THE SONIC OBJECT: 
MUSIC IN/AS MATERIAL

WITH “THE EXCHANGE” (ORIGINAL MUSIC COMPOSITION)

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A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE
BY THE DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

[Adviser: Daniel Trueman]

November 2011
Abstract

Do vinyl records inspire or necessitate different listening postures than mp3s? How might we modulate our listening practice to account for the virtues and drawbacks of particular media? How do the ways we approach different media relate to the ways we think about music as an abstraction or concept, the ways we theorize about music itself?

This dissertation proposes radical differences in the ways we approach different formats, focusing especially on the unique allegiances and proclivities of the vinyl record collector. Part I examines vinyl and digital media culture through the lenses of the embodied cognition and ecological listening models. Part II interrogates the language used to describe these listening strategies, revealing a surprising, striking connection: the language used to account for the substantive differences between digital and physical media shadows the language used to account for the ways music behaves on the page, the ways the mechanics of music operate.

Each of six chapters begins with a narrative vignette that focuses on a particular record; taken together, these narrative sections create a kind of listening autobiography that stitches together and intensifies the argument over the course of the essay. This strategy allows for novel points of comparison, among them the Galant style with dubstep, Autechre with Tchaikovsky.

The original composition, “The Exchange,” that completes this dissertation represents an attempt to untangle my artistic personality, negotiating the territory where two crafts—writer and composer—overlap. I recorded my own voice speaking segments of prose, used various techniques to create discrete fragments out of this
recording, and generated MIDI data from each one. I sampled these fragments and their corresponding synthesizer accompaniments and mapped the samples onto percussion and keyboard triggers. By performing idiosyncratic patterns on the instruments the text emerges from shards of recombined speech.

This piece underscores the concerns that motivate my work: a queasiness about rigid boundaries between genres and artistic roles; a fascination with the human body’s capability to mold itself around a unique task; a conviction that following our creative imperatives, while they may drag us far afield, allows for their integration into something singular.
Acknowledgments

I’ve always fantasized about giving over completely to artistic practice, directing any given day’s energy towards the making of things. Dan Trueman, my advisor, mentor, and friend, seems intuitively to have understood this need. I’m grateful for his unflagging support, for his ability to tell me that something didn’t make any sense at all without ever compromising that unflagging support, for his willingness to take what I’m sure amounted to many, many leaps of faith as I untangled this project.

I didn’t realize scholarly prose was permitted to be beautiful until I read Barbara White’s. I thank her for setting this example, for her willingness to shepherd this project from the very beginning (despite needing to far exceed her role as “second reader” in order to do so), and for her generous, persistent encouragement of my prose work, my musical personality and, most often and most thankfully, their intersection.

Paul Lansky oversaw—and indeed inspired—my fledgling attempts to sort out whether I was a writer or a composer, and spent many hours helping me redefine my artistic personality so that I might account for both impulses. Steve Mackey had the idea, five years ago, to add something—maybe text?—to the first proper composition I made at Princeton, to “plant a flower,” so to speak; this suggestion profoundly changed my artistic trajectory, and I am grateful for it. Dmitri Tymoczko regularly blew my mind in first his graduate seminar and then, perhaps more my speed, in the lectures he quite fortunately enlisted me to attend as one of his preceptors. Rinde Eckert showed me that a lack of boxes into which we might conveniently pack our work doesn’t justify a lack of effort to do our work regardless.
Greg Smith, with whom I am in constant communication as I finish this project, provided limitless support, guidance, wisdom, and reassurance throughout the process. Cindy Masterson likewise made life easier in a million ways. I both thank her and assure her that I will return (most of) my keys upon receipt of my degree.

The Princeton Writing Program has been my silent collaborator as I thought through this project, articulating the things I knew I wanted my writing to do but for which I lacked a convincing vocabulary. Judy Swan is particularly adept at expressing what we endeavor to do when we put words on a page, at giving writers words for ambitions often invisible to themselves. Andrea Scott persuaded me that my project did something exciting. Keith Shaw offered valuable insight into my then work-in-progress, offered to read successive drafts, and even spread word of my crazy dissertation composition performance around the department and surely is responsible for a spike in viewing statistics on Vimeo. Finally, Amanda Irwin Wilkins expertly navigated the unsteady waters between personal and scholarly motive in order to see something promising in this project, and has perhaps unknowingly reassured me that I bring something of value to the outstanding community of scholars, thinkers, and people that she’s taken great pains to assemble.

Megan Gilbert gave me an unconventional audience for this work by encouraging me to read at “salon,” a monthly gathering at which Rebecca Keith and Dan Hai were also regular attendees and participants. Baldur Gudbjornsson gave me my first-ever vinyl record and is therefore responsible for the entire essay. Mike Williams and Josef Martonyi inspired and continued to inspire me to listen.
voraciously and honestly, and did the all-important work of convincing me that music is something around which one could build a life.

My family, as anyone who has ever attended a performance of mine can attest, is unbelievably supportive of my artistic and scholarly efforts, some of which have surely tried the patience of even the most loving parents, brothers, grandmothers, aunts, and uncles. Vincent Marano’s dedication to the artist’s life has long been an inspiration. My father, Anthony Mazzariello, modeled good musicianship and, more importantly, good character. My mother, Erminia Mazzariello, has always known and has never hesitated to remind me that I am supposed to be writing, and has always given me a sympathetic ear, often over the phone (unless, of course, she has to operate call-waiting during the session). My brother, Luigi Mazzariello, is at the center of the story that generated my original composition. I’m fortunate to call him a brother and honored to call him a friend.

Finally, Christie, this work is your handiwork, its writer is the product of your craft: imagining spaces in which people could achieve the best of themselves and erecting such a space around us. Thank you. And Max? Words fail.
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(I. In)
“Ten or fifteen years from now, there will be something new. We’ll be selling little silicone chips. You’ll be able to encode a whole album on a chip the size of your fingernail and carry a whole record library in your pocket.”

Barry Bergmen, proprietor of Record Bar, sometime in the late ‘80s
1. Saint Dymphna

Damon, her father, the mad king, sends spies. They discover Dymphna in Gheel, near Antwerp. Damon arrives in haste, begs Dymphna to return with him to Ireland, as his bride. Repulsed, she rejects her father’s proposition. The king cannot have his daughter’s hand. Instead, enraged, he takes her head.

The needle drops onto Saint Dymphna, presses into her contours and flattens her grooves. This will be a protracted death, agonizing, no swift beheading. A million ridges scratched smooth, turn by slow turn. I am Damon, the mad king; I squash and sanctify her in one murderous move. She’ll sing, but softer every time, until her voice is too faint to hear. Alone, at night, in a library, I do my dirty work. Quietly, with great deliberation, I cut her down.

But I am the one laid low. Indeed a saint, a worker of miracles, she teases, knows I don’t know where to begin. Which side? My father ruled the records; I never knew about the scratches near the label revealing A or B, so for Saint Dymphna, my first, I have to guess. I guess wrong but it’s perfect: the record, upside-down, begins off the edge and sounds wrong, as if I’ve undershot the groove and the needle is stuck, somewhere on the blank part. I hear a cycle, machine-noise; this is what happens when you miss.

Lift the needle and try again. It sounds the same and my confidence is shot. I’ve made the same mistake. The pattern plays over and over. If I wait one minute I will hear thirty-three and one-third cycles, I surmise, but probably I am wrecking something by letting this experiment continue. Move to lift the needle and try yet
again. Then freeze. Something is happening to this sound. A wooden tap, close to my ears, a stick against the rim of a drum? Then a woman screaming, faintly, well in the distance, far enough away that I’m unsure if I’m humanizing the screech of a machine. The mechanically repeated snare seals the deal: these sounds are really there, pressed into vinyl, intentional. A vocoded voice, the center cut out, a splash of electronics, and the song takes off.

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The fact of physical contact, stylus on moving surface, brings sound out of silence. On “Inners Pace,” Side B track 1 on *Saint Dymphna* by Gang Gang Dance, the sound brought out of silence references, accidentally or not, this physical fact:

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It sounds like what it is: a spike boring into tiny grooves on a surface spinning on its axis. The loop feels unintentional, ambiguous; you probably hear the ring-modulated treble percussion as beginning on the dotted eighth and concluding at the second quintuplet, but the bass line confounds this hearing, articulating the tonic at its own dotted eighth and thereby asserting a different “one.” The bass drum seems to side with the bassline, splitting the percussion apparatus, deployed as it is toward two different ends with respect to articulating the bar line. It sounds, in short, like the influence of some kind of machine, some automation. You listen to the track and immediately imagine objects in space colliding in a particular way: scraping each other, tactile, like needles and records. Which is what you presumably have in front of you if, like me, you decided to start buying records, happened to begin with this particular LP, and happened to start it on the second side, unsure of the workings of the object and the machinery designed to make it speak.

A string of remarkable coincidences—buying *Saint Dymphna* as your first proper vinyl purchase, accidentally beginning on the B side—leads to the birth of an idea: there’s something singular, even magical, about the alignment of physical and aural reality. Beating a drum, scraping a fretboard: it sounds the way it looks. Your brain fills in the blanks, attributes a particular sonic fact to a particular physical circumstance. So this spinning disc with a needle pressed into its surface and the cyclic repetition in my headphones satisfies the impulse to connect what I know is happening in the room with what I hear to be the aural result.

I used to watch my father’s fingers as he tore the keyboard apart; this was my first impression of music, a body moving through space and time with sophistication,
a remarkable material event calling forth corresponding sound. Now I hear backwards again: what physical action does the sound mandate? If in the case of Chopin, Op 10 No 12, an elastic left hand:

Example 1.2. Chopin, Etude Op. 10 No. 12 “Revolutionary,” measures 1-4

then in the case of Gang Gang Dance, *Saint Dymphna*, side B track 1, a spike and a ring of ridges. It was meant for vinyl. I have no sonic correlate for a CD player or disc drive: a laser, a series of zeros and ones, a CPU in the act of translation doesn’t, to my mind, sound like anything in particular. But my brain seems to understand a needle and a slab of contoured plastic.

And what about the murderous impulse? I process that as well. That this is delicate business. It can’t go on forever; eventually the needle will scratch the record
out of the record. Through bringing out the sound I destroy the sound, slowly.

On purpose.

My father would rarely play the piano. The experience of watching him was limited, sacred, finite. A privilege. So too with records: listening is a special occasion because Saint Dymphna’s days are numbered. I won’t play the LP while I clean my apartment, and I’m thankful I can’t take the sound with me on the subway. Listening has consequences. You’d better pay close attention, because one day it won’t sound as good and one later day it won’t sound at all. I am well aware of this fact because I witness it happening. I watch myself stab the surface. I hear the crackle of violent contact every single time. The music disappears before my ears. This makes listening to records very old fashioned. I’m thinking less about the fifties and more about the centuries before recordings, when, I imagine, you had to work for your music. Go out and encounter it in the world, listen as it disappears into the ether, form a lasting impression, somehow possess this unpossessable entity, Damon, mad king...

Or is this idea of possession a contemporary conceit? Would it occur to our listener ancestor to grab hold of the sound and add it to her aural library? Because to-go containers for music didn’t exist, perhaps no one could imagine the possibility of taking it with them and a lamentation for lack of permanence likewise didn’t exist. So listening to records isn’t old fashioned after all, it’s immanently contemporary: only after achieving the ability to clone a sound and keep it forever does choosing not to do so, a quiet protest, make any sense at all. Inasmuch as it makes sense to choose to spend more money for the obligation to degrade your purchase, Damon, mad king...
Body Sympathy

Watching someone windmill an electric guitar or slam a stick against a drum mobilizes the body, allows it to resonate in sympathy with the physical act. “Expressive aesthetic properties,” notes Gracyk, in his rejection of Scruton’s “traditional elitism,” “depend on our ‘sympathetic response’ to musical movements and gestures.”1 The realization, if his title is any indication, seems to have allowed him to “stop worrying and love Led Zeppelin.” Far from merely being one buttoned-up philosopher’s way into a whole new repertoire, however, the claim is finding more and more concrete substantiation in the field of gestural cognition, a growing research focus across disciplines. “The hypothesis that action and perception share common neuronal codes is getting increasing empirical support,”2 according to Leman. Emboldened fewer than forty pages later, he goes further, specifying that “perception and action share common neuronal event codes, that is, a common representational medium for perceived events (perception) and intended or to-be-generated events (action).”3 What we detect feels like what we intend to do.

In the case of music, sound buoys the mirroring we quietly imagine—or indeed feel—in our limbs, or perhaps provides an audible response to our actual gesticulating, soundtracks our air-guitar or -drumming. “Stimulus properties are turned into

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3 Ibid., 87.
recognition of the stimulus-source relationships,” Leman continues, “through active involvement of body movement on the physical energy.” Something happens in the sound world and our neurons fire as if we are ourselves responsible for the event. Our “perception of sound comes down to finding the proper parameters of the gesture that will allow the resynthesis of what is heard,” so our “response” might be better imagined as a kind of participation in the very making of sound.

Live shows especially foreground this visceral, bodily simulacrum of sonic control demonstrated in musical gestures. Coming as I did from a “classical” world I remember, at one of my first real indie rock shows, pointing to a particularly enthusiastic air-drummer in the throes of a wildly pantomimed accompaniment to Rainer Maria’s performance and making some snide remark to my in-the-know companion, who informed me that this air-drummer had been the opening act. He was on tour with the band and had obviously committed their set to physical memory. Well within his gestural repertoire was the drum pattern for “Artificial Light, specifically:

Example 1.3. Rainer Maria, “Artificial Light,” A Better Version of Me. Polyvinyl CD 039

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4 Ibid., 89.
5 Ibid., 47.
6 This was at the Magic Stick in Detroit, Summer of 2002ish, and the air drummer I not-so-silently mocked was Mike Kinsella, who performs as Owen and records for Polyvinyl.
“The better we know the music, the more we enjoy its simulated control,” and on that night I found myself in a fully indoctrinated audience, though the different simulated controls required very distinct pieces of gestural vocabulary. The air-guitarists were striking a markedly different sort of posture, Kyle Fischer’s steady thirty-second-note pulse on “Artificial Light” requiring a kind of rapt attention. Rather than conjure up a Pete Townshend-style rhythmic “lick,” easily and more conventionally fake-strummed and fingered, the Fischer acolytes swayed with the half-note harmonic rhythm while their right hands oscillated up and down, sixteen times per sway, eyes closed, devotional:

Example 1.4. Rainer Maria, “Artificial Light,” *A Better Version of Me*, Polyvinyl CD 039

These two physical responses to two different instruments appear to map neatly onto Godøy’s two divisions between “sound-producing actions,” *ballistic* and *sustained*. In the former, the *ballistic* action, exemplified by the air-drummer, one follows “a brief, concentrated effort” with “a phase of relaxation.” “The moment of impact,” Godøy explains, “is immediately followed by a shorter or longer period of energy dissipation in which the sound usually has a decaying shape.” (This decaying shape, as if the drummer had read Godøy, is build into the beat itself: the accented two

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8 I’m thinking of, say, the “Baba O’Reilly” riff, inspiring an almost percussive ‘windmill’ move, well in rhythm.
followed by the thirty-second-note grace note followed by the kick drum, three hits
that form a “natural” diminuendo off of every two and four.) In Godøy’s counterterm,
the sustained action, apparently exemplified by the air-guitarist, one engages in
“continuous effort,” as in the case of “blowing, singing, and bowing, and the shape of
the sound may just as well be flat or even ascending (i.e. having a crescendo) because
of the continuous transfer of energy in the sound-producing actions.” The critical
moment in Godøy’s text, though, comes immediately after this explanation of the
binary division: that these actions might also be “concatenated into more composite
actions, such as several hittings in a drum roll or several sustained tones in a long
melody.” That we might like to describe a musical gesture in more complex terms than
‘ballistic’ or ‘sustained’ seems straightforward enough: upon close inspection, the look
of an air guitarist mirroring Kyle Fischer suggests a kind of shape-shifting between
ballistic and sustained, the harmony progressing through long-feeling half notes
(sustained), each composed of sixteen thirty-second-note “hits” across the strings
(ballistic). Asking whether or not Godøy’s division is ever truly operable is tempting.
Do the mechanisms of music-making, and sound production generally, always blur
these theoretical possibilities? Even the eighth note pulse on the cymbal, a seemingly
textbook ballistic action, serves to throw the division into disarray; while each
iteration might present a listener with that discrete ballistic action, a single hit that
decays as expected, the real music, the pulse, creates a kind of sustained wash of
sound that abstracting into notation fails to capture. We attempt to classify a musical
gesture into this or that sort of move, but the more we zoom in on the gesture itself,
the more it evades our best efforts, the more it reveals its complexity. And yet we’re capable of apprehending music in our bones. Or, more precisely, in our nerves.

The capacity to feel, internalize, and then enact complex relationships between sound-producing actions reveals the sophistication of our motor programs, our mental images of the physical processes necessary to accomplish a specific task. “There is an incessant simulation and reenactment in our minds of what we perceive and a constant formation of hypotheses as to the causes of what we perceive,” Godøy continues, and ultimately concludes “we mentally imitate sound-producing actions when we listen attentively to music.” Listening, then, is on some level a process of mimicry.

Conventionally we consider this motor programming apparatus with respect to musical components produced by a performer: one feels the drummer’s beat in one’s hands and feet, one feels the singer’s tones in one’s throat. Even when the “performer” is noticeably absent, as in the case of electronic dance music, the vestiges of the human body mobilized in time are sufficient to compel a physical response: the music asks our bodies to imagine what they might have to do to make such sounds, and we derive a certain kind of pleasure when we’re asked to feel something difficult or even impossible for our bodies to achieve. Part of the appeal of the drum n’ bass genre, for instance, might be its ability to turn the listener into a kind of Superdrummer, physically detecting—and even enacting, on some level—what it might be like to play that fast and with that degree of precision.

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“Provided the sound has the dynamo-agogic development corresponding to a natural movement,” which “Squarepusher’s Theme” certainly does—at least initially—“it will evoke the impression of this movement in us.”

Squarepusher seems to be intuitively aware of this sort of response; the intensification of rhythmic activity might be best though of as a constant raising of stakes with respect to our ability to enact what we hear. The first phrase baits us, so to speak, into body sympathy, presents a “performable” figure:

Example 1.5. Squarepusher, “Squarepusher Theme” *Feed Me Weird Things*, Sony Music Entertainment (Japan), CD 8323, 0:23-0:35

“In order to fully experience music,” Leman reminds us, “it is essential to understand its driving force, which is the expression of inner movement. The

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composer makes music that is full of inner movements. The musician gives shape to these inner movements by translating them into proper body gestures, and the good music listener is able to trace and imitate these movements in order to experience and understand the music properly. \textsuperscript{11} The fills at the ends of phrases begin to unsettle us as physical respondents. They’re \textit{fast}, and they serve to unsettle the way we’ve been feeling the beat thus far, hanging back a bit into the syncopations rather than feeling every single 16\textsuperscript{th} note. As we’re well en route to understanding this music “properly” by a quiet, subtle internal mimicking, Squarepusher ups the ante:

Example 1.6. Squarepusher, “Squarepusher Theme” \textit{Feed Me Weird Things}, Sony Music Entertainment (Japan), CD 8323, 0:46-0:58

\textsuperscript{11} Leman (on Truslit), \textit{Embodied Music Cognition and Mediation Technology}, 44.
Then things get fully out of control:

Example 1.7. Squarepusher, “Squarepusher Theme” *Feed Me Weird Things*, Sony Music Entertainment (Japan), CD 8323, 0:58-1:13

The initial musical movements that compelled our physical response have intensified to the point that we simply cannot imagine performing the music anymore. Does this suddenly lock us out of our subjective response? Does Squarepusher lose us by phase
three? Clarke asserts that “a listener’s sense of meaning in music is powerfully bound up with his or her experience of being subjectively engaged (or alienated) by the music, and with the variety of subjective states that music can afford.”

Does the impossibly intensified beat risk alienating the thus far sympathetic listener? Or, to use Clarke’s terminology, what sort of “subjective state” does phase three inspire in a listener? He provides a possible answer. “An important component of that subjective engagement with music,” Clarke continues, “is its corporeal, proprioceptive, and motional quality, which may on occasion provide listeners with experiences of ‘impossible worlds’ that have some of the same attractions as do other forms of virtual reality. Just as Cook has argued that music is a means of gaining insight into other cultures and histories, and that we listen to music ‘not just for the good sounds, though there is that, but in order to gain some insight into those (sub)cultures,’ so too music affords peculiarly direct insight into a limitless variety of subjective experiences of motion and embodiment—real and virtual.”

Perhaps one listens to this sort of music, then, for the experience of living and playing in an “impossible world,” one in which we can actually perform 64th notes across our limbs at 80 bpm. Or, considering that we gratefully settle back into the “performable,” physically attainable figures when they return, we might listen to this sort of music for the sense of jumping from the possible to the impossible and back again. We move between a figure we can actually mirror—a figure into which our bodies can settle—and something we can only imagine.

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14 Clarke, *Ways of Listening,* 90.
mirroring, a kind of physical hypothetical; the tension between musical gestures we can and can’t imagine ourselves performing drives the piece.

But what happens when the medium itself activates this motor programming apparatus, when it transports us to a kind of virtual world? Differences in format might actually change the way our bodies respond to the sounds these different formats convey. I certainly couldn’t experience “Inners Pace” on Saint Dymphna in the same way had the format been CD or mp3; my disorientation, the result of confusing the sound of the machine itself and the sound the machine is designed to translate, simply wouldn’t have been able to exist. This represents a special case, of course; the track seems to reference, if not the sound of a spinning record, then some other machine-dependent, cyclic “noise.” We see evidence for the character of the sound in the physical circumstances of the record player and assume, momentarily, a causal relationship.

The tune drops in and the mirage dissolves, but the damage, so to speak, has been done: the physics of the record player have been hardwired to the sonic result. It’s impossible to hear the rest of the side the same way ever again. And once it occurs to you, it might be impossible to hear any record the same way ever again. The needle drops on a rotating plastic disc and our bodies respond in kind to the ballistic and sustained gestures encoded on its surface, the musical events it serves to memorialize. But perhaps our bodies detect and sympathize with the meta-event as well, “the sustained sound-producing action”\textsuperscript{15} of the interaction between vinyl and needle. Perhaps there exists a motor program for the format-specific act of listening to

\textsuperscript{15} Godøy, “Motor-Mimetic Music Cognition,” 318.
records, like running a moistened finger around the rim of a wine glass. Pressure and rotation sing.

Castles Made of Sand

Pressure and rotation, however, have consequences. The needle will, over time, degrade the record until sound quality diminishes perceptibly. Every time we re-listen to a record it sounds worse, theoretically, for wear. It’s as if the sound of the machine competes, patiently, with the sound of the music, continuously over the life of a record. And the machine will always win in time.

Another competition occurs simultaneously, however: as the machine overtakes the music, literally grinding it out of the record’s surface, the memory overtakes the machine. We write a physical, mental, and emotional program as we listen, attentively and repeatedly, as if the grooves scratched out of the vinyl are reinscribed on our bodies in the form of new neural pathways, muscular associations, and biographical signposts, taking a photograph of a sand castle before the surf washes it away. Once you become aware that your records are dying, you commit to this internal programming all the more willingly. Like the way Gang Gang Dance’s “Inners Pace” changes your hearing forever, realizing the reality of the object’s inevitable demise irrevocably transforms your listening practice. So listening to records might accurately be called “retro,” but not in the sense that a present-day vinyl aficionado invokes nostalgia for the sixties or seventies. Rather, the resurgence of records reclaims a sort of listening that started to wither at moment of music’s
mechanical reproduction, when musical objects began to transform into “systems similar to roads and canals” instead of “precious art objects.”

Something was lost during this transformation. “One might subsume the eliminated element in the term ‘aura’ and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.”

The watershed moment eerily predicted by Barry Bergmen—and, of course, Walter Benjamin—came to pass; the music library miniaturized into the size of a pack of cigarettes. This constituted an event horizon for the record, a point of no return after which listening on vinyl became a reclamation of old values.

Perhaps, though, dubbing them “old values” misses the mark. Values imply choices between possibilities, and a distracted listening justified by the ability to simply re-experience without cost or consequence simply wasn’t an option before recordings became widely accessible. We might idealistically imagine an attentive listening, an effort to etch the sound into memory, as the de facto posture, as the inevitable stance the listener of old must have assumed when confronted with, say, a Mozart symphony; one couldn’t listen to “Jupiter” while washing dishes or brushing teeth.

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out the toilet. Records bring us back to an earlier listening practice but take us there of our own choice; in that respect the posture is new and novel. No one has ever listened like this before.

**Ownership and Knowing**

This new, novel listening posture makes sense of some “old school” personalities. One of my haughtier professors in college used to ask if I “knew” Mahler symphonies or Berlioz overtures or *Peter Grimes*. I never answered in the affirmative, even though the respective works might have been in my CD collection; he clearly wasn’t asking if I owned the artifact or even if I’d heard the compositions before. “Knowing” a piece of music, as a listener, suggests a certain level of intimacy for which ownership is perhaps a prerequisite but in no way guarantees. Indeed the fact of ownership on the more popular CD/mp3 formats might, as I’ve suggested, actually suppress our ability to get to “know” a work, these formats offering as they do the possibility of limitless future encounters that deflate any sense of urgency in the present listening act. “In the beginning,” claims Attali, “it was a mere possession: one ‘had’ music, one did not listen to it.”

The record, though, in its persistent degradation, encourages our rapt attention. The object we “own” might bear the physical and aural traces of wear, but each surface scratch, each amplified pop or hiss signals the presence of a profound re-wiring in the listening body, an enhanced sense of knowing.

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The needle marks the record but it also marks its listener, etching plastic grooves into human memory. We might fully commit to this project through the rigor of our listening practice, but we also might try it on for size as we acquire—and display—the physical insignia of careful, deliberate listening. We might wave records like flags.
2. Draft 7.30

I acquired another LP before *Saint Dymphna*. My friend Baldur gave me Autechre’s *Draft 7.30*, which he finds virtually unlistenable, in a transparent plastic bag, straight off the shelf where he keeps his record collection. I carried it proudly on subways and the New Jersey Transit, displayed it on the barstool next to me when Megan and I stopped for a drink. I wore it like a badge that night, falsely declaring myself a part of the subterranean culture that prefers its music analog and can lecture you at length about how much warmer it sounds on vinyl, through expensive tube preamps and diamond-tipped needles.

Or maybe an authentic member of vinyl culture could identify me as one of the *nouveaux riches*; what sense does it make, they might wonder, to spend twenty-three dollars on this computer music, digital through and through? It’s supposed to sound brittle and inhuman; pressing it to vinyl is a profound waste of resources. Unless displaying this beautiful swirly cover is somehow ironic, a Sarah Palin t-shirt at a punk show?

Disregarding the specifics of the hipster reaction, this object marks me, orients me in some way to a whole mode of acquisition. I’m cooler than you, it sneers. Or perhaps it exposes me, proves I’m a poser. This is not so simple as a CD in a dainty plastic shopping bag. Which is how I first came to know this music; I recognized the cover as I leafed through Baldur’s LPs, but seeing it blown up struck me.

“Blown up.” The word choice betrays my point of reference: it’s a gigantic CD in my account, an enlargement of conventional media. Does this reflect some market
reality? I imagine a roomful of suits arguing with the artist, that is has to “pop” on a four and a half inch square and in the iTunes album art window. “We are not in the business of selling canvases,” they might have said. “Work smaller.” And maybe they were onto something: it does, in fact, look good in the iTunes album art window, and it looks good as a CD square as well. But the LP cover doesn’t just look good. It’s breathtaking. We have big plans for it. It will live, along with The Present’s *World I See*, on our wall, on a thin-lipped shelf designed for just such a purpose, and preside over the apartment, the marriage, houseguests, dinner parties, the arrival of children.

I mean this as a tribute. I mean to say that this object is art. I curate my own small museum, *Draft 7.30* my Starry Night, my trump card. For our guests I will point out that the album begins with nineteen seconds of silence, time during which, I theorize, you are supposed to contend with this artwork. You look around the room, waiting for the music to begin, wondering how long this cleverness will continue. You fixate on the most interesting thing in your vicinity, which must be the glorious cover in your hands. Just when you begin to lose yourself in its contours and subtleties of shading the beat drops, reminding you that this image and this future-sound are correlated. Can we hear it? I drop the needle. Our guests nod in appreciation at the nineteen blank seconds. Then the intricate almost-loops penetrate the attentive silence.

“She silence.” Betrayed again. What about the needle-sound? This could compromise my pet theory about nineteen seconds of respectful art-time. If you listen to *Draft 7.30* on vinyl, then the nineteen seconds of “silence” aren’t silent at all, they sound of abrasion and might draw you into a different sort of listening, a deep awareness of the physics of your sound system. Which would then be suddenly, even
violently, interrupted by the “real” sound, the punch of a bass drum. Especially if, confused, you starting dialing up the volume during those nineteen seconds. You’re made even more aware of needle-sound and static, and then that bass drum punches harder, maybe much harder, than you originally intended. Make a dash for the volume wheel. Maybe even start the record over, now that you know what’s coming.

I shouldn’t have told them about the silence. Now they’ll never hear it right.

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The album tucked under your arm as you navigate bars, subways, and commuter rails might say something about you. Before identifying the slab of cardboard and plastic as, say, an Autechre record, before noticing the cover art for specifically, say, Draft 7.30 as opposed to some other Autechre release, an observer might mark you as a member of a particular subculture. They might see your curious record collecting practice as a kind of throwback, an anachronism, “retro,” a reference, the invocation of another era. Alternatively, they might see it as a sign of audiophilia, envisioning your careful, pure analog home listening setup; imagining your modality of listening that depends on high fidelity and values “warm” sounds. Or perhaps they can name the artist and the record and thereby conclude that you don’t know what you’re doing. It’s computer music, meant for downloading and earbudding; on vinyl it’s simply a waste of money.

Maybe, though, the observer knows you know all of that and chose the format for some other reason, some motivation you can’t quite articulate. Is it that this particular album feels multivalent to you? That in its visual appeal and its literal
weight it becomes more than just the sonic facts? The gorgeous swirling cover seems somehow implicated in the music,

\[ \text{Example 2.1. Autechre, “Xylin Room,” Draft 7.30, Warp LP 111, 0:19-0:31} \]

cold grey against visceral, seductive, corporeal, undulating lines, a depiction of a sympathy that the sounds pulled out of the object have in common with the artwork that adorns it. The visual-writ-large and the aural cross-reference each other; a CD square would seem like the artwork in miniature, its representation rather than the thing itself.

Or perhaps you’re motivated by the way these particular grooves pressed into plastic interact with the machinery that translates them into sound, the way the initial silence anchors you to the spot, insists that you become aware of your surroundings,
note the needle hiss, the crackle and pop, dial up the volume and notice them even more, until the beat gloriously drops and you are yanked into the tune, sucked from the literal into the representational, the real sound of a needle pressing into plastic subsumed by the figurative sound, the imitation of what it might sound like to be in the same room as the duo from Rochdale as the algorithmic rhythm kicks in.

**Object as Marker**

The experience of music is always an engagement with a larger human community. In deciding whether to pursue aesthetic engagement, we are conducting an imaginative experiment: what kind of a person must I be, I ask myself, in order to sympathize, or identify, with this?19

Gracyk (via Scruton) here ruminates on the act of listening broadly, but choosing a particular medium to deliver musical content likewise asserts cultural (and subcultural) membership. So too does the degree to which we actively engage these choices. And as with any form of self-identification, allegiance to a particular medium marks us from without as well as from within: others sort us into groups as readily and (un)willingly as we sort ourselves.

“To listen from within a culture,” Gracyk likewise claims, “is to adjust one’s listening to the kind of music heard, to understand it with historically appropriate listening habits, and to listen imaginatively, with the expectations or imaginative projections appropriate to the style of music in question. It is, in short, to belong to a

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specific musical culture demanding distinct cultural capital.”\textsuperscript{20} Gracyk is here talking about genre, but the same principles also apply with respect to the medium of choice: “music’s aesthetic value emerges when experiencing it. Its aesthetic rewards are generally limited to persons possessing appropriate cultural capital and to whom such music personally matters. Music’s value is therefore a function of joining in a musical culture.”\textsuperscript{21} These cultures define themselves with respect to not only genre, but to medium as well, and in so doing cut uniquely across the neat divisions that could apply if we were to consider genre alone.

We might perform various simple mappings between medium of choice and cultural membership. We might consider, for example, when a listener “came of age” and thereby make somewhat reliable predictions about the sorts of media we might find on their shelves or hard drives. A generation of tech-literate and Internet-savvy consumers probably prefers mp3s synched to various hand-held electronic devices. Those less comfortable with the personal computer might choose CDs and play them on a home system, a car stereo, or even a Discman. Finally, “those who, for various reasons, resist technology or progress,” writes George Plasketes of vinyl collectors, “determinedly clinging to the artifact, collecting or preserving a part of it because of the meaning and experience contained within.”\textsuperscript{22} We move along a kind of continuum from whiz kid to Luddite, from the mp3 to the record. The present situation, however,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Theodore Gracyk, \textit{Listening to Popular Music}, 126.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 132.
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challenges these easy mappings, and reveals collisions between cultures often considered to be at odds.

Nowadays new records often contain a slip of paper which reads something like “Dear lucky, lucky consumer: With the purchase of this copy of Teen Dream on vinyl LP, you are hereby offered access of all of its tracks as mp3s,” followed by a Web address and a download code. This complicates the conventional division of music cultures we just performed. Why offer mp3s to those listeners who “resist technology or progress?” The present reality is that the opposite ends of our continuum cross-contaminate each other; you’ll find young(ish) folks with iPods digging through stacks of vinyl alongside collectors who don’t own a computer.

The economics of listening further complicate the situation, as determining the true cost of different media depends on a particularly complex equation. Vinyl used to be the cheapest way to go; jumping to CD involved the purchase of a new machine as well as a commitment to a more expensive medium, while listening on mp3 required all the startup cost of moving to CD plus a computer plus an mp3 player, if you wanted the full portable effect. The marked driving down of costs for computers and mp3 players, though, has confounded any attempts at a simple economic equation; indeed the aforementioned paradigm might have inverted. Records are now typically up to twice the cost of their CD counterparts, and still more expensive than $.99 mp3s. And the new vinyl listener comes from mp3 or CD culture so must add the cost of a turntable as well.

23 Beach House, Teen Dream, Sub Pop LP 845.
So is a record listener the ultimate cyber-bourgeois poser or a technology-fearing (or impoverished) collector? That question might not exactly frame the situation in the most productive terms. Perhaps medium choice itself is less significant than the degree to which the listener engages that choice, indeed the degree to which the listener is aware of making a choice at all.

We return to Gracyk, once again with a mind to applying his focus on genre to our own focus on medium. After an attempt to collapse the distinction between ‘popular’ and ‘serious’ musics on aesthetic terms, he turns to the divisive concept of listening strategy: “If there are no aesthetic properties that distinguish popular music from serious music, there is nonetheless a widely endorsed account of the different listening strategies employed by their respective audiences. The key idea is that there are two distinct ways to respond to music, and the mode generally adopted for Mozart and Stravinsky differs from the mode employed in response to Chuck Berry, Shania Twain, and U2.”  

He elaborates: “The distinction between popular and serious music has a long history of being handled…by positing a difference between active and passive consumption that corresponds to attending to the different elements of the music. Historically, it has been presented as the difference between listening and hearing.”

This idea of active engagement versus passive reception, while most often inelegantly invoked to divide music cultures into high- and low-brow, might be redeemed, productively applied to medium choice instead of musical taste: those who

25 Ibid., 135.
interrogate media themselves, who resist cultural norms through this interrogation, become the avatars of active engagement, whatever that might mean in a given cultural moment. A decade or so ago it meant exploding the artist’s governing authority of the musical experience and creating diverse playlists, asserting the listener’s ability to create the superstructure of the listening arc with yet-unheard-of effectiveness. Now, perhaps, it means reinvesting in the artifact, resisting a cultural practice that has quickly become lazy, passive, inert.

This form of resistance wears camouflage. It looks to the outside observer like cultural vestige or else a kind of overwrought hip posturing, renders us conservatives or imposters, suggests lack of integrity or just plain weirdness. Yet the virtues of the vinyl format might be most effectively extolled to such outside, thoroughly enculturated observers, namely through the objects’ visual and tactile resonances.

**True Multimedia**

Vinyl, to those enculturated in CD culture, reinvigorates the aura of the object. When CDs first burst onto the scene in the late 80s, vinyl aficionados resisted the relegation of album-associated artwork to a 5” X 5” square.²⁶ For those raised on large-format visual and tactile experience, the CD felt like a diminishment of the artifact’s power. Yet just as the cost-structure inverts in the present circumstance, the so-called vinyl resurgence, so too does the capacity of the object to communicate its object-ness, to announce its relevance, its meaning, its ability to take up space. I had never bought a record before *Saint Dymphna*, had never walked around with one.

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before Draft 7.30. The experience was that of magnification of the CD experience, an intensification of the thrill of possession. I own Draft 7.30 on CD but the record feels different, the same artifact forced through a sort of megaphone.

Further, I came into this culture anew; while the practice of switching over to records might register as cultural nostalgia from a particular vantage point, a reclamation of things lost, the implicated individual feels an uncanny sense of discovery. There is nothing to go back to, no object with comparable size and scope in her experience; she registers the blowing up, the enhancement, of the only medium she’d ever really known, an amplification of terms rather than the feeling of returning to her roots. The current practice is anything but retro; the real circumstances of our past can’t abide the term.

**System-Sound**

Leman would have it that “mediation technology stands between what [we] want and what [we] get,”\(^{27}\) that cultural pressure moves in the direction of “a technology which no longer is an obstacle between the human subject and the music. The technology should become a tool that enhances subjective access to music.”\(^{28}\) Our relationship to the sound of the playback system, however, is novel with respect to this claim, inverting Leman’s formulation; we move from transparency to mediation, and do so by choice. Such willful movement defies the arc of the prevailing notion of technological advancement, for which progress might be said to constitute a more and more invisible rendering of the machine. Invoking the term *immediacy* from new

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\(^{28}\) Ibid., 24.
media theory to explain this notion of the machine’s translucence, this “desire to remove all traces of the interface,”29 Bolter and Grusin, writing on Virtual Reality, describe an unattainable but still theoretically compelling technological endpoint: “the logic of immediacy dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented.”30 We’re after “corporeal immersion in sound energy,”31 according to new media theory as well as conventional wisdom, rather than the indirect experience, which “proceeds by way of a mediator, such as a linguistic description of music, a score, or an audio player.”32 The latter, after all, “is an example of a physical mediator. It mediates access to music as sound (or physical) energy, and via this way it is possible to form a mental representation of the music that is heard.”33 Mental representation is a kind of stand in, though, a shabby substitute for corporeal immersion. The literal experience of music that we seek is replaced by a figurative stand-in, the best we can do.

Yet the resurgence of vinyl culture flies directly in the face of this reading of the direction of cultural pressure. We ought to be pushing our playback devices to disappear, our aural representations to ring unmediated, such that we almost forget that they’re “representations” in the first place. Instead we subject ourselves to pops and hisses, we rise from our seats to lift needles and change sides, indeed we remind

29 Aden Evens, Sound Ideas: Music, Machines, and Experience (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 128.
31 Leman, Embodied Music Cognition and Mediation Technology, 4.
32 Ibid., 5.
33 Ibid., 5.
ourselves, through drawing attention to *literal* sound, of the presence of sonic
representation as such. The shabby stand-in appears to be what we’re ultimately after.

Although…

The reverse reading is also possible, that the vinyl record, eerily, somehow exceeds representation, that the record may, in fact, be the thing itself, emphatically *not* a stand-in for the duo from Rochdale dropping the beat in your living room. It doesn’t *represent* or imitate or account for anything at all; it’s simply its glorious self. Indeed we might *prefer* it to actually beaming the performers into our home. We encounter the sound on our time, on our terms, and in so doing invest in the object that conveys it a much more significant role than a provisional, somewhat inadequate substitute. We can watch it move, can imagine its physical contours becoming waves that literally hit us. Rather than substitute for human beings in our private space, the record and player come alive in their own right, singing and dancing before our ears and eyes and triggering novel sympathetic responses, unique to the medium itself, not to whatever the medium is supposed to represent.
3. In Rainbows

Technically I purchased another LP, a double, before Saint Dymphna, but never actually intended to listen to it. There was no real reason to bother with the vinyl; I had the mp3s, legally, before the records arrived in the mail, and they shipped with CD copies as well. I didn’t own a record player at the time; this was simply a collector’s purchase. I’d started buying the limited edition packaging for every new Radiohead album with Kid A. In the case of In Rainbows, their then-latest, such packaging consisted of mp3s available for download as soon as your credit card was authorized, the album on CD, a CD of bonus tracks, and a double LP, a full frontal assault on the consumer for a mere 40 pounds. On my budget I doubtless should have elected the pay-as-you-wish option for the mp3 download, especially since no physical object provided the usual temptation; this was purely an Internet affair. The limited editions were still in production so you really had no idea what you’d be getting in the mail, weeks later. It’s not like I saw it on the wall at a brick-and-mortar store and picked it up and felt the weight of it in my hands. How could the object fetish flare up in the absence of an object? There wasn’t even a photograph of the thing on the W.A.S.T.E.\textsuperscript{34} website, just a cold description of the contents of the box that would presumably greet you from your doorstep in a month or two. Point and click and wait.

You could see the first part of this whole purchase-procedure as the most immediately gratifying possibility for music acquisition: run your card, enter your download code, and a minute later you have the important stuff, the recording, the

\footnote{\textsuperscript{34} Radiohead’s merchandise wing, http://www.waste.uk.com/}
aural facts. No need even to remove shrinkwrap; the line into your brain is straight, direct, unencumbered, the whole process bordering on science fiction. You almost don’t even have to listen.

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I know people, connoisseurs, who get everything this way, completely dissociated from any physical object charged with the conveyance of sound. I can’t imagine it for myself; I actually gave away my iTunes gift cards after Christmas one year, realizing I’d never use them. My experience of music, for better or worse, is irrevocably bound to the experience of acquiring a shiny new object, the consumer buzz. I remember where I was and what I was doing when I first listened, for example, to the National’s *Boxer*: beginning my first drive across the country, windows down, the traffic so loud it obscured the bass, so I couldn’t hear the polyrhythm on “Fake Empire” as such:

Example 3.1. The National, “Fake Empire,” *Boxer*. Beggars Banquet CD 252, 0:04-0:11
and was completely unnerved when the drums dropped, suddenly articulating a slow three beats per bar instead of the quicker four I expected, that my ears inherited from the piano’s right hand, the treble clearing the traffic noise:

Example 3.2 The National, “Fake Empire,” Boxer. Beggars Banquet CD 252, 1:43-1:51

But I also remember the details of what happened when I first acquired the CD, splurging at the Record Exchange on a glorious evening, the kind on which you could finally accept the inevitability of summer. I remember the color of the sky, deep blue across the color wheel from the bright yellow of the small bag containing my most current round of purchases. I don’t really remember downloading In Rainbows, but I remember clearly the day the thin square package arrived in the mail. Which means I
don’t really remember the first time I listened to the album. I presumably played it, probably out of my laptop speakers, as soon as the download was complete, but I don’t feel like I really heard it until I had the giant, full-spectrum booklet in front of me. I powered up the mixer and monitors, spent a little extra money, did a little extra work. For my trouble I am marked, the music burned into my autobiography, tattooed onto my flesh.

I seem to be formulating a theory of inconvenience: the more difficult and complicated the process of bringing music into your possession, the more chance this music has of making a profound impact. More simply: the greater the effort, the greater the reward. That’s not exactly what I mean to say, however. What looks like effort, complication, difficulty, inconvenience in my accounts might be better described as singularity, autobiographical specificity. Of course the more deeply implicated the music in your particular quirky story, the deeper the impression this music will make. More simply: music makes its most profound impact when it glues together the details of your personal narrative. But in much the same way that we read Gracyk’s account of genre as applicable, additionally, to medium, we can apply this conventional account of musical relevance to more than this idea that music provides “the soundtrack to our lives.” The means by which this music is delivered, after all, likewise makes an impression and folds into our narrative: I remember the object that accompanied my first attempt to work a record player (Saint Dymphna), my first commute wearing the badge of a beautiful LP (Draft 7.30), my first practically triple-digit LP purchase (In Rainbows), to say nothing of the accompaniments to falling in and out of love, the death of a friend, the start of a war. Nattiez, writing about how
music acquires meaning for a listener, does the work of extrapolation for us, conveniently translating his assertions into object-terms: “An object of any kind takes on meaning for an individual apprehending that object, as soon as that individual places the object in relation to areas of his lived experience—that is, in relation to a collection of other objects that belong to his or her experience of the world.”

(There’s a kind of disingenuousness at play here: Nattiez isn’t talking about physical objects like vinyl records, but it’s somewhat irresistible—at least for the purposes of this project—to ask what the implications of taking him literally might be. We’ll soon see that this kind of object-language pervades the way we write and think about music. What happens when we substitute real objects for conceptual ones?)

Music functions as suture to the details of our stories. And particular media have a greater likelihood of sewing together these disparate details; downloading an mp3 is markedly different from purchasing and playing an LP. For me the LP is foreign and delicate, it disappears before my eyes, it requires me literally to re-wire my personal space, re-write my story. Maybe for my father an mp3 seems the more fragile, fickle, and undependable; it’s a magical, disembodied entity that travels from the magical information superhighway into a magical machine that sometimes freezes up and sometimes eats your data. So successfully pulling Brasilerio by Sergio Mendes down from iTunes casts the sound that later emanates from his rickety PC in enchanted, resplendent light. Even though he owns the LP already. He hears it again

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for the first time. Like hearing *In Rainbows* yet again but this time with the collector’s set finally in hand.

Extend yourself to meet the music. This extension pushes the boulder to the top of the hill. Press play and potential energy becomes kinetic, the boulder rolls; sound flows into the wake. Walking to the record store, splurging on a limited edition, learning how a new machine works; each carves out an autobiographical space, however local and brief. This space begs to be retroactively scored, retrofitted to the music that opened it up in the first place.

This process seems to map onto genre: popular music, after all, is often defined in part by its extension into the extramusical, its obsession with the artist’s look, romantic life, dance moves, the willingness to “play” upon a kind of enlarged canvas, the whole of the media apparatus designed with the delivery of these elements in mind. It follows, then, that the acquisition of such music would encompass the extramusical as well, that the typical pop music listener would fetishize object over or as much as the actual musical data, would care deeply about possessing the glossy image of Lady Gaga climbing out of a swimming pool in a catsuit and heels in addition to the soundtrack to this photograph; the packaging, literal and metaphorical, rivals in importance the musical content.

And yet the practice of downloading mp3s, legally or otherwise, which erases the physical object from the aural information, threatens to topple an entire industry; brick-and-mortar record stores close their doors while a new generation of listeners fileshares on SoulSeek or MediaFire. Indeed, as Sterne points out, “writings on mp3s and file-sharing almost uniformly sound a note of crisis, as if the battle over mp3s and
intellectual property is the most important cultural conflict of our time.” But what are the consequences to this cultural conflict in terms of what it reveals about the practice of listening?

We might conclude that mainstream listeners have become as “sophisticated” as the art music crowd, focusing their aesthetic attention on the work instead of on its trappings. Perhaps the obsolescence of the music object, the vessel, signals some quantum leap in sensibility onto the real “substance” of music. Faintly echoing McLuhan, Cutler cites “information” (emphasis his) as “the crucial commodity. Solid products are merely incidental to information movement.” It would appear that the typical listener would agree.

On the other hand, if we view the experience of popular music as by definition an essentially multimedia affair, the practice of downloading, of divorcing the physical object from the musical content it conveys, might degrade the audience’s experience, not just the bottom line of the big labels; the great casualty of file sharing could be the listener’s full engagement in the whole media apparatus of popular music. She only participates in one of many dimensions and platforms through which popular music operates—she merely hears. Maybe piracy actually impoverishes the pirate more than the industry from which he steals. Would the realization by the consumer or assertion by the record companies that the data alone insufficiently represent the whole of music turn contemporary practice on its head? “The ‘content’ obsession of the man of print

culture,” worries Cutler, “makes it difficult for him to notice any facts about the form of a new medium.”

We might explain the resurgence of vinyl as a kind of realization by “the man of print culture” that the form does, in fact, matter.

It matters only to the extent, though, that we interact with music primarily in our living rooms, that we privilege the domestication of the object, its invitation into personal space. The turning on its head of contemporary practice might, in fact, already be taking place. Consider Brian Eno’s assertions that the recording no longer constitutes the money making apparatus of popular music: artists essentially give their recorded music away as a kind of lure into the stadium or club, where the real cash changes hands. If Eno’s claims are broadly applicable, we find ourselves in a curious situation: the mp3, the sonic object devoid of physical collateral, actually serves to hook the listener into a multisensory environment, actually references a situation in which the whole media apparatus is very much in play.

Perhaps, though, extrapolating away from the medium itself to its role as economic and aesthetic instigator does a disservice to the audience member’s predilections, preferences, and singularities, which might compel particular relationships to particular media and problematize blanket statements about the way the mp3 or the record operates for all listeners all the time. Perhaps the medium an individual chooses matters less than how much space this medium carves out in the individual’s story; whether we may “make the jump” to vinyl or mp3 (or CD, or eight-track tape, or wax cylinder) might matter less than that we’ve made a jump in the first place.

38 Ibid., 251.
place. The degree to which the arc of our personal narrative bends towards a particular type of musical object is the degree to which we will find this object—and the music it conveys—meaningful, even—and perhaps especially—when the object compels us to enlarge the canvas, so to speak, when the download inspires us to buy a ticket.

**Fetish in the Object’s Absence**

In discussing the narrative devices of contemporary pop in particular, we are not just talking about music but also about the whole process of packaging. The image of pop performers is constructed by press and television advertisements, by the routines of photo-calls and journalists’ interviews, and through gesture and performance. These things all feed into the way we hear a voice; pop singers are rarely heard ‘plain’ (without mediation). Their vocals already contain physical connotations, associated images, echoes of other sounds.  

Though Cutler would have it that “perhaps the only common denominator of all musics called popular is that the term can only be applied in class-divided societies to the musical currency of the class who don’t hold power,” an alternate, and persuasive, view holds that its dependence on a host of other suppositions, beliefs, information outside of ‘purely’ musical content at least in part defines popular music. McLuhan’s perspective, that “as the age of information demands the simultaneous use of all our faculties, we discover that we are most at leisure when we are most intensely involved, very much as with the artist in all ages,” appears to support this alternate take on popular music’s enlarged canvas, the connection between “leisure” and multisensory involvement.

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41 Cutler, File Under Popular, 16.
42 Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media, 347.
If this is in fact an operable observation, that its extension into other media to some degree defines our experience of the popular, then accounting for the preponderance of the download and the mp3 in that very culture becomes problematic. The download by definition divorces musical content from a physical entity charged with its deployment; culture unexpectedly appears to pressure outside information, in the form of visual and tactile collateral, to disappear. Perhaps listeners are more interested in musical content than the commodity form, the container, and industry might have been all wrong about the way it tried to sell us the goods, so to speak, for so long.

More likely, though, the collateral hasn’t disappeared at all, it’s just been liberated from its proximity to musical content. We might think of the situation not as separation of the sound from the container, but rather the presence of the container in situations new and novel, in spaces both physical and virtual, and in the individual listener’s ability to create meaningful composites in these spaces. It’s not so difficult, after all, for her to compile her own multimedia assemblages: pictures are a Google search away, documentation of live shows is possible on the Smartphone in her pocket. She doesn’t limit her concentration to musical content, to the exclusion of other forms, rather she realizes that musical content is present within a network of easily digested, acquired, sorted, repeated information. She makes a mix tape but across media, sight- and sound-track to whatever she happens to be doing, wherever she happens to find herself.

For her newfound agency, though, she trades the gravity of the musical work, its ability to suck up specific images or objects, its ability to fix, at least provisionally,
its borders, the sense that this exact image on this exact sleeve made of this exact material goes with this exact recording. The latter, though, has physically evaporated, so we look elsewhere for its associated content. Some of us find it again in a blur of images flickering on a computer screen or on a magazine cover or on a monitor in a stadium. Others prefer more intimate associations, so open up our wallets to gatefold 2XLPs and clear space on the shelves.

**Hearing in The Object’s Presence**

This palpable hunger for image and tactile sensation, for the weight of an object in the hands, while pushing some of us toward newfound agency, toward the composition of context, pressures others of us towards a kind of deference for any attempt to associate sound with a specific, singular object that conveys more than sonic information. In both cases we do more than hear. We integrate our senses, attach the look and feel of something to its respective sound. So records are staging a minor comeback. What’s actually “coming back,” though, or put better, what we’re being made aware of through the current trend in industry, is the idea that music doesn’t exist in a vacuum, that the notion of musical content as a bounded entity, independent of associated content, deserves our critical engagement. As a concept it simply may not bear out; from its original function in sacrificial ritual\(^{43}\) to its modern-day instantiation as the thing that comes to life alongside a glossy picture, music soundtracks *something*: a conductor in tails waving a baton, a series of dots and lines

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on paper, a safety pin through the nose. We might blindfold ourselves in the concert hall, but if we’re being honest we still dance.

**Soundtracking Unwritten Memoir**

Even on hearing a Beatles song for the first time there was a sense of the memories to come, a feeling that this could not last but that it was surely going to be pleasant to remember.44

The way to effect this integration can’t be the same for all listeners (or viewers, or dancers). iTunes opens for the first time on my father’s PC and he immediately worries that his computer will catch a virus from the CD in the tray or from the mp3 on which he’s just clicked somewhere in cyberspace. Or Yours Truly attempts to play a record and becomes convinced, immediately, that something horribly wrong has transpired. Or a listener bursts into spontaneous applause after the Grand Pause in Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony, unaware that we’ve not yet heard the motto’s return.45

Anxiety precedes our memberships in music cultures, a desire for integration with the whole experience of music drives our fascination, our purchases, our bodily responses. Something unfamiliar confronts us and we meet it with the whole of our sensory apparatus; you wouldn’t close your eyes the first time you heard the roar of a lion in the wild, any more than you’d count on sight alone to navigate your way out of a thick forest at night. All of our senses conspire to burn music into the brain, indeed what we

45 For an instructive example, see the Boulder Daily Camera’s review of a Valentine’s Day 2009 Performance of Tchaikovsky’s Fifth: “Saturday night at Macky Auditorium, Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra music director Michael Butterman explained the cyclical concept to the audience, making careful note of the triumphant return of the ‘motto’ at the end. Yet several audience members still fell into the notorious trap at the end of the symphony and applauded at the grand pause before that triumphant return.”
mean by “music” encompasses a whole array of sensory experiences not limited to hearing. We almost never “just listen,” except in the most rarefied environments, on the most peculiar occasions.

Clarke investigates these environments, interrogating the ways in which artists have historically portrayed entranced listeners. They are often “depicted with this religious demeanor, often with their eyes closed, in both public and more domestic musical contexts. The ‘religion of art’…forms one of the historical prerequisites for that intense mode of perception that represents the subjective correlate to absolute instrumental music with its claims to artistic autonomy.”

Clarke looking at paintings reminds me of my own looking, around the room in composition seminar at my colleagues, eyes closed, heads buried in their folded arms. For some of us, this study of music’s reception is as much a part of the music our distinguished guest might have shared as the sounds coming out of the speakers. We swallow a conversation, not a one-way transmission, and we parse these conversations with our whole bodies. Indeed the more bodily, sensorially, autobiographically we engage in such processes, the more we’ve heard. “Listening becomes an occasion for self-interrogation, introspective and autobiographical.”

Contrast Korsyn’s claim with Clarke’s description of “structural listening,” which is “peculiar in encouraging the listener to turn away from the wider environment in searching for meaning,” from “the circumstances that give rise to it.”

He goes on to describe:

46 Clarke, Ways of Listening, 131.
four broad factors that play a part: (i) the listening environment; (ii) the relationship between perception and action; (iii) the compositional characteristics of the music; and (iv) the predispositions or habits of listeners. The first of these, the listening environment, is perhaps the most obvious and crudely determining factor: a traditional aural training or analysis class may specifically require students to listen in a structurally focused manner; and, by contrast, in shops, restaurants, clubs, cars, and stations it would be unusual and perhaps difficult and disruptive to pay the kind of focused attention to the sounds themselves that structural listening demands. In part this distinction simply maps onto the continuum between more narrowly (autonomous) and more broadly (heteronomous) focused attention—but that is certainly not the whole story. The kind of listening which takes musical sound as the starting point for a “thoughtful” exploration of any one of a huge potential variety of connected domains (cultural connections, personal memories, other music, unresolved problems, fantasies, inventions…) may also be highly integrated and intensely concentrated—but not directed solely at musical structure. To submit to the discipline of the musical structure has become the norm of both musical academia and (in milder form, perhaps) the concert hall—and the result is a style of listening that has technical focus, specificity, and adherence to the particular work as virtues. But it is a considerable leap from recognizing those attributes to claiming that this is the only way really to experience music.  

Clarke gives Kramer the last word: “Submissive listening, which certainly occurs, at least sporadically, at least with certain kinds and examples of music, can be challenged as an instituted norm. Is my not listening that way really a ‘deviation”? Am I failing to experience the music when I vary my attention level or simply let it fluctuate?” This variance or fluctuation, I would argue, far from signifying a “failure” to experience music, actually represents the taming of music, the invitation of music into singular, autobiographical space, its inscription into memory and

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personal history. Music becomes a kind of Rorschach, catapulting us into a reverie that may or may not correspond to the composer’s intent. The “structural listening” posture suggests that there’s something to uncover as we apprehend a work, some message that trumps our subjective impression. Further, the thing we uncover is allegedly a continuous whole in itself, a message with a beginning, middle, and end that can be elucidated through an appropriately attuned apprehension. So-called submissive listening, on the other hand, surrenders the allegedly universal, coded transmission that the music is supposed to convey in favor of a kind of self-scrutiny, an accounting for our own particular, unique set of responses, jagged and discontinuous.
4. “Port Rhombus.” To “Hollybrook Park,” seven years later

In Ann Arbor I began an apprenticeship to a woman much cooler than me. She dismissed my entire CD collection as inconsequential at best and downright lame at worst, the product of too much music education and not enough soulful exploration. She also had a record player, not to mention a certain purple-covered EP that is now out of print and difficult to locate. In a too-small basement apartment she first dropped the needle on this particular EP. I’d never heard IDM, Intelligent Dance Music, before; I had no referent for the warm blanket of bass and intricate, double-half-time beat:

Example 4.1. Squarepusher, “Port Rhombus” played at 45 RPM, *Port Rhombus*, Warp EP 74, 0:00-0:10
It sounded like music from another planet to me, a much cooler planet, densely populated with women like this one luring you into smartly decorated basement apartments, playing records, then ripping the rug out from under you as you began the forced rethinking of your entire aesthetic. I heard this record in relation not only to the things I’d heard before, but also the life I’d lived before: I “heard” music at “concerts” while these other, hipper beings “saw” bands at “shows.” And bought records, purple records, Intelligent Dance Music. I prepared myself to disavow my whole musical life up to that point, to learn new names, to cut a path through subcultures, to attach new faces and friendships to new sounds. Then she pressed a button and slowed the playing speed down, from 45 to 33. It still sounded hot:
Example 4.1. Squarepusher, “Port Rhombus” played at 33 RPM, *Port Rhombus*, Warp EP 74, 0:00-0:14

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How do you make a track that sounds “right” at two speeds? Would you buy, let alone sell, such a thing on CD or download the mp3 and lose an entire rendition of the tune? Or would Squarepusher cringe at the 33 1/3 version, an unintended consequence of pressing Port Rhombus to vinyl? Or is he playing some kind of compositional trick, making a virtuosic joke? I simply could not locate this music. I had no sonic referent, no cultural comfort, not even an authoritative version of the track itself. The EP reminded me of a score, a set of parameters to realize under a
certain cultural rubric. I witnessed a period piece in which the period was precisely then, the performer a hip young woman, the instrument a record player. She took it at a fast tempo first, then slower and in a different key, sight-transposing, to better bring out the nuances, clarify the beat, widen the bass blanket. I’m reminded again of an old-fashioned practice: bring the score into your space and engage with it, stretch the elastic that you locate through translation of cultural code. You have rights and responsibilities.

Seven years later I dig through the Grime & Dubstep bin at Other Music and locate Joker. Only an amateur performer on the record player, there are things I don’t yet understand. Such as: 12” singles play at 45. I get “Hollybrook Park” home, power up my system, start the turntable spinning, at 33, ignorantly, and drop the needle. I can do it now without too much scratch-sound and I never accidentally begin too far toward the center or too far toward the edge. I congratulate myself on this newfound fluency as the sub-bass erupts and the beat slinks forward:

Example 4.3. Joker, “Hollybrook Park” played at 33 RPM, *Hollybrook Park 12”, Kapsize 001, 0:00-0:34*
Example 4.3. (cont.)
Later I remember Port Rhombus and press the “45” button. Amazing. This is the definitive version, according to cultural convention:

Example 4.4. Joker, “Hollybrook Park” played at 45 RPM, *Hollybrook Park 12”, Kapsize 001, 0:00-0:26*
but I’ve already listened to both sides at 33 and been convinced by the slower speed. I have to Google “twelve-inch single play speed” to know for sure which rendition I’m supposed to be enjoying. Alien hipster women laugh. As do I. The sound of laughter melds with photon-beam synthesizers and bass-boosted 808 kick drums. We’re folded into the song.

**Synesthetics**

Remember the swirling square, *Draft 7.30*, that marked you on the subway, that asserted your membership in a particular, object-fetishizing subculture, for better or worse? Being seen in the record’s possession sorted you for the in-the-know observer. As did, in the case of encountering “Port Rhombus,” the use of language that privileges the aural, the desire to go and “hear” a “concert” instead of going to “see” a “show.” These examples suggest that the organization of our senses betrays our
stylistic preferences. Placing the visual at the top of the sensory hierarchy may give our predilections away; perhaps such placement suggests that we might have fewer “classical” records and more “pop” CDs in our music libraries. This premise might operate within different musical cultures as well. The operations of and relationships between sight and sound might position us in a particular way in the record store, the concert hall, the arena, the club. In what (surprising) ways might these positions predict the relative resonances of particular formats for particular listeners?

These sensory organizations affect our ability to locate the objects, sonic and otherwise, to which we respond in the first place. Our eyes, ears, and hands tell us something about where the “definitive,” “authoritative,” and “authentic” reside, and can contradict each other. Further, the relative ambiguity of these residences might correspond to particular music cultures. Are certain genres more slippery than others in terms of defining for an observer the object of scrutiny? Does this slipperiness itself contribute to aesthetic pleasure or lack thereof?

An initiate of a particular music culture eventually achieves the ability to locate the musical object, to define its boundaries. Reinforcing or flexing against those very boundaries constitutes a kind of performance, and can even signal aesthetic sophistication, self-knowledge, a virtuosic ability to “go meta,” as in the case of the hipster who knows the record will work at 33 and chooses to stage the revelation. A certain sensibility looks for and derives a kind of existential pleasure from this boundary awareness, whether mobilized for the sake of revealing or dissolving the lines. How do certain genres and formats enable and limit us as performers and participants in the (un)masking of musical meaning?
Ingroup/Outgroup: Seen and Not Heard

We’ve already discussed the multivalent nature of musical experience, that seeing and feeling take place alongside hearing as we process musical information. The visual, though, seems to occupy a particularly problematic space. Even the simplest expression of our intentions—seeing a show versus hearing a recital—suggests a difference between music cultures in terms of the way each privileges the visual or the aural. These different cultures aren’t bashful about the sensory hierarchy in their respective disciplines. How often does someone close their eyes at a concert of classical music or in composition colloquium, allowing “just the music” to wash over? Imagine the same behavior writ large at a rock or dance show, where the audience constantly jockeys to better view the stage or light show. The relative anxiety or lack thereof about embracing music’s visual component might even be seen as a point of pride for different music cultures; the orchestra wears a uniform, goes the scholarly story, visually unobtrusive, even invisible; the pop star, on the other hand, gyrates in patent leather inside a multicolored glowing orb with fifteen different camera angles alternating on a giant screen above the stage.

The question becomes whether—or when—this hierarchization of sensory information makes sense. Is there is something to be gained by ignoring—or indeed suppressing—music’s visual component? Or, conversely, does permitting—or indeed obsessing over—a visual focus enriches the listener’s experience? Does the old adage about the blind man’s superhearing teach us something about how we might approach music? On the one hand the apprehension of only what is audible is a perfectly
reasonable practice and posture; perhaps suppressing or ignoring the visual forces the audience’s focus to the important stuff, the sound and the transmitted message is the richer for it.

On the other hand, the ecological listening and embodied cognition approaches suggest that we separate the senses at our peril, that we isolate the aural in vain. For McLuhan, the high fidelity home audio system at least in part accomplishes the requisite sensory integration; it allows for “the recovery of tactile experience.” The sensation of having the performing instruments ‘right in the room with you,’” he continues,

is a striving toward the union of the audile and tactile in a finesse of fiddles that is in large degree the sculptural experience. To be in the presence of performing musicians is to experience their touch and handling of instruments as tactile and kinetic, not just as resonant. So it can be said that hi-fi is not any quest for abstract effects of sound in separation from the other senses. With hi-fi, the phonograph meets the TV tactile challenge.\(^\text{50}\)

The highest fidelity, the truest truth to sound most nearly brings the performer into the listener’s presence, transmitting critical corporeal information. Reading McLuhan alongside Bolter and Grusin\(^\text{51}\) connects the disappearance of the interface with the reappearance of some original kinetic energy: the more our representations ring unmediated the more kinetic, bodily energy these representations might transmit, the more sympathetic resonance we experience as listeners. The composite claim is that as the medium dissolves the body becomes more actively involved in the content

\(^{50}\) McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 282.

that medium is purposed to convey. So why buy records? Why this practice of foregrounding the medium itself?

The conventional argument is simply that records sound better, that throwing in as many analog stages as possible warms things up or otherwise improves the sound. In other words, buying records doesn’t foreground the medium, rather it ensures its higher-fidelity disappearance. The snap crackle pop! of the needle? That’s like programs rustling or people coughing in the crowd, necessary evils that, in it their willful suppression, actually focus us on the sound all the more. Writing for the popular technology website Gizmodo, John Mahoney invokes audiophile Michael Fremer to account for this presence of extraneous sound. “‘It’s like when you go to the symphony, and the old men are coughing—same thing,’ Fremer says. Necessary impurities. Reminders of being in the real world.” 53

But what if the presence of hisses and cracks, not to mention wear and tear, actually does what we might expect it to do, i.e. make things sound worse than on CD? Mowitt reminds us of a preference that seems self-evident, that “however much two listeners may differ in their tastes, they are likely to share standards of hi-fidelity.” 54 How then do we account for the resurgence of vinyl? Deliberately creating a lower fidelity situation means we fail to meet McLuhan’s “tactile challenge” on purpose,

actually blunting the transmission of the physical information that accompanies the hi-fi broadcast.

One possibility is that we’re thrown more effectively into “brain space” in so doing, that working to cut off our physical response engenders so-called “structural listening.” We blunt both the mirroring in our limbs we might imagine as accompaniment to musical gestures as well as the physical response to the medium itself, the sense that the needle is tripping over tiny grooves, that its weight is pressing the sound out of the record’s surface.

**Locating the Definitive**

It would appear as though the object on which our listenership focuses keeps slipping out of sight, resisting our impulse to draw lines around it, to locate it inside a frame. Cutler’s claim “that there can be no such thing as a finished or definitive piece of music” resonates; “at most,” he continues, there could be said to be ‘matrices’ or ‘fields.’ Korsyn likewise wonders about the ability to pin down exactly what we’re talking about when we talk about music. “How stable is the identity of a piece,” he asks, “how secure are its boundaries?” To offer a slight redirect on this interrogation: how does the presence (or absence) of a sonic object complicate the delineation of a work’s edges? “Any solution,” Korsyn warns, “must be partial, provisional, and local,” as we seek to define the dodgy “identity of a composition and the

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undecidability of its boundaries," as we indeed seek to complicate an already complicated conceptual situation.

The way in which we organize our senses in apprehending musical works seems to help us draw a few partial, provisional, and local distinctions. Art music allegedly concerns itself with sound alone (we listen to a concert); other forms implicate other senses (we see a show). But ‘sound alone’ might not be exactly what the structural listener is after. Any sonic realization of a piece, no matter how brilliantly executed, is after all an interpretation, to borrow structural listening’s own language; what exactly this sound is an interpretation of is another question.

Perhaps the record offers another provisional solution to the problem of locating the definitive: its appeal, as I’ve suggested, might be that it is somehow that thing represented, that it gets at the otherwise invisible. On some level the record and the culture taking root around its resurgence proposes to have cracked the code, drawing opaque lines around the work. It is this object adorned with this image with these particular grooves pressed into its surface that constitutes the piece, the official document. Rather than constitute an ambiguity, the thing to which representations all point but never quite encapsulate, the record articulates its boundaries. Rather than assert that there are only ever representations, that these are as close as we can get and ideally an authorial intention of some kind is conveyed through a possible, provisional

58 Ibid., 100.
59 “Brilliant execution,” after all, might cost us dearly. See Adorno, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening”: “The new fetish is the flawlessly functioning, metallically brilliant apparatus as such, in which all the cogwheels mesh so perfectly that not the slightest hole remains open for the meaning of the whole. Perfect, immaculate performance in the latest style preserves the work at the price of its definitive reification.”
realization of a work, record culture declares that the work has a limit, that we can hold this limit in our hands.

Leman gives voice to the conventional view: that recorded media convey secondhand, mediated experiences. Between our ears and The Real Thing sits a piece of plastic and the machinery that translates it, gives voice to it. Unless this innocent piece of plastic is actually doing something quite radical: rather than hint at or suggest The Real Thing, the record might actually deliver the goods.

**Performing the Object**

‘Reading,’ ‘contemplating’ a work of art, the ‘enjoyment’ of a work of art, all represent an individual and tacit form of ‘performing.’ The notion of an interpretive activity encompasses the totality of these behaviors.

You change the play speed. You beat-match to another record, changing pitch and tempo as the dance floor dictates. Or, considering Michael Fremer again, you play a tune with the assistance of his $4,000 AC power adapter. Does this constitute an interpretation of an allegedly fixed entity, like some figuration we’ve heard a million times before, this time performed on a Stradivarius? The object, the alleged thing itself, can also sometimes be interpreted; this reading might complicate the notion that the record can constitute a “fixed” entity and makes it seem more like a musical score, a set of possibilities that the interpreter must engage, the “piece” itself a kind of cloud, a range of options, an effective region in which the composition has agency.

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(II. As)
“It can be employed to furnish constant amusements to invalids.”

Thomas Edison, on the Gramophone
5. What this has to do with Music, in the Galant Style and otherwise

For a “teachable moment,” a mnemonic, I play a famous Sex Pistols song off of *Never Mind the Bollocks* for my Writing Seminar. The song is about, to put it bluntly, getting screwed by your record label. Except that at the chorus, precisely when Johnny Rotten maniacally enunciates “E-M-I,” I point, in rhythm, to three letters I’ve written in giant blocks on the board: T-M-I.

“What’s ‘TMI?’” I ask the less-than-eager-to-be-aware-at-8:30AM group of freshmen. Radio silence. “Too Much Information,” someone finally offers, reluctantly. I pounce. “NO!” Now I have their attention. What, then, crazed graduate student to whom, by some terrific mistake, the minds of twelve young students have been entrusted?

“The Music Itself!” I scrawl across the board, then launch into an incensed explanation, something about “the notes and nothing but the notes.” But that doesn’t seem adequate. “Content not context.” Not that either. I am trying, after all, to reduce this to sound byte, bumper sticker, slogan. Something they’ll understand in the age of death panels. It’s not working out; I’ve lost them.

Maybe “Too Much Information” was, in fact, the best pivot after all. Its converse: only what one requires. Sound without any of its associated baggage.

I explain that this idea, to my way of thinking, is a kind of sham, at least when we’re talking about the Sex Pistols or punk generally. We’re much more interested in Too Much Information than in some provisional notion of The Music Itself. We want
the weight of the white space around the notes. The project of meaning-making depends on it. “Context is all.”

So what does a kind of love song to vinyl have to do with The Music Itself or, perhaps, Too Much Information? Can we spin the record into a productive metaphor for understanding what happens inside music?

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We require some untwisting, which comes, in part, from an unlikely place: a February 2009 colloquium with Robert Gjerdingen at Princeton University. If you were an orphan in Naples in 1750, he tells us, you might have fallen under the tutelage of a maestro and, if you were lucky enough and gifted enough, worked your way up to the illustrious position of court composer. You would have learned to compose by internalizing a series of “stock moves,” pieces of standardized vocabulary, and practicing the placement of these moves over a partimento bass. At some critical point you would have achieved a kind of fluency, been able to “speak” Galant music. Very postmodern, in a sense, a pastiche turned language. Speaking of language…

“What distinguishes writing about Classic music from that about other music,” Agawu observes, “is not merely a general awareness of the affinities between music and language, but a persistent concern with a shadowy linguistic analogy at all levels.” Gjerdingen’s description, or at least my memory of it, is certainly

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demonstrative of this tendency: we imagine the ‘fluent’ Galant composer liberating musical grammar from its origins in a kind of pedagogical project and utilizing it to novel ends. What underpins this tendency, what inspires and even necessitates this reliance on a ‘shadowy linguistic analogy’ is the way in which we understand ‘Classic’ music by running it through a centrifuge, separating it into component parts and asking how those parts relate to each other. In order to talk about this music, we break it into discrete units, we think of it as a kind of collision of objects.

The wild analogy I aim to construct in this turn to ‘TMI’ (and, soon, Mozart,) is between the kinds of music-conveying objects with which we’ve been concerned up until now, things like vinyl records and mp3s, and the kinds of music-conveying objects that we imagine deploying within music, the components that together comprise the sound-world. The former, as we’ve seen, inspire particular and singular relationships and listening postures, occupy a unique cultural space. We might apply the lessons we learn from examining these specific sonic objects to another class of sonic objects, those that take up musical space. For example, the way we conceptualize listening to records might tell us something about, in Gjerdingen’s case, the way we conceptualize listening to a whole series of rhetorical maneuvers that composers would have deployed in Galant syntax. I’ll elaborate.

My father played Mozart\(^66\) in Alice Tully Hall, well before I was born. As a retirement gift I remastered—actually I hired someone to remaster—the original tapes and presented him with his senior recital on CD. I kept an mp3 copy, of course, and

\(^{66}\) Coincidentally, this is the same Sonata that Agawu works through in *Playing With Signs.*
listened to the Mozart a lot, remembering my father occasionally revisiting it on the old Baldwin upright in the family room, giving the downbeat of measure six an added emphasis, the phrase markings trumping the hemiola, as if he couldn’t give over to the new subdivision. I can feel my thumb twitch in time with that sticking-out g, which is probably not the right fingering. And the cadence, measure eleven beat three to measure twelve beat one, are suddenly delicate, an attempt to restore order, to pretend that this is a normal phrase.

But this first phrase is funny, as his phrases, Mozart’s I mean, often are:

Example 5.1. Mozart, Sonata in F Major, K. 332—First Movement, measures 1-12

I always stumble, in the best possible way, at bar 9. Probably because of the way I hear bars 5-8. Of course they’re written like so:
Example 5.2. Mozart, Sonata in F Major, K. 332—First Movement, measures 5-8

but I hear them more like so, every single time:

Example 5.3. Mozart, Sonata in F Major, K. 332—First Movement, measures 5-8, reinterpreted

the melodic f-d-c, accents mine, suggesting a half-note harmonic rhythm, phrasing mine, and recasting the whole subphrase into two big 3/2 bars.

There’s conflict in this music, there’s a mystery figure living somewhere beneath these composed four—or is it two?—bars. There’s an idea in play of what the music is *supposed* to be, how it might sound without the fancy hemiola, perhaps:
Example 5.4. Mozart, Sonata in F Major, K. 332—First Movement, measures 5-8, recomposed

Which is why the hemiola works on us as listeners. There are four ‘straight’ 3/4 bars being silently called out, flexed against, by the two 3/2 bars that occupy the audible surface. We might think of this missing straight articulation of bars 5-8 as an object of some kind, something we don’t hear but can still detect. An “absent prototype,” as Korsyn will later tell us. Or perhaps what we’re missing in bars 5-8 isn’t the fully realized straight articulation; instead, we have some idea of what four bars of 3/4 feels like in and of itself, some notion of the meter as a “thing” that can be invoked, suggested at without being fully satisfied. Regardless, we talk about what’s missing as if it’s a building block, a ‘thing itself’ that the hemiola points to. Or maybe we think of it conversely: the musical foreground, the hemiola, is the concrete part of the subphrase, the building block. (It is, after all, the thing we can most readily hear and notate and see and analyze.) Regardless of which conceptual option works for us, we’re thinking of musical moves as ‘things’ that can be moved around, substituted for each other, suggested at. We puzzle over how to conceptualize these potential musical objects, charged with conveying meaning or intention, in much the same way we

67 Korsyn, Decentering Music, 96.
earlier puzzled over how to conceptualize physical objects charged with conveying content. We turn to the same language, again and again, to deal with both problems.

And then we crash into the ninth bar, which allegedly attempts to restore our faith in 3/4 time but, for my money, doesn’t quite erase the departure that immediately preceded it. It opens up melodic space (one, two, three, climbing to d), then the tenth bar answers, closing this space down (one-and two-and three-and, reaching down to f), reminding us how 3/4 works: the emphasis on one (where the direction and the harmony change), the clear quarter note pulse. But it feels elemental, bald grammar, pure subject-verb-object, music stripped of music; it’s as if Mozart deliberately left it naked. The piece jumps a level, from a foreground that departs from or ‘dresses up’ something that isn’t there (5-8) to an irreducible (9-10). Then cadence. Breathe.

**Da Capo**

Reducing the concept of The Music Itself to a “takeaway moment” for a roomful of eighteen-year-old non-musicians as they listened to the Sex Pistols, probably for the first time, proved problematic. Especially when the upshot of the lesson was to call the whole idea into question with respect to a certain musical and cultural phenomenon. Here’s an idea you may never have thought about before, I propose to my students: there are notes and rhythms that might convey more than Johnny Rotten’s haircut. This is a pervasive view, sort of, I “explain,” and is hugely problematic, sort of. Any questions?
Later, after seeing him in the hallway, I read Scott Burnham on this very issue\textsuperscript{68} and become convinced that my “lesson” was even more ill-advised than I’d originally imagined, the baby thrown out with the bathwater. There is something to the idea that Burnham eloquently explores of music’s ability to “speak about itself,”\textsuperscript{69} something that deserves real consideration rather than a glib public dismissal. Unwittingly, I find myself somewhere in the middle of a difference of philosophical opinion, accounted for by Burnham as between little-t-theorists and big-t-Theorists, one seemingly innocent capitalization dividing musical thinkers into camps. The former, music small-t theorists, study The Music Itself, while the latter, critical big-T Theorists, work to problematize that very notion.\textsuperscript{70} My course became “new musicology” in an instant, after merely redefining an acronym.

This redefinition, The Music Itself into Too Much Information, betrays a certain set of values, an insistence on situating the work in the historical and cultural context of its making, indeed on implicating these contexts in what we refer to as “the work.” Beyond context, to take the redefinition yet further, there isn’t anything on which to focus; there is no disciplinary object at the center of the web or matrix or field or cloud; the nebula is all that we have sensory power to apprehend and rhetorical power to describe. This is beginning to sound familiar.

We endeavor to locate a definitive object to scrutinize. Or we give over to the idea that this constitutes a fool’s errand, that such definitive objects will always slip

\textsuperscript{69}Ibid., 325.
\textsuperscript{70}Ibid., throughout.
through our fingers. We might as well be talking about a vinyl record versus an mp3 instead of theory versus Theory. It’s as if the whole of this project up to now has been the construction of an elaborate metaphor.

**The Music Itself**

What we mean when we talk about The Music Itself seems to be a kind of Platonic ideal, a divorce from the logistics of soundmaking in an actual room, the pedestrian concerns that might interfere with the realization of this ideal. The Music Itself refers to an impossible world, but aiming at it might serve to keep us honest, so to speak, calibrate our analytic tools, ensure that we aren’t distracted by the realities on the ground, by what is actually plausible—or even possible—when human imagination meets human limitation. My own language betrays a bias toward those very plausibilities and possibilities; the military jargon from which it’s drawn suggests that these “realities on the ground” are, in fact, all that really matter, that ignoring or relegating them puts us at risk of making some profound conceptual mistake.

And yet, as Burnham argues, there is value in this study of music as a syntax that might be invoked away from the score in question, apart from the specific confines of a musical moment in a real piece. An isolated piece of musical vocabulary—Burnham’s example, say, the 2-3 suspension in “Chopsticks”—can be made to display abstract syntactical properties at the same time that it manifests itself in a real musical moment, as it takes up space in the score or in the air. “The prototypical utterance,” he explains, “is also a concrete example of the class”—the 2-3 suspension, plunked out on the keyboard or notated on staff paper, isn’t mere description of a dissonance in the
bass and its subsequent resolution. It is itself what it seeks to account for; “the thing doing the describing is also the thing described.” This unique condition makes a musical gesture “a metalinguistic act,” one that “uses language to speak about itself.” There is no real bridging necessary between descriptive and functional language, no back-bending act of translation required between the two modes of articulation.

This is not to say that we can simply pick a piece of vocabulary up “off the shelf like a fan belt;” there are, of course, “complex contextual considerations” that we must bear in mind as we seek to discover the means by which music is capable of speaking about itself. The work of analysis, then, might be described as an accounting for these capabilities, the ways in which pieces of musical vocabulary are deployed in time and how this singular deployment might “make meaning.” To reinvoke Korsyn and, in so doing, offer a slight redirect: “Analysis attempts to measure the distance between the absent prototype and the expansion, between the piece and itself.” The conversation, once again, gets physical, becomes about objects—whether a prototypical version of a moment in a piece, a piece of pure syntax, or, indeed, a fan belt—taking up space. We pick them up off a shelf, watch them expand, measure the distances at which they’re set off from other, categorically different objects. Perhaps the ways in which we talk and think about physical media and the ways in which we talk and think about the building blocks of music shadow—or substitute for—each other.

71 Ibid., 325.
72 Ibid., 319.
73 Korsyn, Decentering Music, 96.
Too Much Information

While analysis may in fact depend upon music’s ability to “speak about itself,” music does so in ways more elaborate and surprising than we might allow for in our abstractions, in our insistence on pinning them down and using this sort of object-language to describe them; our reductions may, in fact, be reductive. The elaborations and surprises with which we’re concerned as the piece expands away from its prototypical version certainly encompass musical syntax, but they can be said to encompass other grammars as well, can exceed The Music Itself. Artists can reference absent prototypes on a kind of enlarged canvas. This, again, is beginning to sound familiar. The record, for some of us, fixes the boundaries of the sonic object, frames the canvas, while other media, for others of us, call into question the whole idea of such pinning-down. To commit fully to a “shadowy linguistic analogy” we extend these possibilities for sonic objects onto possibilities for the work, framing it as either The Music Itself or Too Much Information.

To offer a concrete example of the different approaches, we return to Mozart. Certainly he could have conceived of the hemiola in bars 5-8 of K 332 as a kind of metrical trick, appealing to a pianist’s ability to “feel” and convey rhythmic ambiguity, a sensitive listener’s ability to be pleasantly redirected at that moment. But he also would have known that such moments soundtracked a living, breathing social world in which “every gesture, word, glance, step, tone, inflection, posture” could contribute to—or detract from—a courtier’s “success in the moment-to-moment

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74 Burnham, “Theorists and 'the Music Itself,'” 325.
interactions of society.”

What, then, did the hemiola mean in Mozart’s time? What social signal did it convey? (What does the record tucked under your arm say about you? What do your iPod earbuds mean?)

Gracyk reminds us that “evaluating music requires learned habits of listening,” an attunement to “the acquired musical schemata that individuals learn and apply to music.” But he draws a somewhat uncharitably distant connection between these schemata and their broader significance:

These schemata are similar to the socially conditioned schemes of perception that Pierre Bourdieu calls habitus. But where Bourdieu assumes that each person acquires one general scheme, it is far more likely that most people develop multiple schemata—one for each distinct style of music they learn to enjoy. At the same time, these acquired habits are barriers to hearing and evaluating unfamiliar styles of music.

The schemata that Gracyk here invokes might be more than similar to Bordieu’s habitus; there may be no analogizing necessary between musical and broader social behaviors. The sticking point for Gracyk seems to be the “general scheme” idea; he counterproposes the existence of many different schemata, each corresponding to a particular musical tradition, each perhaps excluding others that rely on different sorts of perceptual schemes. Semantic differences aside, Gracyk’s reading of Bordieu suggests that social conditioning can attune us to the rules and regulations of different types of music, and further that there’s a kind of reflexivity going on, whereby music plays upon a host of suppositions about the ways in which we are permitted to act—speak, move, dance—when encountering it. At stake is more than

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75 Gjerdingen, Music in the Galant Style, 3.
76 Gracyk, Listening to Popular Music, 77.
the degree to which music pleases us; music sorts us, (again,) into those who belong and those who are excluded.

**The Conceit**

Walking through this compacted charting of a kind of philosophical difference of opinion about the ways in which we imagine “music itself,” (or can’t imagine “music itself,”) we rely on much of the same language and conceptual thinking as when we talk about the substantive differences between sonic objects. When we find music literally “in” material—when it’s stapled to a piece of plastic or represented by zeros and ones—we treat it in much the same way as when we find music “as” material—when it seems to behave like an object of some kind, when we talk about it as if it’s a tangible, physical, material entity, or even when we talk about it as if it can’t possibly be a tangible, physical, material entity. The sorts of things we discover about sonic objects upon close scrutiny lend us a vocabulary with which we might talk about music as a concept.
6. “Payroll (Paul White’s Clean Dub)”

I make the mistake, one holiday, of waxing poetic about Tranqill to my brother-in-law. It relates to my dissertation, I claim, this idea about objects. An object that, in this case, isn’t even there. Wait out the cut-up introduction and then listen to the setup, especially the kick drum bridging bars two and three:


And then the punchline, that kick drum eradicated, along with every other sound in its metric neighborhood:
That single, profoundly silent moment is what I am after, the de-emphasized emphasis. Take the expectation par excellence of dubstep, the mind-melting, head-nodding, crushing bass, and remove it with a scalpel, creating a sonic vacuum leading to the one. I’m interested in how we process this absence, I claim, how the object is actually bolstered by its disappearance, how our expectations of a glorious landing before the start of every measure are actually met by not effecting it. (“Sensitivity to
salience,” contends Gracyk, “requires knowing what is standard and unremarkable.”  

In this case, the emphasis on the last two sixteenth notes of each bar becomes standard, unremarkable. Until they’re subtracted, along with everything surrounding them.

“Check this out,” he counters, and plays a different tune out of his laptop. I listen. He presses the mute button here and there, a cheap emulation of The Tranqill Effect, and laughs. At me, not with me.

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What’s so fascinating about a rest? Granted, it’s a rest-writ-large, and it sucks the whole tune up into its orbit, like a black hole. It also silences the track perfectly and completely; the only thing you’re left with in that silence is system-sound, no ring-down of any kind, as if we’re playing the tune in impossible space. The recording requires us to imagine a kind of conceptual situation in which sound doesn’t behave the way our bodies know it to behave. It’s the work of a mad scientist, this innocent little rest, and it makes manifest the difference between literal and representational, about which we’ve been so concerned in our talking through the properties of sonic objects. The silence isn’t, after all, rhetorical, a rest through which the cymbals ring and the synth continues running through a delay, a kind of claim to silence. This is the real thing, the soundspace wiped clean. And, finally, it suggests a range of possibilities with respect to the way musical objects might behave. If this one is absent, an eradication, then we might also encounter those from the other end of the spectrum of musical possibility: one fully present, a literal object deployed in musical space. In

77 Ibid., 84.
fact we might imagine a continuum of the kinds of objects of which musical space might be said to consist, with the literal on one end and the absent on the other, though the world in between, of suggestion and implication, is the one we most often inhabit….

Literal Objects

No sort of popular musician can make music from scratch—what we have these days instead are scratch mixers, fragmenting, unpicking, reassembling music from the signs that already exist, pilfering public forms for new sorts of private vision. We need to understand the lumber-room of musical references we carry about within us, if only to account for the moment that lies at the heart of the pop experience, when, from amidst all those sounds out there, resonating whether we like them or not, one particular combination suddenly, for no apparent reason, takes up residence in our own lives.78

Transcription doesn’t do some music justice; it fails, at times, to meaningfully account for the level at which a piece engages us. Take the recently hipster-famous “glo-fi” or “chillwave” artist, Neon Indian; surely one could account for the musical content of one of his tracks, say “Mind, Drips,” in abstract terms on a sheet of paper,

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but what’s really going on inside the music, its terms of engagement, require us to take stock of it in a categorically different way. Something like tactile engagement makes the music go, the interplay of uniquely sourced sounds. If one gets excited about this
music, it’s not over the way the notes move around. It seems deliberately shallow on those terms; in this case Bb major and G minor tug lightly at each other while the busy synth line runs through a pentatonic scale. The Music Itself, on ‘grammatical’ terms, is kind of thin. Or, to put it yet more ungenerously, glo-fi songs are, according to Jon Pareles of the New York Times, “even more repetitive than electropop, just looping on and on because they can, bouncing along as mindlessly as a bobble-head doll.”

Each sound, though, has a particular quality that points to something outside and beyond the interactions of pitches and rhythms, challenging the notion that this is “mindless” music through and through. Every line is pushed to a sonic extreme bordering on caricature; the “impersonal sounds” that Pareles mentions briefly—and dismisses—in his review are at the very core of what propels the tracks.

It’s tempting to connect this concept to traditional ideas of orchestration, to the achievement of singular tone color and texture though novel combinations of instruments. And that gets at some aspect of what makes the music special, the unique sonic signature of each independent line. But this music goes further. It’s constructed not merely of special colors that adorn series of pitches and rhythms; rather, these “colors” source themselves, they announce their unique origins in other eras, spaces, autobiographies; their ‘vintage’ quality, even if we don’t fully get the references—or get them at all—gives the music richness and depth that is invisible when we draw it on staff paper. The only thing that gets at The Music Itself is The Music Itself. It

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simply can’t be accounted for by our metalinguistic act, no matter how competently executed.

Something like, say, an 808\textsuperscript{80} on a hip-hop track means something more than the transcription of the rhythm it’s programmed to play would suggest. The 808 line is a marker, and understanding what its presence ‘means’ for someone in the know requires re-approach, requires us to let go of the privileging of its abstraction into formal musical parameters. Rather than reject as baggage the resonances of that particular drum machine, we willingly engage in the free play of baggage. We listen for collision of markers, of loaded guns.

This process of meaning-making confounds conventional distinctions, problematizes binary divisions between music that either makes sense in terms of grammar or makes sense in terms of narrative. “For Meyer,” Nattiez tells us,

there are on one side \textit{absolutists} who believe that musical meaning is based exclusively on the relationships between the constituent elements of the work itself, and on the other \textit{referentialists} for whom there cannot be meaning in music, except by referring to an extramusical universe of concepts, actions, emotional states, and characters.\textsuperscript{81}

We hear from Coker a few pages later, who claims that

\textit{congeneric musical meanings} are those resultants of a predominantly iconic situation in which someone interprets one part of a musical work as a sign of another part of that same work or a different musical work…\textit{extrageneric musical meanings} are those resultants of the iconic sign situation in which someone interprets a musical work or some portion of it as a sign of some nonmusical object, including sounds not then organized as part of a musical work.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{81} Nattiez, \textit{Music and Discourse}, 108.
Nattiez then steps in to complicate/resolve the situation. “If there is an essential being of music defined from a semiological vantage point, I would locate that being in the instability of the two fundamental modes of musical referring.”83

How “fundamental” are these modes of referring, though, to our “glo-fi” example? Do we hear the effect-saturated lines as signs of some sort, as pointers that direct us outside the work and into some kind of “extramusical universe”? Again, the object-metaphor proves useful; this music, when it works on us, does so because it feels like something literal rather than something representational, something we can hold in our hands rather than something we have to deal with in terms of rhetoric. The same impulses and rewards that lead us, say, to buy records might likewise lead us to this sort of music. We privilege the notion that something is there in the room with us, taking up space. The active engagement of our bodies and their autobiographies replaces the relegation of music into “brain space.”

On the other hand….

Representational Objects

….what happens when music can, in fact, be fairly accounted for by a kind of metalinguistic act; when, say, transcribing a track gets at its singularity and richness? Put another way, what about music that’s more “note-y” than Neon Indian, that engages on the level of musical rhetoric rather than sources itself more literally?

Certain musics push us into that “brain space” more intentionally, engage us by asking us to consider the ways in which they seem to play with our expectations on a

83 Nattiez, Music and Discourse, 118.
kind of *grammatical* level. The *Rockabye Baby* phenomenon provides an instructive, if somewhat ridiculous, example. These “lullaby” renditions of, say, Radiohead depend on what I call the “representational object” character of the music. We listen to “No Surprises” reorchestrated for “the delicate sounds of the glockenspiel, vibraphone, and other instruments” and it sounds, despite ourselves, sort of fantastic. The musical terms of engagement allow a good part of the song’s singularity to translate, well outside of its original, intended sound world. Not so for an imaginary, similar reorchestration of Neon Indian’s “Mind, Drips.” What would John Pareles say? Likely what he’s already said. He dismisses the whole genre on the grounds that it’s repetitive and mindless; he may as well be listening to the glockenspiel and vibraphone version, since his critique makes clear a preference for music that operates on the level of representational rather than literal objects.

Likewise, he might as well just buy the mp3s, given their similar representational bias. As vinyl maps onto the literal object, so does mp3 map onto the representational one. “The mp3,” Sterne reminds us, “is a medium which, in most practical contexts, gives the full experience of listening to a recording while only offering a fraction of the information and allowing listeners’ bodies to do the rest of the work. The mp3 plays its listener. Built into every mp3 is an attempt to mimic and, to some degree preempt, the embodied and unconscious dimensions of human perception in the noisy, mixed-media environments of everyday life.”

The technology depends on our ability to fill in the blanks. We do so, however, on multiple

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85 Sterne, “The mp3 as Cultural Artifact,” 835.
levels. We can reconstruct the high-fidelity source from the mp3 that represents it in much the same way we can reverse-engineer the musical grammar, the rhetorical maneuvers, of music that’s intended to operate on the level of rhetoric.

Absent Objects(?)

What follows, then, is the question of what happens when neither this singular hearing of literal objects (like “Mind, Drips”) nor this reconstructive hearing of representational objects (like Rockabye Baby) operates. Both members of the binary we’ve constructed depend upon the presence of an object of some kind, whether it’s fully present in the soundscape or alluded to by suggestion. But binaries have a habit of collapsing under scrutiny. With what are we left if we eliminate this object-dependency from our construct? What does a proper “absent object” look (sound) like? Can we think of a representative example?

“If we compel the composer to write in terms of what the listener is able to hear,” advises Nattiez, “we flirt with the danger of freezing the evolution of musical language, whose progressive development comes about through transgressions of a given era’s perceptual habits.”86 In the search for that rare case in which we’ve heard something unlike anything we’ve heard before, the instance of formation of what will become a new prototype, the moment of musical innovation, we might remind ourselves that the logistics of listening, the ways in which we transmit musical information, belie the ways in which we think about music, philosophize about its potential. Future containers might tell us something useful about future content.

86 Nattiez, Music and Discourse, 99.
7. One More Revolution

Our story began with Damon, the mad king, destroyer of the object of his affection, bent on possessing the unpossessable. A critical difference abides between this metaphor and what we do when we endeavor to talk about music. In the story, Damon kills his daughter; subject persists over the object it sought to consume. When we talk about music, though, subject never wins. The object always slips out of our discursive traps, always exceeds the rhetorical frame, requires us to make exceptions, construct and then collapse inadequate binaries, consider alternate points of view.

This project attempts to write the tragedy out of Dymphna’s story, to make the things we examine come alive in spite of ourselves, to blunt our attempts to smother them in language that tells us more about ourselves than about what we’re trying to describe (or possess, or overcome). Narrative performs a kind of alchemy, a reanimation; argument falls into and accounts for the cracks opened up by our admissions, confessions, revelations. In this new story music rings unencumbered, Damon walks away. In this new story Dymphna survives.

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The Exchange
Notes

This work represents an attempt to make sense of my artistic personality. For several years I’ve been writing a large-scale prose project, one I initially thought of as separate from my work as a composer. This piece imagines an integration that calls this separateness into question, by negotiating the territory where two crafts—writer and composer—overlap. Other boundaries blurred as I developed the piece: between composer and performer, between notes-on-paper composer and computer programmer. The result is a composition that accounts for the diverse artistic paths I’ve followed over the past many years, a viable hybrid.

The working method consisted of recording my own voice speaking segments of prose. I then used a variety of techniques to create discrete fragments out of this recorded speech: cutting the sound file at zero-crossings, imposing a tempo on the voice and then making divisions according to rhythmic patterns, or isolating the stutters, sibilants, and breaths and amplifying them by orders of magnitude. These discrete moments generated MIDI data that sound a variety of software synthesizers. I sampled the fragments and their corresponding synthesizer sounds and mapped the samples onto percussion and keyboard triggers. By learning and performing idiosyncratic patterns on the instruments the text emerges from shards of recombined speech, while speaking live over the triggered text creates chorus, flanging, and phasing effects.

This piece underscores many of the concerns that motivate my work: a queasiness about hard-and-fast boundaries between genres and artistic roles; a fascination with the human body’s capability to mold itself around a unique, nearly
impossible task; a conviction that following our creative imperatives, while they may drag us far out-of-bounds, allows for their integration into something singular.
Setup Diagram
My brother shakes me awake. Through gauzy eyes I barely decipher the time, a blur of boxy digits glowing green on high-tech home theater equipment. Stacks of softly humming boxes adorn a giant television, the newer devices placed with care above their older, larger counterparts. DVDs give way to VHS tapes on racks that line the walls and wrap around corners, jutting up to meet framed posters of famous actors and foreign films. My Uncle Pino, whose name is actually Joe, typically starts the day in this room, watching soccer or the Italian news. Today, though, he must already be downstairs. Late October dawn, deep blue, backlights Venetian blinds on tall narrow windows, casting Luigi, my brother, in broad-shouldered silhouette. He rushes off, leaving me on the couch, hands over my eyes. I’m the one of us still resting, after all that my brother has endured.

He arrived the night before, very late, after a series of phone calls between us that began mid-afternoon and persisted well past midnight. Coordinating his arrival at the house required the input of a small committee, each member advocating a subtly different optimum route. My father erred on the side of shortest distance, disregarding traffic and speed limit (“why would you go west to go east?”) while Uncle Vinnie tried to minimize travel time, predicting with authority the congestion of every major highway between here and Camp Lejeune, Luigi’s duty station in North Carolina. Uncle Pino, who knows the neighborhood best, fine-tuned the exit strategy from the Cross Bronx Expressway. I compiled the final choreography from this patchwork and requested occasional revision from the committee as Luigi phoned in progress reports from each successive northbound roadway.
Earlier that day I needed my own set of directions, which Uncle Vinnie gladly provided. He has a subway and bus system map in his head, imprinted over the course of decades spent moving among the boroughs of New York City: the first apartment, near Fordham; the artist’s studio in Alphabet City, the single family home and marriage-turned-divorce deep in Queens; the one-bedroom in Washington Heights. He crisscrossed the city in rented U-hauls, used cars, subways, elevated trains, buses, the occasional taxi, deeply ingraining the route back to this house, my maternal family’s home for half a century.

My grandparents saved and borrowed their way to the down payment, a few thousand 1960 dollars. The basement apartment a few blocks away that my grandfather rented, before sending for his wife and seven children, couldn’t sustain the family, so they upgraded. More space but questionable conditions: a dirt floor in the basement, the main dining area uninsulated. Generations of repair muted evidence of poverty by degrees as siblings married off in turn, roughly in order of age, and emptied the makeshift bedrooms. They moved north, slowly colonizing Westchester and upstate New York. Eventually only my grandparents and Aunt Maria remained, a perfectly reasonable arrangement for a two-bedroom house. Soon they didn’t even need the income from the rented upstairs anymore, and my Uncle Pino, still single, moved in. He renovated, bought an espresso machine and a flat-screen TV.

Sunday after childhood Sunday we made the car trip to this house for the big midday meal, but both my brother and I need directions to get here as adults. Now we come from points south: Camp Lejeune and Times Square. As children we came from the north: Yonkers, then Brewster. The polarity is beginning to reverse.
I rise slowly. This room is a sedative, the air thick and full. Cologne drifts down the hallway from a table in my uncle’s bedroom displaying every make and model: Molto Smalto, which I adopted in high school to profound effect with the ladies. Acqua di Gio, the most fun to say. Opium. Joop. Their scents mingle by the time they reach the living room and sense memory engages: I’m watching the Sunday soccer game with my Uncle as he discusses the finer points of the game, his resonant bass punctuated by the announcer’s impeccable Italian that I sometimes understand. Or Luigi and I, having gained access to the “video store” lining the walls, are together negotiating a title not too violent for our mother but not too dialogue-heavy for our father, a time-consuming and often unrewarding process. Like getting to my feet on this particular morning and making my way toward the staircase.

The stairs clatter in this house. Their severe pitch requires a forceful descent, as if half-falling. I compare my sluggish thuds to the remembered sounds of an Aunt’s Italian-engineered house slippers, the wooden heels slapping the flat of every step as their wearer charged downstairs, arms full of Christmas gifts or six-packs of 7-Up. Perhaps I revised the sound over time, made it quieter and added a sharper point, a slower gait, a longer stride, a flat surface. Now it’s the sound of women at work in unreasonable heels walking across the polished wood floor on the way to the elevators, and my response has less to do with childish giddiness and wholesome anticipation.

The door at the bottom of the stairs is unlocked. It must have been an early morning. Both the deadbolt and the standard lock should be drawn tightly shut at this hour. There was a robbery years ago. They didn’t come in the front door and all they
took was the pasta machine. Still, before bed and after an informal head-count, someone turns the deadbolt for the night, discouraging entry and exit thereafter. Even in the middle of the day someone needs to follow you out and secure the door, though deadbolting is thought to be excessive. Locking the door is the last topic of conversation, the final social interaction to coordinate. When you walk in you lock the door behind you, when you leave a representative from the inside takes over. Diligence and discipline define this house, the ritual at its threshold sets the outward bounds. So when Luigi pulled off the highway in the dead of last night there was a stir at the door.

Uncle Pino and my father drove out to meet him around the block so he, unsure of the way, could follow them back. The final deadbolting had to be undone but couldn’t be left alone after midnight, so someone had to deadbolt the door behind them and then let them back in a few minutes later, my brother in tow, and then deadbolt the door again. We expertly restored the rupture in ritual, with no formal delegation of tasks. Everyone knew what needed to be done. I don’t remember who finally turned the locks for the night.

Nor do I know who undid them in the morning, so early, the seals barely in place before someone broke them again. A small crowd gathers in the parlor, backs to the unlocked front door, waiting. I enter the room, where my grandfather used to sit and watch the neighborhood traffic drift by, outside the barred windows and beyond the iron gate. After he died it became a guest room, where my Uncle Sal would sometimes sleep, too tired to make the trip back to Albany. Then my grandmother gradually moved in. At first she watched TV here during the afternoons, in a
wheelchair. The wheelchair became a hospital bed, paid for by Medicare. Eventually she stopped making the trip back to her bedroom and simply lived in the parlor, fused to that bed, under Hospice care during the day, while my Aunt Maria taught second grade at Mt. Carmel, and under her daughter’s watchful eye in the evening and through the night. My mother and my Aunt Rosetta came on weekends, did the cooking, sat with my grandmother in the parlor. Once in a great while she defied the tumor encircling her spine and would stand or even walk. I could hear those rare occasions in my mother’s voice, even before she told me “Nonna had a good day today.”

I join the silent circle around the bed, listening to my grandmother’s quiet wheezing, watching her chest and stomach pulse. My impatience surprises me. Her breathing stops and we wait.

The sound of an angry ghost slices through silence. We refocus on my Aunt Maria, wailing. The youngest daughter hardest hit, she presided every day over her mother’s gradual deterioration. Perhaps she didn’t even see it, like parents watching their children grow. Check the progress against photographs or lines drawn on a wall, otherwise change is imperceptible. “You got so big,” Uncle Damiano always said when he came back from California and saw Luigi and me. The polarity is beginning to reverse. “You got so small,” he might have said when he entered his mother’s room the night before. Instead it was simply “mamma,” spoken with warmth, optimism, the word out of his mouth before his eyes could process the image. Then the sight of her broke him, laid him low. I warned him at the airport. “She looks like a skeleton.” He had to see for himself.
“She waited for Luigi.” This seems to be the consensus, after the room settles around her absence, though in truth no one could tell if \textit{sta venendo}—he is coming—could penetrate the haze of her slow shutdown over the course of the previous evening. When my brother finally arrived he said nothing. \textit{Come stai?}—how are you?—likely would have been the extent of his Italian had he chosen to speak; the question must have seemed wholly unnecessary. Maybe \textit{grazie} would have been a better choice from a limited vocabulary. Thank you for keeping me alive. Thank you for going in my place.
URLs for video of representative performance:

http://www.andreamazzariello.com/andrea_mazzariello/5_the_exchange.html

or

http://vimeo.com/21520895