Music and the Forms of Thought

So: what do we know about music? What do we think we know? What kind of knowledge is that and what is its relationship to other kinds? As I write, thinking about music has passed through almost a quarter-century of intellectual ferment. Has anything been settled? What do we want to know? What should we be asking these days?

Much recent work, both pro and con, suggests that one thing we should be asking—still—is this: What does music have to do with ideas? The form of the question implies that the ideas at issue are not ideas about music, at least not primarily, but ideas about anything and everything else. More importantly, the question assumes that music and such ideas are capable of separation in the first place, that they begin from a condition of independence, indifference, or antagonism. One way to describe the ferment of recent decades is to say that after around 1990, too many people to ignore had become unwilling to grant that assumption. Ideas from all over the compass seemed to invite, or even demand, not only a hearing with music, but also the recognition that music had never been heard, could never be heard, without ideas. (What music? Any music. Take your pick. What ideas? Any and all; the question is what to do with them.)

One result of this push to ideation was a hermeneutic impulse that broke radically with the tradition of what, *faute de mieux,* I will call closed or weakly contextual hermeneutics—the essentially modernist practice of aesthetic paraphrase that, according to Gary Tomlinson, can be traced from Donald Tovey through Charles Rosen to Richard Taruskin.[1] The turn from closed to open hermeneutics has had too many forms for easy summary, but most of them have seemed premised on the falsity of Kant's claim that music pleases us acutely but does not leave us much to think about—that it is "more

pleasure than culture."[2] Another result, probably inevitable, was a backlash that has tried to think of music in performance as a means of extinguishing thought—or, failing that, to preserve a precinct of difference in which music could find shelter from the ideas raging all around it.

This is not the place to expose—yet again—the emptiness of such claims. Suffice it to say, in passing, just two things in lieu of the fuller arguments that have been made elsewhere. On performance: even if performance did put the mind to sleep (but does it? Whose mind? And don't vivid performances actually *wake us up?*), there is nothing to prevent us from reflecting afterward on what we've heard. On the dream of rediscovering what James Currie calls "music after all"[3]: that insubstantial pageant dissolves the moment we say *anything* about music. One sentence is all it takes to open the door to language and the symbolic order. (Whereof one speaks, thereof one cannot be silent.) Autonomy becomes contingency the moment it allows any act of interpretation, however small. One touch of meaning saturates its bearer with heterogeneity.

If music were really the black hole (or rabbit hole) down which thought disappears, would we even be able to hear it? The persistent effort to situate music at some such vanishing point seems to suffer from a double dose of what W. J. T. Mitchell calls ekphrastic fear—the fear that representation will consume or hollow out what it represents.[4] The dose is double because it involves both speaking about music and thinking about it—and if the words are bad enough (being metaphorical and such like), the ideas are worse. Words fail to capture music (or so we're told; did anyone ever expect them to?) but concepts kill it.

Well, no: not for me, anyway. Critical musicology, cultural musicology, New Musicology—call it what you will, and love or hate it—rose on the power of thinking precisely the contrary. That thought is its wager. This trend or temperament (it was never a doctrine) sees a rough but vital harmony among music, words, and ideas as they address, orbit, and collide with each other. Often this *harmonia mundi* happens in terms that should impel us to rethink not only the relationships among its elements but their very identities (for of course none has just one). Of course I would say so—I have a bet down, myself. My own work—call it what you will, and love it or hate it—has been an extended effort to share in and give further voice to that harmony, discords notably included. The wording here is important. Any notion that such an effort seeks to nail music down to some Aesopian signified is a caricature. Music is thinking in tones. Where have we heard that before?

But the impulse to confine or suspend thought where (and wherever?) music goes obviously exists for a reason, and although it may have to give ground, it is not likely to give up or give out. So it is a good idea to give it a sympathetic hearing on occasion, so as to test the limits and reexamine the conditions of possibility of thinking about music as thinking (about everything, music included) in tones. The premise of—let's call it the polyglot position—is that ideas saturate music, and music saturates ideas, and so does everything else (both ways). The ideas do not come with guarantees. Pursuing them often requires doing without the consolation or illusion of empirical or theoretical foundations, and it often demands some creative enterprise. (These requisites, of course, apply well beyond music.) But the contrary position—call it the monophonic—asks us, not unreasonably, to acknowledge that there are times when we want just music, to lose ourselves in music, and since it would be foolish to deny this (we are all monophonic sometimes), it would also be foolish not to ask about the kernel of truth in the monophonic position's ekphrastic fear. Perhaps ideas can do damage to music, or more exactly, to our experience of music; perhaps in denying a reductionist impulse in the polyglot attitude I have already acknowledged as much. So it behooves even the most ardent of polyglot thinkers to ask about when and how such damage may occur, and how its possibility should alter our thinking about thinking about music.

GETTING STUCK

So just what is the thought of music, in all the ambiguity of that phrase? Working out answers to that question requires a series of test cases, single instances that can stand as paradigmatic "best examples." (The need for single, singular instances is general. The reasons why will appear below.) This book is itself such a series. Its first instance is Paul Harper-Scott's recent *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism,* a book that raises the issue of music and ideas in a big way.[5] The book is a sweeping indictment of musicology and a manifesto for its transformation. Its core thesis is that musicology today is mired in a neoliberal late-Capitalist swamp from which it blindly ignores "our most pressing present concern—to escape the horrors of the present by imagining the transformations of a coming society" (xiv). The argument draws, by its own account, and despite the book's Lacanian title, primarily on the philosophy of Alain Badiou, which it purports first to expound and

then to apply to questions of musicology and music, particularly with reference to modernism and the proposal that modernist music, rightly understood, can help advance the pressing concern of utopian hope.

That last sentence is meant to be a neutral summary, but the innocent-seeming word *apply* is a loaded one. Application is precisely what I think we should *not* be doing. Similarly, the innocent-seeming phrase "musicology and music" is actually anything but. Harper-Scott subsumes both the method and the object of study under the same umbrella opened by (his) Badiou without reflecting on whether the difference matters, and without questioning whether Badiou's categories can be trusted to act as a universal conceptual solvent. Badiou's philosophy of the Event, which, full disclosure, I have called on sympathetically in some of my own recent work, here takes on the mantle of dogma, or what Harper-Scott himself might identify as a quilting point—Lacan's metaphor for a term that arrests the unruly motion of a body of signifiers to create a coherence at once potent and fictitious. Ideas endowed with that much power, if one adheres to them, can subsume music and musicology easily because they can subsume almost anything. But it is just this sort of power that I think we should deny to ideas by our ways of deploying them.

This chapter will sketch the project of that deployment with primary reference to music, though doing so will obviously continue to have implications for musicology. The practice of the latter does, after all, depend on one's conception of the former. Nonetheless, Harper-Scott's quarrels with Taruskin (whom he pillories mercilessly) and others are not my present concern. Neither is his account of modernism. And I have no interest in criticizing him except insofar as he encounters difficulties to which none of us is immune. My aim, to put it in terms that acknowledge a certain underlying irony, is to work up some ideas on the problem of ideas and their potential bearing on music, for good and ill. But the problem of application instanced by *The Quilting Points* in relation to music may also, mutatis mutandis, be understood to bear on what we take to be a tenable program for understanding music, or, more broadly, for the pursuit of humanistic knowledge in general, to which both music and our ways of understanding music have something to contribute.

For starters, then, let's try pinning a few things down via Harper-Scott. *The Quilting Points* is a stimulating book to argue with. It is quite provocative—admirably so—but also quite provoking. The book strikes me as tyrannical in its quest for liberation. It invites a critique that turns its own stand-

point against it. Nonetheless, the book's ekphrastic fearlessness is bracing. To argue with it at all is to acknowledge that the kind of ideas it draws on are not the intrusions on music *ab extra* they are still sometimes thought to be. *The Quilting Points* can form a point of departure here (without becoming a quilting point itself) because of its exemplary insistence that ideas not specific to music are foundational to musical understanding. The trouble with that is not the appeal to ideas as such, something I am obviously glad to endorse. The problem is with the covert assumptions that the ideas are transparent and that they operate from the top down.

Harper-Scott is refreshingly candid about this:

> Because the argument of this book depends on a fundamental critique of the forms of argument and the subject positions of scholars of modernism, it depends at every stage on an expansive philosophical interrogation of the ideas of truth, ideology, and the subject as they appear in the theory of Martin Heidegger, Alain Badiou, Jacques Lacan, and Giorgio Agamben (to name the most important influences on my argument). These ideas, which I draw on freely and extensively throughout the book, are introduced as they arise, and often re-presented later. . . . They are given an exposition that presumes little familiarity with the theory (xiv).

The language of expansiveness, extensiveness, and freedom here shows a great deal of confidence in the ideas it recruits—whether misplaced or not readers will judge for themselves—but what does this language hide? Subject positions can be critiqued only from other subject positions, and this passage firmly stakes out an imaginary subject position of its own, that of the philosopher as first among tutors, the master who expounds philosophical truths for the disciple. In invoking this metaphor I have in mind not only the rhetorical form of medieval pedagogy but also Lacan's "discourse of the master," the attempt to organize a diversity of signifiers (here directed at understanding modernism) under a master signifier (here the compounded ideas of Heidegger, Badiou, etc.) while concealing the problem that every such effort produces a remainder that inevitably compromises its success and questions its possibility.[6] Push that thought a step further and it leaves the master the first and last subject, in every sense of the term, of his own discourse.

Just for this reason, however, the position formulated here makes *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism* paradigmatic of the problem of application and therefore a paradigmatic text to depart from (in both senses of "depart"). In what follows, I will continue to let philosophical ideas

epitomize ideas in general, in part because the philosophical register helps bring out a key aspect of the problem—the aspect of otherness, of ideas about *this* applied to *that*—and in part because of the epistemic authority that philosophical ideas are still, often unreflectively, allowed to carry. That authority is the very reason they tempt us to "apply" them.

GETTING UNSTUCK

The metaphor of the quilting point provides an effective way to piece together the problem of application. As I use the term here, ideas are applied by becoming quilting points. The process presupposes the transparency and top-down authority I mentioned earlier, at least as a pretense. (*This* is a language-game; *that* is the uncanny—or bare life, or the coming community, or a rhizome, or. . . . You get the idea.) If Lacan is right, we are all stuck with this process because otherwise we could not make our way through the swarm of signifiers among which we live. But that is not so certain. Signifiers and signifieds are capable of intricate and giddy dances, but ordinary life tends to proceed on the assumption that they have a good enough stability for most purposes. And meaning may not be a product of signification at all, a claim I have argued elsewhere; meaning uses signifiers in limited ways but it does not come from them.[7] There is no imperative to pin ourselves down with ideas, and perhaps a strong imperative not to.

The problem with the quilting point is that the concept allows for nothing in between a discourse that is all buttoned up and a discourse that is all mobile signifiers. The problem with application is that it turns the second into the first; its mode of understanding is to stick the buttons on. Application does not use ideas; it reproduces them; it transforms phenomena into allegories. If we want something more, we have to find a way into that intermediate space where our discourse (assuming for the moment that signifiers are at issue) can avoid playing fast or loose and instead can sway or channel or in every sense *conduct* the flow of signifiers. There is currently no standard name for doing this. My inclination is to think of it as an extension of the open hermeneutics I alluded to earlier, a practice of open interpretation that includes creative activity, performance, and the reuse or reiteration of cultural products as well as the production of discourse.

Are there criteria for using ideas generatively in open interpretation, and, if so, what might they be? Clearly, they could not rely on any of the either/or

distinctions that open interpretation puts in question. Divisions between history and criticism, or work and performance, or the empirical and the speculative, will be of no help because they, too, tend primarily to reproduce themselves; they seek application. In other words, we cannot set ratios between opposed terms to guide the desired practice. Instead of speaking of an intermediate space between fixity and flux (which turns out to be only a first approximation) we need to try imagining a space of continuous transformation and self-paraphrase in which all boundary terms are dead ends. The issue is complicated by the fact that no *one* such space is possible; there will be more to say later about the problem of the one, with particular reference to music.

Prior attempts to imagine such a space tend to represent it as the medium of a distinctively modern form of cognition. Walter Benjamin, for example, said of Kafka that his work "constitutes a code of gestures which surely had no definite symbolic meaning for the author at the outset; rather, the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings."[8] In a later text, Benjamin went further, observing that Kafka's writings were parables that had to become more than parables. Instead of assuming a truth that can never be fully transmitted, they preserve the fullness of transmission while sacrificing the determination of truth.[9] The result is a discourse full of what we might, troping on (or against) a term first suggested by Suzanne Langer, call partly consummated symbols—symbols that give a meaning that they do not have.[10] This discourse, in Benjamin's reading, may help suggest one of the criteria for what to do with ideas. The point is not to write like Kafka (as if we could) but to emulate him: not to do the same thing, but to do many similar things. Kafka thus understood supplies a model not by specifying positive content, but by indicating conditions of possibility.

One criterion, then, is that our practice or discourse should be amenable to the presence of partly consummated symbols, elements of untethered parable that guide but never determine the understandings they elicit. Another criterion, equally implicit in Benjamin's account of Kafka (not "in Kafka," and the point is significant; we will come back to it), is what we might think of as the criterion of vulnerability. Change and experiment presuppose uncertainty and open-endedness. The ideas put to those ends must retain the mobility of the material they engage with, which means that they must be open to change and experiment as they go along; they must be capable of being rewritten by the phenomenon they address. The generative use of an

idea only begins with the idea's identification of some phenomenon as falling within its purview. If that identification is to be anything more than an appropriative paraphrase that merely reaffirms itself as a premise, the idea must show a reciprocal impact from its exposure to the single and singular instance it addresses. The change wrought by that impact is what the idea reveals, if it reveals anything.

This capacity for metamorphosis belongs especially (if not exclusively) to modern forms of cognition because the confidence induced by the quilting points of yore is impossible to recover. The buttons have all come loose while other sorts of discourse have thrived like invasive species. Not to build this awareness into the space(s) of our practice would be to remain unaware of something basic about the conditions of our thought. The lost quilting points, moreover, include those of earlier moments of modernity. During the modernist era, the humanistic impulse often defined itself in opposition to machine models of knowledge and identity, but the machines in question lacked intelligence. Today's emergent models are based on intelligent machines and on machine-human interfaces that run continuously from one term to another. So we need a new alternative, and not one that quixotically opposes other forms of practice and discourse but one that differs from them—differs in ways that attract both attention and desire. One of the paramount features of "posthuman" interfaces is the unprecedented volatility they offer by means of cutting and pasting, processes that not only make texts, images, and sounds easily transferable and transportable, but that also, in so doing, expose modern cognition to an unprecedented degree of heterogeneity. With that, too, comes a dispersal of agency, a circulation of actions in which the subject is more vehicle than origin. We might accordingly take a readiness to accommodate heterogeneity as another criterion for the use of ideas in open interpretation.

The three criteria of partial consummation, vulnerability, and heterogeneity may usefully inform how we put ideas to work—on one condition. The criteria have to be so interpreted that they meet their own standards: that they guide but do not determine the direction of discourse, that they are open to change and experiment, and that they are amenable to multiplicity. But how do we get from these general ideational concerns to music in particular? We make music, among other reasons, in order not to accept being buttoned down, and we might now find it best to think, and write, and talk about music in ways that extend the enterprise. How do we go about it?

When it comes to music, to think without the buttons is to turn the noun into an adverb: it is to understand *musically,* to philosophize musically. It is to ask how the knowledge we derive from studying, teaching, performing and composing music can annex ideas from philosophy and elsewhere and bring them into a mutually informative relation with acoustic culture. To engage thus would change both the import of the ideas and the nature of the musical practice, and would do so, ideally speaking, without imposing either on the other as a constraint. The ideas we find most generative may often, perhaps most often, not be ideas about music at all. When figures like Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy, Slavoj Žižek, or Stanley Cavell take musical excursions they are writing as philosophers, not musicians. For us to make good use of their philosophical ideas, the ideas have to become musical ideas, not just ideas that some music may illustrate. Andrew Bowie has argued compellingly that the best philosophy of music comes about when we recognize the power of music to raise and explore philosophical questions.[11] The same principle applies to a philosophical hermeneutics of music. Ideas may tempt us to treat them as master signifiers, but we need to respond instead by treating them as points of departure. (The significance of that little word *points* will emerge shortly.) And we have to do this work for ourselves: we cannot let philosophy or philosophers do it for us.

For what happens when we apply ideas or give readings based on them, usually associated with an authoritative name: "quilting point," "Lacanian reading," and so on? (Even Žižek is not exempt from this question, though his Lacan is for the most part a kind of ventriloquist's dummy, and sometimes none the worse for it.) Such certified application only suppresses the interpretive possibilities it is supposed to open. That is often true even when we are wary of it. The idea turns us into *its* ventriloquist's dummy.

To put an idea to work rather than merely apply it to music—or, really, to anything else—it is imperative to recognize, first of all, that the idea has to be interpreted. Ideas have no fixed form; they exist in a series of citations, repetitions, and paraphrases; they depend on language. (Hence the caution offered earlier, that the criterion of partial consummation is not "in" Kafka.) The burden of the contingent history that comprises any idea must be taken up knowingly and must affect the way in which the idea is understood both before and after it is put to work.

Take "quilting point" again. The English term is not a good translation of *point de capiton,* which Lacan says refers to upholstery buttons. The suturing

here is not stitching but pinning, which implies a degree of force or violence and avoids the comforting image of a quilt, a.k.a. a comforter. So understood, the idea under whatever name forecloses the possibility that the subject might willingly or spontaneously or enthusiastically invest or absorb itself in symbolic forms.

Harper-Scott, following Žižek, uses the identification of quilting points as a means of ideology critique, but Lacan regards the *points de capiton* as necessary even though the coherence they produce is illusory; quilting points form the subject's line of defense against psychosis.[12] Like anything with a sharp point, the concept has to be used with caution. In *Écrits,* Lacan sharpens the metaphor further—to a fishhook.[13] But without the hook, there is no catch. And the metaphor dangles under a cluster of floating signifiers that it may or may not invoke but in any case cannot arrest: for starters, the fisherman is a traditional symbol of both the idler ("Gone Fishing") and the seducer (as in Schubert and Schubart's "Die Forelle"), the fish is a symbol of Christianity (based on an anagram formed by the Greek word ΙΧΘΥΣ [Ichthys]), and Jesus's disciples are fishers of men.

Lacan introduces the idea of the quilting point in a quasi-Biblical context, a reading of a scene in Racine's *Athalie* to which, in retrospect, he gives a musical twist: "Were we to analyze this scene like a musical score, we should see that this is the point at which the signifier and signified are knotted together, between the still floating mass of meanings that are actually circulating. . . . Everything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier, similar to those little lines of force that an upholstery button forms on the surface of material. It's the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in this discourse to be situated retrospectively and prospectively."[14] Note, however, that Lacan omits the possibility entailed by his metaphor, that there is not just one quilting point on the surface, but many. His "everything" is myopic. The surface is covered with a whole network of points, from which the radiating lines overlap, combine, and clash with each other. The effect of meaning comes not from the points as such, but from the matrix that envelops them.
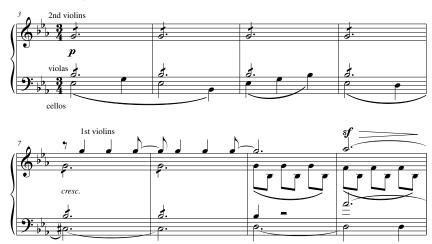
The trouble with Harper-Scott's quilting point—and it's an exemplary problem, not something to lay at Harper-Scott's doorstep alone—is that the idea remains stubbornly Lacanian throughout the text; it never finds its musical transpositions. For such transpositions to appear, for ideas to be put to work in musical terms responsible to our three criteria, the music must be granted enough semantic license for accounts of it to join, on equal terms, the

succession of paraphrases, citations, and reiterations that constitute the ideas in question. The music has to be accorded a concrete, idiomatic, and hermeneutically active role in the project of thought.

This can be done only with music in particular. To philosophize musically requires a practical response to an obvious fact that has not often had its due: There is no such thing as music. There is no phenomenon that corresponds to a single concept of music. Music is a prolific acoustic field of family resemblances. Both the philosophy of music and musical aesthetics have faltered over this point. Musical understanding needs to be reconceived in light of the experience of musical singularity. Music in the abstract can exemplify ideas but not interrogate them. We can think generatively about "music" only by putting ideas to work on its instances.

This breakdown of generality has serious consequences, but it is important to spell out what those consequences are—and are not. That music does not exist as the referent of a single unified concept does not imply that we cannot think about music in general terms. How else are we supposed to think about it? The point is not to avoid conceptualizing music but to conceptualize it flexibly and, since no conceptualization can cover the whole field of resemblances or be adequate to all circumstances, to conceptualize it repeatedly in changing frames of reference. The argument in favor of singularity is that individual instances of music (whether works or performances) cannot be understood adequately by the application of fixed general ideas. Each instance must be allowed to transform the concept it instantiates. This is possible because singularity and generality are not opposites. Singularity (not to be confused with particularity) is a way of inhabiting generality, a consequence of the fraught and indirect passage from the general to the particular. To talk about singularity, in music or any other locus of humanistic knowledge, we have to work our way through generality toward something else.

At this point the discussion needs such a singular instance, and Harper-Scott provides a good one: the famous C♯ in the opening theme of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony (see Example 1.1). This dissonant note, we're told, is an example of the void that, for Badiou, subtends any event. The idea of this void is a node in a network of ideas that Badiou stitches together to elaborate on a theory of truth as fidelity to an event by a "faithful" subject. There is some question here of being "faithful" to Badiou himself, whose account

EXAMPLE 1.1. Beethoven, "Eroica" Symphony, opening.

supposedly rests on a rigorous derivation from axiomatic set theory and whose articulation of the details is so complex and multiple that it may be meant to resist rather than facilitate application (that, in any case, is its effect). But the broad conceptual arc is reasonably clear. Here is Harper-Scott:

> Every situation . . . contains a void element, which is subtracted from a situation in order to create it. . . . In terms of the subject's relation to truth, [this void,] Ø, is the truth as it appears in the situation—strictly external to the situation (since it cannot be expressed fully in terms of the situation), but nominated by the faithful subject, in faithful confidence, as an infinite possibility "to-come." [. . .]
>
> The tense for truth-Events is therefore the future perfect, [that which] . . . "will have been" assigned a referent. . . . [Consider] the *Eroica*'s aberrant C♯. On its initial presentation in b. 7, it is simply the void element in the set of the scale of E-flat major, expressed as the set {0,2,4,5,7,9,11, Ø}.
>
> Beethoven's confidence in this Ø and his faithful nomination of it through the remainder of the movement means that, as a result of its final spectacular resolution in the coda, it "will have been" assigned a referent in b. 7 something like *form-generating excrescence of the tonal architecture.* (75–76, italics in original)

We might want to question here the use of set-theoretical notation (both musical and mathematical) simply to give an aura of rigor to the simple obser-

vation that C♯ is dissonant in E-flat major. More substantively, we might also want to question the use of Badiou's elaborate apparatus to tell us what we already know, or think we know—what the textbooks say, anyway—about the *Eroica* and its C♯. Is there some way to put these ideas to work towards the uncovering of something we *don't* know?

Perhaps there is. This is not the place for anything like a full account, but it is at least possible to observe that the rubric "C♯" in this instance takes in not just a note but a tangible sonorous thing, a manifold, or what Badiou might call a "multiple." In addition to the pitch identity of the note, there is the crescendo that fills its extended duration, its color on cellos alone in the low tenor register without support from the double basses, the syncopated violin Gs that enter high above it, and the violins' subsequent sforzando on A♭—a "subtraction" no less jarring than the C♯ even if A♭ is nominally part of the E-flat major scale—once the bass has moved up to D. The subtraction audibly emerges from the foundation of the music, both formally and acoustically. It might be said to be the means by which the movement assumes its positive consistency, an act of assumption that may be what the famous opening chords are asking us to listen to.

If so, the "void element" does create the situation of the movement, as Badiou would claim is necessary. But it does not do so exclusively by complying with later developments that determine what it will have been, no matter how often its long-term resolution (is there one? Perhaps we should not be so sure) has been celebrated. Instead, this "C♯" becomes the kernel of the music's immediately felt perceptual identity, the core of the music's sensory character. Its status as texture rivals its role as architecture. This action, moreover, is independent of its consequences. The C♯ will, indeed, have become something by deferred action, but only in addition to, and possibly because of, what it has already been.

Even more significant, this C♯ void is strangely palpable, as voids go. It is a fullness, even an over-fullness, far more than it is a blank. In *Being and Event,* Badiou denies that such palpability is possible. "What is at stake," he says,
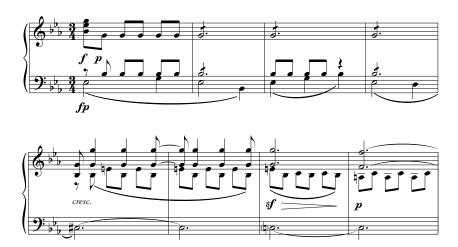
> is an unpresentable yet necessary figure . . . the non-term of any totality, the nothing particular to the situation, the unlocalizable void point in which it is manifest both that the situation is sutured to being and that the *that-which-*presents-itself wanders in the presentation in the form of a subtraction. . . . It would already be inexact to speak of this nothing as a point [as Badiou has just done: LK] because it is neither local nor global, but scattered all over,

nowhere and everywhere: it is such that no encounter would authorize it to be held as presentable.[15]

The paradoxes and incessant self-paraphrase of this and other passages demonstrate what they cannot, in principle, exactly say; they cannot describe the void element so they have to adumbrate it. Badiou hammers the *point* home: the void element has no location. It is everywhere in the situation it precipitates precisely because it is nowhere. But the *Eroica* unapologetically reverses this logic. It insists that the void, or at least a void consistent with the values the music aims for—say of finding the best by facing the worst—must paradoxically be as local and concrete as possible, and as promising as it is enigmatic. The void is not a shell but a kernel. In *this* situation the void element can and must present itself, and present itself early. One name for such a void might be pure potentiality, which at this level of generative agency is *not* a necessary component of every situation, although it might be what, for Beethoven, qualifies a situation as what Badiou would call a truth-Event.[16]

Once treated as I have tried to treat the void element here, ideas can have extensive ripple effects. We might, for example, reconsider the notion of the "form-generating excrescence" by asking what happens when the C♯ manifold returns in the recapitulation. Is the most important thing about it that it "resolves"? Perhaps not, if we dwell on the fact that it resolves off the tonic to a C-major sonority, that is, to V/V/V (see Example 1.2). Perhaps the most important thing is that it returns at all, that the manifold does not efface itself but insists on its material presence and its ontological value. (Lacan or Žižek might say that it becomes an ethical affirmation by refusing to give way as to its desire. But we can't pursue that thread here. Nor can we address the analytical question of whether the subsequent prominence of D-flat major in the coda represents a reinterpretation of the C♯, except to say, again, that we should not be too sure. There is no clear place to stop this discourse, so it must simply be cut off.)

Similar if less sweeping effects may often occur even when an idea seems to fit a piece of music perfectly well and therefore to apply in an unproblematic sense. (There should be an allowance made for this possibility, but it comes up less often than one might think, and the less so the more we hear music as singular—a topic to be considered shortly.) To illustrate, and to reach for a moment outside my comfort zone, consider Cole Porter's mischievous song "Let's Do it." The song is a celebration of sexual anarchy. It reels off a potentially endless list of creatures (human and animal) who "do it" with-

EXAMPLE 1.2. Beethoven, "Eroica" Symphony, recapitulation of opening.

out regard for anything but pleasure, starting with the proverbial birds and bees. But its cadential refrain, "Let's do it! Let's fall in love," is euphemistic to a fault—a flagrant evasion. From its first statement, the refrain mocks prudish conventionality. Verbally, it is less a coy invitation than a deliberate act of bathos; musically, it is a deployment of cadence not as a resolution or reward but as a curtailment.

As the song continues, the attitude of the refrain becomes more radical. The vivaciousness of the music becomes an expression of animal drive, the social expression of which is effervescent wit and knowing insinuation. The cadence becomes a repressive device that exposes falling in love as a mere pretext, a displaced expression of "doing it." Sex thus becomes subtracted from the song, whose situation is just that subtraction. And as Badiou would claim, this void element has no place; it is everywhere because it is nowhere. But at the same time, contrary to Badiou, this void element does localize itself in a specific absence, a little gasp heard in the line following each statement about which creatures "do it"; "educated fleas" (following those birds and bees) is the first example. The gasp is a vocal rest on the downbeat that recurs at this point. Sex, the void element, thus materializes its own absence, denies the promise of the "to-come," and propels the song into an increasingly preposterous series of instances of who and what "do it." The song itself thus becomes a replacement for the sex that the culture around it insists on subordinating to a false romantic impulse.[17]

"Musical understanding" is an ambiguous phrase. It can mean either understanding *of* music or understanding *by* music. The first meaning is the usual one, but the second is more than merely a grammatical double. I want to suggest that understanding *of* music and understanding *by* music are almost identical. The two are twins. They may sometimes get in each other's way, but only in the process of each finding itself in the other's place, in a classic instance of Derridean *différance*. Music both *attracts* and *enacts* understanding. As an aesthetic medium it does so through sensory, bodily events; as an imaginary or symbolic medium it does so through cultural tropes and hermeneutic windows.

Music, of course, is not the only thing that acts this way—far from it. But in its semantic fluidity music might furnish the paradigm of such cognitive twinning, just as it furnishes the paradigm, or so I've argued, of interpretation and expression. Music is notorious for its power to give understanding and withhold it at the same time; like Achilles chasing the tortoise, we can never quite catch up to what we hear. But it is important not to misunderstand the withholding as an end term. There are always two actions, giving *and* withholding, enacting *and* attracting. Their joint effect is to show candidly the conjectural underpinning of all perception. With music, perception is conjecture. Music gives possibility and surmise the force but not the substance of observation. In other words, music offers to demonstrate that experience in the absence of assured knowledge is an entirely livable condition. Listening, enhanced through music, allows us to entertain the possibility of uncertainty and even bewilderment without regret. With music we know by not-knowing, or better, we know surely by not knowing for sure. Musical understanding just is this twinned condition, which, however, we need to understand better. Even Hegel said that philosophy begins in the ear. So what does musical understanding involve?

Well, what does music involve? How does it involve *us?* The meaning of a musical act or occasion is the character of the experience it offers. Realizing as much shows the absurdity of the now exhausted question of whether music "has" meaning, which has been asked the wrong way throughout its history. The music-based experience may be described in terms of its kind (genre, recurrence, iteration) or of its instance (the particular, the event, the singular). The description forms part of the experience and vice versa. But to accomplish real understanding we have to go further. Our description must not only address the experience but also *continue* and *transform* the experience. To borrow an image from Lacan, these three actions—addressing, continuing,

and transforming—make up a Borromean knot: they are all intertwined, and you cannot cut one without the whole assembly falling apart.

Lacan speaks of a Borromean knot to emphasize the elusiveness of signification; a knot is an enigma. But it is more proper, topologically, to speak of Borromean *rings,* which suggest a complex harmony similar to Heidegger's "round dance" of Being—our continual turning and returning amid the varied forms of proximity and distance. Heidegger develops this image with emphasis on the "radiance" and "mirror-play" that endow things with their place in the world—a richly provisioned place but also one that, Heidegger adds, is "unpretentious."[18] To this we might add further that such ringing, as the English word suggests, is also acoustic, perhaps essentially acoustic, and that dancing in the round is often an occasion for singing.

Addressing, continuing, transforming. To think in the mode sketched here is to weave such rings together. Where such thinking ties itself in knots, its primary impulse is to tie them artistically rather than to attempt a denouement. When it comes to music, to think in this way is to exercise musical understanding, to philosophize musically, to think in tones.

What do we think about when we do that? Anything you like. I tend to dwell on culture and the hermeneutics of the subject, but these choices—like the classical music I prefer—represent a necessarily limited and selective means of modeling the discourse I think we need for musical understanding.

In a sense I have only one thing to say about that discourse, which is that *one thing* must always form its nucleus. To develop a point made earlier, thinking in tones can flourish only in the particular. Musical understanding depends on singularities, not on large generalities and above all not on a reified and rarefied ideal called Music, capital M. We have to address music with the same concreteness that it enhances to address *us,* the ones who play, compose, or listen. To say so is to bypass yet another sterile debate on whether to subordinate works and meanings to bodies and performances, or vice versa. Any of these alternatives is possible, none escapes mediation, and all are equally expendable and essential. What to make of them depends on how they address us, and we them, in the singularity of a musical event. Any such event will attract and enact musical understanding in its own way. As it does so, the music at hand, in whatever form it takes—performance, recording, memory, score; the list goes on—will both reach and escape us. Musical understanding will require the music to sacrifice a portion of its singularity while also wagering that part of what has been lost can sooner or later be regained in a new way.

The result is, or would or will be, a language of musical understanding far removed from the still-familiar ways of talking about musical form or style or genre or, worse, structure. It even runs ahead—though I would like to think that the distance is far less—of the hermeneutically inspired language I favor as an alternative. My recent work has tried to push that language further toward the nameless discourse I'm speculating on here.[19] The received language should be demoted or abandoned. Let me repeat that: the received language should be demoted or abandoned. This process seems to require experiments of all sorts and to be quite unfinished; perhaps it is unfinished in principle. But whatever its morphing and metamorphoses, one thing remains at every phase, and that, as I said before, is just—one thing.

Which means that one thing is still missing from these remarks, which can continue only if they settle on the one thing they need. What thing? Call it a reflection on the fact, and it's no less, that music is not one thing. The consequence, only seemingly a paradox, is that musical understanding can extend to many things only if it grows out of some one thing, precisely one among many: one of the things that music, what we call music, can be. To speak in this way of music's singularity is not to deny its participation in common discourses. On the contrary, that participation is necessary to the advent of singularity. The shared becomes a source of the singular when we understand musical traits to act like the verbal "shifters"—deictic terms like *here, there, this, that, I,* and *you*—that continually assume new import as they migrate from one situation to another.[20] Otherwise we risk hearing not music, but a category.

We can, of course, always choose to think generically, to deploy categories, to hypothesize norms and deviations. But all such discourses are limited by their tendency to reproduce themselves at the cost of the phenomena they seek to describe. Perhaps it is time to revive Alfred North Whitehead's idea of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness—not with the aim of absorption in pure process, but as a means of clearing the way for a discourse that preserves singularities without being confined to them. Music, I want to say, is both a model and an object of such a discourse, provided that we insist on it in the exemplary singular.[21]

How? We can start by acknowledging that there is no one way to do it, and that *therefore* it can be done only in an endless series of *this* way and *this* way: one way at a time. Musical understanding, thinking through music, means addressing, working through, extrapolating from attention to particular acts and events of music. Not to linger with the particular, not to prove the thought in sound, is fatal to the enterprise. We cannot work with a

Platonic phantasm of music that floats free of circumstance, history, accident, moment, and *différance.* Too many philosophers, perhaps, have been enchanted by that phantasm even while clearing up multitudes of phantasms in other departments. To illustrate, consider—one thing.

For Jean-Luc Nancy, the essential element in music and in listening generally is timbre: "Timbre . . . forms the first consistency of sonorous *sense* as such . . . [for] even if it remains possible and true to distinguish [timbre] from pitch, duration, intensity, there is, however, no pitch, and so on, without timbre (just as there is no line or surface without color). We are speaking, then, of the very resonance of the sonorous."[22]

This statement is questionable on both logical and musical grounds. Logic first. What Nancy says about timbre can be said equally about the other sensory qualities he mentions. Yes, there is no pitch or duration or intensity without timbre, but there is no timbre without pitch and duration and intensity, not to mention rhythm, attack, tempo, texture, contour, and so on. It makes no sense to single timbre out for idealization, even in the name of sheer materiality or "sonorous sense." The "very resonance of the sonorous" can be anything or nothing depending on what is sounding—a point basic to musical understanding. To music, then. As musicians we know very well that *any* sensory quality may emerge in a particular act of music as the "first consistency" of its "sonorous sense." There is no *the* "very resonance of the sonorous"; there are only singular resonances that come to sound that way. Examples come quickly to mind. Pitch: the incessantly repeated A♭ in Chopin's "Raindrop" Prelude, a pitch—a pitch, not a note—whose contradictory burden is that it can't bear to stop and can't bear not to. Duration: the multiplier of expression in the finale of Beethoven's *Waldstein* Sonata. Intensity: the extended fortissimo outburst in the slow movement of Mahler's Fourth Symphony. And that's just classical music. *Old* classical music.

But let's stick with timbre. Driving home from the train station one day while this chapter was in progress I had the misfortune to hear an arrangement of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* for wordless *a capella* chorus.[23] It was a cringe-worthy moment, but it did get me thinking about the role of timbre in the history of this music. The Adagio originated as the slow (middle) movement of Barber's only string quartet. In that guise the combination of solemnity and tenderness in its melodic line also has a certain countervailing astringency, so that the music invites both absorption and reflection and allows the balance between them to waver. In the more familiar string orchestra version, and with no flanking fast movements as context, the

astringency disappears in favor of a fervid lushness. The music turns into a lamentation, suitable for tragic use in the Vietnam War film *Platoon,* which gave the Adagio a new identity and established it as a popular favorite. The lament, though, cannot entirely disengage from the lushness, and the link adds a troubling note of aestheticized pain and sorrow. Change the instrumentation to wordless chorus and the trouble multiplies exponentially. The aestheticizing of pain and sorrow now becomes erotic, or perhaps I should say more erotic, more openly erotic, at the same time as the lamentation assumes a quasi-sacred character because of the vocal texture—so we have a witches' brew of sanctity, sexuality, sensuousness, and sentiment.

The result is confounding: it projects a kind of ethereal lushness, reveling in the materiality of the voice while at the same time denying it. The wordless chorus produces the willed illusion of disembodiment, as wordless choruses often do in film. The logic is that of the fetish in its classical formulation: I know, but even so. . . . This double-sidedness takes advantage of a strange element of voice in the plural: that the sound of a chorus is never quite traceable to the bodies that produce it, but instead seems to hover about the performance space, not quite linked to its source, precisely because nobody—no (one) body—is producing it. For that reason this effect of disembodiment never occurs with solo singing, the sound of which can never escape the body that produces it, though it may try.

Some listeners might decide they like this second-order vocalise; that's a judgment of taste. (And *that's* a fraught Kantian phrase.[24]) But the point here is that as timbre becomes the resonance of these resonances, it falls into an uncontrollable excess of signification, the very opposite of what Nancy postulates timbre to be. Postulates it because he isn't thinking *musically* enough. And this fall raises questions that need to be addressed through musical understanding. Is the fall a contingency, a law, an accident, a fatality? What is its history, and what is its place in the history of perception? Is it a variant of Merleau-Ponty's principle that the subtraction of any sense from the sensory manifold yields an uncanny effect?[25] Is sound particularly susceptible to such subtraction? Is music?

PHILOSOPHIZING WITH THE PHENOMENA

In the tradition running from Nietzsche through the later Heidegger through Derrida, the work of thinking often proceeds not with abstract con-

cepts but with what might be called enhanced exemplars, particulars imbued with a paradigmatic value that enables us to ask what they have to tell us about being, knowing, sensing, and so on. The result for music would not be a conjunction of music and philosophy, but a practice of philosophizing through occasions of music. The procedure resembles Kantian reflective judgment, reasoning from the particular to the general, with the key difference that the particular is understood to be never wholly particular and the general never wholly general. Precisely the lack of such completion or closure is what makes the enterprise work.

The understanding that results exceeds the scope of representation on one hand and metaphor and metonymy on the other, though it may incorporate all three and more. "The hat flew off my head," say Müller and Schubert in "Der Lindenbaum"; "I did not turn back" (see Example 1.3). This detail becomes both an enigma and the means of resolving it (resolving, not "solving"; resolving into its elements, numinous particles, some clear, some not). The wanderer declines the most intimate and most minimal form of shelter, a hat in a snowstorm. The singer qua wanderer recalls (and in recalling repeats) this moment of abjection, which has been decisive without exactly being decided on; the vocal line for his speech act dwells on C, a void element, the first degree of the lowered submediant, but also a kind of momentary talisman, itself a surrogate shelter. The piano buffets this note with harmonically vacillating figuration until the note, too, blows away without a backward turn. The episode takes the state of mind it expresses as a means to interrogate the relationship of subjectivity and the signifier.

Music specializes in this mode of being. Contrary to conventional wisdom, music—the network of musics—is not void of reference, not without referent, but instead without the *order* (rule, sequence) of reference, in place of which it puts the *animation of referral*. This action does not occur only in its own separate sphere. It continuously opens outward to model the possible sphere of livability that I referred to earlier and that in *Expression and Truth* I call relative transcendence or everyday enchantment.[26] The importance of music as an epistemic and ontological model is not that the modeling elevates this one art or activity over others, but that it demonstrates the musical element inherent in all ideas and all philosophizing. It suggests not only *that* the absence of big transcendence, ultimate truth, affords pleasure and knowledge without the need of certainty; it shows *how*. All thinking is thinking in tones.

EXAMPLE 1.3. Schubert, "Der Lindenbaum," "My hat flew off my head."