprit*] ‘it will be called intuition.’” Guerlac, “Duration.”

¹²⁹ “Dès la première séance, nous réussîmes à les hypnotiser en les regardant à l'improviste de très près, et en maintenant fixés ours eux, pendant sept à huit secondes, nos yeux grands ouverts; aujourd'hui, il nous suffit de poser brusquement une main sur leur tête et d'attirer ainsi leur regard sur le nôtre pour les plonger instantanément dans cet état de stupeur qui caractérise l'hypnotisme le mieux prononcé : les yeux restent démesurément ouverts et fixes, la physionomie perd toute expression intelligente; enfin, Ton observe tous les phénomènes cataleptiques habituels : insensibilité générale, obstination à conserver indéfiniment les attitudes suggérées par le

seems to have referred to a general absence of intervention by the representing mind—the mind that forms experience into an abstraction that is useful for instrumental ends. That the teenagers became “insensitive” suggests that they were suddenly open to whatever happened to be there, refraining from normal conscious processes. As a result, they gained a whole other kind of sensitivity. Seated in front of Robinet, who had before him an opened book, the hypnotized teenagers were able to discern the page numbers and various phrases from the text. Despite the appearance that magic had occurred, Bergson did not take the teenagers’ ability to read bits of Robinet’s text as evidence of mind transference, but rather attributed it to heightened sensitivity induced by the hypnotism, which allowed them to discern parts of the text as reflected in Robinet’s eyes. A “general insensitivity” to their physical surroundings was thus coupled with a super-human sensitivity; once the conscious mind was subdued, vision was enhanced.

When Bergson wrote of the effects of musical rhythm in the *Essai sur les données immédiates*, he surely had this hyper-sensitive state in mind. He did not believe that such a state allowed access to an otherworldly realm, but rather that human perceptions were mystical enough. Profound truth was not to be found in the *au-delà*, but rather in the usually obscured reality of actual experience. As art historian Todd Cronan has put it, “Bergson’s claim is not that the artist produces sensations in the beholder’s mind and body, as in traditional accounts of ‘suggestion,’ but rather that those emotions are *already there* in the beholder’s self but buried beneath the ‘normal flow’ of conscious intent.”¹³⁰ To argue for his belief that something is already there in the human being, Bergson smoothly integrated the lessons that he learned from observing the teenagers at Clermont with his discussion of musical aesthesia in the *Essai*. This integration of psychological and artistic experience, dual sides of a philosophy meant to engage directly with temporal life, allows one to confront the dual role of illusion in Bergson’s thought, both an inevitable problem and a means through which to alleviate the problem.

Bergson’s description of the mysterious musical groan of sadness or the multi-temporal flow through which a melody proceeds recalls a familiar dichotomy between aesthetic appearance or semblance (*Schein*) and deeper reality from Nietzsche’s *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872, 1886). As is well-known, Nietzsche described the philosophical basis of the arts by way of a distinction between Apollo, the god of dreams who presides over the world of appearances with an air of detachment and mastery, and Dionysus, Apollo’s obverse, who plunges headlong into appearances by way of intoxication. Describing the Apollonian spirit, Nietzsche drew heavily on the idea of illusion:

The beautiful illusion of the dream worlds is the prerequisite of all plastic art.... [artists, like] philosophical men have a presentiment that the reality in which we live and have our being is also mere appearance, and that another, quite different reality lies beneath it.¹³¹

magnétiseuse.” Henri Bergson, “De la simulation inconsciente dans l’état d’hypnotisme,” *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger*, T. 22 (1886), 525.

¹³⁰ Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 93.

¹³¹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 34.

While the Apollonian artist strives toward the perfection of visible forms, the Dionysian seeks a raw experience of truth, an “intoxicated reality [that] seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness.”¹³² Bergson’s mysterious groan was, along these lines, an illusory intoxication. Unlike Nietzsche, however, who invoked the notion of illusion or *Schein* as he described abstract spiritual archetypes, Bergson trained his gaze toward the concrete truths (and illusions) of aesthetic experience—that is, toward sensation.

This orientation toward the senses led Bergson to develop a position on aesthetic illusion that distinguishes him from Nietzsche—since, to recall Fillerup, an illusion is not something dreamed up: it is a trick of perception that involves actual sensory data—and that also sets Bergson off from the nascent phenomenological tradition. On one hand, as I have suggested, illusion was a profound problem for him since we are inevitably bound to confuse inner experiences with external representations, a confusion of quality with quantity. This is why, in a section of the *Essai* devoted to the sensation of tone, Bergson urged his reader to consciously dissociate the sensation of sound from the physical effort necessary to sing. Since a pitch sung in the extreme high register requires extra vocal tension, resounding from the throat and nasal cavities, we tend to represent these pitches as greater in quantity and higher in space than the lower sounds produced when we sing from the chest or the belly. The temporal life of a sensation gets confused with a spatial representation.

We agree that a sharper sound evokes the image of a higher position in space. But does it follow from this that the notes of a scale, as auditory sensations, differ other than in quality?¹³³

With his implied “no,” Bergson curiously presaged the *époche* or phenomenological reduction that would soon form the bedrock of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology.¹³⁴ Imploring the reader to dissociate from the physical sensations of sound and to concentrate instead on the abstract qualities of sounds as intentional objects of the imagination, he asked the reader to “ignore the shock, the well-defined vibrations that you experience in the head or sometimes in the whole body” and to “take away the clash that occurs between two simultaneous sounds: what remains, other than an indefinable quality of the sounds heard?”¹³⁵ When one grasps a sound as pure sensation, one can then ascertain pure quality distinct from any representation of quantity.

On the other hand, I would suggest that this example demonstrates the positive role of artistic illusion in Bergson’s thought. Music was compelling for him precisely because it embodies the temporal lapse between what can be represented and what actually exists, or between lasting

¹³² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³³ “Nous accordons qu’une acuité supérieure de son évoque l’image d’une situation plus élevée dans l’espace. Mais soit-il de là que les notes de la gamme, en tant que sensations auditives, diffèrent autrement que par la qualité ?” Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates*, 33.

¹³⁴ Cf. Brian Kane, “L’Objet Sonore Maintenant: Pierre Schaeffer, sound objects and the phenomenological reduction,” *Organised Sound* 12, no. 1 (April 2007), 15-24.

¹³⁵ “Mais faites abstraction du choc, de la vibration bien caractérisée que vous ressentez parfois dans la tête ou même dans tout le corps; faites abstraction de la concurrence que se font entre eux les sons simultanés: que restera-t-il, sinon une indéfinissable qualité du son entendu?” Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates*, 32.

“truth” captured in words or images and the momentary illusions that seem to inspire and compel this truth, yet which always elude our grasp. Bergson’s endeavor to dissociate fleeting sensations from lasting representations was ultimately geared toward zeroing in on the movements of consciousness in the form of what Husserl would later term the “living present” (*der lebendige Gegenwart*), the constant now-moment in which conscious life unfolds.¹³⁶ Yet since he insisted that sensation occurs (like everything else) in time, Bergson would not have believed that phenomena could be adequately grasped in the intentional consciousness described by Husserl.

Bergson’s thought played somewhere in the gap opened up once the abstractions of the mind become dispersed with the movement of time. This commitment to thinking in time allowed, conversely, for Bergson to play the representing game on a higher level, since the figure of the memory cone is, as a representation, much closer to the actual reality of lived time. Once intuition has adequately parsed the qualitative from the quantitative, then the reality of duration, what Bergson called (in *Matière et Mémoire*) the “real curve of experience,” becomes accessible: hence, as Gallope has it, for Bergson “speculative fidelity to the ‘real curve’ of experience has an important philosophical goal: to rescue the possibility of thinking something absolute.”¹³⁷

Something of this “real curve” came to light, I would suggest, during another moment of the section on tone in which Bergson remarked that “some neuropaths cannot be present at a conversation without moving their lips.” Such individuals cannot help sympathizing with the speech uttered around them, mimicking the voices of others just as we might sigh at the musical imitation of a groan—after all, “this is only an exaggeration of what takes place in the case of every one of us.” A phantom identification occurs as “we repeat to ourselves the sounds heard, so as to carry ourselves back into the psychic state out of which they emerged.” In the same breath, Bergson then explained the “suggestive power of music” by writing of a certain motion and attitude that “sound imparts [on] our body,” suggesting that we repeat musical sounds to ourselves in order to link these sounds to “original states.”¹³⁸ This inner repetition of vocal or musical sound is a deeper, more introspective

¹³⁶ This aspect of Bergson’s thought anticipates Husserl’s phenomenology. “States of consciousness” occur in a “multiplicity” rather than in isolation; they “unfold themselves in *pure duration*.” For Husserl, the thinking subject persists along with its world always in the present, a “waking ‘now’” that “has its temporal horizon”: the waking now, “infinitely alive” stretches out in both directions toward “its unalive past and future.” As he wrote in his 1913 *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*: “when consciously awake, I find myself at all times, and without my ever being able to change this, set in relation to a world which, through its constant changes, remains one and ever the same. It is continually ‘present’ for me, and I myself am a member of it.” Whereas Husserl’s phenomenology hinged upon the deliberate bracketing out of the external world in order to grasp the *Eidos* (essence) of objects of experience through an internal process, however, Bergson understood the now-moment not through the rigid separation of one moment from another, but through an intermingling. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F.L. Pogson (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1910), 73; Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), 103.

¹³⁷ Michael Gallope, *Deep Refrains: Music, Philosophy, and the Ineffable* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago, 2017), 170.

¹³⁸ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 44.

form of repetition than what Bergson previously described, but whether we speak or we sing, the effect is the same. This movement is not an oscillation, but rather an instant psychic echo that establishes a sympathetic connection between an individual's present state and certain states inhabited in the past; in other words, we carry ourselves back into the virtual past, immediately, constantly.

Bergson's conflation, in this passage, between an aberrant psychological condition and a common facet of musical experience harkens back, once again, to Nietzsche's use of *Schein*. Sensory illusions become a means to access a deeper reality. I do not read Bergson to imply that one *really* goes back in time toward an original state; rather, it is the connection cultivated through interior repetition between a sound (musical or vocal) and a memory that reveals, once again, the actual temporal play of becoming. The past and present blur. Bergson therefore took hyperaesthesia and other sympathetic states to suggest that a perceiver may see beyond the tip of the cone. To take some liberty with Bergson's diagram, it is almost as if the effects of hypnosis or musical aesthesia had the power to invert the memory cone:

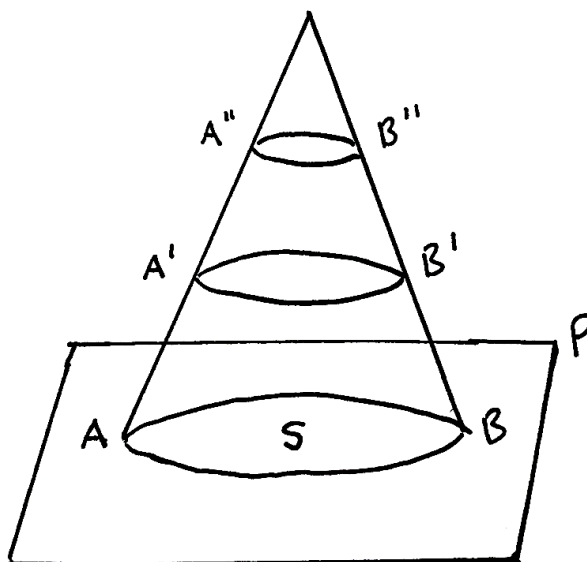


Figure 9. An inverted memory cone (poorly drawn by the author).

Suddenly point “S,” the present, collapses with the distant past and it becomes possible to sense how profoundly the past shapes the present. It is as if one may step outside time, through a leap, a flip of the cone, to see the whole play of virtual and actual, and thus to be positioned at what Bergson called “the *turn* of experience.” Illustrating this turn as a “faint light” that “[illuminates] the passage from the *immediate* to the *useful*,” Bergson contended that the real curve of experience, which “[stretches] out into the darkness behind us,” is anterior to the conscious mind’s intervention.¹³⁹ Just

¹³⁹ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 184.

before the mind transforms our experience into a representation that is useful for our survival or for our life in society, the real curve moves in the dark.

This real curve of experience, a peculiar poetic image, is only thinkable if one imagines oneself in a state like the teenagers at Clermont, suddenly sensitive to a condition that consciousness would normally ignore. This is the power, Guerlac asserts, of Bergson's endeavor to invoke the concrete reality of lived time as against the abstractions upon which philosophy ordinarily relies. "What is so thrilling about reading Bergson is that he undertakes to do the impossible, namely to treat philosophically what thought has suppressed: the radical force of time as becoming."¹⁴⁰ I would add that this figure of the real curve is further evidence that illusory experience was actually central in Bergson's thought. For what is a real curve if not a profound philosophical kind of illusion? It is not merely a literary trope or an abstract figure that Bergson fabricated. The real curve *is something to be experienced*; it has to do with actual sensations that a reader may recall and rethink. This curve is graspable only if one is willing to take the plunge, so to speak, to pass one's actual experiences through the medium of Bergsonian intuition. In other words, it takes a kind of trick of perception, a trick worked as one follows Bergson's thought and imagines oneself looking beyond or behind the abstractions of conscious life into the very instability of the "now," the always-fleeting moment—of which music, as we have seen, was a compelling figure. A deeper reality can be discursively apprehended, and a distinction made, in Bergson's own words, between "properly *human* experience" and experience beyond the turn.¹⁴¹

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Before bringing Satie back into the foreground, I would like to pause a bit longer over the implications of Bergson's endeavor to push philosophy "beyond the turn" by contrasting Bergson with Deleuze's Bergson. Whereas the former took cues from the the arts or hypnotism to affirm the self-creative power of the soul—a word that Bergson frequently used in the *Essai*—the latter seemed less interested in these illusions. In place of duration as a qualitative experience of lived time, Deleuze substituted "the virtual," a kind of impersonal, absolute, and ultimately abstract ground for all possible experience.¹⁴² This change in focus makes clear a central thread of Deleuze's Bergsonism:

¹⁴⁰ Guerlac, "Duration."

¹⁴¹ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 184.

¹⁴² I am grateful for Fuoco Fann's insights into the status of illusion as well as the question of representation in modern art and aesthetics, specifically his discussion of the notion of simulation, which I take to be roughly equivalent to "the virtual" in Deleuze. For Deleuze "*simulacrum* [was] a crucial art-historical term" that the philosopher leveraged "to resolve the predicament of representation": that is, to resolve a "futile debate" between "mind/heart, ... external/internal, image/reality, representation/presence," which Fann terms "the old grid" structuring European thought. He clarifies that Deleuze "advocates reversing Platonism by uplifting the simulacrum over the world of representation," which is to say that simulation—or the virtual—stands opposed to the "old grip," providing an alternative to the old dichotomies of appearance and reality, or illusion and the real. However, while Deleuze believes that simulation might "perhaps even ... 'cure' the dichotomies prevalent in discourses of the human sciences"—dichotomies that have their basis in

namely, Deleuze's conviction that Bergson "develops the notion of the *virtual* to its highest degree and bases a whole philosophy of memory and life on it."¹⁴³ The virtual is somewhat like a non-actual or a negative time, which is not to say that the virtual is fictive—far from it: Deleuze is adamant that the virtual "*possesses a reality*."¹⁴⁴ In other words, the virtual is not an illusion; it is not of the order of illusion. The virtual, instead, is an integral reality, crucial to defining consciousness and to understanding how consciousness works.

The difference between these two Bergsons, between Henri himself and Bergsonism, might be summed up as one between a "psychologically" oriented inquiry and an "ontologically" oriented inquiry. This distinction is an apt metaphor for the movement away from aesthetic illusion and toward ontology that characterizes Satie's later phase, and also perhaps our own late Bergsonian moment. As I have endeavored to demonstrate, for both Bergson and Satie, there was something magical about music's repeating rhythms. The state of artistic absorption, like the sleepy state of hypnosis, indicated to Bergson that consciousness depends upon a virtual realm beyond itself, which is a philosophical way of saying what artists in Satie's fin-de-siecle milieu already knew. As Deleuze took up Bergson's notion of memory, however, he trained his gaze toward the non-psychological conditions undergirding any such mystical experience, and his notion of virtuality casts Bergson and Satie's respective "mysticisms" in sharp relief.

To explain "the virtual," Deleuze carried Bergson's own effort to distinguish the qualitative from the quantitative further, though toward a distinct end. "'Object' and 'objective' denote [a] quantitative multiplicity," he wrote, whereas the subject or "the subjective" has to do with qualitative or non-numerical multiplicities. To understand the former, we can think of numbers, which "[have] only differences in degree, [hence their] differences, whether realized *or not*, are always actual in [them]."¹⁴⁵ Whether realized *or not*: this is the key phrase, since the number 100, for instance, is the aggregate of 10 groups of 10 and is also the sum of many smaller numbers that we may not "realize"; that is, we do not think of "ten tens." Yet these many smaller numbers are always already there—always actual—within the bigger number. The "objective" in Bergson therefore referred to that which differs only in degree. A quantitative multiplicity is like a big mass of the same stuff—everything is in the open, so to speak; we can add, subtract, or multiply without changing the nature of numbers themselves. The same reasoning applies when we impose numerical values on an experience: notes are high or low, loud or soft, yet are still "notes"; sounds *are represented as* being of the same kind, ignoring subtler differences in quality. By contrast, in a qualitative multiplicity different *kinds* of phenomena become mixed. We cannot count how many different feelings are contained within a

the old grid (or instance, the knowing subject versus the unthought, man versus his doubles in Foucault's sense)—Jean Baudrillard finds simulation endlessly problematic because "Reality is a Western implementation." Either way, however, "for better or for worse, simulation overthrows representation." I owe the following discussion of the opposition between illusion and virtuality, between Bergson and Deleuze's Bergson, to these insights. See Fann, *This Self We Deserve*, 143-147; and for the opposition of illusion with "integral reality" via Baudrillard, see esp. 153-155.

¹⁴³ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 43. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁴ "The possible has no reality," wrote Deleuze; "conversely, the virtual is not actual, but *as such possesses a reality*. Here again Proust's formula best defines the states of virtuality: 'real without being actual, ideal without being abstract.'" Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 96.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

feeling of melancholy, for example, especially since our feeling of melancholy changes as soon as we attend to it.¹⁴⁶

Virtuality is therefore the condition of complex aggregate psychological states. “Subjective” experience is symphonic: we blend different feelings or conscious states just as a listener hears different and layered instrumental voices, pushing some notes aside in order to dwell upon others. This process creates what we might call a multiplicity of virtuals, since as consciousness parries with related states—envy and depression, for instance, two emotions that are different in kind—one state might form the background and the other the foreground, or vice-versa. Certain states are therefore virtual, others actual, and consciousness makes them switch. However, whereas Bergson may have preferred to think of this play of virtual and actual as evidence supporting an inherently human capacity, ultimately affirming the soul, in *Le Bergsonisme* Deleuze used Bergson’s observations about consciousness to point toward something entirely beyond the human. Reading the passage from *Duration and Simultaneity* that I quoted earlier—Bergson’s Walter Pater-esque description of sitting on a bank of a river and listening to his life’s deeps—Deleuze writes: “The flowing of the water, the flight of the bird, the murmur of my life form three *fluxes*.” *Flux replaces the soul*: “my duration is one of them”—the water, the bird, or the murmur, as I choose—“and also the element that contains the two others,” containing them virtually. A bird’s flight and an inner murmur are different in kind and uniting them into one duration—my duration—implies subsuming multiple fluxes into one.¹⁴⁷ The play of actualizing certain qualitative perceptions while leaving others unactualized, continues; we divide, unify, and divide again continuously.

Deleuze amplifies the notion of virtuality beyond what Bergson seems to have intended. While Bergson affirmed that the soul may indeed fly like a bird, with all the poetic and symbolic weight that such an image might carry, Deleuze emphasized the non-psychological, non-individual—in a word: absolute—nature of this self-creative power.¹⁴⁸ If there is anything special about the human being, it is only that it forms a locus of different fluxes reaching backward into the virtual past while also flowing forward. *This movement is pure ontology*, as if a person is merely a node linking many warps and wefts weaving through a timeless Time. “It could be said that in man, and only in man, the actual becomes adequate to the virtual”; only “man is capable of rediscovering all the levels ... that coexist in the virtual Whole.”¹⁴⁹ Psychological states, on this view, are mere epiphenomena of a fundamental time, an *ontological time* that flows beneath what we can actualize. Indeed, we are always too limited, stuck on the tip of the cone; the flux is beyond us.

In the next and final section, I will describe other receivers of Bergson who conceived time as a kind of non-psychological flow, positioning Satie as a precursor to theories according to which

¹⁴⁶ In Bergson’s words: “a complex feeling will contain a fairly large number of simple elements; but, as long as these elements do not stand out with perfect clearness, we cannot say that they were completely realized, and, as soon as consciousness has a distinct perception of them, the psychic state which results from their synthesis will have changed for this very reason.” Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 84; cf. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 42.

¹⁴⁷ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 80.

¹⁴⁸ The *élan vital* is “a virtuality in the process of being actualized, a simplicity in the process of differentiating, a totality in the process of dividing up: Proceeding ‘by dissociation and division,’ by ‘dichotomy,’ is the essence of life.” *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

musical temporality—*true* musical temporality—is a rigidly metered and impersonal flow. Satie made his own kind of “ontological” inquiry into the nature of sound—always, of course, with the familiar wink. His growing love of the musical fragment made possible a different poetics of repetition, more grating and less nuanced than the dancing and sighing melodies that echoed from the Chat Noir. By ousting his early mystical influences, the composer anticipated (in his own strange way) later endeavors to dig “real” sound out from under the baggage of traditionally established metaphysical beliefs about music. Satie’s style was a musical prefiguration of a particular *mentalité* according to which sound is reality in itself. In other words, the idea now current in a certain Deleuzian branch of sound studies that our actual sonic experience derives from, and is owed to, a supra-audible virtual realm of fluxes and vibrations owes something to that odd Arcachan cynic.

Finale: ontological time in Satie and Bergsonism

After he had emerged from isolation and finally gained fame, Satie envisioned a furniture music that would pulse, somewhat like a “flux,” somewhere beneath conscious attention. Fernand Léger recounted a walk he had with Satie in which the composer imagined a “music [that] would be part of the noises around it”: a “tuneful” music that would “[soften] the noise of knives and forks without overpowering them or making itself obtrusive”; a music that “would banish the need [for table companions] to make banal conversation,” while also “[neutralizing] street noises.” It would be a functional music “responding to a need.”¹⁵⁰ The stories of Satie’s early forays into *Musique d’ameublement* are well-known: the composer arranged short fragments derived from popular tunes for a small horn band and looped them ad nauseum, and during the premiere he ran about telling people not to listen.¹⁵¹ He kept his penchant for repetition, in other words, but without the ecstasy.

¹⁵⁰ Fernand Léger, from *Satie Remembered*, ed. Robert Orledge, trans. Roger Nichols (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1995), 74-75.

¹⁵¹ Darius Milhaud recounted that he and Satie premiered Furniture Music during the intermission of a 1920 concert of music by Les Six and Stravinsky as well as a play by Max Jacob. “A programme note warned the audience that it was not to pay any more attention to the ritornelles that would be played during the intervals than to the candelabra, the seats, or the balcony.” Once three scattered clarinetists, a trombonist, and a pianist (Marcelle Meyer) began to play from various corners of the auditorium, however, the audience returned to their seats to listen, much to Satie’s dismay—“Go on talking! Walk about! Don’t listen!” As Caroline Potter suggests, Furniture Music had an earlier origin, even as early as 1916 according to an unsubstantiated account by an owner of a Parisian venue (named Emile Lejeune) who stated that Satie improvised on a piano during the entr’acte of a collaborative artistic event—Satie allegedly called his amblings “furniture music” and avowed: “I want the visitors to circulate.” Whether or not this account is accurate, certainly by 1917, around the time Satie conceived *Socrate*, he had written his first movements of *Musique d’ameublement*. Potter speculates, in fact, that *Socrate* may have been originally imagined “as furniture music, as an inherently multimedia project which incorporated Grecian dancers against various antique-themed backdrops in imagined spaces.” Darius Milhaud, *Notes Without Music*, trans. Donald Evans (London: Calder and Boyars, 1952), 105; Potter, *Erik Satie, A Parisian Composer*, 146-155.

By this point, Satie had begun to favor pastiche, as in his texted piano works like the *Embryons Deséchés* of 1913, desiccated embryos of eighteenth-century pianistic motifs, or his series of short *Sports et divertissements* of 1914, each devoted to some charming banality of bourgeois life—picnics, yachting, golf, and tennis. Even in later works that recalled his earlier introspective mood like the *Cinq Nocturnes* of 1919, Satie refrained from opposing legato melodies against steady ostinati. Instead, the melodies of the *Nocturnes* are “built in” to the ostinati: they do not stretch over the barline, but are instead part of the very texture of the ostinati themselves. And each ostinato is an atomized bit—a measure or two at a time—that Satie strung together.

1^{er} NOCTURNE

The image shows the musical score for Satie's 1^{er} Nocturne (1919). The score is in G major and 12/8 time. It consists of three systems of music. The first system (measures 1-2) is marked 'p' and 'doux et calme'. The second system (measures 3-5) is marked 'p' and 'pp'. The third system (measures 6-7) is marked 'pp' and 'p m. g. en dehors', with a section labeled 'attendre' and 'Reprendre'. Red brackets highlight specific melodic fragments within the score.

Figure 10. Satie’s First Nocturne (1919)

If we take any one of these bits, repeat it over and over again, voila, we get Furniture Music. This is a process we cannot apply to Satie’s early works, at least not without doing serious violence to them.

Satie readily applied this process of fragmentation and repetition when he composed other pieces, perhaps most obviously *Cinéma* (1924), which he wrote to accompany René Clair’s *Entr’acte*, the cinematic interlude for the ballet *Rêlache*. Promoted in the Parisian press as a “ballet *instantanéiste*

in two acts, with a cinematographic interlude, and Francis Picabia's dog Tail,"¹⁵² *Rêlache* was a Ballet Suédois flop, provoking scorn from critics who balked at its seeming absence of plot. In front of a bleak set composed of metal discs, the ballet features a lone ballerina who smokes a cigarette and greets a series of suitors; gradually they all undress; she dons a beard, lies upon a stretcher, and pushes a wheelbarrow; a fireman pours water in a bucket; eventually they all disband into the audience. Francis Picabia's Dadaist aesthetic took form in the disjunct actions onstage as well as in the disjunct images of Clair's film. Beginning with slow-motion sequences of Clair and Satie jumping up and down next to a cannon (pointed at the viewer), *Entr'acte* proceeds through a hodgepodge of images, disparate signs that signify nobody-knows-what. Chimneys of Paris filmed upside down are perhaps a mock-marker of bourgeois society; the chess pieces on Marcel Duchamp's board perhaps are symbols of reason washed away as a fire hose douses Duchamp and Man Ray's chess game.

Composed of a series of one-measure phrases repeated to fill up various sequences—usually in phrases of four or eight measures—Satie's *Cinéma* is devoid of sighs. His grating ostinati churn in ceaseless annoyance as the film moves through a loose narrative arc: a man shot dead in a hunting accident is given a funeral procession (led by a camel) that turns into a mad dash down the streets of Paris and down a rollercoaster as the coffin takes off on wheels, landing eventually in a field, opening as a magician emerges to conjure away his pursuers. Especially in the context of a ballet, Satie's musical loops recall a Stravinskian score for the Ballets Russes, though unlike the layered dissonance and polytonality of *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Satie employs constant consonance and purposeful lack of orchestral finesse as tactics of aggravation. With simplistic counterpoint, *Cinéma* opens with a main "motif" of a bumbling bassline posed clumsily against shrill woodwinds, churning in mock-marching dotted rhythms.

¹⁵² "Ballet instantanéiste en deux actes, un entr'acte cinematographique et la Queue du chien de Francis Picabia; Musique d'Erik Satie—Film réalisé par René Clair." Poster for the *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*, December 1924, catalogued as an *affiche typographique*. BNF Gallica: accessed 26 September 2017. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b531185420/f1.item.r=Rêlache%20Satie>

Figure 11. Satie's hand-written score for *Entr'acte*, with his main "motif."

Compared to the pendulum-like movement of the *Gymnopédies*, the ostinati of *Cinéma* circle and circle as shrill monophonic winds dip chromatically down and up against an ever-quickening two-step rhythm between a bass drum and cymbal—a crude mimesis of the rolling coffin wheels.

It was repetition devoid of mysticism, without long arching melodies, without sighs and moans of inimitable sadness. Whereas the *Première Gymnopédie* featured lengthy melodic phases, *Cinéma* featured only the barest traces of melody—a few notes in stepwise motion here, a fraction of a fanfare there—never crossing the bar line; instead of complex chordal colors, bare octaves and fourths moving simplistically in parallel; instead of a poetic arc leading from major to minor, the blunt restatement of *Cinéma*'s main "theme" at various points. These recapitulations hardly constituted a development or a subtle change in mode. *Cinéma* is more like a musical collage, as if Satie fragmented items from the everyday musical context—a march rhythm, a fanfare, a scale. No arc, only loops; no depth, only surface. We are done with the magical effects of induction. Late Satie, it seems, had little need for such illusions.

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What happened? I take this change in Satie's style to suggest that the composer was after a more real condition of sound, which he sought precisely by banalizing his music. When a composer refuses the "drastic," even as a conceit, one is left with a bare reality, as when one refuses to take the plunge into hypnosis, one is left sitting in front of a swinging pendulum, clock-like and mechanical. Satie's refusal of the sigh, of the poetic illusions that characterize his earlier music, is reminiscent of the kind of renunciation of artistic representation that Wassily Kandinsky had theorized in 1912, claiming that abstract art, precisely because it no longer imitates objects of the visual world, plunges deeper into the reality of line, figure, and color.

The dichotomy between “the Great Abstraction” and “the Great Realism” that structures Kandinsky’s essay, “On the Question of Form,” published in Munich as part of the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*, is, despite Kandinsky’s distance from Satie’s immediate context, an apt foil for the internal conflict I have observed in Satie—the clash between his two “faces,” mystical and cynical. Kandinsky provides a way to see this opposition as dual sides of an artistic quest for the real—or, more precisely, for what he termed the “inner sound” of the medium. He explains “the Great Realism,” for instance, as “a desire to exclude from the picture the externally artistic [element] and to embody the content of the work of art by means of the simple (‘inartistic’) rendering of the simple, hard object.”¹⁵³ The great realism is something of an ideal type, a style of painting in which things of the world are depicted plainly, simply, primitively.¹⁵⁴ The kind of stripped-bare simplicity and refusal of profound illusions that we can hear in *Cinéma* or even in Satie’s *Nocturnes*, from this perspective, amount to the “exclusion of accustomed, importunate beauty”; that is, a reduction of the “‘artistic’ element to a minimum”—a refusal of embellishment, of elaborate textures and other painterly effects.

Conspicuously, for Kandinsky this reduction of the “artistic” element would allow, conversely, for “the inner sound of the thing” to ring: “the soul of the object sounds forth most strongly from within this outer shell, because external, palatable beauty can no longer distract us.”¹⁵⁵ Satie certainly disdained the distraction of external beauty, and if we take seriously (a dangerous move) his words to Cocteau about *Musique d’ameublement* that I quoted in the introduction—that Furniture Music would create vibration for vibration’s sake, like light, heat, or other comforts—then we might think of this banalized music as an absurdist kind of “great realism.” Yet Furniture Music, a music that refuses narrative, that proceeds through loops and through blunt restatement without development, hardly presents something “objective” in Kandinsky’s sense. There is no *mise en scene*, no symphonic or operatic plot; the musicological hermeneut has no room to wax. However, in describing “the Great Abstraction,” Kandinsky invoked precisely this kind of refusal of representation, which allowed him, paradoxically, to claim that abstraction, by “[excluding] completely the objective (real) element and [embodying] the content of the work of art in ‘nonmaterial’ forms,” accomplishes a higher kind of realism. I read “objective (real) element” to connote illusory experience: the sense that music presents something beyond itself, recalling an image, drawing one in. Instead, the poetics of a work like Furniture Music hinges on “nonmaterial” forms, a phrase that Kandinsky puts in scare quotes, I think, because he does not wish to imply that the “materials” of painting are any less important in abstraction than in realism. Quite the contrary: through the use of lines, colors, and abstract shapes, which foreground the very materiality of paint on canvas, the painter would make it possible, “as in the case of realism,” “to hear the whole world just as it is, without objective interpretation.” The interpreter’s words are useless; meaning goes silent; we hear the “inner sound” directly. This conflation of the aims of abstraction and realism

¹⁵³ Wassily Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings On Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1994), 243.

¹⁵⁴ “In the ‘great realism’ (as exemplified in the art of Henri Rousseau) the external-artificial element of painting is discarded, and the content, the inner feeling of the object, is brought forth primitively and ‘purely’ through the representation of the simple, rough object.” Peter Selz, “The Aesthetic Theories of Wassily Kandinsky and Their Relationship to the Origin of Non-Objective Painting,” *The Art Bulletin* 39, no. 2 (1957), 131.

¹⁵⁵ Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” 243.

allows Kandinsky, in a final moment, to synthesize the “Great Abstraction” and the “Great Realism,” arguing that the former manifests *in* the latter, and vice-versa.¹⁵⁶

It is “objective interpretation,” then, that is the problem for Kandinsky, since seeing an object in a painting (or perhaps hearing the musical imitation of a groan in a composition) detracts the viewer’s or listener’s attention away from this inner sound.¹⁵⁷ Regardless of how serious Satie was, or how seriously one might take him, it is tenable that that composer was also after the “inner sound” of music—or the inner vibrations of sound—treating sound both as a “simple, hard object” in Kandinsky’s sense and also as figureless material with its own life. The composer’s well-known quips (from his *Memoires of an Amnesiac*) that “[f]rom the beginning of my career I immediately classified myself as a phonometrographer” and not a musician— “[m]y works are of pure phonometrography”—are perhaps best understood in this light. Whatever “inner sound” Satie found may have been measurable by a *caléidophone-enregistreur*, a recording device he claimed to have used to write his *Pieces froides* of 1897 (“It took seven minutes. I called my servant to have him hear them”), or perhaps this inner sound could have been cleansed of external superfluous beauty through *phonotechnique*, Satie’s process of “cleaning sounds” (“It is a rather dirty business”).¹⁵⁸

The more art refuses imitation, the closer it gets to a real element: for Satie, a rather banal reality of inert vibrating matter—hence his words to Cocteau. While Satie’s cynical wit does not make an interpreter’s job very easy, I doubt, contra Jillian C. Rogers’s suggestion, that the composer *really* cared a great deal about the science or significance of vibration during his day.¹⁵⁹ Though Satie surely was aware of earlier experiments in resonance conducted, for instance, by Hermann von Helmholtz, his use of the term “phonometrographer” was most likely a winking, parody of the scientific

¹⁵⁶ Or, as Kandinsky put it, “in their ultimate basis (= goal) these two poles equal one another. Between these two antipodes can be put an = sign:

Realism = Abstraction

Abstraction = Realism

The greatest external dissimilarity becomes the greatest internal similarity.” Ibid., 245.

¹⁵⁷ The “abstracted or abstract forms (lines, planes, patches, etc.) are not important in themselves,” Kandinsky concludes of abstraction, but rather for their inner sound.” Ibid., 244.

¹⁵⁸ The terms *phonométraphe* and *phonométraphie* were among several neologisms that Satie coined to counter his critics and to belittle his contemporaries: others included *pyrotechniques*, techniques for dealing with the force of “explosive sounds” (by stuffing cotton into ones ears); *phonologie*, which is “superior to music,” “more varied,” and “gives a better return on investment”; something called a *motodynaphone*, which an amateur musician could use to show up a professional; and finally, *philophony*, which sums up the methods and intentions of the other terms, pointing to the future. “The future,” indeed, “lies with philophony.” Erik Satie, “*Ce que je suis*,” translated as “What I Am,” from Ornella Volta, ed. *A Mammal’s Notebook: The Writings of Erik Satie*, trans. Anthony Melville (London: Atlas Press, 2014), 108.

¹⁵⁹ Rogers interprets Satie’s words to Cocteau as evidence that the composer understood music as a vibrational medium, taking seriously contemporaneous scientific studies of resonance and vibration. Satie’s words to Cocteau, however, is the evidence cited to support this claim—and, I repeat, it is dangerous to take the composer at his word. See Jillian C. Rogers, *Resonant Recoveries: French Music and Trauma Between the World Wars* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 115.

seriousness that characterized contemporary attitudes toward sound.¹⁶⁰ Satie's sense of vibration was as two-faced as the "realism" that Kandinsky described, since ultimately the composer's interest was in finding an abstract "inner sound" of music, not through scientific "realism," but through a disillusioned musical *aesthetic*. The precarious self-positioning that we encountered earlier in Satie's writings about Péladan recur in his later phase as he apes scientific ideas for avowedly *Satie* ends, allowing himself to be read as *both serious and* a parodist of science's "Great Realism."

Though Satie the cynic often denied that Art embodies a single Truth, nevertheless his stripped-down aesthetic of repetition without "sighs" anticipated an understanding of musical *durée* that the musicologist Pierre Souvtchinsky, undoubtedly influenced by Bergson, theorized in a 1939 article for the *Revue Musicale* titled "The Notion of Time in Music: Reflections on the Typology of Musical Creation."¹⁶¹ A composer, in Souvtchinsky's view, seeks first of all to express "a complex of inner intuitions, based before all on the specifically musical *experience of time—of Chronos—in relation to which music, properly speaking, only plays the role of functional director.*"¹⁶² Souvtchinsky claimed that different mental states—"suspense, anguish, pain, suffering, fear, contemplation, sensuousness"—seem to pass at different tempos, yet "all this variety of types and modifications of *psychological time* would be elusive if, at the base of all this complexity, we could not discover the *primary sensation—often unconscious—of real time, ontological time.*"¹⁶³

Ontological time becomes the ground, in Souvtchinsky's essay, for the fleeting, ever-changing forms of "psychological time" that shape the surface of a musical work. On this view, an impersonal flow runs beneath psychological time, and is often masked by the many different "subjective" flows (or durations) that music seems to portray. Yet what Souvtchinsky called ontological time was, for Vladimir Jankélévitch, always a part of musical experience. Music, Jankélévitch wrote, "imposes ... the law of measure—which is the beat—on the disorder of measureless chaos, and ... measured and stylized time ... on unequal time, time by turns languishing and convulsive, fastidious and precipitous: the time of our daily life."¹⁶⁴ A student of Bergson, Jankélévitch claimed that certain French composers refrained from indulging in the surface effects of psychological time—since these effects had become, in the hands of German romantic (aka traditional musicological) critics, the

¹⁶⁰ Hence Joseph Auner would later appropriate Satie's own term to describe the "phonometrographic attitude" that by and large characterized the fin de siècle. Joseph Auner, "Weighing, Measuring, and Embalming Tonality: How We Became Phonometrographers," in *Tonality 1900-1950: Concept and Practice*, eds. Felix Wörner, Ullrich Scheideler, and Philip Rupprecht (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012), 25-46.

¹⁶¹ I am grateful to Richard Taruskin for suggesting the connection between Souvtchinsky's sense of "ontological time" and Bergson's duration.

¹⁶² "Cette expérience, qui est un complexe inné d'intuitions et de possibilités musicales, est basée avant tout sur une *expérience du temps* spécifiquement musicale - *du khronos* -, par rapport à laquelle la musique proprement dite ne joue que le rôle de réalisatrice fonctionnelle." Pierre Souvtchinsky, "La Notion du temps et la musique (réflexions sur la typologie de la création musicale)," *La Revue musicale* 20/191 (May-June 1939), 72.

¹⁶³ "Or, toute cette variété de types et de modifications du *temps psychologique* serait insaisissable, si à la base de toute cette complexité d'expérience ne se trouvait la *sensation primaire* - souvent subconsciente - *du temps réel, du temps ontologique.*" Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 6.

means through which to make music into an “analogy” for deeper meanings. In other words, whereas music criticism tended to represent music as a metaphor for something else, turning it into a trope or symbol, Jankélévitch argued—along familiar Bergsonian lines—that music is not a mere metaphor: music embodies the qualitative experience of pure duration. Hence he claimed that the music of Fauré or Debussy does not merely represent, but rather directly enacts things: in *La Mer*, “Debussy put a stethoscope to the ocean’s chest, to the tide’s lungs,” thus “there is nothing” in the music “but the dialogue of the wind and the sea, which is moreover the monologue of the ocean, excluding all anthropomorphism, all reference to the subject.”¹⁶⁵ Somehow French music cuts below faulty representations, the “subjective” impressions of psychological time, and presents the depersonalized, and hence more real, flow of ontological time.

Souvtchinsky championed Stravinsky as a composer who best exemplified this ontological time, but I think this dualism between “psychological” and “ontological” time had been present in Satie decades prior, figured early on in the opposition between the steady oscillations of an ostinato and the enchanting effects of legato melody.¹⁶⁶ As in Souvtchinsky’s theory, in Satie’s practice by the end of his life, the real or ontological time superseded psychological time—or, as Jankélévitch waxed, the “implacable chronometrics” of the kind of perfectly metered time, *not rubato*, “casts out all weakness and ignores human lassitude.” After all, “a motor never feels sorry for itself.”¹⁶⁷

Perhaps the late Satie never felt sorry for himself, either. At home, aging and sick, he never let anyone visit his Arcachan closet; onstage, with Picabia and Clair at the premiere of *Entr’acte*, he rode about in a toy car with a sign claiming himself the greatest composer of all time. Self-mocking, maybe self-loathing, Satie’s late music certainly “ignored human lassitude” and wiped out “all reference to the subject.” But it is in this game of hide and seek, of self-effacing and self-aggrandizing, that one can see that Satie’s bid for Furniture Music, a music of vibrating matter, was a Great Musical Abstraction leading to higher Great Realism—always with a wink. This churning and depersonalized music seems to have echoed in Jankélévitch’s ears when he wrote that “all of music is in essence allegory and alibi—since a succession of sounds is, in itself, something entirely different from an emotion.” The “great truth” that ontological time seems to have conveyed for Jankélévitch is the truth that music is always a lie, and further, that “the subject” itself is a kind of illusion: “acoustic vibrations are of an entirely different order than psychological facts.”¹⁶⁸ A higher realism becomes possible when a composer shows the whole realm of psychological experience, his own and that of others, to be nothing but a big gag, an illusion under which one may sense a deeper lasting “truth” of ontological time or of bare vibrating matter.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 36-37.

¹⁶⁶ Souvtchinsky’s typology included two kinds of music: a “chronometric music” that would allow the listener to experience the flow of musical time in the same manner as the composer—it “is characterized by the absence of emotional and psychological reflexes,” and “evokes a particular sentiment of dynamic calm”—and an “a-chronometric music,” “a secondary notation of primary emotive impulses.” “The particularity of the musical notion of time consists precisely in the fact that music arises and flows either *outside* the categories of psychological time, or *at the same time* as them, which permits us to consider the musical experience as one of the purest forms of the ontological sensation of time.” Souvtchinsky, “La Notion du temps et la musique.”

¹⁶⁷ Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 45.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 47, 48.

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But while Satie was never *too* serious about vibration, some certainly are. I fear, however, that a certain branch of sound studies devoted to the underlying reality of vibrating matter has taken a Satiean joke a little too seriously. To put this another way, when scholars of sound seek an underlying ontological reality, we risk losing what made music so compelling for the young Bergson, young Satie, and (hopefully) for many of us: illusion. We wind up walking in Deleuze's footsteps.

It may seem counterintuitive to implicate Bergson in a historical shift away from music's illusions toward enduring "truth" since his philosophy always chased after ineffable experiences. But in *Le Bergsonisme*, Deleuze summed up in one loaded sentence Bergson's own two-faced position on time.

The two major aspects of [Bergson's] evolution are the following: Duration seemed to him to be less and less reducible to a psychological experience and became instead the variable essence of things, providing the theme of a complex ontology.¹⁶⁹

Since illusion involves plays of sensation, deceptive appearances and groans of sadness, it is fair to say that from a Deleuzian standpoint illusion would be merely of the psychological order, whereas philosophy aims to uncover the "complex ontology" of multiple fluxes moving always beneath us.

It is conspicuous that these fluxes continue to move through sound studies. For Christoph Cox, "works of art are never representations and never signify" because art is "[fundamentally independent] from the world of subjects, objects, and states of affairs."¹⁷⁰ Fundamentally unrepresentable, a work of art is more than a piece of music, a sculpture, or something fashioned by an actual human: it is a condensation of various already-existing elements, percepts and affects. Sound art, for Cox, "detaches sensations from objects and subjects, presenting [sensations] as pure intensive forces that inhere in things but are not reducible to them, having the power to act and affect as sensations independently of the subjects and objects who might bare or undergo them."¹⁷¹ One could call this way of describing the effects of sound art a *sonological mysticism*: sound art holds essentially the same potential for Cox that hypnosis held for Bergson. We, as viewers and listeners, are subject to a much larger virtual world of affects and intensities that we can never master. We merely actualize parts of an infinite virtual storehouse in the act of making and experiencing art, and therefore art is, once again, an illusion through which one can discursively grasp a deeper truth. This truth is the sonic flux, which Cox theorizes as a "materialist aesthetics" based on an immemorial material flow that goes beyond and beneath the sounds, feelings, memories that one actualizes when one encounters the sonic arts. Music's rhythms die away; the sonic flux, the condition of actual sonic experience, always endures.

Bergson, as we have seen, would surely have agreed that art can reveal something about immaterial and invisible flows, since the human being is always limited and there is a larger virtual

¹⁶⁹ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 34.

¹⁷⁰ Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 37.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

domain beyond us. Yet Bergson and Cox are not only separated by a century: the former believed that the illusions of art fundamentally affirmed the human being's free will, the inherent power of the soul to self-create, while the latter, taking his cue from Deleuzian ontology, seems not to care about our souls at all. It hardly seems necessary to point out the similarities between Cox's sense that art goes "below representation and signification," "[revealing] ... forces, intensities, sensations, and affects" and nineteenth-century romantic beliefs about music's power to embody the Will or to take the listener out of the everyday and into the realm of the infinite, to paraphrase E.T.A. Hoffmann's words about Beethoven.

But the sonic flux smells of bleach. Yearning, longing, and divinity matter about as little as human agency in Cox's understanding of the ontology of sound, since it is "noise" that is the "ground, 'the continuous acoustic flow' that provides the condition of possibility for every articulate sound." Noise or vibration forms the ontological ground "from ... which all speech, music, and signal emerge, and to which they return," and while human acts and historical moments might nudge this flow in one direction or another, ultimately this flow exists independently of any actual human.¹⁷² Sound art, in short, allows one to "leap into ontology," to return to Deleuze's phrase. The sound artists that Cox describes, on this view—whether Alvin Lucier or Brandon LaBelle—are merely human vehicles for a ~~divine~~ ontological truth that dwarfs and subsumes all of us.

"*We leap into ontology*" is an elusive phrase: taken literally, a "leap into ontology" would mean a leap into a discourse, a Logos about being. As if one "leaps" into the pages of philosophy rather than into Being itself—or perhaps Being is only ever a figment of philosophical writing anyway. This is not what Deleuze meant, but is, I would suggest, effectively where we end after untangling the ontological notions in *Le Bergsonisme*, or, for that matter, in Cox's *Sonic Flux*. By leaping into ontology, we make absolute conditions legible—*we leap into writing*. Sonic flux represents a kind of Deleuzian perversion of Bergson's ideas, since ontology, from Deleuze's standpoint, is a metaphysics bleached of illusion. Thinking "the virtual" allows one to wrap up and subsume "psychological" epiphenomena. Gone are the oscillating rhythms and sighs of sadness, the "properly human" experiences that inspired Bergson's inquiry. Effaced are the aberrant psyches of Charcot's hysterics. Absent are the occult fantasies of medieval Catholicism, Péladan's Princess or the Idol of Perversity, and missing is the Greekish primitivism that formed the background—not the virtual background, but the *actual* historical context—for Nietzsche's clash of godly archetypes or for Satie's poetics of opposition. Now we are lulled into trance; now we awaken toward banality: the real and the illusory play and play, and this play is art. Through an ontological lens, however, these feminine interiors and these black mysteries, this purity and pulp—all of this becomes derivative with regard to a play of fluxes that is adamantly *not* of the order of illusion but of the order of the virtual. Ontology is a Logos of sublimation, a white science that whitewashes: an Absolute Bleach. Grappling with, penetrating, and blotting out that which is other than Being, ontology has its way with Reality, perpetuating the ultimate western illusion (perhaps the illusion of "the West").¹⁷³

¹⁷² Ibid., 119.

¹⁷³ "Metaphysics—the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own logos, that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still with to call Reason." Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), 213. Derrida took up Emmanuel Lévinas's conviction that "metaphysics"—more specifically, "ontology"—had been a

But is this virtual reality more than a pile of words? For if we move beyond the turn in human experience, where do we go? When Bergson searched for the conditions of real experience, illusion and reality shared equal parts in the play. Though he had a problem with the illusion of an abstract world, he could not really toss aside illusion entirely, for thinking in time is, after all, a kind of *poiesis*. Cox, by contrast, underwrites the delusion (*Deleuzion?*) that the virtual overcomes and sublimates the whole play of illusion and reality by creating a different kind of real. This real, however, does not appear in miniature as a hypnotist heightens our senses; nor can we feel it as music lulls our consciousness away. Even if we do sense something beyond the turn, we are never adequate to the play of fluxes. We can only ever understand this reality of fluxes by taking a leap, not into life's deeps, but into the space of the text.

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“philosophy of power”: a discourse about being that tends to reduce and to sublimate whatever is not comprehensible from within the purview of philosophical reason. By reducing the other to the same, ontology, in Lévinas’s words, is a “philosophy of injustice,” a kind of intellectual imperialism that was more than a simple analogy, for him, to European colonial oppression and military domination. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l’extériorité* (The Hague: Marinus Nijhoff, 1971; originally published 1961), 38. Cf. Robert J.C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Fann, *This Self We Deserve*, 49-50.

Chapter Two

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Ontological Machines: Varèse's Musical Power

The only salvation: that some creators possess interior ears—Beethoven is the prototype—and I think his deafness to the sound of the world was for him a blessing—and the source of new concepts of sound.¹⁷⁴

Edgard Victor Achille Charles Varèse (1883-1965) surely knew when he wrote to his student André Jolivet of Beethoven's deafness that he was invoking Wagner. The latter once likened the deaf genius to "the blinded *Seer*" who, no longer troubled by "life's uproar," gains the "power to [shape] the unfathomable, the never-seen, the [never] experienced." As is the case with a blind clairvoyant, "the [deaf] musician's eye [grows] bright within."¹⁷⁵ For decades scholars of Varèse have tried to see the light inside the composer's mind.¹⁷⁶ Like Wagner, Varèse took Beethoven's deafness as a metaphor for his own musical vision, but even as he invoked the German musical tradition that the Beethoven-Wagner dyad well represents, he often publicly posed himself against certain of its features.¹⁷⁷ In a 1936 lecture delivered in Santa Fe, Varèse called for the disavowal of the "incidental, anecdotal, sensual or picturesque" use of "color or timbre," seeking instead to conceive sound as an "agent of delineation like the different colors on a map separating different areas."¹⁷⁸ This "liberation of sound" (Varèse's famous phrase) took form as the composer strove to oust the representational function that generations of past composers and critics had attached to certain European musical conventions like tonal harmony or symphonic forms, "topics" or leitmotifs—in short, the "anecdotal" or the "picturesque." Sound would become even less bound to the external world, functioning neither as a mime nor a mimic. However, while Varèse had a gift for making pithy

¹⁷⁴ Edgard Varèse, from a letter to André Jolivet of 19 July 1935, in Edgard Varèse and André Jolivet, *Correspondance 1931-1965*, ed. Christine Jolivet-Erlieh (Geneva: Contrechamps, 2002), 113; this translation from Klaus Kropfnger, "You Never Took the Simple Path': Varèse's Liberation of Sound and the Delimitation of the Arts," *Edgard Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary*, ed. Felix Meyer and Heidi Zimmermann (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2006), 158.

¹⁷⁵ Richard Wagner, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works* Vol. 5, *Actors and Singers*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966; reprint of 1896 London Routledge edition), 92.

¹⁷⁶ Many posthumous appellations abound, an "astronomer in sound" or a "sound sculptor visionary" among them. See Malcolm MacDonald, *Varèse: Astronomer in Sound* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2003); Felix Meyer and Heidi Zimmermann, eds. *Edgard Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2006).

¹⁷⁷ By echoing Wagner's words about Beethoven, Varèse seems to have used the composer of the Ninth Symphony the same way: that is, to say something about himself. "[A]s much as Beethoven is the explicit subject of the *Beethoven* essay, Wagner himself is its implicit subject." K.M. Knittel, "Wagner, Deafness, and the reception of Beethoven's Late Style," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51, no. 1 (1998), 51.

¹⁷⁸ Edgard Varèse, "The Liberation of Sound," from *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, ed. Elliott Schwartz and Barney Childs (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 197.

quotable pronouncements about his music, he never entirely ousted musical representation; if anything, he sought a maximally intense and direct form of it.

This chapter will suggest that despite Varèse's forward-looking pronouncements, and despite his critical image as an oracle of musical modernism, he was perhaps the most regressive composer of the twentieth century. Regressive because he took on a very old, very "ontological" view according to which an enduring reality might be uncovered, through a discursive process, from beneath the faulty world of appearances, that "real sound" could be revealed beneath faulty musical "appearance." In his pronouncements, he rebuked romantic musical metaphysics, casting sound as a pure force in itself—as if sound had been waiting for centuries for just the right composer, just the right medium, to set its essence free. In his writings and his music, Varèse often seemed to believe that certain kinds of sound had the ability to shape musical form, and he built a musical language on the conceit that we can, through his works, hear and experience sound as such. To put it roughly, his music is supposedly "about" sound, however, I will suggest that sound, for Varèse, amounted to a form of power. In what follows, "power" will have a dual sense, referring to the power of sound on the senses, as Varèse deploys a brigade of brass against a battery of percussion, for instance; and also, to the power of a modern individual mustering all the strength of his technique, leveraging his persona, and utilizing his connections—in a word, forging a *discourse*, a term that I will use to connote what Varèse said about what he was doing and also what he *did*, the very writerly language of his compositions—all in an endeavor to envision a new order.

This chapter casts Varèse's compositions—as well as Varèse's discursive persona and authorial presence—as what Georges Bataille might have called "ontological machines," a pejorative phrase he once used to describe the idealizing logic that had structured western thought at least since Hegel.¹⁷⁹ I will investigate this idea by focusing on three specific aspects of Varèse's discourse: (1) his spatial approach to sound—as in his conception of "sound masses" or "harmonic planes"; (2) his poetics of intensity—that is, his obsession with combining sound masses to produce ever-more-intense climax moments, a central structural feature of basically all of his works; and (3) his concept of "the purity of sound."¹⁸⁰ After focusing on Varèse's New York phase, paying particular attention to *Amériques* (1918-22) and *Arcana* (1926-7), I follow the composer as he moved back to Paris in the late 1920s

¹⁷⁹ In his 1930 essay, "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," Bataille reproduced photos of various stone-carved icons dated to the first century CE, deities attributed to the early Gnostic religions. As I will describe in section two, Bataille took these deities as signs indicating that western thought, deep down at its base, conceals a sinister darkness. Bataille dubbed "base matter" that which cannot be taken up into and subsumed within rational processes like Hegel's dialectical idealism—a process according to which that which is "base," degraded, unholy, must be subsumed within a higher ideal. This movement of sublimation defines the progression of Hegel's World Spirit (*Geist*). This kind of sublimation, the uplifting of whatever is "base" into a higher form, had characterized not only Hegel's system, but also Christian theology: theorizing "base matter" was Bataille's tactic to destabilize these great idealisms. Georges Bataille, "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," from *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 45-52.

¹⁸⁰ I am grateful to Mary Ann Smart for coining the phrase "music of phonetics" as she read a prior draft of this chapter, eloquently summing up what Varèse heard in the fragmented syllables of Dadaist poetry or the meandering streams of consciousness that characterize surrealism.

and conceived *Ecuatorial*. Throughout I will use Bataille as a foil to distinguish Varèse the progressive from Varèse the regressive.

Bataille and Varèse shared a belief that certain archaic or non-European spiritual forms could productively resist the idealizing logic of, say, the Hegelian dialectic or the romantic symphony. While Bataille studied icons of Gnostic *archontes*—the creators of the material world according to ancient myth—Varèse read Miguel Angel Asturias’s *Legendas de Guatemala* and wrote music inspired by fantasied images of ancient Maya. For both, these figures of otherness amounted to “base matter,” a phrase Bataille applied to expressive forms that resist the dialectical reasoning. “Base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations,” he claimed, “and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations.”¹⁸¹ While Bataille wielded base matter to destroy western ontology, Varèse’s compositions bespeak an even more absolute and more abstract kind of idealizing logic. Which is to say that Varèse the “art-scientist” was all about ontology.

Ontology is—to borrow a phrase from Jacques Derrida—a “white mythology” through which otherness is reduced, sublimated, made part of the same.¹⁸² To put this another way, ontology is a kind of power play, a historically western way of thinking about the world that undergirds the ethnocentrism—indeed, the suprematism—of the very idea of “the West.”¹⁸³ Varèse’s ontological machines are like musical Panzers, ready to blast through appearances to declare timeless sonic truth. Varèse’s search for “pure” sound is best understood as a search for personal power and composerly authority, thus we might say that “sound” was Varèse’s vehicle to rebuff metaphysics and declare his own myth—that is, an ontological myth.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” 51.

¹⁸² “What is metaphysics? A white mythology which assembles and reflects Western culture: the white man takes his own mythology ... his *logos*—that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that which it is still his inescapable desire to call Reason.” See Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” *New Literary History* 6, no. 1, On Metaphor (Autumn, 1974), 11; Cf. Robert J.C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), esp. 38-52.

¹⁸³ Citing Emmanuel Lévinas’s fighting words against ontology—“Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power”—Robert Young points up “the connections which [Lévinas] makes between the structure of ontology and Eurocentrism”: “He connects the form of knowledge that is self-centred but directed outwards, philosophy as ‘egology’, quite explicitly with the appropriating narcissism of the West.” Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, Boston, and London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 46; Young, *White Mythologies*, 49.

¹⁸⁴ This latter phrase derives from Fuoco Fann’s aperçu about the modern speaking subject in a rich discussion of Michel Foucault’s archeology of the human sciences alongside Habermas’s reading of Foucault: the “Modern man [or Foucault’s *l’homme*] rebuffs Metaphysics but declares his own Myth.” I am indebted to Fann’s insights into the precarious status of *l’homme* and modern knowledge, as well as the philosophical history of the term ontology as a white mythology par excellence. See Fuoco B. Fann, *This Self We Deserve: A Quest after Modernity* (Berkeley: Philosophy and Art Collaboratory, 2020), 25-30.

“Heil” Varèse: sound masses and the poetics of intensity

From today’s perspective, one might call the Varèse of the interwar years a white supremacist. “Heil to Hitler” he wrote to end a 1937 letter to the American painter Will Shuster; he griped in 1934 (to Jolivet, again) about a Jewish acquaintance, suggesting that Hitler’s hatred may have been justified; and in a 1928 profile published in *Le Figaro*, the composer exclaimed “Jazz is not America. It’s a Negro product, exploited by the Jews.”¹⁸⁵ Leaving aside (for now) the question of what America was for Varèse (it apparently was not the “golden door” that Emma Lazarus once envisioned when she welcomed the many “huddled masses yearning to breathe free”), in this section I want to explore potential connections between Varèse’s attraction to national socialist thought during this period and his musical aesthetics.

While his “Heil” cannot be explained away as the misplaced aggression of a restive youth, Varèse seems to have had complicated and inconsistent views on both race and power. By the 1950s, he had apparently changed his mind about jazz, collaborating with Charles Mingus during a series of improvisation sessions at the Greenwich House, and he certainly was neither a stranger nor an adversary to critics of Jewish descent like Paul Rosenfeld.¹⁸⁶ I would presume that when he wrote “Heil” in his letter to Shuster, Varèse was drawing on Hitler’s “power” to undergird his own view of his world and his art. In other words, his “Heil” bespeaks a kind of “ontological” suprematism, a belief in the supreme power of a specifically western approach to Being.

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Fresh off the boat at age thirty-one, in 1915 the émigré Varèse sought refuge at the Breevort Hotel in Greenwich Village along with Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Man Ray, and a horde of Dadaists and Dada-esques. Prior to his emigration, he had attended the Schola Cantorum in 1904, a year before Erik Satie would return to school to hone his skills in counterpoint.¹⁸⁷ Unlike his elder, however, Varèse did not take to the Schola; he dropped out, refusing to become an acolyte of

¹⁸⁵ Quoted in Olivia Mattis, “Edgard Varèse and the Visual Arts,” Ph.D. Dissertation (Stanford University, 1992), 175, 176.

¹⁸⁶ See Olivia Mattis, “From Bebop to Poo-wip: Jazz Influences in Varèse’s *Poème électronique*,” from *Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary*, 309-317; Brigid Cohen, “Enigmas of the Third Space: Mingus and Varèse at Greenwich House, 1957,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, no. 1 (Spring 2018), 155-211; Paul Rosenfeld, *An Hour With American Music* (Philadelphia and London: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1929).

¹⁸⁷ According to Caroline Potter, there is little evidence that Satie and Varèse were more than acquaintances, though Varèse spoke highly of Satie’s 1893-5 *Messe des Pauvres*. The two composers also had friends in common: according to biographer Fernand Ouellette, Satie wrote to Varèse after the latter moved to New York, conveying a sad message in August 1918: “Our poor Debussy is dead. He has been very ill, dear fellow that he was, for a long time.” Potter, *Erik Satie: A Parisian Composer and His World* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016), 62-66; Erik Satie, quoted in Fernand Ouellette, *Edgard Varèse*, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: The Orion Press, 1968), 44.

Vincent d'Indy.¹⁸⁸ He was already something of a rugged individualist, and found an answer to his frustrations through his interactions with poets and painters at the Arensberg salon and the Stieglitz gallery from his earliest years in New York City. The city, with its endless flow of traffic, the mechanical churning of engines, and the ubiquitous sirens, undoubtedly rubbed off on Varèse as he wrote his first major compositions for large orchestra. In this section, I describe how Varèse used repeating motives to create a sense of spatialization, and by attending to *Amériques* and *Arcana*, will explore the tension in his music and his discourse between pure sound and the mimetic effects. Varèse was always ambivalent, obsessed with the intrinsic properties of his “sound masses,” yet only able to approach these sounds by leaning towards or drawing from mimesis. Examining these works as well as to the image of the composer that began to spread in the press—an image forged partly through this tension between sonic “purity” and musical representation—we can get a sense of how Varèse’s discourse of musical power took shape.

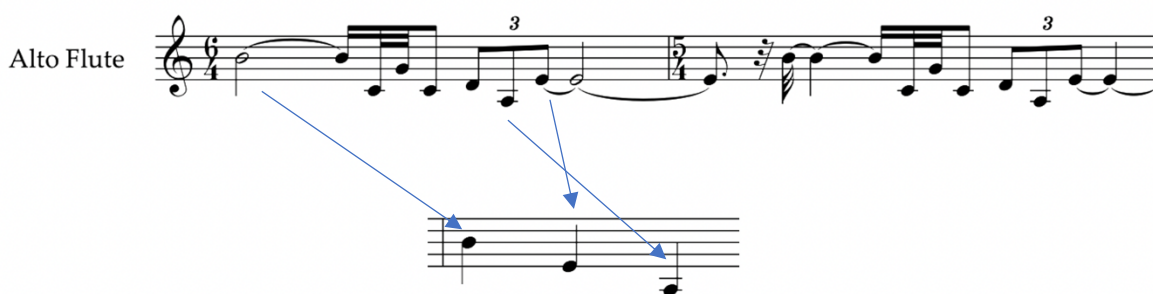


Figure 12. The opening of Varèse’s *Amériques* (1918-22).

Amériques begins with a melodic machine. The opening phrase, played eerily by a solo alto flute, is anaphoric, repeating a single brief motive almost obsessively. The phrase has a wide ambitus—it is based around three main pitches, each a fifth apart, and the predominance of open fifths and fourths creates a neutral sound, neither consonant nor dissonant. The motive repeats again and again, quickening, recalling the famous opening bassoon phrase of *Le Sacre du printemps*, and the flute is soon joined by a harp ostinato that is similarly reminiscent of the early, primitivist Stravinsky. Two harps move up and down a minor third in quick succession, providing a softly churning undergird for the flute melody.

¹⁸⁸ In his biography of Varèse, Ouellette consistently painted the composer as a rugged individualist, un beholden to his teachers and predecessors in Europe. Ouellette quoted a correspondence with Varèse about the latter’s departure from the Schola: “The reason I left him [d’Indy] was because his idea of teaching was to form disciples. His vanity would not permit the least sign of originality, or even independent thinking, and I did not want to become a little d’Indy. One was enough.” Varèse, quoted in Ouellette, *Edgard Varèse*, 14; see also Robert Crunden, *Body and Soul: The Making of American Modernism* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 44.

The image shows the musical score for two harps, labeled 'Harp 1' and 'Harp 2'. Each harp part consists of two staves (treble and bass clef). The music features a complex, rhythmic ostinato pattern. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings such as 'p' (piano) and 'b' (basso). The pattern is consistent across both harps, creating a layered, mechanical texture.

Figure 13. The harp ostinato at the opening of *Amériques*.

The way Varèse uses these opening themes, however, distinguishes him from the Stravinskian lineage to which he alludes. The flute motif does not develop, nor does it give way to another theme in a similar register or style; instead, it remains faceless—mechanical—and, like the harp, resembles a building block, especially once Varèse layers other blocks on top of it.

This image displays a larger section of the orchestral score for the opening of *Amériques*. The score is divided into two main sections: 'I Animato molto subito (♩=112)' and 'Subito a tempo I (♩=60) Moderato poco lento'. The instruments listed include Piccolo (Picc.), Flutes (Fls.), G.A. Flute (G.A. Fl.), Oboes (Oba.), Clarinets (E♭ and B♭), Bassoons (Bsn.), French Horns (F Hrns.), and Trumpets (C Tpts.). The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes, with dynamic markings such as 'mf' and 'con sord.'. A red circle highlights a specific rhythmic motif in the French Horns part, and a blue circle highlights a similar motif in the Clarinets and Bassoons parts. The score also includes a first ending bracket labeled '1. incisif 1'.

Figure 14. A later moment of the opening of *Amériques*.

After a few more repetitions of the flute theme, suddenly a few short fanfares composed of rapid series of repeated notes erupt across the orchestra, summoning a barrage of percussion. There is something about this passage, the way that Varèse parses out the “fanfare” into three main groups (delineated with colored brackets above), that suggests a spatial notion of sound. First come the horns (positioned offstage), then the trumpets, flutes, and high strings, and finally the rest of the high winds. The “scene” has exploded: the earlier ostinato may have led one to expect that *Amériques* would develop like a primitivist ballet, with sections conveying different moods, allowing for a longer narrative progression or even for dance. Now suddenly the range of the orchestra expands, like opening the blinds to a too-bright sun, as Varèse layers this abrasive triple-fortissimo theme via different instrumental groups. The opening flute phrase and harp ostinato then re-commence, yet the entrance of the percussion disorients any sense of a consistent tempo.

The musical score for the introduction of percussion in *Amériques* is shown. It features two harp parts (Harp 1 and Harp 2) playing a continuous ostinato. The percussion section includes S.B. (Snare Drum), S.D. (Snare Drum), Cym. (Cymbal), B.D. 1-2 (Bass Drums), Tri. (Triangle), Cast. (Castanet), Tamb. (Tambourine), and W. (Woodblock). The score is marked 'Animato molto subito (♩=112)' and 'Subito a tempo I (♩=60) Moderato poco lento'. The percussion parts are marked with 'pp' (pianissimo) and 'sempre pp' (always pianissimo).

Figure 15. Introduction of the percussion in *Amériques*.

The various percussion parts seem to play independently, a sleigh bell in counterpoint with a snare drum, two bass drums at odds with a triangle, a castanet, a tambourine, and so on—a layered cacophony.

“As I worked in my Westside apartment ... I could hear all the river sounds,” Varèse wrote in a note about *Amériques*: “the lonely foghorns, the shrill preemptory whistles—the whole wonderful river symphony.”¹⁸⁹ The composer invited his listeners to associate the distinct percussion voices to various river flows, including the imagined river of people walking the Manhattan streets. Perhaps the offstage brass, which soon interrupts the percussion with static, drawn-out dissonant honks, alludes to these distant foghorns; or, even further, perhaps the fanfare fragments were meant to convey the deafening shock that the young immigrant must have experienced from time to time amid the blaring of car and train horns in the big city. The Varèse of this early phase was apparently not opposed to the idea that music could represent things in the world—“the shrill voice of the trolley wires, ... strange moanings of appeal from the tug boats,” and so on. Already one gets the sense that there was an element of mythmaking in Varèse’s later disavowal of the “anecdotal” or “sensual” use of sound.

¹⁸⁹ Varèse, quoted in Peter Garland, “Americas,” *Soundings* (Spring 1974), 115.

Even if Varèse at times seems to lean towards pictorial depiction and programmatic explanation in *Amérique*, the opening moments of the piece essentially lay out the tools and concepts of Varèse's mature style. This is evident especially in the use of "spatial" sound.¹⁹⁰ From the opening flute theme, Varèse foregrounds register as a parameter: the harp ostinato, as well as upward-climbing passages played by a bassoon in its high register that enter to accompany the flute, fit into the flute's range, as if to construct a self-contained building block, limited registrally and timbrally. With the fanfare fragments and barrage of percussion, the registral ambitus abruptly expands. This play with register is also a play with space: sound becomes "an agent of delineation, like the different colors on a map," delineating different registral areas that will come into conflict.¹⁹¹

Varèse's sense of spatial sound is perhaps most clearly expressed at two early climactic moments. The first occurs six measures after rehearsal number 5.¹⁹² Suddenly the high winds and trumpets join in a downward-stepping triplet figure, a series of triads moving in parallel, and the percussion, formerly a disparate jumble, become a unified front.

¹⁹⁰ Jonathan Bernard outlines various ways of understanding Varèse's aural "spaces." He explains, for instance, how the composer arranged his pitch clusters and then transposed certain symmetrical chordal structures from one instrument group to another, one register to another. Bernard clarifies that "*timbre, rhythm/duration, linear succession, and dynamics*, applied separately or in combination," constitute the various "criteria for segmentation" in Varèse's music—that is, the criteria by which the analyst might distinguish one sonic grouping from the rest. See Jonathan W. Bernard, *The Music of Edgard Varèse* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), esp. 43-85.

¹⁹¹ Varèse, "The Liberation of Sound," 197.

¹⁹² For a virtuosic parsing of the various themes used in *America* (fifteen in total, apparently), see Keith Tedman, "Edgard Varèse: Concepts of Organized Sound," doctoral dissertation, University of Sussex (1983), 262-4.

The figure displays a complex musical score for a section of Varèse's work. It is organized into three main horizontal sections. The top section, labeled 'left', is a 'reduced score' featuring staves for Piccolo 1.2, Clarinet in Eb, Trumpet in C 1.2.3.4, Trumpet in C 5.6, Trombone 1, Trombone 2, and Trombone 3. The middle section, labeled 'right', is a 'reduction of Varèse's chords', showing a piano accompaniment with dynamic markings *f*, *ff*, and *ffff*. The bottom section, labeled 'bottom', is 'the percussion', including parts for Snrn., S.B., R. S.D., Cym. B.D. 1, Cast. Tamb., and W. C. with dynamic markings *pp*, *f*, *ff*, and *mp*. A yellow circle highlights a specific rhythmic pattern in the percussion part, and a red bracket highlights a specific chord in the chord reduction.

Figure 16. Varèse's first "punch": left, a reduced score; right, a reduction of Varèse's chords; bottom, the percussion.

Varèse's poetics are built on passages like this, where themes build and bump against each other, preparing ground for certain extreme moments like this, a kind of aural "punch." While one could imagine this moment as another allusion to a New York traffic jam or note that the trombones span a minor ninth, or that the perfect fourth played by trumpets 5 and 6 rubs against the rest of the section, a minor second or a minor ninth away from other voices, these observations seem to only tell part of the story. It is as if one *needs* Varèse's own words. His advocate, the journalist Winthrop Tryon, captured some of them in 1922: "we are working toward placing one harmonic plane against another," Varèse declared, "and one volume of sound against another."¹⁹³ At this

¹⁹³ Varèse, "New Instruments in Orchestra Are Needed, Says Mr. Varèse," *Christian Science Monitor* (date date 1922); quoted in Oja, "Creating a God," 33.

moment of *Amériques*, there are at least four distinct “harmonic planes” that coalesce to create this punch (indicated by the brackets in the example above). The descending triplet motif can be thought of as one plane; the trombones another; trumpets 5 and 6 seem to define their own plane since they enter late to intensify the mess; and the percussion is a fourth plane, with, sleigh bells, a lion’s roar, a snare roll, and a siren crescendo-ing together. This is “spatial” sound at work, as if each registral area of the orchestra is a block that Varèse juxtaposes against the others.

Indeed, a siren: another marker of the New York cityscape, making a programmatic reading of *Amériques* even more tempting. Yet as Varèse commences with a second “punch,” the sheer force of the orchestra seems to challenge the hermeneutic strategy through which an interpreter might associate the siren, the clash of “harmonic planes,” or the percussion barrage with the New York that Varèse heard through his apartment window. After a cool-down period during which yet more thematic material is introduced—more dissonant brass, upward-and-downward cascades in the harp and in the low strings, etc.—the brass and winds suddenly erupt.

The image displays two musical scores side-by-side. The left score is a simplified reproduction of Varèse's score for the second and even bigger "punch" in *Ameriques*. It features multiple staves for various instruments: Piccolos, Oboes, English Horn, Clarinets in Bb, Bass Clarinet in Bb, Bassoons, Contrabassoon 1.2, Horn in F 1-8, Trombone 1.2.3, Trombone 4.5, Tenor Tuba, and Bass Tuba in C. The right score is an even more simplified reduction of Varèse's chords, taking much liberty with register. Both scores are in 3/8 time and feature a key signature of one flat (Bb).

Figure 17. The second and even bigger “punch” in *Ameriques*: left, a simplified reproduction of Varèse’s score (excluding percussion and strings); right, an even more simplified reduction of Varèse’s chords (taking much liberty with register).

I would take Varèse’s words about the Manhattan soundscape literally up to this point; *Amériques*, in a sense, is this soundscape. But the spatial understanding of sound to which Varèse alludes in his program note seems to take on its own life in this moment, pointing us elsewhere. When the Philadelphia Orchestra premiered *Amériques* in 1926, with a whopping 140 players on (and off)stage, this climactic moment must have felt like an assault (it feels so even through headphones today). The hermeneutic game of linking Varèsian sound to the city, or the music-theoretical game of taking

apart tone clusters, analyzing intervallic structures, and so on, seems to fall short.¹⁹⁴ It is not necessary to use set theory (or some variation thereof) to see that Varèse jams almost all twelve pitches together across every possible register, stacking minor ninths in the horns and bassoons, screaming a minor second through the highest winds. And as these many voices join to produce this dissonant color, the familiar siren returns, crescendo-ing again, and the trumpets soon commence with the downward-stepping triplet motif from the first “punch,” adding another sound mass to the whole.

Through this brute force, the siren takes on something of the autonomous quality with which Varèse imbued it in interviews. “What we want is an instrument that will give us continuous sound at any pitch,” Varèse explained to Tryon; “the composer and the electrician will perhaps have to labor together to get it.” The siren is a marker of a particular place and time, in other words, but also suggests the possibility of hearing beyond a particular time—as if one may hear another world created in sound. “I studied Helmholtz,” Varèse recounted in an interview from the late 1950s, describing his fascination with certain scientific “experiments with sirens.... Later I made some modest experiments of my own and found that I could obtain beautiful parabolic and hyperbolic curves of sound, which seemed to me equivalent to the parabolas and hyperbolas in the visual domain.”¹⁹⁵

For Varèse theory and practice were in constant tension, and that tension perhaps defines his discourse, which often relied on a slippage between music-as-mimesis and sound-as-violence, between real-world associations and the visceral effects the music may produce for the listener. So the siren could be either a synecdoche for the city or a “pure” aural presence. Though he surely took Helmholtz’s experiments with resonance seriously (certainly more so than did his winking predecessor Satie), it seems more likely that during this early phase Varèse was filtering sounds from his Westside apartment window rather than from sound theory, and that his later words about hyperbolas amounted to hyperbole.

This is the inconsistency, and also perhaps the allure, of Varèse’s self-positioning. “We should write today ... in a telegraphic style,” he continued in his 1922 conversation with Tryon: “We should not hint at situations and emotions; ... we should discard ... material which is not purely musical and should try for expression in the simplest way.”¹⁹⁶ In listening to *Amériques*, his adjective “telegraphic” seems like an empty signifier if by this he meant that music would somehow be neutral, pulsing like a patterned electrical signal, spanning distance and affecting listeners without alluding to “situations and emotions.” If he felt charmed as he listened to the sounds of the city through his window, then there is no reason for Varèse to have disavowed “situations and emotions.” When his acolyte and biographer Fernand Ouellette remarked “it was necessary to have known [Varèse] a long time to be able to tell *when* in his replies he was telling the truth,” Ouellette allowed—perhaps unwittingly—for critical suspicion of his master’s many oft-quoted aperçus.¹⁹⁷ One could therefore ask: when Varèse famously dreamed of his liberation of sound; when he declared in 1917 that “[m]usic, which should pulsate with life, needs new means of expression, and science alone can

¹⁹⁴ This latter music-analytical game (of counting semitones, etc.) is Bernard’s.

¹⁹⁵ Edgard Varèse and Alcopley, “Edgard Varèse on Music and Art: A Conversation between Varèse and Alcopley,” *Leonardo* 1, no. 2 (1968), 194.

¹⁹⁶ Bernard, *The Music of Edgard Varèse*, 12.

¹⁹⁷ Fernand Ouellette, quoted in Larry Stempel, “Not Even Varèse Can Be an Orphan,” *The Musical Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (1974), 51.

infuse it with youthful vigor”¹⁹⁸; when he avowed in the Santa Fe lecture that “the new notation will probably be seismographic”; and when he imagined (in 1939) a kind of musical “machine” (a proto-synthesizer? multiple loudspeakers?) that would liberate music from “the arbitrary, paralyzing tempered system,” allowing for “a sense of sound projection in space”¹⁹⁹—how much of this talk of an “art-science” of music was true and how much amounted to self-posturing?

The question only seems meaningful if one takes Varèse (as he may have wished) as *the* authority when it comes to his music. But rhetoric aside, what is going on with these various sonic “punches”? An aural assault; a musical Panzer: Olivia Mattis opened her doctoral dissertation about Varèse with a quote from another of the composer’s painter friends, Juliette Roche, who described Varèse’s torturous “desire to strangle someone, anyone, at random.”²⁰⁰ It is easy to imagine that his audience in Philadelphia would have felt stifled or strangled by this wall of sound in *Amériques*. Even if one lacked the sense of hearing, surely the bombardment of 140 players would have felt like a vibrational assault, just as a rapidly approaching train that blares its horn provokes a visceral response, gooseflesh by reflex.

It does not follow, however, that these sounds, by virtue of their violence, completely transcend representation—Rosenfeld fell right in line with Varèse’s own call for the “purely musical” when he wrote (in a 1925 review of *Integrales*) that “Varèse never has imitated the sounds of the city, as he is frequently supposed to do, or supposed to have been said to do by critical writers. His work is much more the penetration.” Mythopoeia through crude metaphor: Rosenfeld celebrates the “genuine feeling of power” evoked through the “pulsating swing” of “brass and steel” as Varèse “thrusts” sounds upward in the air, “masses of ... impenetrable bodies in collision.”²⁰¹ Bodies in collision? Penetration? Strangulation? (Perhaps Varèse’s music would have been a better candidate for Susan McClary’s rape whistle than Beethoven’s.²⁰²) What Varèse termed the “purely musical” is purely a white musical mythology, for his sonic “punches” are about as “pure” as his fantasies of strangling someone, anyone, at random, or his occasional anti-Semitism (which apparently was unknown to Rosenfeld?). Purity, power, and penetration: it does not take much of an intuitive leap to sense a deep connection between Varèse’s call for musical purity, or the “genuine feeling of power” that Rosenfeld felt in his music, and Varèse’s eventual “Heil to Hitler.”

* *
*

After the Philadelphia premiere of *Amériques* in 1926, Varèse got to work on *Arcana* for the next season, retaining his spatial approach to sound but foregrounding even more his poetics of intensity—what he would later call his work with “zones of intensities”: “zones ... differentiated by

¹⁹⁸ This passage from the first edition of Francis Picabia’s 391, published in New York in 1917, is among the Varèse-isms compiled in Edgard Varèse, “The Liberation of Sound,” Chou Wen-Chung, ed. *Perspectives of New Music* 5, no. 1 (1966), 11.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12, 13, 16.

²⁰⁰ Mattis quotes Roche’s unpublished memoirs; see “Varèse and the Visual Arts,” 1.

²⁰¹ Paul Rosenfeld, quoted in Oja, “Making a God,” 40.

²⁰² Susan McClary, “Getting Down Off the Beanstalk,” *Minnesota Composer’s Forum Newsletter* (January 1987), 5-8.

various timbres or colors and different loudnesses.”²⁰³ Though in *Arcana* Varèse abandoned the siren, and did not pitch the work as influenced by a particular soundscape, the title as well as the addition of an epigraph from Paracelsus signal what the piece was meant to convey. “One star exists, higher than all the rest,” reads the epigraph: “This is the apocalyptic star.” Beyond this star there are six others: one symbolizes “the ascendant,” four align with the elements, and the final star, “imagination, ... begets a new star and a new heaven.” His use of this epigraph demonstrates that he wanted to add another “spatial” metaphor—that of space travel, a voyage into the stars—to his repertoire.

A minute or so into *Arcana*, we encounter another of Varèse’s sonic pile-ups, more extended than any in *Amériques*. With the epigraph in mind, it is difficult not to hear the gradual ascent in the following bars as an allusion to a climb into the cosmos.

The figure shows a musical score for the beginning of *Arcana*. It consists of four staves. The top staff is for Four Horns in F, the second for Bassoons, the third for Contrabassoon, and the bottom for Trmbns, Tubas, and Contrabasses. The time signature is 5/4. The Horns staff has a red bracket around the final measure, which contains a rapid succession of staccato E-naturals. The Bassoons, Contrabassoon, and Trmbns, Tubas, and Contrabasses staves have a blue bracket around the first three measures, which contain a drone-like pattern of notes. Dynamic markings include *p*, *sf*, and *p*.

Figure 18. A much-reduced score of the droning bit towards the beginning of *Arcana*.

The blaring low Eb in the low brass, basses, and finally bassoons is a conspicuous moment in the piece, a sudden drone that sets the ground for another play of registral layers. Another fanfare-like figure rings out from the horns, a rapid succession of staccato E-naturals, forming a minor ninth with the droning bass. Over the next four bars, at least three other “zones of intensity” come into play while the drone—or some variation of the drone (marked in blue again, below)—continues.

²⁰³ Varèse, “The Liberation of Sound,” 197.

The image displays a page of a musical score for an orchestra, specifically focusing on the woodwind and brass sections. The instruments listed on the left are: Cor Anglais, Heckelphone, Clarinets in B \flat , Bass Clarinet in B \flat , Bassoons, Contrabassoon, Trumpets in B \flat , Four Horns in F, Trombones, Tuba, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The score is written in 4/4 time and features a variety of dynamic markings such as *ff*, *f*, *mf*, and *fff*. There are several instances of triplets and slurs. The score is annotated with color-coded brackets: green brackets highlight the bass clarinet, four horns, and cellos; orange brackets highlight the cor anglais and other winds; and dark red brackets highlight the trumpets. The music shows a progression of themes and textures across the instruments.

Figure 19. The following four bars (also simplified).

The bass clarinet, four horns, and cellos commence with a leaping melodic line based around a minor ninth and tritone (in green); another four horns, a cor anglais, and other winds play a variation of the fanfare figure, elongated this time, and culminating in two immense leaps upward (in orange); and finally, the trumpets enter, recapitulating the earlier sharply attacked repeated-note figure (in dark red this time). Each of these themes has a distinct character—a drone, a phrase defined by intervallic leaps, and a longer fanfare—as well as a distinct registral identity. But specifics aside, anyone can hear that Varèse is leading us up, up, up...

Figure 20. At the top of the ascent...

The peak of this ascending passage comes next, as two flutes hold out high Bbs, soon joined by violins a semitone and a third away (in purple). As the flutes and violins suddenly catapult to the extreme upper register, at least two other registral levels are established—the winds (in light blue) and then the high strings and the piccolos (in pink).

“One star exists, higher than all the rest. This is the apocalyptic star.” This moment in *Arcana* is perhaps the highest-reaching moment in Varèse’s oeuvre up to this point, or at least a moment that foregrounds ascent, the push ever upwards, more so than any comparable moment in *Amérique*. The Paracelsus epigraph mentions seven stars: it is almost too easy to interpret this Varèsian registral game as a literal representation of the “space” described in this obscure text. The constellation of stars and their symbology—the apocalypse, the elements, the ascendent, and life-giving imagination—all add up to complete the picture of *Arcana*; indeed, a picture of the arcane. Yet Varèse continued to deny any representational impulse and to insist on the complete abstraction of his music. “The title of my composition, *Arcana*, and the epigraph from Paracelsus have nothing to do with the actual composition of the work,” Varèse bluffed in an undated statement collected by Louise Varèse and published in 1976: “My titles are never descriptive.”²⁰⁴ In light of that dizzying musical ascent, the disavowal has a comical effect. This music is about space, about the accumulation of intensities

²⁰⁴ Edgard Varèse, “Statements by Edgard Varèse,” *Soundings* 10 (1976), 7.

pushing ever upward—and in performance, the effect is so intense that the listener may feel the sensation of departing the external world.

Amériques and *Arcana* are vehicles for a possible, and maximally intense, experience of sound—and in this sense, I would agree with part of Rosenfeld’s portrait of the composer, crude metaphor aside (“penetration”). Varèse *was* a philosopher in sound. Through examining his spatial conception of sound as well as his work with “zones of intensities,” we might grasp on an experiential level what “sound” or sonic liberation meant to the composer. Varèse began from city sounds, from river flows or sirens, or perhaps from the imagined sounds of outer space, and aimed to arrest these fleeting presences, to solidify—or, to play on one of his own terms, to *crystallize*—these sounds into new musical units or sound objects. He sought to create a new musical order from the play of sound masses rather than counterpoint; the clash of sound planes rather than tonal harmony; a sonic drama rather than musical dramaturgy.

By attending to the shock effects of this music, though, I would wager that Varèse’s music *was* meant to represent something real—precisely through the discursive “rub” through which he denied the links between his music and the external world (i.e. a city or outer space) while everyone knows these links are simply *there*. Metaphor was a kind of convenience for him—*Amériques* is “about” a city, but through Varèse’s sonic bomb bursts and his own discursive disavowals, the neat association become obscured. The metaphor is reversed: music no longer invokes the city, but rather the alluring, fast-paced modern city is made to function as itself a metaphor for “sound,” adding an aura of progressiveness and timeliness to the composer’s own critical image.

As Varèse wrote his music, ripe as it is with powerful effects, another kind of power began to accumulate around this music as his critical image was born—an image perhaps advocated loudest by Rosenfeld.

Edgar Varèse follows in the steps of Wagner ... and all of the young musicians not so much interested in the creation of beautiful objects as in the penetration [again?!] and registration of the extant. He, too, is a kind of philosopher or sacred doctor, hearing the logic of things, the way the world is put together as other logicians may see or feel it; and his art is a sort of revelation, made through the manipulation of the musical medium.... [Varèse] is one of the conscious truth-seekers; and his music is a genuine declaration of things as they are; not the mere illustration of a system.... Varèse is to be placed entirely in the company of the composers who have actually philosophized in music.²⁰⁵

Heil to Wagner? Rosenfeld seems to have delighted at invoking an old German Power. Varèse was a “philosopher or sacred doctor,” registering “the extant,” hearing deeper than others because he was not hindered by the trappings of the external world. As if Varèse could hear old Hegel’s *Geist*, the Western Spirit that unfolds through violent clashes with its others, eventually attaining self-consciousness.²⁰⁶ This teleological narrative undergirds Rosenfeld’s celebration of Varèse the conscious truth-seeker; the composer pushes, even further than Wagner before him, to uncover

²⁰⁵ Rosenfeld, *An Hour with American Music*, 165-166.

²⁰⁶ Cf. My discussion of the Hegelian dialectic in chapter one, as well as Young’s discussion, drawing from Hélène Cixous, in *White Mythologies*, 32-36.

“things as they are.” Or, at least to hear sound as it is. Perhaps this is the power that Varèse also sensed in Hitler—since, once again, the composer never actually became a Nazi, but certainly felt an affinity with the National Socialist cause, at least during certain private moments. A utopianism akin to the inner world of the composer’s ear.

Through this double play, the eternal “rub,” the composer based his whole mythos around the notion that through his music we may arrive at a higher understanding of what sound *is*. His sound was to have a particular effect, evoking *both* “pure” bodily immediacy *and* the will to pick apart and decode this immediacy. It is in this sense that Varèse may be understood as a sonic ontologist, and his whole method and approach to sound an ontological approach, since the composer aimed to seek a truer sense of sound, a sound that was ephemeral, fugitive, and contingent—to paraphrase Baudelaire’s well-worn words about modernity—yet also eternal and immutable.²⁰⁷ It was as if the “Being” of sound, its ontological status, needed the proper method in order to be uncovered.

But to invoke Baudelaire’s formulation of the spirit of modernism is, once again, to suggest that Varèse, despite his rhetoric of transcending tradition, was very much a part of one. I tend to think of the composer as a species of the Modern Man (*l’homme*) that once preoccupied a certain Foucault, that is, “an incredible and ultimately unworkable idea of a being ... whose very finitude allows him to take the place of God.”²⁰⁸ During the late 1960s, (the Bataille acolyte) Foucault put forward his well-known contention that this figure of the Modern Man was an affordance of a new configuration of knowledge, emerging around the turn of the nineteenth century, that all in all effaced the metaphysical presuppositions of the Classical Age (i.e. the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). This Modern Man, who was a uniquely western (i.e. European) product fabricated “less than two hundred years ago” by “the demiurge of knowledge,” would soon crumble like a sand painting on the edge of the sea.²⁰⁹

Through the next section, we may come to see that this Foucauldian narrative of the creation and disintegration of the figure of *l’homme* took up something of Bataille’s restive recalcitrance in the face of modern western reason. This Modern Man, like Varèse, was possessed by a sheer will to cognitive self-mastery.²¹⁰ Dreaming of an electronic music studio before electronic music existed;

²⁰⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York and London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995), 12.

²⁰⁸ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 30.

²⁰⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 336. “Once the order of the world was no longer God-given,” that is, once the world no longer appeared as a “great chain of being” in which the human being was merely a part of a larger order already in place, “man, as we know him today, makes his appearance and becomes the measure of things.” Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism*, 27-28.

²¹⁰ The phrase “sheer will to cognitive self-mastery” derives from Jürgen Habermas’s discussion of Foucault’s archaeology of the human sciences, specifically Foucault’s claim that the Modern Man (or *l’homme*), the object of the human sciences and the subject who uses these sciences, is characterized by a “pretentious and never redeemed” “*will to truth*.” Thus, this subject is, in Habermas’s phrase, a “structurally overburdened and overstained subject,” for whom “any frustration is only a spur to the renewed production of knowledge.” Jürgen Habermas, *The*

imagining new forms of musical writing akin to the curves of a seismograph; calling for “new dynamics far beyond the present human-powered orchestra,” and new “[units] of measure or time which [are] humanly impossible to obtain”: Varèse aimed to transcend the humanly possible to obtain the impossible.²¹¹ He possessed an “intractable will to knowledge and ever more knowledge,” to quote Jürgen Habermas, who once described how, for Foucault, the modern man’s “unique dynamism of a *will to truth*” is “the key to the internal nexus of knowledge and power.”²¹²

Knowledge and power: we can think of Varèse’s ambition to go beyond the human-powered orchestra as a “will to truth,” or a will toward total mastery of a newly “discovered” sound world. As the next section will suggest, however, the use that Varèse made of extreme sonic experiences distinguishes him from his contemporary, Bataille. Though the philosopher certainly loved the profound “punches” of avant-garde art, he took such extreme experiences to indicate that beneath the façade of western reason and faith, there exists a certain excess that undermines, rather than bolsters, any sense of a coherent and discoverable reality. By casting Varèse’s “punches” as endeavors in musical “base matter,” I will show that Varèse had something in common with the renegade surrealist Bataille—they were both stranglers—but also will use Bataille as a yardstick to measure Varèse’s own latent German Power.

For by the end, we may find that the Hegelianism—or, more precisely, Hegelian Idealism—that Bataille vehemently opposed was in fact the core of Varèse’s sonic philosophy. This is, I think, what drew the composer to Wagner and also to that other Wagner fan, the leader of the Third Reich. As if Hegel’s *Geist* took sonic form.

Sonic “base matter”: Varèse through Bataille

What a mixture, this mélange of torrid nature, jumbled botany, indigenous magic, and Salamancan theology, where the Volcano, the friars, the poppy man, the merchant of precious jewels, the ‘flocks of parakeets in their Sunday best,’ the ‘master-magicians who throughout the cities and countryside would teach cloth-making, the value of zero’ are the stuff of the most delirious dreams.

Paul Valéry²¹³

Reading Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias’s breakthrough novella of 1930, *Legendas de Guatemala*, Paul Valéry found images of a primordial earth, naked natives, licentious gods, spirits of the heavens, and eternal temples juxtaposed through constantly shifting narrative modes. Asturias

Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 261.

²¹¹ Varèse, “The Liberation of Sound,”

²¹² Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 261.

²¹³ Paul Valéry, letter to Francis de Miomandre, quoted in the preface to Miguel Angel Asturias, *Legends of Guatemala*, trans. Kelly Washbourne (Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review Press, 2011), 21-22.

posed images, places, and peoples long gone against incantatory passages of prayer and surrealistic jumbles of short utterances, native cries, erupting volcanoes, and percussion music. The *Legendas* won Asturias literary fame: as Valéry exclaimed in his above-quoted letter to the French translator of the *Legendas*, Asturias's legends were "story-dream-poems."

In 1934 Varèse premiered a work of story-dream-music, *Ecuatorial*, for orchestra, two electronic instruments (designed by Léon Theremin), and bass voice. Taking a passage from Asturias's *Legendas* as his text, Varèse explored the incantatory depths of vocal color. Shocking New York's Town Hall in 1934 as bass Chase Boromeo sang through a megaphone in front of Theremin's malfunctioning aerophones (which the composer eventually replaced with *ondes martinot*), *Ecuatorial* would not be performed again until the 1960s. However, the story of Varèse's conception of this work in Paris between 1928 and 1933 indicates that the composer shared a common urge with his contemporary Bataille to seek a more immediate and visceral form of expression.

For Bataille, however, German power was a problem. The philosopher was enraged when, in 1933, Elizabeth Foerster attested to Hitler that her brother, the late Friedrich Nietzsche, was devotedly anti-Semitic. Bataille dedicated an entire issue of *Acéphale*, the journal of his secret society of the same name (and which was composed of other oddballs like Michel Leiris, Roger Callois, and Pierre Klossowski), to debunking Foerster's words and rescuing Nietzsche from the Nazis. He dubbed Nietzsche's sister "Elisabeth Judas-Förster" and called her betrayal "even more vulgar than Judas's deal."²¹⁴ Beyond the fact that Nietzsche was *not* anti-Semitic, at stake for Bataille was the conviction that philosophy ought to seek an elsewhere, a mode of thinking that could be cleaved from totalizing ideologies, whether of the left or the right.²¹⁵

Bataille voiced his rage against the Nazi machine just before Varèse privately made his "Heil," though specific political allegiances are less important for the present discussion than what such allegiances betray about these thinker's ontological convictions—this is the primary distinction

²¹⁴ "The Jew Judas betrayed Jesus for a small sum of money—after that he hanged himself. The betrayal carried out by those close to Nietzsche does not have the brutal consequences of Judas's, but it sums up and makes intolerable all the betrayals that deform the teachings of Nietzsche (betrayals that put him on the level of the most shortsighted of current enthusiasms). The anti-Semitic falsifications of Frau Förster, Nietzsche's sister, and of Herr Richard Oehler, his cousin, are in some ways even more vulgar than Judas's deal—beyond all reckoning, they give the force of a whiplash to the maxim in which Nietzsche expressed his horror of anti-Semitism: DO NOT BEFRIEND ANYONE INVOLVED IN THIS IMPUDENT HOAX, RACISM!" Georges Bataille, "Nietzsche and the Fascists," in *Visions of Excess*, 182.

²¹⁵ For Bataille, defending Nietzsche "was ... a move to preserve a Nietzschean point of view on politics, in other words an 'elsewhere' beyond the categories of left and right, an attitude which could be opposed to Stalinism as well as to fascism.... It was a move to save independent action because it is the only weapon against the fascination of Nazism." Jean-Michel Besnier and Amy Reid, "Georges Bataille in the 1930s: A Politics of the Impossible," *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990), 176; in Sylvère Lotringer's words, "Reclaiming Nietzsche from the Nazis was also a way of validating his [Bataille's] own fascination for violence and fanaticism, a 'fundamental aspiration of humanity,' he said, that the fascists misappropriated." Sylvère Lotringer, "Furiously Nietzschean," introduction to Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1992), vii-viii.

between them that I wish to foreground in what remains of this chapter. In “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” published in 1930 in the collaborative journal that Bataille edited, *Documents* (which was just as eccentric as *Acéphale* would soon be), Bataille railed against the western notion of ontology, making a characteristically bold and sweeping claim that Christian theology as well as Hegel’s philosophy, as twin monoliths of western dualism, both “proceeded from very ancient metaphysical conceptions” like those developed by the Gnostics.²¹⁶ Hegel’s system and Christian tradition hinged on a tension between “an abstract God ... and abstract matter; the chief guard and the prison walls” of the western metaphysical prison house.²¹⁷ Bataille positioned Gnostic religion as an archaic development phase for western dualism, believing that certain Gnostic icons expose the “sinister love of darkness, a monstrous taste for obscene and lawless *archontes*” that is actually the bedrock of Hegelian or Christian metaphysics.²¹⁸ By thus returning to origins, the philosopher could imagine an epoch in which matter and spirit indeed existed in a dualist relationship, but not necessarily a dialectical one.

Bataille’s line of argument suggests that there is always otherness caught up within an ontology, the perverse or profane elements that Bataille aimed to foreground in order to resist “the West’s” great ontological machines. “The existence of a sect of *licentious Gnostics*,” he wrote, with their “love of darkness, a monstrous taste for obscene and lawless *archontes*, fulfills this obscure demand for a baseness that would not be reducible, which would be owed the most indecent respect.”²¹⁹ The demand was not too obscure; it was Bataille’s own demand for a baseness that would be irreducible to ontology, whence came his call for a “base matter ... external and foreign to ideal human aspirations,” refusing to allow itself to be taken up by “the great ontological machines.”

How much Bataille actually knew (or cared to know) about the various early religious sects that developed during the first century CE, and which are classed as “Gnostic” today, seems beside the point (for him, if not for us).²²⁰ His essential view, which he articulated repeatedly throughout his career, was that underneath and within western idealisms, there is something that does not fit in God’s kingdom or in the realm of ontological truth. Whether in non-reproductive sexual practices (especially perverse ones) or in banal violent modern spectacles like sporting events, a certain non-instrumental excess is produced, an expenditure without return.²²¹ In “Base Materialism,” he reproduced pictures of various stone-carved icons—humanoid figures with duck heads; animals

²¹⁶ Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” 45. Regarding *Documents* and *Acéphale*, cf. David Evans, “*Documents* against Civilization,” from Martin Evans, ed. *Empire and Culture: The French Experience, 1830-1940* (Hampshire, UK, and New York, US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 71-88; Georges Bataille, *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*, ed. Marina Galletti and Alastair Brotchie, trans. Natasha Lehrer, John Harman, Meyer Barash (London: Atlas Press, 2017).

²¹⁷ Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” 45.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ “I admit that I have, in respect to mystical philosophies, only an unambiguous interest, analogous to that of an uninfatuated psychiatrist towards his patients.” *Ibid.*, 46.

²²¹ See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share* vol. I, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988); Jacques Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 317-350.

surrounded by planets; and a god with the legs of a man, the body of a serpent, and the head of a rooster—as symbols of this profane excess that resists idealism. These objects were not interesting as ethnological artifacts per se, but rather as poetic devices for an avant-garde puncher. That Bataille packed a punch is confirmed by the particular allure that the “solar ass,” another humanoid figure with the head of a donkey, exerted on him. Calling “the ass ... the most hideously comical animal, and at the same time the most humanly virile,” he imagined its “comic and desperate braying [as] the signal for a shameless revolt against idealism in power.”²²²

Desperate braying: a revolt against idealism would involve sound, particularly a primitive form of utterance. This was not a central feature of Bataille’s “base materialism” by any means, but is nevertheless conspicuous when viewed alongside Varèse, who leveraged a different archaic source in his endeavor to create a sonic form of “base matter.” Varèse’s text for *Ecuatorial* includes a prayer to an imagined deity (about whom the composer probably knew as much as Bataille knew about Gnostic *archontes*—that is, not a great deal). “Hail, beauty of the day/ Givers of yellow, of green Give life, existence/ to my children, to my offspring,” exclaims Varèse’s bass singer in a passage that cherishes “Your power, Your sorcery,” the power of mythic beings who bestow and protect life. In 1930, the ex-surrealist Robert Desnos introduced Varèse to Asturias, who had travelled to Paris in the early ‘20s to study jurisprudence and stayed to translate the Mayan “Bible,” the *Popul Vuh*, with French religious studies scholar Georges Raynaud. Asturias had just released his *Legendas*, which Varèse quickly came to love: as Ernst Lichtenhahn accounts, Varèse’s papers (held at the Paul Sacher Foundation) include a copy of Asturias’s text with Varèse’s scribbled annotations (including short sketches of vocal phrases).²²³ The passage that Varèse chose from the *Legendas* to set as the text for *Ecuatorial* was one that Asturias borrowed and re-worked from the *Popul Vuh*, a desperate plea for these great deities, “Givers of children, of daughters,” to bestow life and prosperity for future generations.

²²² Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” 46, 48.

²²³ Varèse may also have come into Asturias’s orbit through Heitor Villa-Lobos, one of the few composers with whom Varèse is known to have spent time (he preferred the company of painters, poets, and dramatists). Ernst Lichtenhahn, “Varèse’s *Ecuatorial* in its Parisian Surroundings,” from *Edgard Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary, 193-201*; Michel Duchesneau, “Varèse in Paris, 1928-1933,” from *Edgard Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary, 184-192*.

The image displays two systems of a musical score. The first system includes parts for Ondes, Bass, Piano, and Timpani 1. The second system includes parts for Ondes 1 and 2, Bass, Piano, and Timpani 1. The score is written in a key with one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The first system begins with a circled '10' above the Ondes staff. The Bass part features vocal lines with lyrics: 'HO-O HA DA-DO-RES DE HIJAS DE HIJOS'. Performance instructions for the Bass include 'Hummed-nasal', 'close mouth abruptly after attack', and 'mumbled'. The Piano part includes triplets and a 'sonoro' marking. The second system features two Ondes parts with dynamics like 'subito ppp', 'molto', and 'ppp'. The Bass part has lyrics 'HONGH! HENGH WHOO' and instructions 'Hummed-very nasal' and 'close mouth abruptly'. The Piano part includes a 'l.a.' marking and triplets. The Timpani 1 part consists of rhythmic patterns with triplet markings.

Figure 21. Excerpt from *Ecuatorial*.

This plea to the “Givers of daughters, of sons,” must have been spoken, in Asturias’s text, by an imagined Mayan native, and in Varèse’s setting, the bass voice—which is the most conspicuous addition to Varèse’s sonic “space”—veers between stammering recitation, arching melody, and nasally hummed incantation to invoke these deities’ life-giving powers. The quivering voice with harsh “h” syllables (“Ho ha”; “Hongh! Hengh whoo”; a desperate braying?) gives way to the upward soaring voices of two electronic instruments, resounding as if a response from the gods. Hovering steely and disembodied above strikes of a timpani, the two *ondes martinot* suspend time between vocal utterance and the denser orchestral passages that follow. The role that the two *ondes* play, however, is not at

all new from the perspective of Varèse's poetics; they replace the piccolos that soared to the high reaches of the orchestral "space" in *Arcana*. (Finally the composer found an instrument that could produce the "pure" continuous artificial sound that he had wished for during the prior decade.)

Text aside, the musical language of *Ecuatorial* is already familiar. Upward-reaching gestures reminiscent of the grand ascending passage from *Arcana* abound. Shortly after the vocalist cries "Héng! Hengh whoo," for instance, and after an organ interlude, Varèse commences another upward climb from the orchestra's lowest register toward the high *vibratissimo* of the *ondes*, propelled by a series of staggered entrances each a minor ninth apart (perhaps the composer's favorite interval).

The image displays a musical score excerpt from *Ecuatorial*. It features four systems of staves. The first system is for the Ondes, with two staves (1 and 2) and dynamic markings such as *pp subito*, *ppp*, *pp*, *loco*, *ff*, and *subito pp*. The second system is for the Organ, with two staves and dynamic markings like *sf*, *fp*, and *ff*. The third system is for the Trumpets, with four staves (1-4) and dynamic markings including *sf*, *pp*, and *fff*. The fourth system is for the Trombones, with four staves (1-4) and dynamic markings such as *sf*, *pp*, and *fff*. The score includes various musical notations, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings, with some staves marked *senza sord.* (without mutes). A dashed line at the top indicates a *vibratissimo* section.

Figure 22. Another excerpt from *Ecuatorial*.

Keeping the Asturias text in view, however, I would suggest that this Varèsian play with registral areas, his sound masses, takes on a distinct representational function in *Ecuatorial*. The pairing of scintillating, soaring electronic voices with a human voice rooted somewhere in the soil, singing of an ancient spirituality now lost, betrays something about what Varèse's sense of spatial sound and this poetics of intensity really meant all along. After writing *Ecuatorial*, the composer could never have claimed, as he did with *Arcana*, that the text is of no import to his sound world, or to his process of creating it—this music *does* represent a fantasied primitive Mayan land. The jumble

of sound masses, from this perspective, is analogous to the jumble of sounds in the Mayan forest that Asturias describes in a passage that Varèse annotated in his edition of the *Legendas*.

Delirious night. Silence follows sound; desert follows sea. In the shadow of the forest my senses deceive me: I hear the cries of mule drivers, marimbas, bells, steeds galloping down cobblestone streets.²²⁴

In this passage, vocal incantation is a sonic embodiment of surrealist delirium. This delirious night is more than a metaphor for Varèse's sound masses: the exotic elsewhere depicted in the *Legendas* is not a "scene" accompanying this music. It seems more appropriate to suggest that this music is a delirious night. Varèse deconstructs sound, stripping musical grammar bare just as Asturias deconstructs the sounds of marimbas and bells into free-floating syllables as the passage continues:

Clasping one hand with the other, I dance to the rhythm of the vowels of a cry: *A-e-i-o-u!* *A-e-i-o-u!* And to the monotonous rhythm of the crickets. *A-e-i-o-u!* Softer *A-e-i-o-u!* Softer! Nothing exists! I, who am dancing on one foot, do not exist! *A-e-i-o-u!* Softer! *U-o-i-e-a!* More! Chirp-chirp! More! Let my right hand pull at my left until I have split in two—*aeiou*—to go on dancing—*uoiea*—split down the middle—*aeiuo*, but joining hands—*chirp... chirp!*²²⁵

Varèse's use of the harsh "h" in "Hongh! Hengh whoo" is a transposition of Asturias's play with these letters, an incantatory music of phonetics.

These phonetic games take on tremendous symbolic weight in the *Legendas*—the dancer dances in two; words divide into their base sounds. A native prays; the solar ass brays. These associations between Varèse's sonic language and the kind of sonic effects described in Asturias confirms something that a Varèse listener might already intuit: namely, that his musical language was always a (not too) veiled form of exoticism. Two sides of the same coin, the near future and primordial past, scientific reason and primitive unreason, embodied in the tension between the soaring *ondes* and phonetic bass, would together lend musical writing a renewed vigor in Varèse's aesthetic. "We are at a new primitive stage of music today," he claimed in the Santa Fe lecture, calling instruments like Theremin's *aerophones* "primitive electrical instruments," which demanded new methods of writing closer to the ideographic inscription for the medieval voice prior to the invention of the modern staff. He imagined that a distant past, what he called the "Mediaeval primitive," could serve "our own primitive era."²²⁶ Musical writing needed to be freed from the rules of western music's twelve pitches in order to approximate the parabolas of the siren or the arches of hummed glissandi.

²²⁴ Miguel Angel Asturias, *Legends of Guatemala*, trans. Kelly Washbourne (Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review Press, 2011), 54.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

²²⁶ After endeavors to include electronic instruments like the *aerophone* and *ondes* in works like *Ecuatorial*, Varèse concluded in 1936 that "our still primitive electrical instruments find it necessary to abandon staff notation and to use a kind of seismographic writing much like the early ideographic writing originally used for the voice before the development of staff notation." Varèse, "The Liberation of Sound," 198.

Varèse's sound masses, like the harsh syllables of his bass vocalist, are a kind of musical "base matter," bare building blocks forged from a neo-primitivist will to strip musical grammar bare. In this sense, *parameterization*, a buzzword often associated with Varèse and with modernists of his ilk, is *primitivism*, a return to origins in the sense of a return to the basic components of musical language: interval, register, and timbre. In terms of effect, therefore, the basic thrust of Bataille and Varèse's work was undoubtedly similar. The former's pornographic prose works seem to perform the same profane violence against Christian tradition that the latter's sound masses perform against the hallowed norms of western music.

The "solar ass" mentioned in "Base Materialism," for instance, is a recasting of "the solar anus" about which Bataille wrote a surrealist text in 1927 (that was later published with a set of André Masson's drawings). He explains volcanic eruption as the result of "the earth sometimes [jerking] off in a frenzy"; he likens "Communist workers" to "ugly and dirty ... sexual organs" in the eyes of the bourgeoisie; and thus "the erotic revolutionary and volcanic deflagrations antagonize the heavens," an anti-bourgeois and anti-Christian refrain that culminates with the image of "the *solar annulus*," "the intact anus of her body at eighteen years to which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except the sun."²²⁷ Pornographic surrealism and archaic mysticism were dual means for the philosopher to foreground the otherness at the heart of "the West's" various idealisms.

On the surface, therefore—and, after all, this is precisely how Bataille and Varèse each understood the "exotic" sources from which they drew: as surfaces, primitive expressions that can be read, cited, appropriated at their face—the philosopher and the composer played the same anti-western avant-garde game. They were both fans of sudden jolts, the shock of juxtaposition (and the above-quoted lines from "The Solar Anus" are G-rated compared to *The Story of the Eye*). Bataille's *archontes* embodied the perversions at the heart of western idealism, while for Varèse the primitivist imagery conveyed in Asturias's *Legendas* uncovered the dark sound under the façade of western musical meaning. As if through surrealist prose or surreal music, we go back to origins—however vague and undefined these origins are.

But nobody has ever accused Bataille of seeking the pure. And "purity" is precisely the term Varèse frequently used, through another discursive sleight of hand, to describe what he was after. The syllable games in Asturias's text, for instance, like the fragmented syllables in works by the Dadaists and Dada-esques with whom Varèse surrounded himself during his early New York phase, became, through the composer's discourse, expressions of "pure sound." There was something about the urgency with which Dadaist syllables could confront a reader, replacing semantic meaning with "pure" (or non-representational) vocal utterance, that appealed to Varèse.²²⁸ "If certain new words,

²²⁷ Bataille, "The Solar Anus," from *Visions of Excess*, 8-9.

²²⁸ A portrait of Varèse by Clara Tice appeared in a 1917 issue of *The Blind Man*, the Dada journal that made Duchamp's *Fountain* famous, and Varèse is known to have frequented at Walter and Louise Arensberg's exclusive avant-garde salon, where he encountered Tice, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Joseph Stella, Arthur Cravan and Mina Loy, Albert Gleizes and Juliette Roche, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, and others of the New York Dada scene—each of whom are depicted in André Raffray's 1984 painting, *Chez Arensberg*. Guido Magnaguagno, "Little France': Varèse and the New York Dadaist Scene," from Felix Meyer and Heidy Zimmermann, eds. *Edgard Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2006), 76-81.

called barbarous by academic purists, live in spite of the science of etymology and of established grammatical conventions,” he wrote in 1923,

it is because their only criterion is the *purity of sound and the harmony of the word*, their only law the law of phonetics. And it is this law that decides the fate of a new vocable, even in deforming it, without a thought for its etymology. The musical works of to-day make their appeal directly and uniquely to their listeners’ ears.²²⁹

Though Varèse did not refer explicitly to Dadaist tone-poetry, his mention of the “purity of sound and harmony of the word” likely referred to the fragmented syllables and musicalized speech of poetry in the style of Kurt Schwitters’s *Ursonate* (1921-32), for instance, or to poetry composed of newspaper clippings à la Tristan Tzara.²³⁰ An aesthetics of collage bestowed a kind of musical ambiguity on spoken and written utterances, a destruction of normative syntax and disavowal of any representational function for language. Once destroyed, the purity of sound would ring true. “Their only law the law of phonetics”: stripped of semantic meaning, sound has its own law.

The Varèse-Bataille dyad represents two divergent ways of giving form to and wielding base matter. While Bataille’s base matter—whether the solar ass or solar anus—was a means to resist the great ontological machines, Varèse’s musical “base matter” allowed the composer to construct a neo-ontology. Sound-poetry bolstered one of the composer’s discursive leitmotifs: that sound is a substance with life and power, an arcane ephemeron beholden to a deeper truth which the composer might uncover through new technologies and new methods of writing. His obsession with the pure, with claiming an otherworldly status for liberated sound, constitutes the main difference between the composer and his philosopher contemporary. Through the methods I have described—his work with sound masses, his poetics of intensity, and his obsession with purity—he constructed his own musical ontological machines, treating sound *as other*, and then “purifying” sound into his own musical systems.²³¹

Cf. Olivia Mattis, “Varèse and Dada,” from James Leggio, ed. *Music and Modern Art* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 129-162.

²²⁹ Edgard Varèse, “Jérôm s’en ca-t’en guerre,” *The Sackbut* 4, no. 5 (December 1923), 146. Emphasis mine.

²³⁰ As Daniel Albright accounts, in his *Ursonate* (1921-32) Schwitters musicalized a sound poem by Raoul Hausmann: “where Hausmann wrote *fmsbwtözäu*, Schwitters devised a pronunciation guide (*fümms bö wö tää zää Uu*.)” Schwitters transformed the strings of consonants into lines of pronounceable sound poetry in a rondo form, culminating in the chanted recitation of the German alphabet. Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 288.

²³¹ His insistence that noise needs to pass through the medium of writing to be properly comprehensible as music, and thus liberated as “sound,” is the context for Varèse’s oft-quoted bash of Filippo Marinetti: “why do the Italian futurists slavishly imitate only what is superficial and obvious in our daily life?” Like Pierre Boulez, who (as I shall describe in the next chapter) snobbishly renounced *musique concrète* for much the same reason, Varèse disavowed futurism on the basis that Marinetti’s noise machines merely reproduce the sounds of modern life. Instead, sound requires a writerly medium to bring it into being. Varèse, from *Picabia’s 391*, 1917; quoted

This process of idealization through subsumption is precisely what Bataille found so problematic about Hegelian Idealism. In “Base Materialism,” he claimed that “Gnosticism, in its psychological process, is not so different from present-day materialism, I mean a materialism not implying an ontology, not implying matter is the thing-in-itself.”²³² “Present-day materialism” refers to Bataille’s own sense of base matter, a material that cannot be taken up and recast, through some dialectical magic, as merely the external appearance of a deeper and loftier ontological condition. If matter is a thing-in-itself, it therefore is not a thing for us, and thus Bataille claimed that to “submit [oneself] entirely to what must be called matter”—that is, to attend to base matter—“is a question above all of *not* submitting oneself ... to whatever is more elevated,” to the higher realms of reason or “to whatever can give a borrowed authority to the being that I am.”²³³

On the surface, it is *as if* Varèse, by seeking another world in sound, could have “submitted himself” to matter in Bataille’s sense—to the brute force of certain vibrations, to the dissonances that do not resolve, and to the unreason always cloaked inside the west’s great ontological machines. But his musical systems seem, instead, to reaffirm in a different form the “ideal human aspirations” that would function, in Bataille’s words, to efface base matter and assert a “borrowed authority” for “the being that I am”—or to the being that Varèse was.

Conclusion: “Heil” Ontology

With Bataille’s vehement anti-Hegelian anti-Idealism in view, the deep resonance between Varèse’s avowal that certain geniuses possess a prophetic “inner ear” and “the West’s” ontological machines come to the fore—somewhat like exfoliating a wart. The composer’s “Heil” can be seen as a salute to a deep western power, as if the absence of any genuine interest in or devotion to religion or spiritual practice was filled by the presence of ontology.

Ontology, as the Logos of Being, is distinct from “metaphysics” more generally because, simply put, it involves speech. Perhaps ontology can be thought of, taking much poetic liberty, as the Talk of Being, or the Being-Talked. There *must* be a discursive medium for an ontology to “be”; otherwise, it is meaningless to employ the term. Hegel once sorted out the World Spirit on paper; Varèse uncovered a deep World Sound through the methods I have described, his plays of sound

in Jürg Stenzl, “‘Daily Life, Slavishly Imitated’: Edgard Varèse and Italian Futurism,” in *Edgard Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary*, ed. Felix Meyer and Heidi Zimmermann (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2006), 142.

²³² Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” 49.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 50. That Bataille’s thought would come to exert a particular allure for generations of later French thinkers is owed to the latent ethics that we can glean from these anti-ontological pronouncements, an allure no doubt amplified by the profane package in which Bataille placed this ethics. He projects a late Marxian ideology critique—a will to “[disconcert] the human spirit and idealism before something base”—through a renegade surrealist pornographic aesthetic tied to a freewheeling ethnographic curiosity. *Ibid.* See also James Clifford’s illuminating discussion of Bataille in relation to surrealist aesthetics, a theme I will take up more explicitly in the following chapter. James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23/4 (October 1981), 539-564.

masses and zones of intensity, and his obsession with the pure. The purity of sound had been waiting all along for just the right moment to be realized, Varèse's Modern Moment.

But what if sound does not exist? In Varèse—and this will be my final suggestion—we do not hear “sound” any more than we hear “sound” in noisy string passages by Rossini or in Wagner's atmospheric ambience.²³⁴ Instead of “sound,” in Varèse we hear *ontological sound*, a sound crafted—discursively, that is—to be heard as such, and a sound that ultimately finds its echo and renewal in the virtual space of language. For once music goes silent, all that is left is a murmuring flow of speech echoing in the “inner ear.” After the shocks, after the sonic violence and the punches in the ear that he perpetrated on audiences during his life, Varèse's music basically lay dormant, performed a handful of times and then all but forgotten. Having failed to establish himself in Europe, he floundered, retreating to New York in 1933, and for the rest of his life his music was not oft performed. It was only recently—during the last half-century—that many of his works were re-activated, edited, performed and recorded, that doctoral theses and music-theoretical studies began to be published about him. Why does this long-muted music carry so much clout?

The lasting life of Varèse's music depends on a particular retrospective game. We *need* his words, his concepts, to untangle what this music meant and to understand what sound “is” according to Varèse's method (a method that was taken up by many later “art-scientists,” up to the spectralists and beyond). To play again on Varèse's own word, the life of his music depends on the listener's will to “crystallize” his sounds. While the composer used this term to describe an organic compositional process through which an initial musical idea “[expands] and [splits] into different shapes or groups of sound,”²³⁵ I would prefer to use this term, contra Varèse's intent, to describe the perceptual process through which the listener or scholar, by attending to Varèse's discourse (his scores and his words) learns how to hear his sound masses, to distinguish zones of intensity, and so on. Crystallization occurs in hindsight: we look back and see his sound blocks, and then we know how engage with this music.

I end, then, with an aforementioned irony. Varèse's music is violent and powerful, yet even this music—the music that seems to be most clearly “about” presence, liveness, goosebumps, what have you—has only endured on account of Varèse's discursive power. Sound, for Varèse, amounts to what Derrida may have termed a *written being* (*l'être écrit*), a phrase that the philosopher once used (filtering something from Bataille, no doubt) to suggest that ontology had only ever been “written in” to many philosophical texts—from Plato to medieval theology, from Rousseau and Husserl. But the notion of the “written being” also connotes a more general metaphysical sense of *being-ness*, or presence, that is produced through the very act of using a phonetic writing—we might call it a “written presence.”²³⁶ Phonetic writing, as a form of writing that doubles the sounds of speech, was

²³⁴ I owe my own skepticism toward the idea of sonic autonomy, specifically the idea that certain modern musics are “about sound,” or they “reveal” an ontological condition, to Nicholas Mathew. Cf. Mathew's historicization of the more recent push in sound studies toward “vibrational matter,” a corollary of the conceit that certain artworks reveal on ontology, in “Interesting Haydn: On Attention's Materials,” esp. 692; this is a tendency of recent sound studies that Brian Kane trenchantly critiqued in “Sound studies without auditory culture: a critique of the ontological turn,” *Sound Studies* 1/1 (2015), 2-21.

²³⁵ Varèse, “The Liberation of Sound,”

²³⁶ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 31-41.

for Hegel the most ideal—“the mind’s writing.”²³⁷ This privileged ideality stemmed from the fact that a phonetic text does not represent things and objects directly through lines and silent visual figures (the way a non-phonetic writing like Chinese may, for instance), but instead makes things speak in the inner ear.²³⁸ In Foucault’s words, summarizing the metaphysical bias that western philosophers had granted to phonetic writing (as opposed to its non-phonetic other), “this presence of repeated speech in writing gives, without doubt, to that which we call a work [of language] an ontological status unknown in those cultures where, when one writes, it is the thing itself that one designates, in its own body, visible, stubbornly inaccessible to time.”²³⁹ Bataille would surely have delighted at Foucault’s idea that the Modern Man was an ontological myth produced in the doubled space of phonetic language, a western myth indeed.²⁴⁰ The tides would soon rise to wash his face from the shore.

Perhaps this elusive sense of phonetic “doubling” offers us a final glimpse into what Varèse found so compelling about Beethoven’s inner ear. Deaf to the external world, the composer hears the inner murmurings more clearly, and as the external world of listeners and performers turned deaf ears to Varèse during his life, his discourse took on its own life in the fictive doubled space of texts. This written presence, which whispers when music is silent, accumulated around Varèse, compensating for the relative silence of his music in performance, and giving the composer a “doubled” power. Another world created in sound.

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²³⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, quoted in Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 39.

²³⁸ Cf. Fann, *This Self We Deserve*, 7-18, 49-50, 132-141.

²³⁹ “Cette presence de la parole répétée dans l’écriture donne sans doute à ce que nous appelons une oeuvre un statut ontologique inconnu à ces cultures, où, quand on écrit, c’est la chose même qu’on désigne, en son corps propre, visible, obstinément inaccessible au temps.” Michel Foucault, “Le Langage à l’infini,” from *Dits et écrits I: 1954-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001, this article originally published 1963), 280.

²⁴⁰ This is perhaps why, when Foucault briefly mentioned this “ontological status” of phonetic writing, or when Derrida defined “logocentrism” as “the metaphysics of phonetic writing,” they each suggested in their own ways—following Saussure’s footsteps—that a non-phonetic writing (like Chinese) at very least has a different status, or, to put it more starkly, simply *does not have* an “ontological status.” Which is to say that ontology has to do with phonetic language, with western language, *not* with certain non-western languages—a claim that has, of course, been contested: see Han-Liang Chang, “Hallucinating the Other: Derridean Fantasies of Chinese Script,” Working paper (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Twentieth Century Studies) no. 4 (1988); Zhuqing Hu, “From Ut Re Mi to Fourteen-Tone Temperament: The Global Acoustemologies of an Early Modern Chinese Tuning Reform,” doctoral dissertation (University of Chicago, 2019), esp. 394-455.

Chapter Three

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Ontological Appropriation: Boulez and Artaud

In his 1963 article “Dire, jouer, chanter,” Pierre Boulez (1925-2016) explained his use of certain exotic sounds in *Le Marteau sans maître*. “I chose this ‘body’ of instruments with the influence of extra-European civilizations,” he wrote: “the xylophone transposes the African balafon, the vibraphone refers to the Balinese gender, and the guitar recalls the Japanese koto.”²⁴¹ The composer insisted, however, that “neither the style nor the very use of these instruments is related in any way to the traditions of these different musical civilizations.”²⁴² Boulez did not wish to represent the music of peoples outside Europe as an ethnologist might when organizing artifacts into a colonial exhibition. Rather, once purified of context, these sounds would “enrich the European sonic vocabulary through extra-European listening,” and, Boulez hoped, have a refreshing and estranging effect on the listener accustomed to traditional western timbres. With this move, Boulez also hoped to sever his chosen sounds and harmonies from the historical baggage of the classical tradition, and thus to amplify the presence of music in its moment. In this endeavor he took a cue from the creator of the Theatre of Cruelty. “Music should be collective hysteria and enchantment,” wrote Boulez in 1947, “violently modern—following the direction of Antonin Artaud, and not a simple ethnographic reconstruction in the image of civilizations more or less remote from us.”²⁴³

What does it mean for a composer to take sounds from the ethnographic other without “reconstructing” the other? This chapter will argue that Boulez’s endeavor to aestheticize the “hysteria” he perceived in the culture of the other was a moment of *ontological appropriation*, turning the other into sound. Composers of art music had long sought fresh styles and new sounds by reconstructing a non-European other, whether through Mozart’s imitations of Turkish music, the exoticized characters of Bizet’s *Carmen*, or the rhythmic counterpoint that drew Debussy to Javanese Gamelan. I suggest that these endeavors to imagine and to appropriate “extra-European” sounds became specifically “ontological” by the mid twentieth century. Boulez’s aim was not to reconstruct

²⁴¹ “Je dois cependant reconnaître que je choisis ce « corpus » instrumental en fonction d’influences dues aux civilisations extra-européennes: le xylophone transpose le balafon africain, le vibraphone se réfère au genre balinaise, la guitare se souvient de koto japonais.” Pierre Boulez, “Dire, jouer, chanter,” from Jean-Louis Barrault, *La musique et ses problèmes contemporaines 1953-1963*, Collection « Cahiers Renaud-Barrault » (Paris: René Julliard, 1963), 317. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations mine.

²⁴² “De fait, ni la stylistique ni l’emploi même des instruments ne se rattachent en quoi que ce soit aux traditions de ces différentes civilisations musicales.” Ibid.

²⁴³ “La musique doit être hystérie et envoûtement collectifs, violemment actuels—suivant la direction d’Antonin Artaud, et non pas une simple reconstitution ethnographique à l’image de civilisations plus ou moins éloignées de nous.” Pierre Boulez, “Propositions,” *Polyphonie 2* (1948). This oft-quoted passage is from a 1947 letter from Boulez to André Souris published in Robert Wangermée, *André Souris et le complexe d’Orphée: Entre surréalisme et musique sérielle* (Liège: Mardaga 1995), 274; see also Caroline Potter, “Pierre Boulez, Surrealist,” *Gli spazi della musica* 6/1 (2017), 75.

a specific other. Rather, *sound* was the other: it emanated from someplace strange and primitive, carrying a visceral immediacy that could be leveraged to puncture the façade of western musical meaning. Boulez sought a compositional method that would, to use his own term, render sound *neutral*: a sonic color rather than a musical sign; a “pure” quality rather than a representation.²⁴⁴ I will argue that Boulez’s compositional strategy prefigured recent claims on behalf of the ontology of sound: that sound can put us in touch with a world more real, or perhaps that sound simply *is* the real. This search for pure sound, a recurring refrain of twentieth-century musical modernism, is, and always has been, inherently ethnocentric. It is a process of *making sound ontological*.

While the question of otherness is seldom addressed in scholarship on Boulez, it is clear that his sense of sound developed as he reconstructed “extra-European” expressions in sonic form.²⁴⁵ In the first section of this chapter, I use Artaud as a foil to explore how Boulez’s idea of musical writing—or *écriture*, his medium to write sonic “hysteria”—took shape as he distilled and sublimated otherness. While Boulez credited Artaud with forging a style of expression that would re-create “collective hysteria and enchantment” without aspiring to realist ethnographic representation, the composer endeavored to push Artaud’s expressive style beyond what even the theatre guru had achieved. For Artaud often acknowledged the sources of his “delirium”: he mimicked the rituals of the Rarámuri tribe of Mexico, infusing his performances with cries, gasps, and ululations, a style of vocal performance that well captured, as Boulez put it, “the basic preoccupations of music today.”²⁴⁶ Boulez’s exoticism, by contrast, was more veiled: rather than follow Artaud to intensify the alterity of the other, Boulez sought instead to purify or occlude otherness, a stance that can be seen as continuous with surrealism.

The approach Boulez took to sound could be called “ontological” because he treated sound as something more “real”—more evocative and powerful—than anything that had been, or could be, expressed through the normative musical languages of the western tradition. In what follows, I will first suggest that Boulez’s philosophy of writing hinged on an ideological distinction between “the West” and the Rest, and then will follow the composer to South America with the Compagnie Renaud-Barrault to hear how he filtered sounds from an “extra-European” source that he never acknowledged outright: Afro-Bahian Candomblé. I will suggest that Boulez modelled the poetics of one movement of *Le Marteau sans maître*, the “Commentaire I de « Bourreaux de solitude »,” on the ritual of spirit possession he witnessed in Bahia in the company of actor and director Jean-Louis Barrault (1910-1994). Unlike Barrault, who claimed that the Candomblé embodied the essence of Greek tragedy, Boulez neither wanted nor cared to turn the Candomblé into an allegory for an original western essence. The “delirium” of Candomblé practitioners in the throes of physical spasms

²⁴⁴ Boulez’s approach to non-European sound was, as he wrote, “totally opposed to the unwelcome appropriation of a ‘colonial’ vocabulary by Europe at the beginning of this century,” including “numerous and ephemeral Malagasy or Cambodian rhapsodies or other [musical] genre paintings.” Boulez, “Dire, jouer, chanter,” 317.

²⁴⁵ See Rosângela Pereira de Tugny, “L’autre moitié de l’art,” in Jean-Louis Leleu and Pascal Decroupet, eds. *Pierre Boulez: Techniques d’écriture et enjeux esthétiques* (Geneva: Éditions Contrechamps, 2006), 299-317; and Luisa Bassetto, “Ritratto del compositore come apprendista etnologo: Pierre Boulez prima dell’incontro con André Schaeffner,” *Musicalia* 7 (2010), 61-82.

²⁴⁶ Pierre Boulez, “sound and Word,” from *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, trans. Stephen Walsh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 42.

and amid abrupt vocal utterances—the kinds of experiences that Artaud emulated directly—took sonic form in *Le Marteau*. As Boulez modelled the “Commentaire” on a fictive narrative of spirit possession, I suggest, sound became an allegory, a figure for an original essence and a kind of elemental force.

Boulez’s sounds are still with us today. Following Christoph Cox or Nina Sun Eidsheim, one might argue that a supra-audible “sonic flux” or reality of vibrating matter exists beyond human perception, as a virtual ground for the sounds that we actualize when we make music.²⁴⁷ The concluding section of this essay suggests that every scholar who holds that sound is a link to the real, to a reality beyond or behind what we can know and represent, implicitly relies on a notion of sound as allegory—a notion that links sound studies to Boulez and a group of his contemporaries in France. This attitude toward sound, often touted as a way to think beyond entrenched West-versus-East and Self-versus-Other dualisms, risks re-inscribing these dualisms on an ever-deeper level. The problem is not with thinking imaginatively about sound, but with the philosophical idea that guides scholars to take sound as an allegory for truth and reality: ontology.²⁴⁸

The term “ontology” has enjoyed a resurgence of late as a marker of a kind of cultural relativism following the “ontological turn” in anthropology and as a substitute for “aesthetic autonomy” in sound studies. However, I am not convinced that the idea of ontology can be purged of its history as a “philosophy of power,” to quote a phrase from Emmanuel Lévinas.²⁴⁹ The very idea of ontology presupposes a relation between the knower and the known such that the known entity, by becoming an object of knowledge and a figure of western writing, loses its alterity.²⁵⁰ Lévinas coined the term “ontological imperialism” to describe the greedy egotism through which “the West” constitutes itself by first imagining and then incorporating the other.²⁵¹ To the extent that Boulez attempted to transmute “extra-European” sounds into the realm of musical writing, he was an “ontological imperialist.” He constituted an idea of sound, not by representing the other as other,

²⁴⁷ Christoph Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018); Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015).

²⁴⁸ I am indebted to Fuoco B. Fann for his mentorship in French philosophy, particularly his insights into the term and concept of ontology from comparative historical and philosophical perspectives. In personal correspondence as well as his writings, Fann has linked the ideas of many major thinkers—Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Lévinas among them—to contend that ontology, a central thread running through all western philosophy, has bolstered the privilege granted in western thought to phonetic language (as opposed to non-phonetic languages), and has also buttressed the modern knowing subject’s anthropocentrism. See Fuoco B. Fann, *This Self We Deserve: A Quest after Modernity* (Berkeley: Philosophy and Art Collaboratory, 2020), esp. 12-17, 25-34, 49-50, 132-142.

²⁴⁹ “L’ontologie comme philosophie première, est une philosophie de la puissance.” Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l’extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 37.

²⁵⁰ See Robert J.C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 14.

²⁵¹ “The relation with Being [*l’être*], which takes form as ontology, consists in neutralizing the entity [*l’étant*] to understand or to seize it. [Ontology] is thus not a relation with the other as other, but the reduction of the Other to the Same.” Lévinas, *Totalité et infini*, 36-37.

but by subsuming the Other into the Same. Recent scholarship, too, treats sound as a figure of radical alterity, yet sonic allegory becomes a means to bolster scholarly authority. The quest for “pure” sound has an unacknowledged modernist history.

Boulez, Artaud, and the ethnographic other

“By the time he was eighteen,” biographer Joan Peyser writes, “Boulez had turned against his father, his country, and everything else that had been held up to him as sacred.... He repudiated Catholicism, spouting Latin obscenities when he was drunk, ... he never studied under any one man for any length of time, ‘detesting the father-son relationship.’”²⁵² While this phase of Boulez’s early life clearly had a strong Oedipal dimension, it was Boulez’s defiance of the role of the religious Father in French society that made him so receptive to Artaud’s cries, shouts, and profane challenges to God’s judgement.

As Edward Campbell, Peter O’Hagan, and François Meïmoun recount, Boulez saw Artaud read his own texts at Paris’s Galerie Loeb in the summer of 1947, witnessing the dramatist performing the kinds of vocal expressions that would be recorded by the Radiodiffusion Française later that year.²⁵³ The broadcast *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* (recorded in November 1947) documents Artaud during a period of rapid physical decay following a series of electroshock treatments administered against his will at the Rodez asylum (1943-1946).²⁵⁴ The forty-minute broadcast consists of readings of Artaud’s texts by the writer himself, his friend (and later literary executrix) Paule Thévenin, and the actors Maria Casarès and Roger Blin. Censored by the RDF just before its premiere in 1948 (due in large part to Artaud’s inclusion of anti-American rhetoric, ill-timed in the wake of the war), *Pour en finir* allows us to hear the voice that Boulez experienced live that summer.²⁵⁵ In his opening unaccompanied monologue, Artaud shouts in his high register: “I learned yesterday...,” and then pauses. His pacing deliberate, his rasping voice swooping low, he describes “one of the most sensational official practices of public American schools”: a “sperm test” in which all young boys are required to give sperm for the government to build an artificial army. America not only manufactured people, but also warships and plastic consumer products, inaugurating “le règne ... de tous les faux produits fabriques” (“the reign of fake fabricated products”) and replacing everything natural with “les ignobles ersatz synthétiques” (“awful ersatz synthetics”).

²⁵² Joan Peyser, *Boulez* (New York and London: Schirmer Books, 1976), 25.

²⁵³ Edward Campbell, *Boulez, Music, and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 33; Peter O’Hagan, *Pierre Boulez and the Piano: A Study in Style and Technique* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 74; François Meïmoun, “La Construction du langage musical de Pierre Boulez: La Première Sonate pour piano,” doctoral dissertation, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (2018), esp. 165-173; Potter, “Pierre Boulez, Surrealist,” 75.

²⁵⁴ Antonin Artaud and Ruby Cohn, “States of Mind: 1921-1945,” *The Tulane Drama Review* 8/2 (1963), 30-73; Sylvère Lotringer, *Mad Like Artaud*, trans. Joanna Spinks (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2015), 12.

²⁵⁵ “Hear Antonin Artaud’s Censored, Never-Aired Radio Play: *To Have Done With The Judgment of God* (1947),” *Open Culture*, September 2014: <http://www.openculture.com/2014/09/antonin-artauds-censored-never-aired-radio-play.html>

These words come at the end of a series of short phrases in which Artaud crescendos, charging the text with belligerent vocal expressions. On *fabriques*, his voice quivers as if a mocking laugh; on *les ignobles ersatz*, he tightens his throat, pushing air with tremendous strength to produce a guttural growling; and before the final syllable of *synthétiques*, he pauses as if out of breath, separating the last “-que,” a percussive click, from the rest of the phrase. Artaud believed in the music of spoken utterance, in the voice’s ability to create meaning through its own contours, sometimes bolstering the literal meaning of a text or—in this case—working against the meaning of the words (“fabriques,” “synthétiques”).²⁵⁶ He rails against an ersatz, synthetic American war machine and then introduces a contrasting figure: “I love most the people who eat off the very earth the delirium from which they are born.” His voice shivers; he blurs “la terre” (earth) to sound like “le délire” (delirium); he whispers: “I speak of the Tarahumaras.... Thus you will listen to the dance of the Tutuguri.”²⁵⁷

The collective enchantment that enthralled Boulez was thus achieved through the rites of the Rarámuri of the Sierra Tarahumara, whose peyote rituals, Artaud claimed, revealed a primordial state of being. After a silence, the next section of *Pour en finir* begins as Artaud screams, a pair of drums and a gong accompanying his ululations as he soars into his extreme upper register. This crude “ethnographic reconstruction” of a primitive ritual seems to account, in retrospect, for the stammering articulations and long-drawn-out pacing of the broadcast so far: Artaud speaks as if in a trance. Casarès then enters to read the “Dance of the Tutuguri” text, her enraptured voice vibrating as Artaud’s shouts continue. This text describes a ritual in which six Rarámuri men, each symbolizing a sun, surround a seventh who races across a primordial land nude upon a horse. The dance culminates with the letting of blood and the ripping of Catholic crosses out of the Mexican soil.

For Boulez, Artaud’s alternation of words with “shouts, noises, or rhythmic effects,” and his effort to push vocal utterance beyond what any written text can convey, felt like an affirmation of the emerging musical language that the composer was in the process of conceptualizing and putting into practice. “I am not qualified to discuss Antonin Artaud’s use of language,” he wrote,

but I can observe in his writings the basic preoccupations of music today; hearing him read his own texts, accompanying them with shouts, noises, or rhythmic effects, has shown us how to affect a fusion of sound and word, how to make the phoneme burst forth when the word can no longer do so, in short how to organize delirium.²⁵⁸

Boulez’s efforts to “take delirium and, yes, organize it,” however, masked Artaud’s explicit exoticism. Perhaps we can hear something of Artaud’s “shouts, noises, and rhythmic effects” in the musical language that Boulez forged in his *Piano Sonata no. 2* (1948), written after Boulez heard the raving

²⁵⁶ See Meïmoun, “La Construction du langage musical de Pierre Boulez,” 167-170.

²⁵⁷ “J’aime mieux le peuple qui mange à même la terre le délire d’où il est né.... C’est ainsi que vous allez entendre la danse du TUTUGURI.” Antonin Artaud, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2003), 28-29. According to Luisa Bassetto, Boulez intended to use the following text, the “Dance of the Tutuguri,” in his unfinished *Marges*, which he conceived in or about 1961 but abandoned after 1968. Luisa Bassetto, “Marginalia, ou l’opéra-fantôme de Pierre Boulez,” in Leleu and Decroupet, eds. *Pierre Boulez: Techniques d’écriture et enjeux esthétiques*, 255-298.

²⁵⁸ Boulez, “Sound and Word,” 42.

dramatist in person.²⁵⁹ During the climax of the fourth and final movement, Boulez prompts the performer to “pulverize the sound” in a short passage composed of a rapid-fire succession of quavers and semiquavers leaping between the extreme high and low registers of the piano—*rhythmic effects*. This harried back-and-forth motion culminates with abruptly-attacked chordal clusters—*shouts*—before a series of connected pitches in the left hand (marked “*Élargir rapidement*”: expanding quickly) winds upwards toward a group of descending dyads in the extreme high range—*noises*. Boulez commands the pianist to play “in a very strong shade,” to sound “exasperated,” commencing another phrase of leaps.

The image shows a page of musical notation for the climax of the fourth movement of Boulez's *Deuxième sonate pour piano* (1948). The score is written for piano and consists of three systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The notation is highly complex, featuring rapid-fire quavers and semiquavers. Performance instructions are written above the staves, including "accélérer", "Élargir rapidement", and "Brusquement vif". Dynamic markings such as *mf*, *f*, and *ff* are used throughout. The score also includes specific performance directions like "pulvériser le son; attaque brève, sèche, comme de bas en haut" and "rester sans nuances dans la très grande force".

Figure 23. The climax of movement four of Boulez’s *Deuxième sonate pour piano* (1948).

²⁵⁹ David Tudor’s remarks about the difficulties he had while learning to play the *Deuxième sonate* for its 1950 American premiere attest to the aesthetic and historical links between this piece and Artaudian theatricality vis-à-vis Boulez. Taking a cue from Boulez’s writings, Tudor read Artaud’s *Le Théâtre et son double*. “All of a sudden I saw that there was a different way of looking at musical continuity,” he stated, “having to deal with what Artaud called the affective athleticism.... I had to put my mind in a state of non-continuity—not remembering—so that each moment is alive.” David Tudor, quoted in Eric Smigel, “Recital Hall of Cruelty: Antonin Artaud, David Tudor, and the 1950s Avant-Garde,” *Perspectives of New Music* 45/2 (2007), 173.

Boulez put little stock in verisimilitude, refusing musical “topics” that his listeners or critics could have taken to represent images or scenes in a narrative mode. But although he downplayed the representational function of music—just as he disdained “simple ethnographic reconstruction”—Boulez’s musical gestures were often visceral, demanding an identification between his listeners and performers on a corporeal level. His early pianistic language might not “represent,” but certainly *presents* rapid leaps, sweeps, and chordal clusters, modes of attack that were part of the composer’s endeavor to forge a new kind of musical experience—a pianism otherwise.

Boulez’s concept of *écriture*, the French term that connotes not only literal inscription but also the symbolic reasoning behind it²⁶⁰, took shape through a compositional practice that consisted of creating contrasts like that between the leaping attacks of the *Piano Sonata no. 2*—in which pitches seem to be either isolated or slammed together—and moments in which successive notes are smoothly connected into lyrical fragments. Boulez’s musical language consisted of opposing features like this, a dialectical approach to timbre and phrasing that Jonathan Goldman describes through various binaries: figure versus structure (i.e. part versus whole), chord-figure versus interval-scale (i.e. “chord” versus “scale,” or vertical versus horizontal construction), and smooth versus striated time—the list goes on.²⁶¹ Boulez owed this approach in part to the voice that we can hear in *Pour en finir*. Rasping and low in one moment, then quietly drawing breath; suddenly shouting and leaping into the falsetto; finally slowing, stuttering, gasping out of breath: this voice is a model also for the sonic palette of the *Livre pour quatuor* (1948-49, 1959-60).²⁶² With each movement structured around a contrast between longer resonant tones and short percussive attacks, the violent oppositions of vocal sounds echo in ever more abstract form.²⁶³ The first four measures of Movement 1b of the *Livre*, for instance, feature a series of intervallic leaps, starting in the viola and echoed by the violin, which sustain long tones in the upper register against a quiet cello attack below, pizzicato. After a fermata, the second short phrase is abrupt, the cello rushing upward to meet the trills and pitch clusters in the violins.

²⁶⁰ This definition of *écriture* derives in part from Antoine Bonnet, “Écriture and perception, on *Messagesquise* by P. Boulez,” *Contemporary Music Review* 2/1 (1987), 209; see Jonathan Goldman, *The Musical Language of Pierre Boulez: Writings and Compositions* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 203 n. 15.

²⁶¹ Goldman, *The Musical Language of Pierre Boulez*, 4, 63.

²⁶² These dates of composition are attributed by Dominique Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, trans. Susan Bradshaw (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 38-39.

²⁶³ The *Livre* exemplifies the opposition of smooth and striated time: longer resonant “smooth” tones forming a contrast with short and percussive “striated” attacks. See Goldman, *The Musical Language of Pierre Boulez*, 12; Cf. Gilles Deleuze, “Boulez, Proust and time: “Occupying without counting,” *Angelaki* 3/2 (1998), 69-74.

The image shows a page of a musical score for a string quartet, labeled 'I-b'. It features four staves: Violon I, Violon II, Alto, and Violoncelle. The music is in 3/8 time, marked 'Moderato' with a tempo of 126/135. The score includes various performance instructions such as 'Pizz' (pizzicato), 'Arco' (arco), 'rit.' (ritardando), and 'acceler.' (accelerando). Dynamic markings include 'pp', 'ppp', 'ff', and 'più ff'. There are also tempo changes indicated by a circled '5' and a tempo of 116/120, followed by another circled '5' and a tempo of 152. The score is divided into measures with bar numbers 5, 16, 8, and 16.

Figure 24. The opening of movement 1b of the *Livre pour quatuor* (dated 1948-49).

Scholarly writing on Boulez, which seldom addresses the question of otherness, is often caught in a hermeneutic “double bind.” By approaching the music as an object that requires laborious decoding (searching for the tone rows and tracing their genealogies, for example), we perhaps miss some of its most striking qualities.²⁶⁴ One does not need to listen “hermeneutically” to hear that the ethnographic other is *simply there* in the music; yet when we delve beneath the surface for compositional processes and deep structures, the other vanishes. This is a problem that seems to haunt studies of Boulez (and, more generally, of serialism): the rigorous methods employed in creating this music seem to demand decoding, as if there is always a hidden order behind every musical utterance. But precisely when we engage in decoding, the music’s “otherness” is concealed.

This double position, I would like to suggest, was part of Boulez’s distinctive mode of appropriation. In contrast with Artaud, who sought to present the “extra-European” as radically other, Boulez sought to occlude difference, and musical writing was his medium to do so. This mode of appropriation involved a specific attitude toward sound and writing that Boulez received partly through Artaud, but also through a larger movement of which Artaud was—at least initially—a part. Though he broke from the official surrealist group led by André Breton (1896-1966) in or about 1926, Artaud retained something of the surrealist attitude toward cultural order and meaning. This attitude had to do with re-assessing the west in relation to its newly-exhibited others: as James Clifford has suggested, the artifacts imported from France’s colonial possessions indicated—to Breton and to other surrealists—that “culture and its norms—beauty, truth, reality” were merely “artificial

²⁶⁴ The magisterial example of analytic decoding is, of course, Lev Koblyakov, *Pierre Boulez: A World of Harmony* (Chur: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1990). See also Pascal Decroupet, “serial Organization and Beyond: Cross-Relations of Determinants in *Le Marteau sans maître* and the Pitch-Algorithm of “Constellation,”” and Erling E. Guldbrandsen, “Casting New Light on Boulezian Serialism: Unpredictability and Free Choice in the Composition of *Pli selon pli—portrait de Mallarmé*,” in Campbell and O’Hagan, eds. *Pierre Boulez Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 108-138, 193-220.

arrangements, susceptible to detached analysis and comparison with other possible dispositions.”²⁶⁵ Detached analysis and comparison were central in the emerging “ethnographic surrealist” view of cultural order—a view according to which western culture is merely an arbitrary collection of signs ready to be reconfigured and jumbled like objects on display in an ethnographic museum. We might call the surrealist mode of appropriation, then, a *symbolic* mode, since the poet was to engage with society’s signs on a second-order level of observation: fragmenting and juxtaposing verbal signifiers in order, as Breton once quipped, to widen the gaps “between the words.” Through the hodgepodge logic of the dream, Breton’s surrealism aimed to *re-appropriate* society’s signs to new expressive ends.²⁶⁶

While second-order reflection on culture and its signs was an essential aspect of the ethnographic surrealist outlook, Artaud took a different tact: the “extra-European” seems to have impelled him to intensify the first-order gut reactions one can have in the presence of performance. Artaud’s mode of appropriation might best be termed an *affective* mode on account of the emphasis he placed on bodily immediacy: he sought to plunge headlong into the unconscious abyss that Breton’s surrealism opened up “between the words.” “It is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text,” Artaud declared in his 1932 *Manifesto of the Theater of Cruelty*, “and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought.”²⁶⁷ The sound of Artaud’s voice, echoing in *Pour en finir*, gives us a sense of how this language was to work. Words *become* gesture through the act of enunciating them with sudden shouts, leaps, and screams—that is, by filling the gaps “between the words” with sound. The normative written systems of western theatre were therefore inadequate to afford the kind of expression that Artaud sought to make available. The movements and utterances of Artaud’s ideal theatre would live only for a moment, beyond what could be written and repeated from reading a script: hence, “let us leave textual criticism to graduate students, formal criticism to esthetes,” he exhorted, “and recognize that what has been said is not

²⁶⁵ James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23/4 (October 1981), 541.

²⁶⁶ By liberating the voice, surrealist automatic writing would, Breton wrote, allow “visual elements [to] take their place *between the words* without ever duplicating them.” In fact, Breton put tremendous weight on vocal sound, claiming in his 1944 essay “Silence d’or” that surrealist poets best understand the “*tonal* value of words”: “great poets have been ‘auditives,’ not visionaries.” The poet, by freeing “a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties,” would endow language with a direct communicative power that Breton curiously attributed to music. Although he famously excluded musicians from his surrealist group, claiming that music was unable to represent anything and hence was unsuitable for surrealist ends, music’s “immediate, pervading, uncriticizable communication of feeling” was nevertheless appealing. The sound of the voice moving freely like music was a medium, in Breton’s surrealism, through which an artist might resolve the states of dream and reality “into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*.” André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), 14, 23, 263-4; André Breton, “Silence d’or,” handwritten original, accessed 10 September 2020: <https://www.andrebretton.fr/work/56600100198010>.

²⁶⁷ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, translated by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 89.

still to be said; ... that all words, once spoken, are dead and function only at the moment when they are uttered." This is why "the theater is the only place in the world where a gesture, once made, can never be made the same way twice."²⁶⁸ At stake for Artaud was the contention that the culture of the west had been dominated by a theological metaphysics according to which life in the world—like the actions on a stage—are subordinate to an original presence, the Divine Word contained in the texts of the Bible, or the theatrical Word written in a phonetic script. "Cruelty" not only meant engulfing viewers in a sensory barrage—producing the kinds of visceral gestures that we can hear, for instance, when Boulez's pianist "pulverizes the sound"—but also demanded a commitment to staying as close as possible to the limit of representability.²⁶⁹ Rather than confront society at the level of its representations, Artaud dreamed of a *pure presence*, an ideal of immediacy and un-representability. Hence the Theatre of Cruelty, in Jacques Derrida's words, would be the art of "pure presence as pure difference": it would move like a language, carrying a signifying force, yet without forming iterable signs.²⁷⁰ Producing an always-renewed effect of presence, a cruel theatre would seek to elide the movement and mechanisms of re-presentation.

But, like Boulez, Artaud needed writing. As we have already seen, ethnographic reconstruction was a part of how the dramatist enacted his "pure presence," and he anticipated Boulez's own search for a new form of writing that would organize the delirium that Artaud imagined to emanate from Mexico or elsewhere. Artaud saw a vision of this new writing when he witnessed Balinese theatre at the 1931 Exposition coloniale held in the forest of Vincennes outside Paris. There, the French government hosted groups of people from Africa, Oceania, West India, and other colonies to exhibit arts, to make food and crafts—including the Oceanic artifacts that fascinated Breton—and to perform music and dance like the Balinese spectacles that Artaud witnessed, claiming that the Balinese embodied "the idea of pure theater."²⁷¹ It is unclear (to us) what Artaud actually saw at the Exposition, though he wrote of Balinese theatre as if it was a collage of ritualistic movements, song and poetry, costume and other visual elements—all appearing before his eyes as a kind of hieroglyphic writing. These "spiritual signs," he declared, "[strike] us only intuitively but with enough violence to make useless any translation into logical discursive language."²⁷² The non-phonetic writing of Artaud's ideal theatre would arrange configurations of bodies and objects, mapping out events; thus it would silence the voice of the absent author-creator, all in an endeavor to approximate the immediacy of "Chinese ideograms or Egyptian hieroglyphs." Rather than inscribe dialogue, staging directions, and the like, this writing would directly deal "with objects ... like images, like words, bringing them together and making them respond to each other."²⁷³ However, while this

²⁶⁸ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 75.

²⁶⁹ "A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle ... from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it." Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 96.

²⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Le Théâtre de la cruauté et la clôture de la représentation," from *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 363.

²⁷¹ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 61; see also Nicola Savarese, "1931: Antonin Artaud Sees Balinese Theatre at the Paris Colonial Exposition," *The Drama Review* 43/3 (2001), 51-77.

²⁷² Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 111.

²⁷³ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 54.

new non-phonetic writing would bypass the written voice of the author, it would not silence the voice of the actor. Far from it: Artaud insisted that the hieroglyph would give a new place to voice, to the real embodied voice onstage, since vocal sounds would no longer be texted, reproducible and representable. He dreamed of a radically other voice.

Boulez stood at a distance from the symbolic and affective modes of appropriation that characterized Breton's surrealism and Artaudian cruelty, but, as I have suggested, Artaud's vocal sounds continued to echo under Boulez's pen. We can hear how Boulez entextualized the "delirium" that he heard in Artaud into an abstract musical language.²⁷⁴ But while the composer aimed to produce sudden first-order gut reactions through musical violence, he also reflected—in published essays and later lectures—on the processes through which this violence would be produced. He sought a technique through which to build upon the "pure presence" of Artaudian expression, taking up Artaud's aesthetic ideal into an ideal musical writing. With the emphasis he placed on writing and structure, therefore, Boulez positioned himself as part of a lineage of French artists and intellectuals leading from the ethnographic surrealist moment of Paris's interwar years toward the mid-century, in which tremendous theoretical weight became attached to the notion that culture is written. The surrealist conviction that Beauty, Truth, and Reality are mere products of symbolic arrangements laid the groundwork, as Clifford suggested, for the "semiotic" view of cultural order that one can read, for instance, in Roland Barthes's famous claim that "everything can be a myth, provided it is conveyed by a discourse." If culture is a collection of signs, then forms of discourse—"modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity"—inevitably entwine themselves with power.²⁷⁵ Artaud, in seeking a form of vocal utterance beyond the "mythical speech" that had upheld bourgeois normativity, gave a specific privilege to sound as a vehicle of transgression—this is the kind of sound we can hear in Boulez.

Boulez's stance toward sound was imminently surrealist since it was a musical response—albeit a very abstract response—to the transgressive aesthetic put forward during the surrealist years. As Clifford wrote, "the exotic [was] a prime court of appeal against the rational, the beautiful, the normal of the West," allowing thinkers in the surrealist camp such as Georges Bataille—inheritor of a transgressive avant-garde spirit that dates back at least to Baudelaire—to deconstruct the hallowed beliefs of western culture by claiming that every cultural norm contains and conceals its obverse. Tonal harmony, on this view, is one European social myth among others, tired and two-faced: confront tonal harmony with its other—dissonance—or confront good with evil, piety with perversion, and one can see that every norm contains the seeds of its own dissolution. This valorization of transgression, in Clifford's words, "[provides] an important continuity in the ongoing relation of cultural analysis and surrealism in France." The present chapter is meant as an entryway to examine the role that music and sound played in establishing this transgressive aesthetic—an aesthetic that

²⁷⁴ Matt Sakakeeny uses the term "entextualization" to connote the process through which a composer takes 'sound' or "noise" and incorporates it into musical writing. On this view, writing allows the separation of a sound from its source "in the world," including the non-European "noise" that a composer might use as sonic fodder, and the translation of these sounds into arbitrary symbols. Matt Sakakeeny, "Music," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 114.

²⁷⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 217, 218.

links “the twenties context of surrealism proper to a later generation of radical critics.”²⁷⁶ The jumble of non-European signs presented at colonial exhibitions (and later housed in the Musée de l’Homme) not only prefigured the semiotic view of cultural order in vogue by Derrida’s day, but also suggested that new and violent sounds—“shouts, noises, and rhythmic effects”—might echo from between the cracks in western cultural meaning. By liberating a stream of speech through surrealist automatic writing, or by shouting, stuttering, and speaking in tongues, sound became “other”: that which resounds beyond the norms of pictorial and linguistic representation, “between the words.” Hence the free play of signs was not only Oriental, but was specifically sonic. This is the Artaud that Boulez found so alluring:

[B]y an altogether Oriental means of expression, this objective and concrete language of the theater can facilitate and ensnare the organs. It flows into the sensibility. Abandoning Occidental usages of speech, it turns words into incantations. It extends the voice. It utilizes the vibrations and qualities of the voice. It wildly tramples rhythms underfoot. It pile-drives sounds.... It ultimately breaks away from the intellectual subjugation of the language, by conveying the sense of a new and deeper intellectuality which hides itself beneath the gestures and signs, raised to the dignity of particular exorcisms.²⁷⁷

Ontological appropriation

In his disavowal of “ethnographic reconstruction,” we can sense that Boulez distanced himself from Artaud even as he drew inspiration from the theatre theorist. The ethnographic other was not a favorable alternative to the west for Boulez. However, as I hope to demonstrate, Artaud and Boulez each participated in the mutual construction of “the West” as opposed to “the Rest,” an opposition that undergirded each artist’s essential views about their respective media—theatre and music. Boulez’s mode of appropriation was *ontological* because he aimed to reconstruct the “hysteria” of the other at an ontological remove from any specific people or place. He whitewashed “extra-European” sounds in an endeavor to create what he called “*pure sounds*—fundamentals and natural harmonics” that could be subsumed within a musical fabric.²⁷⁸ This process of purification was always a part of Boulez’s stance toward sound, part of his own transgressive modernist aesthetic. Yet, as this section will demonstrate, the search for a new form of *écriture* tied Boulez and Artaud to a much older, and explicitly ethnocentric, philosophy of writing.

In practice, Boulez’s *écriture* was a medium to organize delirium, and in theory, too, *écriture* hinged on a distinction between individualized sound and neutral sound, itself a species of a more general dichotomy between a western self and the ethnographic other. “The more a sound has remarkable individual qualities, the less conformable it will be to other sounding phenomena,”

²⁷⁶ Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” 546.

²⁷⁷ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 91.

²⁷⁸ Pierre Boulez, “Pierre Boulez’s introduction to Sonatas and Interludes for prepared piano by John Cage at Suzanne Tézenas’s salon,” from *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, trans. Robert Samuels (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 28.

instead “[preserving] its own individual profile,” stated Boulez in a 1994 lecture at the Collège de France.²⁷⁹ In this he echoed a trope that he had voiced much earlier in a 1949 preface to John Cage’s *Sonatas and Interludes*. Expressing a deep respect for Cage’s use of “non-tempered sound spaces” as well as “sound complexes” in his experiments with the prepared piano, Boulez nevertheless suggested (rather subtly at the time) that his American correspondent was barking up the wrong tree.²⁸⁰ Cage did not produce pure sound, relying instead on the individualized characteristics of sounds made from placing bits of metal, screws, and paper clips amid the piano strings. This endeavor, inspiring and fresh though it was for the young Boulez, ultimately constituted a regression in musical thinking. In a 1972 conversation with Célestin Deliège well after Boulez and Cage parted ways, Boulez aligned Cage’s use of individualized sounds with the twanging and buzzing of the African sanza (or mbira). “In the music of some African peoples (not the most highly-developed from the musical point of view) we find an instrument, the sanza, that has vibrating blades [which] could make up a neutral universe—they form a scale that is fixed and modal, as all African scales are.”²⁸¹ Without the mutes and resonant rings that mbira players attach to the vibrating blades, the sounds of the blades “could” be neutral, just as the notes of a piano are neutral before a composer inserts debris between the strings.

Boulez’s mention of an African instrument bespeaks the composer’s interest in non-European instruments, an interest that he developed early in his musical life as he honed his compositional skills by transcribing musics from outside Europe—a practice that undoubtedly informed Boulez’s view of individualized versus neutral sound. During the summer of 1945, while a student at the Paris Conservatoire, Boulez heard Balinese music in a class with Olivier Messiaen, and as he would later account, “dreamed, for a moment, of specializing in musicology: not in the study of texts, but in ethnomusicological investigation in connection with a department of the Musée de l’Homme or the Musée Guimet.”²⁸² This was not just a dream: after listening to discs of various non-European musics, Boulez planned to go on an ethnological expedition to Cambodia and Laos hosted by the Musée Guimet in 1946, a voyage quickly cancelled as the First Indochina War broke out that winter.²⁸³ In preparation, however, Boulez transcribed various songs including a “Laotian song of

²⁷⁹ Pierre Boulez, “Le Concept d’écriture,” in *Leçons de musique (Points de repère III): Deux décennies d’enseignement au Collège de France (1976-1995)*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez and Jonathan Goldman (Paris: Christian Bourgeois Éditeur, 2005), 559.

²⁸⁰ Pierre Boulez, “Pierre Boulez’s introduction to *Sonatas and Interludes*,” 27-28.

²⁸¹ Pierre Boulez, *Conversations with Célestin Deliège* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1976), 118.

²⁸² Pierre Boulez, from an unpublished interview with Sylvie de Nussac, quoted in Luisa Bassetto, “Ritratto del compositore come apprendista etnologo: Pierre Boulez prima dell’incontro con André Schaeffner,” *Musicalia* 7 (2010), 62. Regarding the Balinese music he heard with Messiaen: “it was the ... quality and resonance of the sonority, the speed of play, and the conception of time over long periodicities,” with “the tam-tam [marking] the time at very long intervals while others played much more quickly,” Boulez wrote, that fascinated him most. Pierre Boulez, “La tradition écartelée: un entretien de Phillippe Albèra avec Pierre Boulez,” *Dissonance* 62 (1999), 11.

²⁸³ See “Chef de musique chez Renault-Barrault” in Christian Merlin, *Pierre Boulez* (Paris: Fayard, 2019).

possession” for two voices.²⁸⁴ This was an ethnographic reconstruction in the most literal sense: according to Luisa Bassetto, the composer likely jotted down this song—as well as others from Cambodia and Cameroon—quite quickly, perhaps as part of a dictation test prior to the ethnographic voyage.²⁸⁵ Transcriptions like these are precisely what the Boulez of 1947 would renounce as Artaud’s voice rang in his ears. Simply reconstructing (i.e. transcribing) the sounds of “extra-European” ritual or spiritual practice did not go far enough for the restive composer, who ultimately did not seek ethnomusicological knowledge for its own sake, but rather for the sake of expanding the timbral and rhythmic possibilities available in new music.

Boulez adopted (by default) a Eurocentric view according to which musical writing allows for a level of abstraction and sophistication unknown in cultures that lack a written musical system, and his transcriptions of these songs give us a hint about what neutral sound came to mean for him. While the recordings housed in ethnographic collections—including those of André Schaeffner, whom Boulez would meet in 1949 and with whom he would correspond for nearly two decades—exerted a particular allure for the composer, he was most interested in exploring what a song of spirit possession might become through the act of transcribing it and studying its written form. While Cage (from Boulez’s standpoint, anyway) perhaps would have believed that the specific characteristics of sounds—Laotian or otherwise—were interesting enough on their own, Boulez felt that merely letting sound be sound (to paraphrase a well-worn Cage-ism) was inadequate. Sound had to pass through the medium of *écriture*—Boulez’s medium—to truly become music. There is perhaps no better summation of Boulez’s take on the difference between his and Cage’s approaches to sounds—and, for our purposes, of Boulez’s own sense of the difference between individual and neutral sounds—than his statement in the 1949 Cage essay: “Noise does indeed have a very great immediate physical effect, but utilizing this is dangerous, since its novelty rapidly wears off.”²⁸⁶ Noise can strike us powerfully, but only so many times. Buzzing and twanging are insufficient. In order to preserve the immediate physical effect of noise, perhaps to base a musical language on its visceral presence, a composer must put sound through *écriture*.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁴ Among Boulez’s papers housed in the Paul Sacher Foundation, Bassetto found four handwritten transcriptions of songs as well as seven typewritten sheets that contain notes, transcriptions and analyses of traditional Cambodian songs and texts. “It is conceivable,” she writes, “that all these notes and transcriptions were taken very quickly, probably under dictation and during a session of listening to recordings (perhaps a selective transcription test given to group of candidates for the mission to Cambodia).” Bassetto, “Ritratto del compositore come apprendista etnologo,” 63.

²⁸⁵ These documents, as Bassetto demonstrates, not only attest to the young composer’s profoundly precise ears, but also “testify more generally to the state of ethnomusicological training in France after the Second World War,” indicating that sound documentation had a colonialist origin. Bassetto, “Ritratto del compositore come apprendista etnologo,” 63.

²⁸⁶ Boulez, “Pierre Boulez’s introduction to Sonatas and Interludes,” 29.

²⁸⁷ “There is no gesture for Boulez without *écriture*,” writes Goldman, “which is the medium of musical discourse and the mediation between the idea and realized sound. Without *écriture*, there is no access to the musical as such, but only to the sonorous.” Goldman, *The Musical Language of Pierre Boulez*, 57.

For Boulez, Cage's approach to sound was not only mistaken; it was primitive. "In that kind of musical civilization"—Africa—"and with an instrument of this sort"—the mbira—"the procedure has every justification": *those civilizations are simple.*²⁸⁸ But it would be unjust and "contrary to the entire evolution of music" for a European composer "to delimit an instrument within highly typical and individualized characteristics, since we are moving more and more in the direction of relativity," that is, toward rendering sound neutral.²⁸⁹ Only neutral sounds can be subsumed into a broader texture, allowing their "true" individuality to ring.

Of course, Boulez's specific approach to sound evolved: the violent gestural language of the *Deuxième sonate*, the system of total serialism through which Boulez composed *Structures I* (1952), and the computers in use at IRCAM two decades later, represent different moments in Boulez's development—he was always on the move. Yet, despite the various approaches that Boulez cultivated, his essential view of sound and writing seems not to have changed throughout his career. "Neutral" or "pure" sound was an enduring conceit, and since sound can only be "neutral" once it is written—that is, once it passes through *écriture*—neutral sound is only accessible to a western composer whereas unwritten "extra-European" sounds are always "individualized." The term *écriture*, therefore, not only connotes a compositional method—which may change through time—but also, more fundamentally, encompasses a philosophical view of writing premised on the difference, formally and ideologically, between individual (primitive) and neutral (written) sound. Like one of his early influences, Boris de Schloezer, Boulez believed that *écriture* allowed for an idealization of sound that was impossible, once again, in cultures that lack a written language. The same year he heard Artaud at the Galerie Loeb, Boulez studied Schloezer's newly-published *Introduction à J.-S. Bach* (1947), in which the musicologist, anticipating Boulez's own attitude toward the mbira, claimed that non-western musical cultures were limited to the material conditions of their instruments. "The essential characteristic of the space elaborated by western musical culture," Schloezer trumpeted, "is its total independence from sonorous material."²⁹⁰ Though these remarks come in the context of a work devoted to Bach, at this moment of the text Schloezer's argument becomes broad and sweeping, having more to do with an essential view of western versus non-western musical systems than with any specific composer. Through the medium of writing, a composer takes a sound as a "number," not as a material element, amounting to a "dematerialization" of the sound space.²⁹¹

It is through Schloezer's affirmation of the western composer's writerly authority—his claim that the "creative act of the artist is to embody this number, to charge it with a certain reality, to confer a qualitative value upon it"—that we can hear the echoes of an earlier philosophy of writing. By affirming that western phonetic writing is the *Aufhebung* or "sublation" of non-western forms of

²⁸⁸ Boulez, *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*, 118. Emphasis added.

²⁸⁹ Boulez, *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*, 118.

²⁹⁰ "La caractéristique essentielle de l'espace élaboré par la culture musical occidentale, c'est son entière indépendance à l'égard de matériel sonore." Boris de Schloezer, *Introduction à J.-S. Bach* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 168.

²⁹¹ "These innovations, these discoveries, these adventures, which belong to western musical culture" as it developed from the classical tradition through Schoenberg and dodecaphonicism, "were and are only possible by virtue of what I would like to call the "dematerialization" of the sound space: the element of our field of action is no longer the sound of the drum or of the bagpipe; it is a number, the term of quantitative relations." Schloezer, *Introduction à J.-S. Bach*, 169.

writing, G.W.F. Hegel performed the kind of “dematerialization” that characterized Schloezer’s notion of the western sound space. “Intelligence expresses itself immediately and unconditionally through speech,” Hegel proclaimed, affirming that hieroglyphic or pictographic scripts are merely material.²⁹² A pictogram creates meaning through the physical trace of a word, whereas phonetic writing activates the medium of voice, floating free of materiality.

Even as Artaud disdained the metaphysics of phonetic writing, he still relied implicitly on this metaphysics. According to this metaphysics—which Derrida famously termed *logocentrism*—the presence of voice, of vocal sound, grants western forms of writing a privileged ontological status.²⁹³ Though Artaud sought, in his own theory of the theatre, to disavow the representational norms of theatrical writing in “the West” (as he construed it), the theatre theorist’s dream of a “hieroglyphic” writing hinged on the same East-West dualism that Derrida found in Hegel’s philosophy. And even though Boulez’s own musical writing was never, strictly speaking, “phonetic,” *écriture* was his vehicle to subsume expressions drawn from sources outside of European. Thus the distance between “us” and “them,” between “the West” and the rest, was not only affirmed but also served as a basic premise of Boulez’s musical language through the various stages of his development. To hear how Boulez “dematerialized” the sounds of Europe’s others in a slightly later phase, let us follow him to South America with the Compagnie Renaud-Barrault. In the period following his early encounter with Artaud, Boulez’s lifelong quest for “pure” or neutral sound took shape as he heard the percussion of Afro-Bahian ritual, sounds that fueled his endeavor, as he later put it, to “absorb” non-European sounds into the abstract and ideal space of western music.

“A magical Greece”: Bahian ritual in *Le Marteau sans maître*

[This], for me, is very important: that we absorb other cultures not only by their content, but also by the way they are transmitted through sound.

- Boulez, from a late interview²⁹⁴

As the musical director of the Compagnie Renaud-Barrault (from approximately 1946-1956), Boulez encountered many “extra-European” sounds. “I am already back at work on *Le ‘Marteau sans maître,’*” he wrote to Stockhausen in August 1954 while on a boat from Brazil to Dakar.²⁹⁵ “I’ve

²⁹² “What writing betrays, in its nonphonetic moment, is life,” wrote Derrida to sum up Hegel’s view, claiming that “*Aufhebung* is, more or less implicitly, the dominant concept of nearly all histories of writing” following Hegel, “still today”—in 1965. Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 39.

²⁹³ Derrida famously argued that the “the metaphysics of phonetic writing ... had only been ... the most original and powerful ethnocentrism, in the process of imposing itself today over the planet.” Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 11; Cf. Fann, *This Self We Deserve*, 23-24.

²⁹⁴ Pierre Boulez, “Pierre Boulez talks about his music,” U-E Interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ie5Ore2rjkh> (accessed 2 August 2020)

²⁹⁵ Pierre Boulez, quoted in Edward Campbell, “Pierre Boulez: Composer, Traveller, Correspondent,” in *Pierre Boulez Studies*, 17.

brought back a haul of “exotic” instruments: wooden bells, double bells made of iron [‘cloches doubles en fer’], Indian flute, little Indian guitar, frame drum, bells [‘grelots’], Jew’s harp [‘birimbao’] (a very curious instrument from Bahia, but of African origin).²⁹⁶ This curious collection supports Boulez’s admission that the timbral palette of *Le Marteau sans maître* derived from sources beyond the borders of Europe, but the connection between *Le Marteau* and Brazil goes a step further. While visiting Bahia during the Compagnie’s tours of 1950 and 1954, Boulez and Barrault witnessed spiritual rituals that the composer dismissed as “ineffectual rites and cults” and that the actor championed as expressions of the essence of Greek tragedy.²⁹⁷ “I saw macumba,” Boulez stated—a term that refers to many varieties of Afro-Brazilian magico-ritual practice.²⁹⁸ “Some absolutely incredible things occurred,” he continued: “I remember now, for example, that there was a black man who weighed at least 110 kilos, huge”; after entering trance, “he spun like a spinning top, very quickly,” and while “all of this ... seemed very dangerous and violent at times, it ultimately was not at all, since you have kids from four- or five-years old in the middle of it all.”²⁹⁹ What Boulez and Barrault likely saw in Bahia was a Candomblé *xirê* or “liturgy.” The term Candomblé connotes

²⁹⁶ Boulez, in Campbell, “Pierre Boulez: Composer, Traveller, Correspondent,” 17. Joseph Salem incorrectly attributes Boulez’s words to a letter to Schaeffner—this passage, also quoted by Robert Piencikowski, was for Stockhausen. Alas, there is no evidence (yet?) that Boulez discussed the instruments he found in South America with Schaeffner, although their correspondence does allude to the South American trip and demonstrates Boulez’s fascination with the non-western instruments housed in the Musée de l’Homme. I agree with Salem’s conviction that Boulez’s endeavor to collect instruments “[confirms] both the ethnomusicological influence of his mentor [Schaeffner] and the source of new percussive combinations in both *Le Marteau* and *L’Orestie*.” Joseph Salem, “Boulez’s *Künstlerroman*: Using *blocs sonores* to Overcome Anxieties and Influence in *Le Marteau sans maître*,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71/1 (2018), 135-6; Robert Piencikowski, “Between the Text and the Margin: Varèse and Pierre Boulez, 1952-1965,” from Felix Meyer and Heidy Zimmermann, eds. *Edgard Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2006), 384 n. 16; Pierre Boulez and André Schaeffner, *Correspondance 1954-1970*, ed. Rosângela Pereira de Tugny (Paris: Fayard, 1998), see esp. 35 and 49-53.

²⁹⁷ Boulez’s words about the ineffectual rites and cults are quoted from Campbell, “Pierre Boulez: Composer, Traveller, Correspondent,” 7; Jean-Louis Barrault, *Nouvelles réflexions sur le théâtre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1959).

²⁹⁸ Pierre Boulez, personal communication with Rosângela Pereira de Tugny, in Pierre Boulez and André Schaeffner, *Correspondance 1954-1970*, ed. Rosângela Pereira de Tugny (Paris: Fayard, 1998), 52-53 n. 1; Kelly E. Hayes, “Black Magic and the Academy: Macumba and Afro-Brazilian “Orthodoxies,” *History of Religions* 46/4 (2007), 284.

²⁹⁹ “Et quand les gens entrent en transe, il y a des choses tout à fait incroyables. Je me souviens maintenant qu’il y avait par exemple un Noir qui pesait au moins 110 kilos, énorme; il tournait comme toupie sur lui-même, très vite.... Ce qui est le comble c’est que tout ça qui paraissait très dangereux et violent par moments, ne l’était finalement pas du tout, puisque vous avez des gosses de quatre ou cinq ans qui circulaient au milieu de tout ça.” Boulez, from Schaeffner, *Correspondance 1954-1970*, 52-53.

various religious practices of West African origin.³⁰⁰ Once imported to Brazil beginning in the early nineteenth century, Candomblé became a complex syncretism of African and Catholic beliefs—still today, Yoruba and Fon deities (*orixás*) are often idolized as Catholic saints. In a later interview with O'Hagan, Boulez expressed awe at the percussion of the public Candomblé ceremony he witnessed, much like Barrault, who, in his 1959 *Nouvelles réflexions sur le théâtre*, described his obsession with the Candomblé after witnessing a man spinning about in trance.³⁰¹

The manner in which a being, whether black or Indian, suddenly finds himself struggling as the Spirit is transmitted to him; the manner in which the medium, after transmitting the Spirit to him, follows alongside this being; the manner in which trances are developed; the “purified” calm that follows; the ritual of these nocturnal ceremonies—all of this struck me, and, so to speak, bound me to these mysterious and endearing people.³⁰²

It may seem outlandish to suggest that any part of *Le Marteau sans Maître*, a monolith of autonomous modern music, was in fact modelled after a Candomblé liturgy. While Boulez did not explicitly cite the Candomblé as a source for *Le Marteau*, by examining the “Commentaire I de « Bourreaux de solitude »” alongside Barrault’s account, we perhaps discern traces of spirit possession taking musical form.³⁰³ Boulez finished the “Commentaire” in South America, mailing the first completed draft to his publisher, Universal Edition, during the 1954 tour³⁰⁴—and he had already witnessed Candomblé at least once (if not several times) by this point. The poetic arc of the

³⁰⁰ These practices of worship took new form in Bahia after the Portuguese imported Nagô slaves from (what is now) the Republic of Benin to Brazil after 1817—hence Candomblé, a more recent import, is often considered by scholars and by practitioners as a more authentically African form of worship. Gerard Béhague, “Patterns of Candomblé Music Performance: An Afro-Brazilian Religious Setting,” in *Performance Practice: Ethnomusicological Perspectives*, ed. Gerard Béhague (Westport, CT, and London, UK: Greenwood Press, 1984), 223; Robert A. Voeks, *Sacred Leaves of Candomblé: African Magic, Medicine, and Religion in Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 41 and 69-114; see also Stephen Selka, “Mediated Authenticity: Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Brazilian Candomblé,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 11/1 (2007), 5-30.

³⁰¹ O'Hagan, *Pierre Boulez and the Piano*, 330-331. “In the course of our tours,” Barrault wrote, “we had the occasion to attend occult seances, particularly in Brazil: macumbas, more or less authentic, and candomblé. I was literally seized by these popular demonstrations, which came from Africa, and whenever the exhausting work of our rehearsals, our public representations and official visits, would allow, I gathered as much material about these rituals as possible to understand the essence of these rites, to capture their significance.” Barrault, *Nouvelles réflexions*, 86.

³⁰² Barrault, *Nouvelles réflexions*, 86.

³⁰³ I wish to thank Carol A. Hess for her comments and questions regarding an earlier conference paper version of this essay, and particularly for introducing me to Gerard Béhague’s work, *Orfeu Negro*, and literature about Candomblé.

³⁰⁴ Pascal Decroupet, “Introduction” to Pierre Boulez, *Le Marteau sans maître: Fac-similé de l'épure et de la première mise au net de la partition* (Basel: Paul Sacher Foundation, 2005), 46.

“Commentaire” follows that of the Candomblé *xirê*—or, at least, seems to follow the “ethnographic reconstruction” of a *xirê* that one can read in Barrault’s *Nouvelles réflexions*, or see in another contemporaneous source, director Marcel Camus’s film *Orfeu Negro* (1959). While Barrault and Camus each turned the Candomblé liturgy into an allegory for a kind of timeless (but ultimately western) spirituality, Boulez relocated the allegory from the level of representation to the level of sound, employing what might be called *sonic allegory*. Of course *Le Marteau* does not ‘sound like Brazil’; of course it is not a literal reconstruction. Boulez neither cited Aeschylus (like Barrault) nor the story of Orpheus (like Camus): instead, I suggest that Boulez’s sounds became infused with mythical presence through an allegorical use of the Candomblé.

Figures of the Candomblé liturgy described in ethnographic sources align with the principal characters in Barrault’s account. In his *Nouvelles réflexions*, Barrault describes entering a large gymnasium and watching a group of white-clothed initiates walk together toward their *pai de santo*, the main priest.³⁰⁵ Accompanied by the regular beat of a drum—presumably played by the master drummer, or *alabé*—the practitioners gather before their priest, who is seated next to an altar scattered with Catholic relics and a large statue of Christ. “The glance of the priest and his smile,” writes Barrault, “the huge Christ’s sorrow dominating the table, and the pervasive scent of the incense gave an unusual touch to this small-town cocktail-party.”³⁰⁶

The liturgy that Barrault describes unfolds with a specific pacing and a gradual increase in intensity—a kind of dramatic arc reminiscent of Boulez’s “Commentaire.” The opening bars produce a similarly meditative mood, complete with a subdued processional rhythm.

³⁰⁵ Béhague, “Patterns of Candomblé Music Performance,” 228.

³⁰⁶ “Il y a bien le regard du prêtre et son sourire, ce grand Christ suspendu, son agonie braquée sur la table, et la fumée enveloppante de l’encens, qui donnent un côté insolite à cette sorte de cocktail-party de petite mairie de campagne.” Barrault, *Nouvelles réflexions*, 87.

II

commentaire I de «bourreaux de solitude»

Lent (♩ = 120)***)
 Tempo rigoureusement exact jusqu'à l'indication contraire
 Les nuances seront exécutées «ponctuellement»
 Toutes les sonorités très équilibrées entre elles

Flûte en sol
 Xylorimba
 Tambour sur cadre
 Alto avec sourdine

*) L'Alto pose l'archet pour jouer cette pièce

Figure 25. Opening of “Commentaire I de «Bourreaux de Solitude»”.

Warming up with three leaps of a flute, a xylorimba and pizzicato viola playing short percussive attacks, the “Commentaire” is a rhythmically layered fabric supported by the irregular accents of a frame drum (like the one that Boulez brought home from Brazil). The score partakes of the cryptographic sublime: with many changing time signatures, the music seems to conceal an underlying order. Even without cracking the Boulez code, though, we can hear that the “Commentaire” shares a basic rhythmic feature with the Candomblé: a regular pulse—notated with vertical lines in the score—which will undergird a longer unfolding progression.

In Barrault’s account, the regular drum rhythms accompany the practitioners as they sing a “canticle,” and then, during an interval of silence, the main priest and practitioners begin smoking “cigars ... that stimulate hallucination.”³⁰⁷ This moment of silence is crucial to the overall narrative arc of the ritual that Barrault describes, just as the insertion of a fermata one third of the way through the “Commentaire” prepares ground for the tumultuous section to follow:

³⁰⁷ Barrault, *Nouvelles réflexions*, 87.

50

molto rit.

mp p mp mp p mp ppp

pp pp p pp p pp pp

mp pp mp pp mp pp

p pp pp pp p p pp

2/4 | 9/16 Δ Δ Δ 6/16 Δ (long) 3/16

enlever la sourdine

Figure 26. A fermata ends the first section.

During the lull, as Barrault accounts, a medium elected by the high priest—perhaps the *babakekerê* or *pai pequeño* (“little priest”)—begins to walk among the initiates. The drums start again; the practitioners sing; the medium wanders among them; and as the canticle becomes more intense, finally the medium provokes ecstasy. “All of a sudden one of the choir singers was electrocuted by the medium. Like a wounded man he bent forward and moved inside the circle.”³⁰⁸ Following the motions of this initiate, Barrault begins to insert vocal utterances drawn from a much different source. “Let us follow the ‘wounded’ man. At first the others do not notice him.... He looks surprised: ‘O to to toï.’ Something like a burning arrow has stuck in the middle of his heart,” and with a grimace of pain, he cries “*Popoï da!*”³⁰⁹ This “wounded man” begins to writhe, his movements

reminiscent of sex or of nausea, of carnal trembling or of vomitous expulsing: his mouth is twisted, his eyes bulging out. “*Apollo! Apollo!*” He begins to whirl round like a top ... his face is completely deformed He sometimes seems to be in contact with the Spirit who clings to his neck and speaks to him; he lifts his eyelids and eyebrows to ask: “*Apollo, god of voyages, where are you leading me?*”³¹⁰

³⁰⁸ Barrault, *Nouvelles réflexions*, 87.

³⁰⁹ “Suivons l’homme « blessé ». Pour l’instant, les autres ne s’occupent pas de lui.... Il a l’air surpris. « O to to toï. » Quelque chose comme une pointe de flèche l’a atteint au sternum.... Il grimace de la douleur. « *Popoï da!* ».” Barrault, *Nouvelles réflexions*, 88.

³¹⁰ “Voici à présent quatre ou cinq secondes trépidantes, rappelant ou la fornication ou le vomissement, la secousse sexuelle ou un refus exacerbé: sa bouche se déforme, se yeux lui sortent de la tête. « *Apollon! Apollon!* » Il semble parfois en contact avec l’Esprit qui s’accroche à sa nuque et lui parle; alors il soulève ses paupières et ses sourcils en signe d’interrogation: « *Apollon, dieu des routes, où m’as-tu donc conduit?* ».” Barrault, *Nouvelles réflexions*, 88-89.

After the fermata, an increase in tempo accompanies an intensification in timbre as the next section of the “Commentaire” commences. The xylorimba player switches to hard mallets and the tambour player to four bongos. Boulez notates the pulse with triangles and brackets rather than vertical lines—pulse areas rather than distinct beats—and he inserts momentary pauses: we can imagine the wounded man bending to the side for a moment before the spasms continue.

Rapide, irrégulier et heurté (♩ = 96)
(♩ = 64)

Commencer un peu au dessous du mouvement et accélérer jusqu'au Tempo ♩ = 96
(♩ = 116) (♩ = 176) ♩ = 96

Laisser les sonorités sans équilibre; l'échelle des dynamiques du Xylophone différente de celle de l'Alto

54 baguettes dures

Xyl.

Bongos *) S A T B baguettes de caisse claire plus lourdes

Alto sans sourd.

*) accorder les bongos très aigu et très près les uns des autres

Figure 27. A more intense section erupts after the fermata.

The “Commentaire” eventually calms, the original tempo returning as the bongo player switches back to the tambour; then decrescendo; then lull to a quiet end. It is the intensification midway through this movement, and the subsequent thrashing, jolting rhythms, that betray Boulez’s ethnographic source. “The *candomblé* was ... most impressive,” he recounted, presenting “a mixture of sound: the excitement of the percussion, and then ... a calm moment, ... always with voice—the contrast between percussion-voice, like psalms.”³¹¹ The four instrumental voices in the “Commentaire” mirror the four main percussion voices in the *xirê*: the smallest drum (the *lê*), the middle-sized *rumpi*, and the bell (*agogô*) repeat their own distinctive patterns, while the largest drum, the *rum*, organizes the choreography. The *rum* player, according to Gerard Béhague, spurs practitioners to trance through techniques of *dobrar*—or diminution, “doubling” the frequency of repetitions—and *virar*, abruptly shifting to denser rhythmic patterns.³¹² The intensification midway through the “Commentaire,” a kind of *virar* spurred as the tambour player switches to bongos and as the tempo increases, echoes the kind of rhythmic diminution and timbral intensification through which *Candomblé* drummers thrust practitioners into bouts of *santo bruto*—or “wild god,” an especially exuberant form of spirit possession.

³¹¹ Boulez, quoted in O’Hagan, *Pierre Boulez and the Piano*, 331.

³¹² Béhague, “Patterns of *Candomblé* Music Performance,” 232.

This moment of spirit possession seems to pose certain questions of an anthropological bent about the Candomblé as a performed event (what is going on? how do practitioners understand what is happening?) and about the Candomblé's authenticity (does a practitioner really enter the trance state? does a god really possess him?). In the state of "wild god," Béhague continues, initiates appear to become "horses of the deities" (*exin orixá*). The "thought-image" of a particular deity comes down and "mounts" the devotee who enters *santo bruto*; through a divination game, the main priest interprets these acts of spirit possession to determine which *orixá* has mounted the initiate, who henceforth devotes him or (more often) herself to this deity.³¹³ Boulez's observation that the *xiré* "seemed very dangerous and violent at times" but "ultimately was not at all," since children walk among the practitioners, had implications that the composer may not have intended. Candomblé is itself a kind of reconstruction, a deliberate and consciously practiced performance through which practitioners can enter another state of awareness, but always with an element of control. *Santo bruto* allows the illusion, as David Graeber has written with reference to certain African fetishes, that the apparent magic one witnesses is *both* a farce *and* an authentic spiritual transformation. Both positions seem to coexist, however impossibly: that the Candomblé is "mere show"—a god does not "really" mount its devotee—and that *santo bruto* is a genuine process of becoming. The writhing body is both an actor and also a god "in the process of construction."³¹⁴

The seeming or real presence of gods—depending on one's perspective—has allowed the Candomblé to become an allegory for various kinds of spiritual experience. In Barrault's account, it became an allegory for an originally western theatrical essence, the "wounded man" embodying the spirit of Aeschylus's medium, Cassandra. In 1954 the Compagnie Renaud-Barrault adapted the Aeschylus trilogy *Oresteia*, a production for which Boulez, eagerly at work on *Le Marteau*, would provide music. In Cassandra's opening utterance of the *Agamemnon*, "Ototoi popoi da; Apollo, Apollo!" unintelligible, foreign syllables burst from her lungs as a choir sings, much as the Bahian chorus accompanies the wounded man's spasms. She calls out to Apollo as she prophesies Agamemnon's impending murder, soon to die with him. While sketches of the Compagnie's production, *L'Orestie*, are scarce, and Boulez's music is incomplete and no longer performed, I wonder if Cassandra's ecstasies found their way into *Le Marteau*. According to his and Barrault's plan for the production, Cassandra's prophecy was to be accompanied by an extended percussion passage (in place of Aeschylus's choir), and one can imagine that this music would have sounded a lot like the "Commentaire."³¹⁵

In any case, Barrault whitewashed the Candomblé as an expression of primordial Greekness. His account concludes with a vignette of himself, back home in Paris. He pulls his copy of Aeschylus's tragedy off the shelf and re-imagines Cassandra's prophetic bouts of hysteria as if she were a Bahian native, believing that the nameless wounded man's cries and spasms revealed a pure and timeless "true life."³¹⁶ A narcissistic projection indeed, the Bahian ritual reflected for Barrault a deeper Self through the fantasy of the Other: "not something erudite, not the famous Greek

³¹³ Béhague, "Patterns of Candomblé Music Performance," 231.

³¹⁴ David Graeber, "Fetishism as Social Creativity; or, Fetishes are gods in the process of construction," *Anthropological Theory* 5/4 (2005), 407-438.

³¹⁵ Peter O'Hagan, "Pierre Boulez and the Project of 'L'Orestie,'" *Tempo* 61/241 (2007), 45-46.

³¹⁶ Barrault, *Nouvelles réflexions*, 90.

harmony of our grammar schools, not the Greece of bleached statues, but an archaic, juicy, human, anguished Greece in constant contact with the mystery of life: a magical Greece.”³¹⁷

Barrault was not alone in viewing the Candomblé as an allegory for a magical Greece. In Camus’s *Orfeu Negro*, released the same year as Barrault’s *Nouvelles réflexions*, the Candomblé becomes a moment in Orpheus’s journey to the underworld to find the soul of Eurydice. Set in the mid-twentieth-century slums of Bahia, and featuring Orpheus (played by Breno Mello) as a black guitarist ready to play at the carnival, *Orfeu Negro* depicts the Candomblé as an authentic expression of contact between the living and the dead. The gold-clothed Orpheus attends a liturgy led by a cigar-smoking main priest, and which features both an altar to Christ and a circle dance in which a female practitioner becomes possessed, writing and screaming. The Macumba scene culminates as Eurydice’s spirit takes possession of an elderly woman standing behind Orpheus: Eurydice’s acousmatic voice begs him not to turn around, and when he inevitably does and sees only an elderly woman, the voice bids Orpheus farewell forever.

Boulez never credited the Candomblé as an explicit influence on *Le Marteau*, and never would have stooped to the “simple ethnographic reconstructions” that we can read in Barrault’s *Réflexions* or see in Camus’s film. To take the Boulez of 1954 at his word would mean believing that the Candomblé had hardly made an impression on him. The natives exhibited “some impressive hysterical states,” the composer wrote to Pierre Souvtchinsky, “but the rites and cults ... addressed to God, to the devil, to the phallus or to the virgin, are always ineffectual rites and cults for their own ends.” It is conspicuous that Boulez, at this stage of his development, distanced himself from Artaud— “I am more and more convinced that Artaud was on completely the wrong track.” He dismissed the rituals for much the same reason that he dismissed Catholicism (which he must have seen reflected in the Candomblé): worshipping God or the devil, the virgin or the phallus is “ineffectual,” in his words, since “hysteria [is] one of the most passive states.”³¹⁸ To “reconstruct” hysteria in the manner of Artaud’s *Pour en finir*, from this perspective, would be to aspire to a “passive state,” while Boulez sought something more active and also more abstract, musically removed from Bahia. To “organize delirium” means to consciously create it, to *write* presence.

The accents of Boulez’s frame drum, unlike a Candomblé bell pattern, are irregular, hardly an ostinato; the voice of Boulez’s flute is neither repetitive nor diatonic in the manner of a Candomblé vocal melody. Yet this is Boulez’s composerly conjuring trick. The rhythmic character of the “Commentaire” mirrors that of the *xirê*: starting with a regular pulse interspersed with accents, Boulez follows the poetic arc through which a practitioner, guided by rhythmic and timbral intensification, enters another state of being. He wrote this being into music. Barrault’s all-too-obvious allegorization of Candomblé as “a magical Greece” is, I suggest, an apt analogy for Boulez’s own (more covert) appropriation: sound itself became a kind of redemptive western allegory through which Boulez affirmed the mysterious power, the elemental force, of sound.³¹⁹ Even in Béhague’s

³¹⁷ “Non quelque chose d’érudit, non cette fameuse harmonie grecque de nos lycées, non la Grèce de ces statues décolorées, mais une Grèce archaïque, juteuse, humaine, angoissée et en contact avec le mystère de la vie: une Grèce magique.” Barrault, *Nouvelles réflexions*, 90.

³¹⁸ Boulez, quoted in Campbell, “Pierre Boulez: Composer, Traveller, Correspondent,” 7.

³¹⁹ A kind of allegorizing often occurs, as Clifford contended, as a staple of ethnographic writing: moments of radical alterity become markers of a human condition beyond a specific instance, ultimately a way to universalize the human condition. “Ethnographic texts are inescapably

ethnographic account, the power that music can seem to wield over Candomblé practitioners becomes an oblique allegory for musical autonomy. “The immediate call to possession,” he stated, “comes from the music itself.”³²⁰ Music wields its own mysterious powers: the effects of the Candomblé drums become an allegory for the immediate spiritual power of *the music itself*, a tacit acknowledgment of the autonomy of musical aesthetics. And “the music itself” was the site of Boulez’s own allegorizing.

Musicology has encountered this situation before. Boulez appropriated an originally spiritual form without its original spirituality, a bid for musical purity along the lines of Igor Stravinsky’s disavowal of his own ethnographic sources. The mythic power of a springtime rite becomes relocated, through a composer’s disavowal of “extra-musical” influences, into the autonomous space of music. Debunking this modernist myth of “the music itself,” Richard Taruskin cited the many folk songs that Stravinsky wrote into *Le Sacre du printemps*, and demonstrated that Stravinsky invoked the poetics of the rite—whether a virgin sacrifice or the wedding depicted in *Les Noces*—to convey a primitive immediacy of consciousness. For Taruskin, Stravinsky’s autonomous music was an endeavor to embody in musical form a Eurasianist dream of a united Russian spirit and Russian land between Asia and Europe. It was a land floating somewhere in the music itself.³²¹

For Boulez, too, the primitive state evoked by a rite beckoned toward a sonic utopia, but this utopia was even less worldly. He did not call for a new national consciousness, nor did he imagine that the sounds of the ethnographic other could uncover a more original or more ideal political reality. Instead, his effort to forge the essence of the other’s hysteria without representing a specific “other” reflected perhaps the oldest, purest, and quintessentially western philosophical dream: ontology.

Conclusion: To have done with the judgement of Ontology

... in its closure, it is *fatal* that representation continues.
- Derrida³²²

There is perhaps no better term for Greek essence than ontology. “A Greek invention first of all,” to quote Derrida, the term refers to a discourse (*logos*) about being (*on*), premised on an ontological difference between particular things of the world and their metaphysical ground.³²³ Drawing from

allegorical,” he wrote, claiming that “the very activity of ethnographic *writing*—seen as inscription or textualization—enacts a redemptive Western allegory.” James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 99.

³²⁰ Béhague, “Patterns of Candomblé Music Performance,” 229.

³²¹ Richard Taruskin, “Russian Folk Melodies in ‘The Rite of Spring,’” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 33/3 (1980), 501-543; *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1997), esp. 589-430, 460-465.

³²² Derrida, *L’Écriture et la différence*, 368.

³²³ Ning Zhang, “Interview with Jacques Derrida: The Western Question of ‘Forgiveness’ and the Intercultural Relation,” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 12/1 (2020), 14.

Heidegger, Derrida held that ontology presupposes a difference between “*seiend* (being in English, *étant* in French, *ens* in Latin),” and “*sein* which means in French *Être*, in Latin *Esse*. In English, there is no way to translate the difference between *Seiend* and *Sein*,” which is why translators sometimes render “*seiend* as ‘being’ with a lowercase ‘b’ and *Sein* as ‘Being’ with a capital ‘B’ which is rather problematic.”³²⁴ Lowercase “being” refers to an entity existing in its temporal and spatial specificity—we can think of the specific sounds of Boulez’s “Commentaire,” or the writhing body of Barrault’s imagined “wounded man,” as “beings” in this sense—whereas *Sein* (or Being) refers to a more abstract sense of presence that is presupposed whenever one writes. However, as Derrida contended, “*Être/Sein* is nothing”: there is no single “essence” in which to unite diverse beings, since “You can never find anything anywhere that we can call *Sein*, and yet *Sein* is presupposed each time we say ‘this is a being.’”³²⁵ This linguistic difference between *Seiend* and *Sein* became, in Derrida’s philosophy, an ontological *différance* between the signifier—the particular material word—and the signified, which is ideal and immaterial. By observing that the signifier and signified, like “being” and “Being,” imply distinct and incommensurate temporal orders, Derrida argued that the whole of western metaphysics, which “has been constituted in a system (of thought or language) determined on the basis of and in view of presence,” had been operating under the spell of a fiction.³²⁶ Presence, or Being, does not “exist” in the strict sense.

Ontology, the bedrock of European philosophy, appears often in Derrida to be little more than a game of writing—though far from inane. It is a discourse that grapples with the nature of being through the *logos*; that is, through “reason, discourse, calculation, speech—*logos* means all that—and also ‘gathering’: *legein*, that which gathers.”³²⁷ If a *logos* is a “gathering,” ontology gathers many disparate beings under the general sense of Being. This is why, for Lévinas, “ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power.”³²⁸ Philosophical discourses about Being had always been constituted through a process of appropriation-by-assimilation, since an ontology takes form as the other—whatever is outside of Being—becomes “gathered” within a western *logos*. Though Lévinas articulated this “ontological imperialism” in the abstract, his political implications were clear enough. As Europe asserted its “being” through economic exploitation and military domination, ontology arose to legitimize the coherency and intellectual supremacy of “the West.” This “West,” in turn, held ontology as a “pure” and neutral medium to comprehend the world, since “Being, without the density of beings, is the light in which beings become intelligible.”³²⁹ “The West” gathers itself by subordinating and subsuming whatever does not enter this light.

³²⁴ Jacques Derrida, quoted in Ning Zhang, “Jacques Derrida’s First Visit to China: A Summary of His Lectures and Seminars,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 2/1 (2002), 154. I am grateful to Ning Zhang for her clarification of Derrida’s views about philosophy as a specifically European discourse, a view that Derrida voiced during the final phase of his career in seminars and interviews given in China.

³²⁵ Zhang, “Jacques Derrida’s First Visit to China,” 154.

³²⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” from *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 138.

³²⁷ Zhang, “Interview with Jacques Derrida,” 14.

³²⁸ Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 37.

³²⁹ “Être, sans l’épaisseur de l’étant, il est la lumière où les étants deviennent intelligibles.” Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 33. Through the process that Lévinas speculatively called “ontological

Artaud and Barrault were after a kind of essence: the sensory barrage of the Balinese theatre or the spasms of a Candomblé practitioner became allegories for the Being of theatre. Even for Artaud, this essence was (sometimes) Greek: a Tarahumara rite that he witnessed in 1936 became, in his writings, “the rite of the kings of Atlantis as Plato describes it in the pages of *Critias*.” He continued:

Plato talks about a strange rite which, because of circumstances that threatened the future of their race, was performed by the kings of Atlantis.

However mythical the existence of Atlantis, Plato describes the Atlanteans as a race of magical origin. The Tarahumara, who are, for me, the direct descendants of the Atlanteans, continue to devote themselves to the observance of the magical rite.³³⁰

All this allegorizing amounted to a navel-gazing fantasy that a deeper Self might emerge from the Other, somewhat like a Catholic cross emerging from the Mexican soil. “Philosophy is an egology,” Lévinas declared, because ontology assumes that difference is but a mirage concealing sameness.³³¹

By disavowing the “simple ethnographic reconstructions” that we can hear in Artaud or read in Barrault, Boulez displaced these explicit western allegories onto sound. Sound became “radically other,” and *écriture* became Boulez’s “neutral medium.” This is ontological appropriation: musical writing becomes the pure light through which a composer writes the other into the ideal space of western music. “Real” sounds, what Boulez called pure or neutral sounds, emerged for the composer only when the specific sonic world that he heard in South America, or that he encountered through recordings of Laotian or Cambodian song, were effaced, neutralized, and made part of his abstract musical imaginings.

Is this not how an ontology—any ontology—is made? A process of extraction and inscription makes reality thinkable beyond faulty appearances, a process of writing that makes the very distinction of reality from appearance possible. However, studying Boulez might remind us, to play a bit with his own concepts, that sound does not “become ontological” until it passes through *écriture*. Ontology is neither a given nor is it a neutral medium—it only seems so, as if to name an ontology is to name what really is, which is part of the trick of the term. Ontology also cloaks the real with a shroud of mystery: a veil conceals many actual voices, “individualized” sounds that fall mute whenever an ontology comes into being. And this same veil often functions as a bolster for scholarly authority. Ontology is a writerly conjuring trick, though a peculiar one because it seems so

imperialism,” in Robert Young’s words, “European philosophy reduplicates Western foreign policy, where democracy at home is maintained through colonial or neocolonial oppression abroad.” Young, *White Mythologies*, 14.

³³⁰ Antonin Artaud, “Le Rite des rois d’Atlantide,” from *Oeuvres* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard 2004), 756.

³³¹ He described this “primacy of the same” by invoking Plato’s dialogue *Meno*, in which Socrates discovers that a slave with no prior education is able, through dialogue, to understand geometrical principles. European philosophy had always hinged on the conviction that “I,” the ego—the slave’s eternal soul—already hold the seeds of knowledge within the self. “The ideal of Socratic truth,” he concluded, “rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same, its identity in ipseity, its egotism.” Lévinas, *Totalité et infini*, 34-35.

innocuous, connoting the “in itself” of things—a real sound beyond language; a presence beyond what we can re-present.

In recent decades, however, many have sought to rescue ontology from its historical baggage as a philosophy of power. For proponents of the “ontological turn” in anthropology, there are many possible ontologies. The anthropologist’s job, according to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, is not to “[explain] the world of the other,” but instead to “[multiply] our world”—that is, to expand the discursive “worlds” of anthropology by letting the other remain other. “The Other [is] the expression of a *possible* world.”³³² From this standpoint, ontology is no longer “a discourse (*logos*) about the nature of being,” but, as David Graeber writes, has become “a word for ‘being,’ ‘way of being,’ or ‘mode of existence.’”³³³ The state of *santo bruto* cannot be judged as real or phony if the practitioner belongs to a completely different order of being. Yet, if it is an “illegal move,” as Viveiros de Castro claims, for the anthropologist to call what appear to be magical moments like *santo bruto* either true or false, holding instead we are witnessing a radically other ontology, then the ethical field becomes flattened.³³⁴ The idea that many other worlds exist, protected from the anthropologist’s Eurocentric gaze by a shield called “ontology,” seems to fall into an ethical dilemma familiar from the days of Franz Boas and his students. If we place the other in another “possible world”—which is, after all, of our making—then there is no basis for truth, and no reason to take the other seriously. Hence no matter how “radical” or progressive, to quote Paul Rabinow, attempts to construct relativistic theories of cultural difference risk “[leading]—despite their intent—to a form of nihilism, a reduction of the Other to the Same.”³³⁵ Ironically, in this flattened field in which many ontologies become equally possible, “ontology” regains its original meaning. If any entity might have or belong to an ontology, then everyone and everything is equally “ontological” (and, then, why not have ontology on the beach? or ontology in bed?).³³⁶ Though it may seem radical to think of many possible ontologies, as soon as the term is in play, there is only ever *one* ontology. It is still a discourse, a light through which to illuminate “beings,” making other worlds part of our own.

Ontology has not changed much since Derrida or Lévinas wrote about “the West.” It has only become a kind of trump card for scholarly authority, since, as Graeber suggests, “the problem with cultural relativism is that it places people in boxes not of their own devising”: ontology “just substitutes a deeper box.”³³⁷ In the musicological “box,” meanwhile, ontology seems to have “imperialized” how some scholars think about sound. Applying Eduardo Kohn’s rather simple

³³² Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Who is Afraid of the Ontological Wolf?: Some Comments on an Ongoing Anthropological Debate,” *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 33/1, Special Section—Remaking the Public Good: A New Anthropology of Bureaucracy (Spring 2015), 11.

³³³ David Graeber, “Radical alterity is just another way of saying ‘reality’: A reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5/2 (2015), 15.

³³⁴ Viveiros de Castro, “Who is Afraid of the Ontological Wolf?,” 14.

³³⁵ Paul Rabinow, “Humanism as Nihilism: The Bracketing of Truth and Seriousness in American Cultural Anthropology,” in *The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 14.

³³⁶ I am grateful to Fuoco B. Fann for his insights, through personal correspondences and lectures, into the ethnocentrism inherent in the notion of ontology as the mainstream of western philosophy. See Fann, *This Self We Deserve*, esp. 49-50.

³³⁷ Graeber, “Radical alterity is just another way of saying ‘reality,’” 34.

definition of ontology—“the study of “reality”—to the study of sound, we can see that sound often stands for just that: reality.³³⁸ “Noise [is] the ground,” as Christoph Cox writes, “that provides the condition of possibility for every articulate sound, as that from which all speech, music, and signal emerge, and to which they return.” Conceiving of the “sonic flux” as an “immemorial material flow” that humans can actualize by making music, but which always goes beyond the human, Cox positions noise as Being itself: the form of presence through which any particular sound or piece of music can be understood.³³⁹ United in a project that Brian Kane termed “onto-aesthetics,” Cox holds that sound art discloses its own ontological condition just as Nina Eidsheim holds that certain forms of avant-garde practice—such as underwater singing—reveal the vibrational matter at the heart of sound.³⁴⁰ While sonic flux resounds beyond human perception, vibration—which is Eidsheim’s update to “noise”—becomes the elusive pure presence underlying what we can represent. Ontology, in this sense, is a means to reconfigure subjectivity—“if we reduce and limit the world we inhabit” by holding to preconceived notions about sound, she argues, “we reduce and limit ourselves.”³⁴¹ A distinction abides between music-as-appearance (something created) and sound-as-reality, and “sensing sound” allows one to break free of Self-versus-Other binaries that continually “reduce and limit” our self.

Despite these endeavors to ethically remediate the idea of ontology, the resonances between our present-day sonic ontologies and the sonic allegories of Boulez and Artaud’s day should make us cautious about using “ontology” as a stand-in for reality. Of course, there is a great distance between Artaud’s pure theatre and Mexico, as between Bahia and Barrault’s magical Greece. Simply describing Artaud and Barrault’s writings is sufficient to uncover the ethnocentric mindset that we know (by now) to have been a part of artistic modernism. But somehow when the ontology of sound is in question it becomes harder to answer: where is reality and where is appearance? For Clifford, all ethnography is (in some sense) surrealist because ethnography always involves aestheticizing its findings.³⁴² The other appears to me through the writing that I know, becoming comprehensible as my representation; the art forms and expressions of the other resonate with my perception of my own culture, and thus the other’s culture, viewed against mine, becomes a form of art. In sum, *all* culture can be something of an ethnographic artifact *and* a work of art, real because farce.

If all ethnography employs surrealist procedures, at least tacitly, I would venture that sonic ontology-making is surrealist too. Which amounts to a rather simple conclusion: ontology-making is, after all, just that. *A making*. But it is a peculiar kind of *poiesis*, since ontology claims to present things as they really are. Thinking through Derrida’s conclusions about Artaud, however, I wonder

³³⁸ Eduardo Kohn, “Anthropology of Ontologies,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015), 312.

³³⁹ Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 2, 119.

³⁴⁰ I wish to thank Nicholas Mathew for his insights, in personal correspondences, regarding recent discourses around vibration and “vibrational ontology” in sound studies, and his exploration (in published and forthcoming writings) of the eighteenth-century pre-history of these ontological notions. See Nicholas Mathew, “Interesting Haydn: On Attention’s Materials,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 7/3 (2018), esp. 692; Cf. Brian Kane, “Sound studies without auditory culture: a critique of the ontological turn,” *Sound Studies* 1/1 (2015), 2-21.

³⁴¹ Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 3 and 54-57.

³⁴² “I would like to suggest that surrealist procedures are always present in ethnographic works, though seldom explicitly acknowledged.” Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” 563.

if ontology “really” gets us closer to the real. “In its closure, it is *fatal* that representation continues.” Precisely as he sought to disavow an older metaphysical regime—in Derrida’s words, to “kill the Father,” both the religious Father who judges the world from afar and the Author-God who makes theatre into a mere “double” of a metaphysical script—Artaud stayed within metaphysics. As soon as one acknowledges presence, it is already a representation. Presence is a mirage of the real, an illusory sur-reality vanishing like sound. We can see the limits of representation, its closure, but we cannot move beyond it. Instead, sound studies often “reconstructs” an old modernist conjuring trick. Ontology-making conceals the maker, becoming another discursive guise for Western Writerly Authority. Perhaps it is time to find a new tool. Or rather, perhaps it is time to have done with the conceit that sends us on endless discursive quests for sound beyond the human, or sound “post”-human. Let us dispense with *reality* once and for all.

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Chapter Four

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Lingering Traces: Cage's Ontology

A not-oft-recounted event. Another day during the summer of 1952, maybe 16 August, maybe not, Cage wrote a sketch of a performance piece that was to be enacted that afternoon at Black Mountain College, the small and politically progressive arts college in the mountains of North Carolina that Cage had visited periodically since 1948, giving lectures and teaching classes. When a few dozen students showed up to the cafeteria that afternoon, wearing sandals and flannel and fresh from various classes (for which they received neither grades nor degree credit), they watched several of their teachers perform. Their recollections vary. Cage either sat or stood, on a ladder or behind a podium, reading the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, or some obscure text by Meister Eckhart; his partner and collaborator Merce Cunningham danced around the audience (which was seated in a quadrangular arrangement in the center of the cafeteria), maybe accompanied by a dog; Charles Olson and M.C. Richards read poetry from another ladder, or from the audience; Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* may have hung from the ceiling, while on the ground Rauschenberg himself played radios and/or scratchy old vinyl records on a blaring wind-up record player; David Tudor played a piano and/or a radio; Franz Kline's paintings may or may not have also been on display; a group of other students or one of the artists was in charge of slide and/or film projections on the walls, showing clips of the college chef, a sunset, and/or abstract visual art; another student may or may not have been in a corner playing Asian instruments; at the end of the performance, a group of young children allegedly came through the performance space and poured coffee into white cups that had been placed among the crowd from the start. A strange closing ritual.

It is not certain what happened during that one hot open-toed summer afternoon (or maybe evening, who knows). But we know that whatever happened... happened, and that is the allure of Cage's *Black Mountain Piece* (also known as the *Black Mountain College Untitled Event*), performed a couple weeks before the premiere of *4'33"*. *It happened*. People were there. The fact that different audience members later recalled the event differently—not remembering who was standing on a ladder and who was seated, who played a radio and who played a record, and so on—was, of course, part of the point.³⁴³ The results would be indeterminate, with each performer acting independently. Ah, freedom...

³⁴³ See David Patterson's study, drawing from the Black Mountain College archive and from interviews with audience members, in "Two Cages, One College: Cage at Black Mountain College, 1948 and 1952," *Black Mountain Studies Journal*, online (March 2, 2013). Accessed September 2016. <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/volume4/4-11-david-patterson/>; see also Brigid Cohen, "Musical Cosmopolitans at Black Mountain College," in Helen Molesworth and Ruth Erickson, eds. *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933-1957* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 202-206.

“But not to do whatever you want.”³⁴⁴ Cage held a dual stance toward the notion of freedom throughout his career. It was as if his performers were free to dance, to play recordings or instruments, to project slides, etc., however they wished, but there were already unspoken limits. Since Cage disdained the idea of improvisation, for instance—he claimed more than once that jazz was inadequate, stating that the idea of communication was inappropriate for new music—his participants were not to respond directly to each other.³⁴⁵ The performance was to be free-wheeling yet atomistic, as if each performer would simply go their own way, yet always with a certain flavor and feeling. Listeners could then assemble the jumble of layered and cacophonous sounds however they would.

Anti-intellectualism was a central part of Cage’s aesthetic position, though it hardly needs pointing out that he wielded his anti-intellectualism with intelligence. “It wasn’t simply that ‘something’ would happen,” wrote Benjamin Piekut, describing Cage’s attitude toward trusted performers like Tudor, “it was that the ‘right’ thing happened, without exception.... With Tudor at the keyboard, Cage accepts whatever will come, ... but this is not a real acceptance—he already knows he will approve of what is to come.”³⁴⁶ One can easily imagine that Cage knew he would approve of whatever was to happen in the cafeteria, too. The *Black Mountain Piece* did not simply “happen,” but happened according to taken-for-granted prescriptions, a complicity between the performers, their audience, and Cage. Piekut’s take on Cage’s dual position regarding freedom—that “Permission [was] granted. But not to do whatever you want”—foregrounds a central Cageian tactic, what might be called double negation, which will be the central trope of this final chapter.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ The well-known Cage aphorism appeared in published form in *A Year from Monday* and reads: “PERMISSION GRANTED. BUT NOT TO DO WHATEVER YOU WANT.” John Cage, *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 28.

³⁴⁵ Cage wrote in his 1965 “Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)”: “Music as discourse (jazz) doesn’t work. If you’re going to have a discussion, have it and use words.” He anticipated this idea in *45’ For A Speaker* (1954): “Communication if it is required is a way of calling attention to one’s own psychology.” Cage, *A Year from Monday*, 12; Cage, *Silence*, 172.

³⁴⁶ Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 57.

³⁴⁷ This phrase does not carry the same connotation as it would in propositional logic: that if a statement is true, it follows that it is not untrue. Rather, my use of “double negation” is more along the lines of Theodor Adorno’s “negative dialectics,” which was Adorno’s answer to Hegelian dialectics. According to Hegel, a philosophical ideal like the Spirit (or *Geist*) contains a negative element within itself, which it sublates in order to become stronger—hence “dialectics” in a traditional sense connotes a positive process of unification. A “negative dialectics” would, by contrast, refuse this positive movement and “[attempt] by means of logical consistency to substitute for the unity principle ... the idea of what would be outside the sway of such unity.” In his study of the German painter Gerhard Richter, Paul Rabinow used the term “double negation” to foreground how the painter frequently refused the very principles that he presupposed. A “negative dialectic” commences, in this sense, when an artist destabilizes any unified aesthetic ideal by denying both the ideal and also its obverse, thus situating himself somewhere in the middle.

Affirming freedom while imposing unspoken constraints; acting as commander for free-form performances while later deriding Allan Kaprow as a kind of “policeman”; appropriating “Eastern” philosophy via D.T. Suzuki while stating “what I do, I do not wish to be blamed on Zen”; and, above all, denying the idea of composition while seeking “composition itself”: Cage had a habit of pitting incommensurable ideas against each other and plopping himself right in the middle.³⁴⁸ Cage is known for introducing chance into the compositional process, and that he based a compositional method on the conceit of denying intention and composerly authority suggests that perhaps each of Cage’s double negations revolved around a single idea: writing. As the first section of this chapter will suggest by attending to a 1963 performance by Cage and Tudor in Berlin, Cage posed himself against “writing” in the Boulezian sense of rigorous “dematerialization” or “neutralization,” the process of tempering down the “individual” qualities of a sound in order to incorporate sounds into larger structures. Cage, as we will see, disavowed the notion of *écriture* as conscious organization in order, paradoxically, to claim that he and Tudor had arrived at “composition itself.” The baggage of the past, the lingering hand of the composer, intention and meaning: in Cage’s view, all of this may be shorn in a special moment of just “being there” with sound.

By endeavoring to flatten composition into sound and, conversely, to posit sound as the essence of composition, Cage followed the footsteps of his French predecessors to arrive, I will argue, at his own ontological sense of sound. Section two will contextualize Cage’s bid to create musical presence with an eye toward Satie, Varèse, and Boulez’s various efforts to uncover “real” sound. It will come as no surprise, in section three, that Cage’s call for an “all-sound music of the future,” his entreaty to let sounds just be sounds, and his disavowal of authority took cues from various Eastern sources, most notably the “Beat Zen” promulgated by D.T. Suzuki and others in 1950s New York. “Zen” served Cage’s aesthetic position because it allowed the composer to negate... anything or everything, to claim that performance is purely of the present, unhinged from intellection, choice, taste, or history. By showing that Cage developed his position on sound by first misrepresenting and then arrogating ideas from Suzuki—a neo-Orientalism that several Cage scholars and biographers, following their hero, have failed to assess critically—I will conclude that presence, in Cage, amounted to a white mythology, a high sonic Idealism.

Yet, to recall Robert Frost’s words, the present is perhaps too crowding, too confusing, too present to imagine. While there was no “pure” freedom for Cage’s performers, there was (and is) no “pure” presence either. The existence of a work like the *Black Mountain Piece*, for instance, as a piece that is explicitly “about” presence—about the sounds of the room, whatever happens—is nevertheless contingent on Cage’s own words, the words of those who were there in 1952, and the ink bath ever since: traces through which the idea of that one-time-only open-toed event takes shape in hindsight, all the more alluring because all the more absent. One could say, to borrow Derrida’s words, that “the movement of supplementary representation approaches the origin as it distances itself from

“Double negation,” as I will demonstrate, is ultimately a means through which to assert authority by disavowing the principle of coherence, which is, from a traditional standpoint, the very basis of authority. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York and London: Routledge, 1973, originally published in German, 1966), xx; Paul Rabinow, *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), esp. 106-122.

³⁴⁸ Cage, *Silence*, xi.

it.”³⁴⁹ The audience’s various recollections, as well as whatever one can read about Cage and his aesthetic position, make the *Black Mountain Piece* feel closer and closer. The origin comes into light, however, only on the condition that its reappropriation is impossible. The gap between *here*—the “here” of a text—and *there*—the “there” of the moment described, the event that unfolded in 1952—is widest when it seems to be nearly closed. Otherwise said, Cageian presence is only comprehensible through a retrospective game. His sense of presence, of “being there,” amounts to a written presence: an ideal forged, carried, and reliable only if one is willing to follow Cage’s words and the words of others. There is no “sound,” in Cage’s sense, outside a world of texts.

Composition itself: Cage at the typewriter

One may ask: what about a different medium? The *Black Mountain Piece* has indeed vanished, after all, and is only available in traces that are written in the most literal sense—documents in an archive. It is worth attending to another event, differently documented, to test my avowedly Derridean hypothesis that there “is” no presence without a supplement—a supplement that both produces presence and separates it from itself—and also to put forward another broader suggestion. By positioning Cage as a hinge between the earlier French musicians I have described and the mid-century New York milieu of which he was a central figure, I suggest that Cage inherited the ontological understanding of sound that previous chapters have described in various forms. The final suggestion advanced here will be that “ontological sound” endures still today, thanks (in part, but not in full) to Cage and company. Sound has drowned in the ink bath.

This second event certainly seems more present: unlike the *Black Mountain Piece*, it exists on video. One can see (and hear) exactly what happened. Over a decade later, on 21 January 1963, the touring duet of Cage and Tudor appeared onstage at the Berlin Kongreßhalle in front of a packed house of suit-and-tie-wearing spectators who scratched their chins while Tudor (who was also suited-and-tied) walked about two pianos that were amplified via microphones and pickups.³⁵⁰ He stoically scraped debris against the strings and twiddled knobs on an amplifier to create sporadic blares, rings, and long tones. Cage, seated a few meters behind Tudor and next to Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt and an interpreter, answered various questions from Stuckenschmidt and the Berlin audience. Cage’s trust in Tudor, and their complicity regarding the sound world that was to be produced (always with an affect of dry, cool detachment), is evident in that Tudor’s scrapes and blares tended to interrupt or obscure certain things said by Stuckenschmidt or the audience (via the interpreter), but when Cage spoke, the blaring and scraping tended to cease. It was clear who was in charge and who was to be in focus.

One question from the audience touched obliquely upon the inconsistency with which I began, Cage’s dual stance regarding freedom. “Why, John Cage, are you against the word ‘improvisation’?” With his characteristically deliberate drollity, Cage responded: “uh, I don’t know

³⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 295.

³⁵⁰ The video of this event, titled “Musik im technischen Zeitalter,” is available on YouTube as “John Cage + David Tudor - Musik Im Technischen Zeitalter 1963,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IAWKjvt6A4&t=674s>. Accessed 30 April 2021.

now whether I am against it or for it.” The audience laughed; perhaps they were familiar with Cage’s (and Tudor’s) tactic of side-stepping certain pointed critical questions, always with an air of quiet recalcitrance, especially in front of the German intellectual crowd.³⁵¹ Cage went on to explain that although he disdained “improvisation,” his works had nevertheless become more and more indeterminate. As if to demonstrate, he moved to a desk closer to Tudor, and with Stuckenschmidt and the interpreter quietly watching, he donned glasses, lit a cigarette, and began typing on a typewriter. As one familiar with Cage and Tudor’s style during this period might expect, Cage’s glasses, ashtray, and typewriter were grotesquely amplified via contact microphones. The rustle of the frame on his face, the twisting of the typewriter’s platen knob and the pounding of its keys must have been as deafening as the continued scraping of Tudor’s piano strings and his occasional loudspeaker blares.

Here and there, audience members kept laughing. Cage surely knew what he was doing, and what kinds of responses he and Tudor would provoke. His recalcitrance was both restively avant-garde, as if behind the audience’s laughter it was Cage who had the last laugh, dodging pointed questions and disavowing profundity, and also betrays his reliance on the very intellectual mechanisms against which he posed himself. This dependence is confirmed by the presence of writing. Even as Cage premised his aesthetic position on estrangement, spontaneity, and anti-rationalism, the typewriter lent him a veil of literary austerity—another double negation: writing is dead; long live writing!

And so Cage wrote. After the pounding ceased, he stood again, putting a microphoned collar around his throat to read the text that he had newly composed:

For many years now, we have been thinking of composition in terms of sounds, which are made up of their parameters: frequency, duration, amplitude, overtone structures, and whatever else one can think of. Now we have nothing to do with the parameters. We produce sounds without giving the parameters a thought. That means, let me suggest, that we are giving up thinking of composition, and in return we are getting composition itself.

Perhaps the ultimate ontological claim: *we are getting composition itself*. The in-itself of composition comes into being as soon as the idea of composition is dispersed to encompass any and every sound in a space for a time. The essence of “composition” in Cage’s sense might be stated thus: sound “is” and “is” always; it only takes the right framing, the right mindset, the right medium, to hear the sounds of the room, the scratching of piano strings, the ring of amplifiers, or the cacophonous barrage of multiple performers, *as* an art of sound.

The image of Cage at the typewriter is, in my view, the very symbol of double negation, and can be taken as a metaphor for the dichotomy of musical presence with which this dissertation

³⁵¹ During a memorial event for Tudor in 1996, Christian Wolff recalled a performance in Germany of Cage’s “Cartridge Music” that took place sometime in the mid 1950s. Adorno attended the performance and afterward gave a short lecture about the relevance of this music. Tudor allegedly responded: “You haven’t understood a thing.” From David Patterson, “Celebrating a Life,” available on [davidtudor.org](https://davidtudor.org/Life/memorial.html) at <https://davidtudor.org/Life/memorial.html>. Accessed 15 May 2021.

began. Despite differences in how the BMC and Kongreßhalle performances were (and are) mediated, they both involve writing, whether Cage's scribbled diagrams of the BMC cafeteria space or the recollections of auditors, or the very act of writing on a typewriter. Beyond the literal sense of writing, though, I would wager that there was (and is) a broader sense of writing at play in each moment. I do not mean to simply transpose the Derridean notion that anything and everything can be considered "writing" as long as a play of deferral or delay is involved—the tracing or *différance* through which the full realization of presence is always deferred as it is presupposed. "Différance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be 'present,'" recalling Derrida's words, "appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element."³⁵² For Derrida, "writing" connoted the play or movement that makes presence and absence possible, since every present thing—as soon as it is recognized, named, or used as a referent—contains traces of an absent past, and also has a certain bearing on the future. These Cage events are surely "written" in this broader (in fact, impossibly broad) sense: presence is produced by virtue of the play of *différance* (difference and deferral). The "real" event is gone; even a video, playing presently, is already an invisible inscription on tape (or encoded in digits re-organized by YouTube), hence the face-to-face is deferred even as it is portrayed.

However, there is a more specific Cageian sense of writing that I wish to foreground here in order to focus the broader Derridean sense of *écriture* toward the present inquiry. If one takes Cage's words seriously about expanding composition beyond the limits of the written page, of any rational system of control, and so on, then *the whole event*—in 1952, in 1963, or any other time—becomes *composed*. The very idea of composition enlarges beyond then-established limits, encompassing any and every sound in a space for a time. Thus these events, which were allegedly meant to oust intellection, prescription, parameterization, what have you—the bugbears of the western literate musical tradition—affirm through this very disavowal an even higher, absolute principle of organization. Another double negation: the essence of music is flattened into "sound"; "sound" is elevated back into essence.

Ontological sound: a look backwards

These two events, one a lost performance recalled by its auditors and the other documented on video, allow us, despite differences in how these events have been mediated, and despite differences in both venue and content, to get a sense of what Cageian sound, "happening" only in its moment, would have sounded like. They also allow one to piece together what sound meant for Cage and for those close to him.

Organized sound, liberated sound, or sound-by-chance—what have you. There are plenty of weeds for the Cage scholar to sort through since the composer's approach to sound changed throughout his career.³⁵³ During his early phase (roughly 1933-48), for instance, Cage conceptualized

³⁵² Jacques Derrida, "Différance," from *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 142.

³⁵³ The seminal survey of these various approaches is James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

music as a succession of time intervals, stating in the aforementioned BMC lecture delivered during Cage's first summer, "Defense of Satie" (1948), that Beethoven relied too much on tonal harmony whereas Satie (and also Webern) determined the structure of their compositions "by means of time lengths."³⁵⁴ This latter method was Cage's preference. In early percussion music and works for prepared piano like his *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946-48), Cage relied on this principle of filling in time intervals, and by 1946 began employing the "gamut" technique to fill in the blanks, restricting himself to a (wide or narrow) collection (i.e. gamut) of tones and tone combinations that he chose beforehand.

It was only a matter of time before Cage took his hand off the wheel, so to speak, flipping coins to make selections from his gamuts in works of 1950-51 such as the *Concert for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra* or *Music of Changes*.³⁵⁵ Through the rest of his career, Cage relied on chance operations in one form or another to create more concertos, works for magnetic tape, for voice, for the Black Mountain College cafeteria, or to create other large-scale collaborative events like the 1967 *Musicircus*, which took place in a large barn in the University of Illinois. Instead of showing cattle, Cage invited Tudor, Gordon Mumma, several vocalists, and jazz musicians to play in the space—whatever they wanted for however long they wanted. Lasting for several hours, audience members could come and go as they pleased. In contrast to this rather free-form event, the highly controlled and elaborately planned *HPSCHD* of 1969 suggests, along the lines of Cage's words to the Berlin Kongrßhalle, that while he insisted that his works could be perceived freely, he nevertheless exerted a great deal of control at the planning stage. In *HPSCHD*, Cage invited seven pianists to come play harpsichord amid a swirling cacophonous light show in which the audience members sat about, walked freely, chatted, napped, and ate. Lejaren Hiller's computerized *I Ching* program allowed Cage to create parts for fifty-two tape players blaring electronically-produced wave frequencies at pre-determined time intervals, and to pre-determine which slides and motion pictures (documentaries, clips from NASA, abstract visual plays of color, etc.) would be projected onto the large circular screen surrounding the auditorium.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Cage, "Defense of Satie," 81.

³⁵⁵ His turn to chance has been explained via Cage's biography. Reading Cage's 1944 *Perilous Night* for prepared piano as an expression of the composer's emotional turmoil after realizing his homosexuality, David Revill suggests 1944 as a breaking point. Cage was distraught, according to Revill, after a music critic compared the clanging, crashing, and percussive timbres of his 1944 *Perilous Night* for prepared piano to a "woodpecker in a church belfry." As Taruskin suggested, the critic's words equipped Cage with a bitter resentment. Cage's quiet recalcitrance, his abnegation of self-expression, can be seen as his response. David Revill, *The Roaring Silence; John Cage: A Life* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), 86-88; Taruskin, "Indeterminacy," from *Music in the Late Twentieth Century*.

³⁵⁶ The harpsichordists were instructed to play specific works: Tudor, a collection of chance-determined compositions by Cage; another harpsichordist, a collection of works by Cage, Webern, Schumann, Beethoven, and others; another player was instructed simply to play anything by Mozart. See Branden W. Joseph, "HPSCHD—Ghost or Monster?" in Hannah B. Higgins and Douglas Kahn, eds. *Mainframe Experimentalism: Early Computing and the Foundations of the Digital Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 147-169.

In summary, Cage employed chance—whether by flipping coins, by consulting the *I Ching*, or, later, by using a computerized *I Ching* program—to forge new ways of approaching and creating sound, through instruments, voices, electronics, and performance art events. Through it all, however, his words from the 1963 Kongreßhalle performance seem to sum up what each of these moments of his career, and each of these distinct approaches to sound, were meant to find: “composition itself.” The arrangement of sounds and silence, whether written out in advance or produced spontaneously, was “composition” in this expanded sense. These sounds were meant for... anyone, whoever happened to *be there* to hear and feel it, live and in-the-moment, as if Cage got to the essence of the matter and there was nothing left to think about.

Cage’s bid for “composition itself,” which was, again, perhaps the ultimate ontological claim, was directly informed by his French predecessors. Whether Satie actually composed according to intervals of time or not, Cage—who travelled to Paris to study Satie’s work—certainly inherited the old Arcachan cynic’s delight to disavow musical illusion. If one takes Cage’s words at their face—and, after all, one *needs* Cage’s words in order to know what his works *are*—then one would be led to believe that *4’33”*, the *Black Mountain Piece*, or Tudor’s piano scrapes, were not meant to refer to anything beyond themselves. “Beethoven was in error”: Satie, Cage’s anti-Teutonic protagonist, would have agreed that the romantic metaphysic of absolute music was too heavy-breathing, and that if there is any Truth to music, it lies in the subtle experience of the simplified, stripped-bare textures and the hypnotic rhythms of the *Trois Gymnopédies*; or, conversely, perhaps the Truth comes out once music is banalized into sonic furniture via the seemingly endless, meaningless loops of a work like *Entr’acte*. The Truth of music is in sound, a credo that Cage pushed to the point where any vibration anywhere could serve—to paraphrase Satie’s words to Cocteau—like light or heat, as comfort in any form. Works like *4’33”* are “about” sound, not about illusion. Vibration is enough.

The negations continue: to apprehend “sound,” happening suddenly in its moment, Cage required that any attentive listener or interested party get hip to a particular retrospective game—much like the game described toward the end of Chapter Two. Varèse’s musical language only takes shape in hindsight as we look back upon a work, drawing from the composer’s own words and the words of others. Only then can we understand spatial sound, apprehending the clashes of Varèse’s sound masses and distinguishing one plane of sound from another. *Then* we know how to listen “now.” By the same token, without the various word piles, perhaps scholars of Cage or of performance art in general would have missed the first “Happening.” This is how the *Black Mountain Piece* is remembered, anyway. Even though Cage’s endeavor, according to certain witnesses, was not at all unique since collaborative events always spontaneously “happened” at BMC—in a way, such events were the whole point of BMC—Cage’s event has been taken up as a crucial predecessor to later performance moments that were also premised on the idea of “pure presence” (that wary Artaudian phrase). “Happenings are events that, put simply, happen,” wrote Cage’s student, Allan Kaprow, in 1961. “Though the best of them have a decided impact—that is, we feel ‘here is something important’—they appear to go nowhere and do not make any particular literary point.”³⁵⁷ But the literary point practically screams: leave thought aside, jump into the bizarre, the banal, whatever is happening now, and thus find Being. Away with words, with concepts, with parameters, all the academic and intellectual shibboleths, and just... experience. Far out, man.

³⁵⁷ Allan Kaprow, “Happenings in the New York Scene (1961),” from *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 16.

Of course, there are always more weeds: Cage was not too fond of Kaprow's Happenings, claiming that Kaprow imposed almost authoritarian mechanisms of control over the events that would unfold. "When I go to a Happening that seems to me to have intention in it I go away, saying that I'm not interested," wrote Cage. "Though I don't actively engage in politics, I do as an artist have some awareness of art's political content, and it doesn't include policemen."³⁵⁸ The double negations continued. Cage, by his own yardstick, was even more authoritarian than Kaprow since *Music of Changes*, for instance, demands a kind of athleticism and rigor on the performer's part that is far beyond anything Kaprow ever expected. Cage loved Tudor (and I do not use the word lightly) partly because the pianist abided so well by the composer's intentions.³⁵⁹ Distancing himself from Kaprow was a discursive means for Cage to have his cake and eat it too, to disavow intention in order to throw the veil of naturalness and spontaneity over his own no-less-controlled works.

Discursive games aside, in essence—and this is the level at which Cage or Kaprow's music or performance art begs to be assessed: the level of essence, of what art or music is—their aims and means were not too different. Their works were "about" presence, though they held different understandings of how presence was to be produced and experienced. This only confirms, in either case, that there was nothing "pure" about it. Which brings us back to the dilemma yet again. While it is conceivable that a listener could simply sit through *4'33"* without thinking too deeply about "sound" per se (I've witnessed such listeners during Cage day of various music courses, listening patiently to the clock ticking and the lights buzzing in hopes that their instructor—me—will give them an A), the lasting life of this work is owed to those who *do* think as deeply as Cage did about the meaning of sound. One must sort through his written and recorded traces in order to conceptually understand what "composition" or "sound" in the expanded sense *is*, or was, for Cage and company. Yet the trick of Cage's double negation comes in that once one sorts through the right traces, once one takes up the right attitude or proper way of listening, one arrives—*aha!*—at a sudden experience of sound in itself. Intellection is presupposed and denied in the same breath.

³⁵⁸ John Cage, from Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 119.

³⁵⁹ Cage wrote to Tudor in 1951: "Loving you from this side with you so close and so far is what loses me." While it is unlikely that Cage's "overflowing [...] of desire" for Tudor, a straight man, ever culminated in a sexual relationship, nevertheless their correspondence indicates that Tudor—who addressed Cage playfully as "lonely heart"—reciprocated Cage's affection with some of the most exacting and technically detailed inquiries about musical performance imaginable. To take a cue from Eve Sedgwick, Cage and Tudor's relationship can be termed homosocial. The desire undergirding Cage and Tudor's musical innovations extended to Cage's other collaborators—especially to Cunningham, whose sexual and artistic relationship with Cage has been well documented. Homosociality functioned as a kind of affective glue for those in Cage's mid-century circle, and perhaps Cage's aesthetic position can be said to have taken shape through an intersubjective process of male homosocial desire. Cf. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Martin Iddon, ed. John Cage and David Tudor: *Correspondence on Interpretation and Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). I am grateful to Mary Ann Smart for suggesting the connection between Cage and Tudor's milieu and the pattern of male homosocial desire that Sedgwick described.

By disavowing parameterization and casting aside the deliberate working-through of sound via the compositional medium of *écriture*, Cage concluded in Berlin that “we are getting composition itself.” If parameterization is a form of primitivism—another suggestion from Chapter Two—then Cage’s disregard for the parameters of sound might be seen as an even more primitive primitivism, maybe an ontological primitivism, a kind of ironic absolutism taking form through the composer’s disdain of all such “thought” of parameter. By ousting the limited sense of composition, Cage thus *ontologized* composition, making his music “about” the Being of sound.

Cage therefore shared an ontological perspective on sound with his French correspondent, Boulez. As Chapter Three suggested, Cage and Boulez each held that sound, happening only in its moment, sudden and jarring, escapes the idea of representation, hence sound is more real than the outmoded norms of western classical music. Although Cage’s turn to chance eventually drove a wedge between he and Boulez, it hardly needs mentioning that these composer’s works for piano from the late 1940s and early ‘50s often sounded similar. Though Boulez’s *Piano Sonata no. 2* is certainly more testosterone-filled than *Music of Changes*—perhaps *Structures 1a* would be a more appropriate corollary—these works proceed as similarly disjunct and deliberately-paced smatterings of notes leap across the keyboard. So-called “chance” and “total serialism” produced a similar musical texture, and Cage and Boulez shared a basic conviction that sound, by virtue of its surprising (or, in Boulez’s word, “novel”) effects, is an infinite resource for creativity. Though one composer may have preferred “individualized” sound while the other strove for “neutral” or “pure” sound, their varied compositional approaches bespoke a similarly ontological understanding of what sound is.

However, there is always otherness at the border of an ontology: some noise, some trembling that does not fit neatly into Sound as Ideal. For both Boulez and Cage, and also for Varèse in his own way, sound was like an as-yet-undiscovered country. Each of these composers construed a non-west as opposed to “the West,” and borrowed something—ideas, fantasied images, noises, expressive poetics—from the ethnographic other. Varèse sought what he called the “purity of sound” by imagining and subsuming the sounds of Asturias’s Mayan forest. Boulez, meanwhile, bleached the poetics of Bahian ritual of any trace of Bahia, foregrounding the quasi-spiritual expressive force of neutral or pure sound. As my discussion of Varèse and Boulez was meant to suggest, these composers treated the Other *as* sound, believing that sound needed to be taken up into the idealized territory of musical *écriture*. Sound requires a writerly medium to bring into being.³⁶⁰ This writerly medium, to recall Boris de Schloezer’s words, allows for a “dematerialization” of the sound space that is impossible in non-western cultures. Hence the allure of non-European musical traditions: there is a seemingly endless resource of Other sound out there, ready to be stripped of its autochthonous existence and re-inscribed in white ink. To posit sound as something with an “in-itself” amounts to a kind of power move (and it is one thing for an artist to make the move, and another thing entirely for a scholar to do so, as we saw in Chapter One’s discussion of Christoph Cox). The belief that

³⁶⁰ To quote Varèse’s famous bash of Filippo Marinetti: “why do the Italian futurists slavishly imitate only what is superficial and obvious in our daily life?” Like Boulez, who disavowed *musique concrète* for essentially the same reason that Varèse critiqued futurism, merely re-creating the sounds of modern life was inadequate. Varèse, from Picabia’s 391, 1917; quoted in Jürg Stenzl, “‘Daily Life, Slavishly Imitated’: Edgard Varèse and Italian Futurism,” in *Edgard Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary*, ed. Felix Meyer and Heidi Zimmermann (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2006), 142.

sound can be neutralized, purified, or liberated basically sums up the reason why I have called the various approaches to sound studied here “ontological.”

“Men are men and mountains are mountains”: Zen in the art of Cage (and Cage Studies)

Cage, too, sought the real in sound, and he too believed that various non-western others paved way for a heightened experience of sound. During a lecture given at Julliard on 27 March 1952, for instance, Cage recalled one of Suzuki’s formulations: that “Before studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains. While studying Zen things become confused.... After studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains.” Cage transposed this koan-like adage to music: “before studying music, men are men and sounds are sounds.” He continued:

While studying music things aren’t clear.... Sounds are no longer just sounds, but are letters: A, B, C, D, E, F, G.... If one wants to get a feeling of how emotional a composer proved himself to be, he has to confuse himself to the same final extent that the composer did and imagine that sounds are not sounds at all but are Beethoven and that men are not men but are sounds. Any child will tell us: this is simply not the case.

The Julliard sound archive includes a recording of Cage’s lecture (which was eventually published as part of *A Year from Monday*). Shortly after this statement about what a child would say, Tudor enters with a deafening BLAM on the piano, and performs works by Cage, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff through the rest of the lecture. Cage emphasizes sudden apprehension, pitching his anti-intellectualism intelligently, once again, facing an intellectual crowd.

That is to say, one has to stop all the thinking that separates music from living.... The wisest thing to do is to open one’s ears immediately and to hear a sound suddenly before one’s thinking has a chance to turn it into something logical, abstract, or symbolical. Sounds are sounds and men are men, but now our feet are a little off the ground.³⁶¹

Cage wielded Suzuki’s words, and the idea of Zen, to enhance his conviction that abandoning choice to chance, abandoning parameterization to thoughtlessness, allows one to grasp—suddenly, voila!—the in-itself of composition.

Suddenness was a key idea for Cage, and while his borrowings from “Beat” Zen Buddhism and other Eastern sources via Suzuki, Alan Watts, and Ananda Coomaraswamy have become well known, many scholars have followed Cage’s footsteps in construing various spiritual practices as vehicles for the same sudden apprehension—the *voilà* moment.³⁶² When James Pritchett claimed in

³⁶¹ Cage, “Julliard Lecture,” from *A Year from Monday*, 95-98. This lecture is available in audio recording via Julliard’s digital archive:

<http://jmedia.juilliard.edu/digital/collection/p16995coll3/id/10933>. Accessed 30 April 2021.

³⁶² See Edward Crooks, “John Cage’s Entanglement with the Ideas of Coomaraswamy,” PhD dissertation (University of York, 2011); David Patterson, “Cage and Asia: history and sources,”

The Music of John Cage, for example, that Cage learned from Zen to “rid [himself] of conceptual thought in order to apprehend ultimate Reality,” Pritchett anticipated a refrain that has echoed in more recent Cage biographies (by Revill, Rob Haskins, and especially Kay Larson), all of which allege that the composer experienced something akin to sudden enlightenment.³⁶³ They all take Cage’s words against “thinking” seriously, and also take seriously Cage’s grab-bag method of appropriation, his manner of cribbing ideas from Coomaraswamy, from Chan Buddhism, or medieval Christian theology, always with an air of American transcendentalism à la Henry David Thoreau. By failing to distinguish these various sources, Cage biographers as well as Cage scholars tend to conflate all of these sources in the same way that Cage did.³⁶⁴

Of course, unpacking anew Cage’s lines of influence and reassessing how his Eastern appropriations have been (mis)perceived is a task beyond the present scope: it suffices to say here that all these mixed sources of influence—and Cage’s friendships with Joseph Campbell and Aldous Huxley should not be overlooked—amounted to a kind of “perennial philosophy” for the composer.³⁶⁵ The basic “facet of Cage’s contact with Asian culture,” according to David Patterson, was “the way in which he studied, absorbed, and sifted through a variety of texts during the 1940s and 1950s, extracting with single-minded discrimination only those malleable ideas that could be used metaphorically to illuminate” his own “artistic themes” or to “reinforce the tenets of his own modernist agenda.”³⁶⁶ Cage was quite self-interested, after all, and the degree to which he understood his own sources is open to question. Suzuki’s words about mountains appearing as mountains and men appearing as men can be read, for instance, to mean that a practitioner of Zen starts from a basic impression of things, and then, by craving to understand things as they really are, becomes

from David Nicholls, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³⁶³ James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 75; Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012); Rob Haskins, *John Cage* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2012); Revill, *The Roaring Silence*.

³⁶⁴ Jonathan D. Katz, for instance, affirms that Zen served a therapeutic function for Cage, allowing him critical distance as a gay man from an otherwise homophobic and sometimes outright hostile mid-twentieth-century cultural scene, while Caroline A. Jones lauds Cage as a “Zen master” to the mid-century avant-garde, casting his use of silence in his music, his frequent refusal to answer his critics, and his persona as a soft-spoken Zen adherent as a “queer resistance” to an otherwise bombastic and phallogocentric New York avant-garde. Finally, Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Kenneth Silverman affirms, in a similar self-empowering mode, that the Zen concept of “no-mind” allowed Cage a unique experience of freedom and “self-reliance.” Jonathan D. Katz, “John Cage’s Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse,” *GLQ* 5/2 (1995), 231-252; Caroline A. Jones, “Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego,” *Critical Inquiry* 19/4 (1993), 628-665; Kenneth Silverman, *Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 108.

³⁶⁵ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York and London: Harper Perennial, 2009, originally published 1945).

³⁶⁶ David Patterson, “Cage and Asia: history and sources,” from David Nicholls, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 58-59.

confused. The idea that one sees, finally, that mountains are still mountains and men are still men seems to refer to a kind of awakening, yet by following the line of thinking suggested by Suzuki's story, after the process of becoming confused and then untangling the confusion, why could a composer not safely return to Beethoven? In other words, if seeing things as they are was Cage's goal, why could one not perceive *Moonlight Sonata* with the same "sudden" apperception? Is not sound, sound?

This is to suggest, simply put, that Cage's variety of ontological appropriation was more hippy-dippy than Boulez's—by comparison, the latter's method of taking the Other as sound was more rigorous and coherent. Cage simply misappropriated ideas to suit his own ends—though he claimed to have met Suzuki earlier, according to Patterson, Suzuki only started lecturing at Columbia during the spring or fall of 1952, thus when Cage gave his Julliard lecture in March, he could not have "studied" with Suzuki for more than a couple weeks or months. And "study" probably meant auditing a lecture, maybe two. Zen was a fresh appropriation, something Cage neither understood nor practiced. If Boulez had taken this tact, one can imagine he might have devotedly transcribed Buddhist chants, read more about its history, or at least studied longer before pointing the spotlight on himself. Cage's misappropriation, to play on one of his own phrases, was something of a cheap imitation. Filtering a phrase from Buddhist Studies scholar Robert H. Sharf, Cage (and sometimes Cage scholars) used (and sometimes use) "Eastern" philosophy, the grab bag, as a marker for a "noncontingent, transcultural, nondual spiritual gnosis that underlies all authentic religious inspiration."³⁶⁷ The same suddenness applied, in Cage's view of new music, to all authentic sonic inspiration. For Cage, "Zen" was a kind of "romantic, ahistorical, and acultural idealization," to borrow Fuoco B. Fann's words about Suzuki, whose efforts to promulgate Zen during the mid-twentieth-century tended to bolster—or, at least, have been understood to bolster—a "view held by the Western world for the last few hundred years of a country like China as an anti-progressive 'immobile empire.'"³⁶⁸ Sudden awakening, living life as it is, and apprehending things as they are: these are among the westernized Zen tropes that Cage (and others) took to indicate an ahistorical, transcendent, and universal spirituality.

And here comes the predicable move. Cage stated in the preface to *Silence* that "what I do, I do not wish to be blamed on Zen."³⁶⁹ Another double negation: Cage appropriated the aura of "Zen," really the idealized and romanticized—in a word: Americanized—aura of Beat Zen, while also

³⁶⁷ Sharf refers here to the conception of Zen Buddhism promulgated in the west by Japanese proselytizers including Shaku Sōen, Sōen's student D.T. Suzuki, and Suzuki's lifelong friend, Nishida Kitarō, in the late-19th-and-early-20th centuries. Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," from *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 124-132. This conception surfaced in works and writings by avant-garde artists and musicians, the "counterculturalists" of the 1940s and 1950s fighting the "technocratic machine," and abides in the popular culture to the present day. Cf. R. John Williams, "Technê-Zen and the Spiritual Quality of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Autumn 2011), 20-21, 59-70.

³⁶⁸ I am grateful to Fuoco B. Fann for suggesting this alternative reading of Suzuki's story via Cage. Personal correspondence; Cf. Fann, *This Self We Deserve*, 164.

³⁶⁹ Cage, *Silence*, xi.

declaring his independence from Suzuki. Just as he denied his own authorial presence; just as he denied that sound “means” anything in particular. There was always an out.

Use or abuse of Zen aside, though, presence was central in Cage’s “perennial philosophy” of sound. As he wrote, “with contemporary music there is no time to do anything like classifying. All you can do is suddenly listen, in the same way that when you catch a cold all you can do is suddenly sneeze.”³⁷⁰ Cage’s words about suddenly listening well sum up the same essential message he would articulate throughout his career. “Contemporary music is not so much art as it is life”: thought is not required; it is only necessary to *be*, suddenly, here and now.

Conclusion: the written presence

But the present is still too crowded, too confusing, too present to imagine. As sudden as sound may be, one can only base an aesthetic on sudden perception if one turns sudden sounding into a prerogative. If one takes Cage’s avowal of suddenness seriously, then thinking about not thinking becomes a normative mode of thinking. This is not another “koan,” but rather what I might term a tautology of presence, since “being,” in Cage’s sense, can only “be” suddenly if one presupposes (uppercase) Being, which is necessarily other than (lowercase) being. To put this another way, *there is no such thing as presence*. Presence only “exists” as a written presence, in writing or in speaking: there is no presence “out there” since the now has always already vanished. To simplify somewhat the ontological difference that Derrida described from Heidegger, uppercase “Being” can be understood as something static; lowercase “being,” as something kinetic: the two terms are somewhat like noun and verb.³⁷¹ The French *la présence*, which, as I described in the introduction, connotes a general static sense of “being there” or there-ness, is only thinkable on account of the various kinetic “beings” that one can see and experience in a particular place and time. This is the rub, so to speak, of an ontology, *any* ontology, since static Being endures on a different temporal order than particular kinetic “beings.” “The sign,” wrote Derrida, “is conceivable only *on the basis of* the presence that it defers and *in view of* the deferred presence one intends to reappropriate.”³⁷² This is why “Being,” or *la présence*, was a “written being” in Derrida’s view: it is already presupposed as the general form in which particular beings will appear, though it does not really “exist” since every second slips out of our hands.

This is to recall a familiar temporal antinomy. Music is *here*, alive in its moment, yet it vanishes right away, beckoning a musician or a philosopher toward ideas and truths that are by nature of an ideal and permanent kind. A basic premise of ontology may be stated thus: that a discourse may close the gap between kinetic beings—the fleeting sounds; whatever suddenly appears in the cafeteria—and the static sense of presence from which these fleeting appearances derive, and toward which they point.

³⁷⁰ Cage, *A Year from Monday*, 100.

³⁷¹ This clarification of the Heideggerian distinction between “Being” and “being” (*Sein* and *Seiend*) as a distinction between stasis and kinesis, or perhaps between noun and verb, is owed to Fann. Personal correspondence; Cf. *This Self We Deserve*, 12-13, 33-34.

³⁷² Derrida, “Differance,” 143.

Perhaps music is, to play a bit with all these (impossibly) lofty ideas, the very embodiment of ontology, since there is always a difference between sound in its moment and its echoes, between music as appearance and sound as essence. It takes a retrospective game to comprehend the latter through the former. Bergson's adage, "nothing is less [present] than the present," seems to have prefigured Derrida's notion that

there is nothing present without some traces referring to something non-present, some references to something else, somewhere else. That is, the trace of something that is not present determines our experience of the present, and so there is no pure present. A present is always marked by the trace of another present, of the other. Some other is always marked within the presence of the present.³⁷³

As we hear music, the absent echoes of many past sounds, of performed moments long gone, condition the experience of the present, making suddenness possible.

It is conspicuous that during the question-and-answer session after Cage's Julliard lecture, a couple of the audience members (both men whose voices I cannot recognize) questioned Cage about this very issue, putting the dilemma in more concrete terms. One audience member pointed out that Cage's compositions (like those by Feldman and Wolff) were not purely of "sound," but rather of certain deliberately conceived sounds—the composer used some method of choice and thus of exclusion, which undermines the whole premise of just "being there." Cage elided his auditor by claiming that while he did employ compositional methods, during the act of performance, "we weren't remembering: we were being in the present." Up jumped another respondent to press Cage's presentism. Their dialogue was quick paced, with one man often cutting off or talking over the other:

Respondent: In order to live our lives in the future, in order to be able to keep on living, we have to, uh, draw upon experience which we've had in the past.

Cage: Why?

Respondent: Well, how can... what?

Cage: Why?

Respondent: *Why!* Because... uh... how do you learn... how do you walk? You walk because you've understood either in the mind or...

Cage: Yes, but I don't walk by asking myself how do I do it. I simply walk.

Respondent: Yes, but at one point...

Cage: And I'm not drawing on my previous experience.

Respondent: In one point in your life you had to have the experience of finding out how to walk...

Cage: Well, fine. Then let it go.

Respondent: Or you have to find out from your parents talking how to talk. And I don't see how, uh, you can live your life completely...

³⁷³ Henri Bergson, *Matière et memoire: Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit* (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1965, originally published 1896); Jacques Derrida, quoted in Ning Zhang, "Jacques Derrida's First Visit to China," 154.

Cage [*presumably walking across the stage*]: Yes, but you see as I walk now it's no longer a problem. [*Laughter and applause from the audience shortly follow.*]

This exchange well sums up Cage's tactic of double negation in relation to the theme of presence. Cage was a sonic ontologist: really, a sonic charlatan. He excluded the past in favor of the "now"; but, if one follows his line of thinking, the "now," conversely, becomes the eternal condition of composition itself. We move beyond the simple "now" toward uppercase "Now," or uppercase "Being"—a kind of stasis, once again. Therefore, while Cage could be taken (on the surface, anyway) to have worked against any kind of nominal logic that would pin down what music "is"—since he wanted to escape intellection and affirm "pure" nowness, always dispersing, always refusing, etc.—this very slipperiness became a means for Cage to revive Ontology as a discourse on what is, or what is "now," in this very moment.

Presence is a kind of ontological myth. Maybe learning to walk was an inopportune choice—Cage's respondent could have simply pointed out that Tudor had to remember a lot of notes in order to "not remember," to "be in the present." In fact, we *are* only able to walk because we've walked before. Many steps lead up to the present, and while one does not need to think about every step one has taken in order to walk now, nevertheless our past experience remains invisibly, unconsciously constitutive with regard to how, why, and where we walk at any given moment. Cage put himself right in the middle of this apparent tension between experience "now" and the conditions of this experience, between the present moment and the absent past, disavowing memory even as he was already beholden to it. And out of this temporal antinomy, this double negation, came an endless flurry of speech—the Q & A went on intensively for twenty minutes or so, with various auditors trying to pin Cage down to one side of a coin. Cage responded every time by discursively flipping the coin.

The disavowal of the past, of memory, in favor of just being here, was not only a means to frustrate the intellectual crowd, but also bespeaks, once again, Cage's ontological view of sound. Which is to restate something I have said about each of the composers studied in the narrative that has unfolded: an "ontological" stance toward sound takes shape through a particular attitude, which one can sense through what composers *do*, if not through what they say. Permanence, or the enduring presence of "Now," a moment both in and out of time, is the very basis of any ontology, since Ontology studies what is. The idea that we can fix the now in words—or "crystallize" it—is a fundamental western myth. A white mythology par excellence.

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Postlude

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A Simulacrum of a Presence

“It got right through to me.” Cage was at first shy to demonstrate his vocal style to John Lennon. During a 1972 televised short film titled *John & Yoko in Syracuse, New York*, Cage appeared with Lennon and Yoko Ono around a table, smoking and conversing about voice.³⁷⁴ Ono (Cage’s longtime friend³⁷⁵) speculated that stress causes certain people to speak in the high register. She explained that women’s voices remain higher than men’s because women are suppressed in society, as if strangled, forced to speak from the nose and throat. The vocal screechiness of certain dictators, Hitler included, could also be explained by the tremendous stress of their situation. If one cannot relax, one’s voice must go higher. A bearded Cage, laughing, asked if his own voice had become so low on account of his relaxed spirit. While Ono affirmed “yes, you’re very relaxed,” a smiling Lennon conjectured that Cage’s bass voice was well suited to saying “Om.”

The conversation veered toward microphones and singing, and Cage said cheekily, “well, you’ve never heard me sing.” After some light goading from Ono and Lennon, Cage demonstrated his vocal style: a kind of low ululation on a “wah” vowel. He modulated the pitch downward, gurgling and vibrating in his throat as if a choking engine, and then ascended to a final short “ah.” “Beautiful,” said Ono right away, and as Cage leaned in with a wide puppy-dog grin, he asked Lennon “did you like it?” The former Beatle confirmed: “it got right through to me.”

The current narrative has described the rise of various “ontological” attitudes toward sound from Cage’s French predecessors up to his own mid-century moment. Having examined these predecessors and having listened for “ontological” sound in various configurations, I wager that the ground has been laid to question whether this “ontological” lineage ever really ended. This chance 1972 meeting between an avant-garde guru, a performance art celebrity, and a singer-songwriter icon may seem an odd place for us to end, but the work of Cage, Ono, and Lennon could be said to coalesce around at least two familiar themes. The first, of course, is presence: one only needs to recall the hordes of screaming Beatles fans, images of Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964), and Cage’s amplified typewriter to see that each of these artists approached the theme of liveness in his or her own way—or at least that liveness, stage presence, shock value, and so forth, remain central to their image in history and criticism. And Lennon’s reference to “Om” also bespeaks a common hippy-dippiness behind each of these artist’s aspirations to presence—Cage had already, in his own way, imagined

³⁷⁴ A clip of this obscure television special is available on YouTube as “John Cage, John Lennon & Yoko Ono”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6fYyw-XcfE>. Accessed 30 April 2021.

³⁷⁵ Ono’s first husband, composer Toshi Ichianagi, studied with Cage in New York during the 1950s, bringing Ono to Cage’s classes at the New School, and Ono is alleged to have met Cage separately while attending the Suzuki lectures at Columbia University. See Mark Swed, “A dean of Japanese music talks boundaries, John Cage and life with Yoko Ono,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 May 2015. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-toshi-ichianagi-profile-20150517-column.html>. Accessed 17 May 2021.

that there is no heaven, no hell below us, no countries, no possessions: “*Imagine all the people / Livin’ for today.*” Or, in Cage’s words: “we weren’t remembering: we were being in the present.”

Second, and keeping in view the weight each of these artists attached to “being there,” the work of Cage, Lennon, and Ono can also be said to coalesce around the decay of various “literate” art traditions in the twentieth century. The fame (and auction value) of Lennon’s lyric sheets attest to the fact that he basically never used notation, more or less eliding musical writing altogether, while Ono’s performance art can be seen as part of a revived “oral” tradition afforded by the advent of video recording—another form of documentation without literal inscription.³⁷⁶ Cage, as we have seen, had already expanded “composition” beyond the score, and by the time of this obscure television special, he had added his vocal gymnastics to his repertoire of sonic experiments.

These vocal gymnastics fell, like the scrape of Tudor’s piano strings or the sounds of the Maverick Concert Hall, under the banner of “composition itself” in Cage’s expanded sense. In 1970, he composed the text *Mureau* by “subjecting all the remarks of [Henry David] Thoreau about music, silence, and sounds ... to a series of I Ching operations,” thus composing, as he put it, “a mix of letters, syllables, words, phrases, and sentences.”³⁷⁷ In listening to a 1972 recording of Cage reading *Mureau*, one senses that his list should have gone in reverse: Cage begins with full sentences, but through the course of the performance, he begins to isolate syllables and to prolong the sounds of particular vowels, as if introducing new vocal elements gradually through the (hour-long) performance.³⁷⁸ Though these vocal sounds have a written text as their basis, Cage’s vocal style veers away completely from notation, intensifying the music of phonetics—the clicks of consonants and the grinding of his throat’s phonic metal. His modulations, his drones, his quick ascensions on certain repeated vowels, his growls and yelps, were not written down. And while Lennon included his own nonsense syllables on famed Beatles tracks—“*I am the Walrus/ Goo goo g’joob!*”—Cage affixed contact microphones to his throat or spoke closely to a vocal mike, performing the broken syllables and gurglings that he demonstrated for Ono and Lennon while on the road with Tudor. A live recording of “Mesostics Re Merce Cunningham (Untitled)” made in Germany (presumably during the ’70s), for instance, which was later released as part of the collection *The Art of David Tudor* (2013), features Tudor’s live electronic music—in which the hum of oscillators or recordings of insects and other natural phenomena would be played through vast arrays of homemade distortion devices to produce various drones, chirps, and white noise—accompanying Cage’s vocals. The electronic squeaks and bles (which surely were deafening) seem to pair well with Cage’s own verbal swoops, vibrating yells, and low drones (as if Artaud’s spirit from *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* was onstage with the Cage-Tudor duo).³⁷⁹

³⁷⁶ This is how Taruskin classed performance art: “recording and electro-acoustical technologies ... spurred the professional revival in the late twentieth century of age-old oral practices normally associated with folklore, giving rise to the genre that is known, for want of a better term, as performance art.” Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century*, 481.

³⁷⁷ John Cage, *M: Writings ’67-’72* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973), ix.

³⁷⁸ John Cage, “Mureau,” recorded 3 October 1972 and released as a cassette by Edition S Press. Available at: <https://youtu.be/R2t3JdtYGzM>. Accessed 15 May 2021.

³⁷⁹ David Tudor and John Cage, “Mesostics re Merce Cunningham (Untitled),” from *The Art of David Tudor* vol. 3 (Anthology of Recorded Music, 2013). Audio recording. Available at: <https://youtu.be/1NXA1N6YO3g>. Accessed 15 May 2021.

In thinking through Cage, Lennon, and Ono's respective "oral" traditions, that one hippy-dippy syllable sticks in my memory: "Om." More could be said about Lennon and Cage's meanderings into (Westernized, hippy-fied, orientalist) spiritualism, but not here. It suffices only to speculate that the former Beatle was not bluffing when he said that Cage's voice "got right through to me." Cage and Lennon seem to represent dual sides—maybe avant-garde and kitsch—of a technologically revived oral tradition, or perhaps an electronically invigorated expansion of "composition" to include all kinds of musical utterance previously limited to oral transmission.

Which brings us back, in closing, to the Derridean question of the enlargement of writing. When Taruskin observed that the advent of electronic media of musical reproduction signaled the waning of the western literate musical tradition, foreshadowing the possibility that we would enter a new "postliterate" musical phase, he stuck with a literal, commonsense idea of "writing." "[T]he one musical medium," he wrote, "that originated in the twentieth century—namely, the electronic—is the one that depends least on writing" in the sense of musical notation. But, to invoke Cage's words once again, when we stop thinking of composition in this limited sense—via parameters, scores, and other writerly methods—we get "composition itself." Which suggests, perhaps, that when a whole era disavows composition in the limited sense—which is exactly what happened during the late twentieth century—composition enlarges to encompass previously "oral" expressions into a new form of technologically reproducible writing. To play with a Derridean phrase, the end of the "literary" musical tradition might mean the beginning of a new written sonic tradition, leading eventually to the inscription of sound in digits planted deeply in mp3 files, democratized through widely available and user-friendly media of musical production like Garageband, and broadcast instantly across the globe via corporate powerhouses like Amazon or seemingly transparent ontological machines like YouTube.

And thus we say "writing" for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural "writing".... All this to describe not only the system of notation secondarily connected with these activities but the essence and the content of these activities themselves.³⁸⁰

Of course, such questions can only be raised but not pursued here. The present study is meant to describe the decay of a certain era of modernism, focused on a group of composers whose works and aesthetic positions center on the problematics of presence and *écriture*. To keep playing with Derridisms, though, these composers might be seen as the last composers of writing, and the first composers of "ontological" sound.

We can still hear this sound. Through the late twentieth century and up to our present, the idea of liberated sound, as well as the related notion that composition now arrives "in-itself" once it is freed from the score, are so frequently invoked—in music highbrow, lowbrow, and "no-brow"—that it is all too easy to forget that "sound" did not always exist in its present forms. Some would say we are in the great era of performance—of recorded performance, that is, where all repertoires are at our fingertips. Others may hold on to the idea of the face-to-face, of bodily co-presence as a basis of authenticity. In either case, the murmuring flow of speech continues. An endless speech captured

³⁸⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 9.

in texts; the flowing language to infinity. One may question what sound is, what it means or has meant, what use can be made of it to understand culture, selfhood, or any other topic of scholarly exchange. Often the discourse matters more than “being there” (and especially if “being there,” presence, *is* the basis of a discourse). Perhaps there “is” no music or sound without a written presence today, since music surely needs discursive media (especially if it is to generate capital).

Perhaps the dilemma of presence is the condition of possibility for music tout court, especially in our own “pomo” or “contemporary”—whatever one calls it—moment. The present is always outside itself; music is always suffused with speech. Perhaps the closure of an epoch of musical metaphysics meant the dawning of an epoch of Ontology. The production of musical presence ended when an epoch of simulated presence began.

Since the trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers to itself, it properly has no site—erasure belongs to its structure.³⁸¹

The present is still too crowding, after all, too confusing, too present to imagine.

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³⁸¹ Derrida, “Differance,” 156; Cf. Fann, *This Self We Deserve*, 13, 142, 152.

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