

# The Expressive Vernacular

What we call the common tongue is that which we acquire without any rule, by imitating our nurses.

Dante Alighieri, *On Eloquence*  
*in the Vernacular (De vulgari eloquentia)*

At the beginning of the fourteenth century Dante proposed—radically, for his time—that not only classical Latin but vernacular languages as well might serve as agents for eloquent and even elevated poetic expression. Even if his case was strategic, since he intended to promote his native Tuscan idiolect as the most “literary” among the many forms taken by what we now call Italian, his methodology foreshadowed in a general way the enterprise of modern sociolinguistics. In his unfinished treatise on the eloquent vernacular, the medieval poet attempted to describe broadly and systematically how language is acquired, and how it strikes the ear. Suggesting that some languages and their verbal forms and gestures could provide models for meaningful imitation or refashioning outside their original ethnic and cultural environments, he argued that the expressive features of a language resided in its sound, and might even be grasped without command of its grammar, a “second” and less essential form of language. His observations constituted a watershed of cultural practice: vernacular literature would soon take off, not only in Italy but in France and England, where poets like Machaut and Chaucer were ready to embrace Dante’s modernist perspective.

Dante’s sense of how language works is especially relevant to musical media repertoires of the twentieth century (including some of the monster hits of rock and pop), in which concert hall music, as it was popularly imagined and characterized by those whose experience lay primarily outside the walls of “classical” music venues, played a significant

expressive role even though its musical grammar did not. How have so many musical works in our own time indulged in reference and citation without compromising vernacular intelligibility and, most important, expressive immediacy? Modern academic readers are familiar with notions of cultural register, a term that appears often in discussions of such hybrids, usually alongside the scalar modifiers “high” and “low.” I would like to bring this commonplace into sharper focus, by invoking register less as a general indicator of cultural location than in a more specific sense familiar to scholars of medieval poetics who have linked the *sensory* aspects of cultural products to the *expressive* value of the registers (i.e., collections) in which they are understood to be located.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of poetry, the bearer of register will be words, of course.<sup>2</sup> Their sensory apparatus can include a range of qualitative and quantitative elements such as phonemes, number of syllables, and resonance with other words; this understanding might be amplified to include, in the case of song, the acoustical components of musical settings. Register, particularly in its expressive function as outlined below, is related to the broader fields of acculturated styles and genres in which it functions as a signal and marker and thus may be (and, especially in literary criticism, has been) expanded beyond the measurements of a simple scale to a system of classification based on words, syntax, form, and sounds; it often serves in place of more general notions of, for example, tenor, tone, and style. Indeed, once they have been sufficiently registered (or registrated) as normative practice, sounds in general may be expressive in this sense with no textual linkage. I see some potential in an expanded approach to the implications (especially for reception) of defining registered objects, borrowing from the sociolinguistic models wherein the concept was first cultivated some additional critical tools related both to register variation and to register formation. Late twentieth-century linguistic criticism, which thus far has been confined primarily to literary studies, provides a model for such an approach.<sup>3</sup> But I would suggest that even if the current terminology and the taxonomies of register theory belong to the field of mid-twentieth-century sociolinguistics, *hearing* register—whatever we might call it—as a concretization of shared cultural values, categories, and word relations is hardly limited to the twentieth century; neither is the tendency to frame this phenomenon within a theoretical or scientific matrix.

## LISTENING BACK

As a theorized listening practice, the origins of the concept lie in the cultivation and simultaneous intellectual framing of an expressive vernacular literature centuries ago, as reflected especially by Dante's treatise. Such early approaches to sound and syntax still bear implications for analysis and criticism of vernacular cultural products in the twenty-first century. In this instance I am using *vernacular* only in its most neutral sense, as a thing that is standard or shared, ordinary or everyday, intending no implications of naturalness or ethnological circumscription, pace Dante, whose project included the characterization of languages according to geographical and ethnographic groups based upon each group's way of expressing the simple affirmative "yes" (*sì, oc, oi*).

Scholars of medieval poetics often preface *register* with the modifier *expressive*, thus pointing to the lexical and syntactic arsenal of gambits and gestures that define and encode particular styles or genres and their expected performance, reception, and audience.<sup>4</sup> While characteristic word types contribute to the establishment of expressive register in the works under consideration in this book, I extend the literary understanding here, embracing additional phenomenal levels such as vocal and instrumental timbre, harmonic and melodic structures, and, in the case of multimedia, visual images. Expressive registers reflect "the extreme formalization of tradition."<sup>5</sup> They are collections that contain the established landmarks of convention. The idea of poetic register embraces an inherent verticality: one speaks, for instance, of the high expressive register of the medieval *canso* versus the low expressive register of the *pastorela*. Crucially, these poetic (or rhetorical) registers were constructed from sound types; oratory and lyric, whether or not fitted with a musical setting, were for hearing more than reading.<sup>6</sup> As "texts," poems were, and still are in some cases, stand-ins for the real thing. This is worth recalling as we set out to "read"—as so many late twentieth-century academic titles characterized it—modern musical media. Medieval markers of register include, at the high end, convoluted syntax and abstract or exotic polysyllabic nouns; at the low end, one encounters simple syntax, concrete and mundane nouns, nonsense syllables, and childish words. Dante, who already in the early fourteenth century dealt extensively with the classification and status of words according to their phonemic structure, cited as cases of lowest aesthetic weight the simple infantile bilabials (humanity's *ur*-words): for him, the Italian *mamma* and *babbo*.<sup>7</sup> These resonate, it might be noted, with the low-register bilabials of English-language rock, rhythm and blues, and

country musics, particularly the conventional expressive vocatives “mama,” “babe,” and “baby.”<sup>8</sup> High register, in contrast, evoked more unusual and even disorienting aural and linguistic strategies.<sup>9</sup> The effusive polysyllabism of later psychedelic and progressive rock represented, among other things, a shift in the generic operations of register within rock’s communicative systems.<sup>10</sup>

Rock’s expressive registers were under construction from its earliest mass-market phases. A less than classic effort, at least according to the current canon, “Surfin’ Bird,” by the determinedly low-register 1960s ensemble the Trashmen, took these phonemic strategies to their extreme, essentially ventriloquizing Dante’s linguistic position almost seven centuries later. Instructing listeners through the lyrics that “bird is a word,” “Surfin’ Bird” demonstrates the power of the smallest phonemes to invoke register and to capture and hone the ear of pop consumers as the song proceeds to effectively disassemble the components of its own language into nonverbal timbral abstractions. The Trashmen’s bilabial fantasy reached as high as the no. 6 position on the *Billboard* charts in January 1964. Featuring a repetitive (“bird . . . bird . . . bird”) and eventually stuttering vocal (“pa-pa-pa-pa-pa . . .,” “mau-mau-mau . . .”) that, it might be argued, presages more recent percussive effects in rap and hip-hop, the song’s strategy derived from similar nonsense syllable insets that characterized the earlier California surf music of the influential Jan and Dean.

While many of these gestures were no doubt meant to invoke for surf-crazed listeners the phonemes particular to native Hawaiian, it is relevant that Jan and Dean’s first trip to the *Billboard* Top Ten was in 1959, with a love song bearing no coastal references, but full of the same form of bilabial vocalizing on Dante’s markers of low register, *m* and *b*. The song was titled, appropriately, “Baby Talk.”<sup>11</sup> Early rock was associated (dangerously, for some) with low-order sexuality and linked to relatively explicit and apparently nonchoreographed, asocial (i.e., infantile) types of dance and bodily motion. From this perspective, Jan and Dean’s alliterative and self-consciously infantile vocalizations were intended as sexual incantations that might register beyond any lyrical context. Their theoretical position with respect to the power of rock phonemes was clarified in another hit wherein the duo answered, for the edification of their adolescent male peers, their own musical question, “Who Put the Bomp in the Bomp-ba-bomp-ba-bomp?” with “We were those guys/I hope you realize/we made your baby fall in love with you,” underscoring the relationship between low-register language formants and the imaginative

realm of informal sexual relations. Akin to the nonsense exclamations that mark the registral collections of medieval pastoral—a genre that often deals with the unritualized “love of peasants” (as Andreas Capellanus described it in his twelfth-century treatise on courtly love, *De amore*)—surf music’s expressive vocal register was hardly as new as it may have seemed.

Poeticians had borrowed register as something approaching a “scientific” tool for analysis from the disciplinary arsenal of the sociolinguists, and I call upon that model at times but by no means systematically or exclusively throughout this book. The study of register variation in sociolinguistics proceeds from the assumption that “a communication situation that recurs regularly in a society (in terms of participants, setting, communicative functions, and so forth) will tend over time to develop identifying markers of language structure and language use, different from the language of other communication situations.”<sup>12</sup> One could imagine a dialect-word forming an item within some special expressive register, but registers are distinct from dialect in general. According to the theory posited in sociolinguistics, “In dialects we say the same thing in different ways while in registers we say different things in different ways.”<sup>13</sup> Constituents of registers, including special terms and formulas, provide communicative shorthand in some cases; in others, they might serve as markers or signals of the register or might create rapport between conversational participants. For music, to the extent that it may be said to communicate (as in fact it *must* do in some instances, for example in film scoring), aural collections based on gesture-type, texture, timbre, and more must be added to the phonetic content of texts, if present.

Although the concept of language specific to situational context well predates the introduction of the term, *register* appears to have been coined in the mid-twentieth century by T. B. W. Reid, who already had in mind a wide application, linked to genre and style in writing: “Among the most generally applicable registers are those of familiar intercourse, of administration (in the widest sense), of religion or ceremonial, and of literature (with various subdivisions).”<sup>14</sup> There was, in this early phase, a suggestion of verticality with respect to register distinctions. Reid cited J. R. Firth’s work of the late 1940s and early 1950s; Firth had referred to situation-appropriate “levels of diction.” When he elaborated register theory in the 1960s, M. A. K. Halliday seized upon the musical analogy inherent in the term, further emphasizing its scalar aspect: “All speakers have at their disposal a continuous scale of patterns and items, from

which they select for each situation type the appropriate stock of available harmonies in the appropriate key. They speak, in other words, many registers.”<sup>15</sup> More recent linguistic criticism has largely abandoned the vertical-scale metaphor in its understanding of the way registers function in language, particularly in literature, but some vertical scales of distinction are so deeply inscribed in the Western view of literary products that their impact must be acknowledged. Indeed, word register as a function of genre registers implying literary status or rank was already the theoretical frame for Aristotle’s *Poetics* and was transmitted in medieval doctrines of poetry, notably those of John of Garland’s thirteenth-century *Parisiana poetria* (which, following the Virgilian categories established in the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid*, speaks of “words cognate to the subject”), along with Dante’s later *De vulgari eloquentia*.

Rock’s conventional registers were occasionally distorted by the introduction of materials—or, “objects”—appropriated from a “higher” expressive register, typically one associated with the concert hall (in the case of music) or the “literary” (in the case of lyrics). These shifts in the tectonic norms of song appear, from the perspective of a two-node scale, to represent a process of “inversion,” a simple juxtaposition or substitution involving the high and the low, and for much of the late twentieth century, theorizing inversion was a significant and popular intellectual undertaking. Musicology is familiar with Barthes’s theories of *inversion* and *renversement* and with Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “carnavalesque.”<sup>16</sup> Seemingly hybrid works might also be theorized as “camp” objects that seek refuge in the “hopelessly, and thus safely, dated” elements of certain period styles, but camp is usually associated more with social typing and group definitions than with analysis of dynamic processes in music and text.<sup>17</sup> In practice, these processes of juxtaposition are various and highly differentiated through expressive nuance; to describe them requires more than an all-inclusive tag.

#### PLAYING WITH REGISTER

Opening gambits generally provide the locus for the encoding of pop “genre,” often through a nonvocal introduction or “hook” that triggers in the listener what Leonard Meyer—referring to other musical styles—called the “internalized probability system.”<sup>18</sup> Significantly, in some cases songs that play with register assert their noncompliance with pop genre codes right off the bat. By not adhering to this standard, these works break the implied contract between song and audience before it

has even been signed.<sup>19</sup> This might be effected through suggested or outright borrowings of concert hall music to introduce a song. For instance, characteristic girl-group register is deflected at the opening of the Toys' 1965 "A Lover's Concerto" (discussed in chapter 7) by concertizing, pianistic gestures. A more extreme case is Barry Manilow's 1975 hit "Could It Be Magic," which begins with a full performance of Chopin's C-Minor Prelude, which Manilow will use as the basis for a harmonic contrafact structure.<sup>20</sup> While Manilow's songs often call attention to his own musicianship, the Chopin citation is not primarily a reference to concert hall practice. In the song's refrain Manilow draws not upon the supposed elevation of the classical-piano register collection from which it is taken but upon what he hears as a vocative quality inherent in the rhetoric of the prelude.

Forcing the listener into a specific analysis of Chopin's expressive register he clearly hears as embodied in the work's inflexible rhythmic patterning, Manilow lends orality to an explicitly Svengalian imperative suggested by the music, one strangely at odds with the saccharine romance of the song's verses. The effect is rendered especially vivid by the ultimate abandonment of verse material in the second half of the song in favor of constant reiteration of the refrain's core words ("come, come, come . . . now, now, now"), layered upon a harmonically manipulated fragment of the prelude that serves as a quasi-cinematic underscore. Each successive utterance is marked by the typical Manilow bump-up in dynamics and orchestration, but it functions as more than a nightclub gimmick here, for it turns the text into a screenplay that must be realized in the listener's imagination. Structurally, the multimedia impression (dramatic monologue, implicit visual, repetitive yet incrementally expressive musical background) is virtually identical to those of "real" cinema, for example the famous threefold farewell embrace scored by Max Steiner for the airport scene of the Bette Davis vehicle *Now Voyager* (1942), a classic of conventional Hollywood scoring. In the end, the song's coda—a replay of the last bit of the Chopin original—forces the listener to reinterpret the prelude as a vehicle of cinematic potential. In another 1975 Manilow effort, "I Write the Songs," there is no classical-style musical content, but the text borrows from the discourse of oratory and rhetoric, specifically in the song's prosopopoeic climax, "I am music," no more overblown perhaps (in terms of twentieth-century media bombast) than Francesco Landini's identical ploy in the fourteenth-century madrigal "Musica son," today inscribed in the musicological academy's registers as a work of high art and technical prowess.

In some cases musical citations of classical music in rock borrow from the text registers of essay rather than narrative or dramaturgy, and these can be rather clever (appropriate to the essayist's enterprise), featuring provocative text/music play often buried beneath the surface. Rather than emphasizing musical alterity, these essays often underscore the universality of music's expressive registers. Two reinterpretations of the slow movement of Beethoven's *Pathétique* sonata, Billy Joel's "This Night" (1983) and Kiss's "Great Expectations" (1976), intersect with Manilow's music-centric perspective in calling attention within the song to musical traditions outside pop genres. Kiss's number opens with a rock orchestration of Beethoven's theme. The text, addressed in part to an imagined female fan, frames the topic as music (in the abstract) by the deliberately reflexive phrase "our music" and describes the arousing sight of the guitarist's fingers in motion. In brief, "Great Expectations" reconsiders—in rather amusing fashion—the dynamics of all staged musical virtuosity and concert performance.

Joel's treatment of the same Beethoven material is even more literal than that of "Great Expectations," although he withholds the melodic quotation until the refrain. But the song is shot through with wordplay linking Beethoven's nineteenth-century practice to that of the self-described "piano man" Joel and to the expressive registers of historical doo-wop ballads that the song references. Indeed, the love lyrics at times seem to suggest the solo pianist's relationship with the keyboard; distortions of musical time and imaginative space are effected through the utterance of words that possess meaningful implications outside the conventional subject matter of the song. These include "ready for romance" (code word for nineteenth-century repertoire), "only a slow dance" (the slow movement, outside the context of the full sonata), and the notion of an expressive historical musical continuum delivered at the end of the Beethovenian refrain music ("this night can last forever"). Joel sets up the first citation of the theme when his doo-wop rocker persona admits at the end of the verse that he can no longer "remember the rules," launching the song into a different registral collection from which the melody and harmony of the refrain are borrowed to create an effectively expressive hybrid.

#### BIRD: WORD OR SIGN?

Studies of mass-market media that have been informed by language models draw primarily upon the field of semiotics, often relying on a

pared-down subset of its essential elements, or an unsystematic mix of terms related to imprecise notions of meaning and its indicators. Philip Tagg's analyses regularly spotlight small musical units, often in multimedia contexts, of precisely the sort I use to generate some of the discussions in this book. His characterization of such units as *musemes* reflects the post-Barthian semiotic framework for his systematic perspective. Tagg's language, accordingly, relies to no small extent on matters related to "units of meaning," connotative codes, "the indexical quality of much musical discourse."<sup>21</sup> And meaning is often, in his analyses, essentially "ideological." For Tia DeNora, Tagg's musemes are signs denoting "emotional significance."<sup>22</sup> Barthes and Levi-Strauss provide the background for Royal S. Brown's concept of the *mytheme* in film music, a term, discussed in his *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music*, that invokes not merely meaning (in its latter Barthian part) but the broad text belonging to a culture (in its primary, Levi-Straussian root).<sup>23</sup> Scholars involved above all in film-music criticism continue to privilege music's role as a bearer of "meaning," a formulation that has survived for several decades.<sup>24</sup> I would argue that film music, like other vernaculars, is an especially expressive mode of discourse, and—adopting the position of literary register theory—that language-based modes of contemporary critique that neglect the operation of registers inappropriately homogenize their subjects.<sup>25</sup>

Brown's discussion reveals the tendency in the last two decades of the twentieth century to think of film as a particular sort of textual entity, and the business of film-music scholarship as one linked to explication of music's role in (and as) the text. That position (with appropriately Barthian punctuation) is rendered apparent in Brown's first chapter title: Narrative/Film/Music.<sup>26</sup> Our widespread acceptance today of film's implicit narrativity, and thus of all "-emes" as constituents of textual systems, may be credited above all to the enormous influence of Claudia Gorbman on this corner of musicological practice. Her *Unheard Melodies* not only encouraged the application of "meaning" to the hearing of film-music "texts" but placed meaning within a specifically narrative and more precisely narratological context at a time when narratology was upon the minds of many scholars interested in musicodramatic forms. Had it not been for Gorbman, and her highly accomplished application of Gérard Genette's theories of narrative to film sound, would so many writers still relish exploring the tensions and ambiguities related to the presence of "diegetic" and "non-diegetic" music in a single multimedia work?<sup>27</sup> Genette's systematic narratological perspective on texts—on dialogue

versus reportage, on narrative voice—remains, via Gorbman, a guide to the overhearing of the off- and on-screen conversations, mechanical music, voice-overs, sound effects, and orchestrations that make up film's complex soundscape, everything that contributes to, in Rick Altman's intelligent coinage, the filmic *mise-en-bande*.<sup>28</sup>

There is nothing wrong, of course, with using diegetic and nondiegetic as pretty, slightly more nuanced substitutes for the old “source” versus “background” music distinction. Once implicated in the landscape of a theoretical discourse of film music, however, they limit the range of potential approaches to multimedia objects. The point may be illustrated by comparison with the discourse of film in general. Shots are fundamental to the language of film visuals; low- and high-angle shots especially can transmit understandings to the audience that are unavailable to the characters in the so-called narrative. These cannot “see” the perspectively skewed images any more than they can “hear” the nondiegetic (i.e., background) musical content. Yet few will find it useful or appropriate to found much film analysis upon the division of the visual track into diegetic versus nondiegetic components. Understanding film music as a parallel narrative tracking a novelistic text seems to be based mainly on the popularity in the last quarter of the twentieth century of the notion that all music narrates (or might narrate), a position that is hardly central to most understandings of cinema's image track.

Our shyness as scholars or our difficulties as viewers in approaching films abstractly is by no means attributable entirely to the narratologists. Early twentieth-century kinotheks (libraries of “silent” movie film music), like that of Erdmann discussed below, attached meaning to film accompaniments (an early musical hermeneutics). This meaning was thought of as tracking a film's dramaturgical structure. We have substituted for that stage-based perspective a more novelistic one. Consider, for example, two analyses of the meaningful aspects of Steiner's 1942 score for *Now, Voyager*. At the time of the film's release it was reviewed in terms that suggest not merely its classic elements but their relationship to the dramatic trajectory of the film: “Once again Max Steiner assists mood and dramatic intent by giving this picture a symphonic musical background of impressive strength. The love poem filtering through the superb action is a symphonic tone poem of great beauty, stressing a great spiritual quality. The ratio between dialogue and music and action is well defined at all times, yet music is an important dramatic element, eloquently supporting description, emotion, action, mood and pace. The work is heavily orchestrated in keeping with the

weight of the story, varying in range to contrast with the production structure.”<sup>29</sup> The reviewer—clearly a Steiner apologist—heard the music dramaturgically, although he does invoke the term “story” in a general rather than linear sense. In her annotated leitmotivic catalog of the film, Kate Daubney seems to hear pretty much the same thing but reveals the influence of Gorbman’s model for the apprehension of musical meaning:

From the opening of the film, with its bold orchestral statement, to the quotation of popular hits of the day, the score for *Now, Voyager* relishes the power of music to be expressive. Steiner has seized the opportunity to create a score which, though largely non-diegetic, emphasizes our experience of the characters from points of view both within and outside the narrative space. Where the diegetic choices for the cruise ship cocktail bar, the party, the cafe near Cascade and the Vale mansion evoke quite particular atmospheres and contexts for the action, the non-diegetic score seems to traverse and transcend the narrative boundaries that can make a post-production score seem objective and wise after the event.<sup>30</sup>

We might approach Steiner’s music and its expressive operations by way its particular registers. This would place much of the score, I would argue, in that of the “Puccinian-operatic.”<sup>31</sup> I will address this characterization in its specifics in the next chapter, but simply put, the orchestral background score is—despite the on- and off-screen intrusions of Chaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony—unambiguously vocal in its expressive gestures, and these gestures embody a form of musical expression that in the nineteenth century was mimetically linked to certain forms of conversational expressive gesture (particularly with respect to dynamic range and the phrasal caesuras that imitate natural, high-emotion respiratory events). My point is to suggest not a wholesale replacement for the language of conventional film-music criticism (journalistic or academic) but only that a slightly different approach to scoring “language” might supplement our currently rather narrow and inflexible range of discursive options. In assigning meaning to a musical bit, writers tend to emphasize the significance of the link to an object’s original associated text (literary, musical, social). Steiner’s Puccinianism, conventionally addressed, would more likely be taken exclusively as miming Puccini rather than as a mimetic realization in music of the expressive potential of most Western languages, something that any attentive Western listener might hear in Puccini’s music. Missing in these analytical positions is much accommodation for the scale of expressive performance involved in the real iteration of such musicological “signs.”<sup>32</sup>

Even before Dante, Occitan poetics—and Occitan was the first language for “composed” vernacular song in the West, the one Dante looked to as his model for the new Italian—emphasized that each vernacular genre demanded a particular mode of expressive performance, a special vocal and perhaps gestural demeanor. These prescriptions offer a glimpse into the expressive component of registral collections. They are part of a continuum of practice that survives in twentieth-century vernacular lyric genres. Emotive and motive elements appropriate to establishing expressive register in a blues performance differ from the laid-back, expressively flat vocalizations that characterize and registrate most surf song. However impressive the chronological gulf between the pre-modern and modern repertorial nodes I am citing, more impressive are their points of conceptual intersection: lyrics composed with an eye toward live and—within certain registral limits—individually flexible performances and geared toward reception based on aurality rather than an inscribed text. In film music the score’s performers are physically absent but their expressive gestures resound.

One advantage of defining registers, especially for something like film music, which is usually historicized as a single continuous strand, is that doing so provides conceptual spaces in which signifiers or markers are understood to be alive and in flux. Register theory invites diachronic exploration of “the life of signs.” Beyond this, by locating conventions in registral systems that may be shuffled in any number of ways to create meaningful loci of intersection (as in a linguistic topography constituted of movable Venn diagrammatic circles, with each circle representing a register), we may expose and account for differences in implication that have been attached by vernacular listeners to objects that look or sound nearly identical. I would hardly argue for a “system” of registers, a sociolinguistic grid against which all vernacular cultural products may be placed and interpreted or through which we might arrive at understandings somehow imbued with the scientific spirit of sociolinguists. I have introduced the subject primarily to foreground the importance of acoustical-phonological formants in musical communication, and to underscore the potentially transitory aspects of the conventional meanings attached to the signs that make up living systems of discourse.

Strategies for cultural critique that emerged in the last third of the twentieth century located critical interest primarily in moments of rupture, or in structural relations of inversion or reversal. As I have suggested, these descend in many cases from the principles of structural linguistics and semiotics, and they must necessarily direct their focus

toward the original or intentional content of the constituent parts of cultural objects, with such content offering meaningful positions on critical-relational maps. Register, while it may be silently implicated in such analyses, is taken as a function of a “dead” language (or a multiplicity of dead languages), in which word values (or image values or sound values) and cultural content are fixed. Postmodern bricolage or pastiche is often read against such values, which are normally located on a vertical scale in standard evaluative systems. If register is primarily a vernacular shorthand, the deciphering of which proceeds from a shared cultural or linguistic understanding, then it must be considered at least as much, perhaps more, a feature of the act of reception as one of authorship, intention, or performance. By focusing on this fluid aspect of register, and by locating its field of operation within *standard* cultural discourse, we can largely avoid invoking the cumbersome bipolar signifiers that demark and deaden the meaningful or live-ly critique of mixed-register, pastiche, or middlebrow works and genres.<sup>33</sup>

Bipolarity has been a particularly dominant aspect of conversation and criticism regarding mass-market, mass-media productions; its constructions may be academic, journalistic, or anecdotal and may include, in addition to high versus low, the old music-appreciation standard art versus popular, along with new markers and their associated positions. Steven Feld’s catalog adds, “‘inside’ versus ‘outside,’ ‘elite’ versus ‘vernacular,’ . . . ‘progressive’ versus ‘mainstream,’ and ‘hegemonic’ versus ‘counterhegemonic.’”<sup>34</sup> Since standard language is in a process of constant transformation, locating all registers in the zone of common practice, or at least close enough to it so that intersections can be charted, permits readings that take into account the diachronic dimension of register formation, along with the potential for re-registrations, like those considered in chapter 2.<sup>35</sup>

#### THE PARTY OF THE FIRST PART

Film music—particularly for mass-market studio productions—is a mass-media discursive arena in which shorthand communication is key. Music for movies must communicate something to justify its eternally tenuous position in the eyes or ears of both the producers and consumers of film; it must accomplish this quickly, even instantaneously. In film, the range—subjective and objective—of communications is broad; mainstream filmic discourse is primarily novelistic, albeit abbreviated and telegraphic. With respect to the score, this leaves much of the burden of the

act of musical communication to the audience, who must decipher the language of the composer. How, then, does music that either reproduces or imitates the sounds of the Western concert hall canon communicate to a noninitiated listener? First, I would emphasize that by drawing upon registered elements that were collected or deposited in the arsenal of vernacular listening over time, film music, and by extension all “cinematic” musics, are ultimately heard in the vernacular.<sup>36</sup> Few American filmgoers, for example, would be able extemporaneously to quote the text of an entire legal contract, but almost all recognize the registral connotations of the phrase “the party of the first part.” Had that phrase not found its way into the register of “legalese” in common practice, the vaudevillian set piece enacted by Groucho and Chico Marx in *A Night at the Opera* as they argue over the percentages due the agent in an artist-representation contract would be neither funny nor brilliant.

Musical parameters that lend themselves to registration are those that are most easily transformed on the fly into visual images (i.e., contour and trajectory) or those most easily sensed as significant in a linguistic sense. If my own language here and above appears to teeter dangerously close to the brink of declaring, more naively than the author cited in my introduction, that music might constitute *a* language, this is hardly my intention. We might better say that language, in its components, is very much like music. Some acts of nonanalytical or nonstructural hearing, though certainly not all, correlate with the interpretative acts of linguistic hearing.<sup>37</sup> Timbre and attack are the primary acoustical correlates to the phonemes of the poetician. Dynamics and isolated pitch values need no translation; they work the same way in speech as in music, at least for the cinematic listener.<sup>38</sup> Often, it seems, even a “noncompetent” listener can hear unfamiliar music in precisely the way it was intended, or in the same way—with respect to its communicative, if not its technical, elements—as a trained musician.<sup>39</sup> Reuven Tsur suggests that there is a physiological basis for the human capacity literally to feel the textural or volumic implications of timbre.<sup>40</sup> Tsur’s emphasis on the phonological dimension of poetics, and his notion that musical tone color is experientially correlative with aspects of the letter sounds of spoken texts, suggests that these factors may participate in the registration of phonological and acoustical content in the reception of music with or without text.

These are precisely the elements that, by their immediacy of perception and their potential applicability to a range of registers simultaneously, point to a weakness in the assignment of “meaning” to the traditional film score. Timbre or tone color, for example, is such a powerful

signal in acoustical communication that it may outweigh other musical nuances and lead not to misreadings but, more to the point, to false registrations based on recalled experience. An example is provided by Frank Nugent's review in the *New York Times* (February 17, 1940) of Lewis Milestone's film version of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Nugent mentions Aaron Copland's score just once: "We noted but one flaw in Mr. Milestone's direction: his refusal to hush the off-screen musicians when Candy's old dog was being taken outside to be shot. A metronome, anything, would have been better than modified 'Hearts and Flowers.'" Both Copland and his friend Paul Bowles responded in the next issue of *Modern Music*.<sup>41</sup> Enumerating the "three important ways in which music helps a picture" (intensifying emotional impact of a scene, continuity, and "neutral" backgrounding of dialogue), Copland characterized the first as "no more than the Hearts and Flowers tradition, but still, perfectly legitimate."<sup>42</sup> Bowles was more direct. Suggesting that the critic "objected to the idea of using music at all to foster emotion for such a patently sentimental episode," he pointed out that "it is quite obvious, even to the layman, if he listens to Copland's score, that there is not the slightest musical connection between the blatancy of that old tune and the sensitive music for this scene."<sup>43</sup>

Nugent's review applauds the authenticity of Steinbeck's vision and its realization in the film: "As in 'The Grapes of Wrath,'" he wrote, "we have the feeling of seeing another third, or thirtieth, of the nation, not merely a troupe of play-actors living in a world of make-believe." He perhaps felt that the particularly harsh realism of this particular scene, rather than its sentimental flavor, was, in an already heavily realist diegetic environment, overly mitigated by the presence of a music cue. In any case, what he *heard* was the legato string subject, as well as the egregiously filmic sound engineering applied to the dynamic level of the background score (instantaneous and unnatural fades) to accommodate the few, halting moments of conversation in the bunkhouse. To make matters worse, the scene ends with an equally conventional "expressive" increase in dynamic level, a musicodramaturgical stinger employed once there is no chance of its interfering with dialogue or other diegetic sounds. What he missed, though, was not only the unusual intervallic and rhythmic features of the string material but, more important, the affective ("poignant," according to Bowles) interruptions by the solo, monotone flute.

Copland's flute marks, like an involuntary intake of breath (neither a sentimental sob nor a melodramatic gasp), the temporal units of that excruciating delay during which we, breathless listeners, await the horrid

but inevitable sound of the diegetic gunshot. It aurally embodies in a temporally collapsed span the inexpressible and immeasurable aloneness of Candy who, as soon as the dog has been led outside, finds himself for the first time without the companion through whom his own existence was defined and signified. Yet the sound of a flute, for the nonspecialist listener, is simply not, as an aural object, textural or tactile enough to compensate for the connotations of the conventional orchestral “presence” and its registral implications, which are those not literally of “Hearts and Flowers” but of the lyric, symphonic expression, grounded in late nineteenth-century concert repertoire, of high, and most often romantic, emotional utterance.

#### CLASSIC’S REGISTERS

Within the nested matrices of vernacular registers, then, in which some are more inclusive, and some more specialized, we might position a register bearing the label “classic.” “Classic register,” while it may include any number of items literally borrowed from concert hall musics, is not a *Bartlett’s* for musicians. Classic register, as I conceive of it, is specifically a region *within* normative cultural discourse. I will employ this construction without attempting to provide it with a simple definition—for it is too broad and in too constant a state of live flux to admit fixing. In vernacular contexts, the terms or objects of the classic collection will tend to be registrated as such on the basis of mnemosynic or metonymic apprehension, or both. This is to say that a speaker (I am pressing the linguistic model here; I mean, of course, a song or a film sound track) drawing upon this register will trigger a recognition response that tends to proceed from the listener’s experience (memory) on one hand, or from an intuition that beyond what has been heard, its phenomenal portion, lies a greater whole, with “greater” intended in the dimensional rather than the evaluative sense. Among those “musicolinguistic” possibilities embraced by the classic register is a special register, that of “the classic” per se. In mass-market musical discourse, “the classic,” or “the register of the classic,” possesses a special flavor; it is often associated with the invocation of death and the dead on the one hand, and reanimation on the other.<sup>44</sup> By this I refer not merely to a condition of pastness, of being dead, but to the state of being monumentally dead, or in a *monumental* state of being dead, emphasizing monumentality to call attention to the architectural implications of invoking the register. Such architectures may be meta-

phorical (i.e., formal) or actual (i.e., plastic or sculptural). Monumentality in this sense plays a part in some of the territory I shall explore later in this book.

Emphasizing the notion of a register of the classic, as well as the generality of the classic register, frees both from any enforced participation in the Western cultural tradition of the classic, which typically has stressed the deathless aspects of the aesthetic objects so identified, although this by no means excludes that tradition from inclusion in vernacular communication structures. Some of the classics of the twentieth century have been elevated, to whatever ends, by critical or, more often, commercial forces that have sought to locate them outside the streams of societal or artistic flux (“classic rock,” “a classic car”). That positioning is crucial. The classic in any case will be framed and discrete. It may be borrowed, with its outsideness intact, for vernacular use. An analogy from standard language would be the situation in which, locked in a face-to-face stalemate with a pedestrian walking from the direction in which one is heading, an English speaker recites, “*Après vous Alphonse.*” Items situated in “the classic register” of the vernacular, by contrast, have been integrated and absorbed, as in the construction “. . . *du jour,*” which will be encountered in a range of written or spoken circumstances, invoking any number of intersecting vernacular registers, including “turnpike diner-menu register,” “authentic bistro chalkboard register,” or “academic in-joke register,” each of which contains special, register-specific features, while sharing this linguistic formula in common as part of the register collection.

As I have suggested, the typical implications of wearing the brand of the classic are those of longevity, incorruptibility, or universal value. Sainte-Beuve held such a view of Virgil in the middle of the nineteenth century, in an essay whose title is cited at the beginning of many subsequent discussions of the question (“*Qu’est-ce qu’un classique?*”), in which forum he opened the term up for the first time (although Dante had hinted at something similar centuries before in his *De vulgari eloquentia*), allowing that the word “classic” might embrace literature of any epoch, if so judged by men who have reached the stage of “maturity”: “It is at this age that the word *classic* takes on its true meaning and defines itself for every man of taste by the irresistible predilection of his choice . . . whether it be Horace or someone very different, whatever favorite author gives us back our own thoughts ripened and enriched, we shall then seek from one of those fine old spirits an unfailing intercourse, a friendship that never declines and cannot fail us.”<sup>45</sup> T. S. Eliot’s 1944

essay, bearing the same title, begins with Sainte-Beuve (and Frank Ker-mode's *The Classic* with both).<sup>46</sup>

Sainte-Beuve's flexibility, as well as his having chosen a metaphor related to alimentary consumption (specifically, the improvement and appreciation over time of fine potables like brandy and cognac), would eventually permit the word to encompass such pantry items as Classic Coke and Johnson's Saran Wrap Classic, those "fine old spirits" singled out among mounds of competitors and multiflavored or multicolored variations. The latter, interestingly, was abandoned shortly after its introduction at the turn of the millennium when—with technologically linked Y2K anxieties momentarily stilled—the product was renamed Saran Wrap Original, in keeping with its traditional position as a technoutopian alternative to its nonclinging ancestor, Reynolds's Cut-Rite Wax Paper. Wax paper, most appropriately, turned to the classic tag in the early years of the twenty-first century in a different sense, one we encounter in other popular media constructions. Recognizing that its target audience fit Sainte-Beuve's circumscription of the category as one appropriate to the realm of the "mature," the new design played upon the product's capacity to trigger in that group a sentimental, perhaps morbidly Romantic reminiscence of generations past and passed, emblazoning their new box with the nonsensical heading "A Kitchen Classic for Over 75 Years." Thus, it seems wax paper was classic from birth, a view Eliot held regarding his own poetry.

Sainte-Beuve maintained, as did Eliot, the position of Virgil at the top of the heap. And so, when Eliot describes the classic as possessing elements of commonality, comprehensiveness, maturity, and universality, he draws that model from his understanding of Virgil, simultaneously laying the groundwork for reception of his own work.<sup>47</sup> Regardless of the name Eliot gave it, Virgil's "common language" is elite, not vernacular. The classic, that is, the "absolute" (in contradistinction to the "relative") classic, as Eliot put it, remains, as I have suggested of items in the register of the classic, outside the practice of vernacular language and experience. One may aspire to it, and one may invoke it, but one may not act upon it. Eliot's imperialist absolutism on this issue was no doubt the object of Groucho Marx's jibe in a letter of 1963, written during a period of correspondence between the two men that eventually led to dinner at Eliot's home in London in 1964. Groucho, who was somewhat familiar with literary criticism as well as literature, wrote: "I have just finished my latest opus, 'Memoirs of a Mangy Lover.' Most of it is autobiographical and very little of it is fiction. *I doubt whether it will live*

*through the ages*, but if you are in a sexy mood the night you read it, it may stimulate you.” (Emphasis added.)<sup>48</sup>

Yet Eliot did acknowledge the possibility for intuitive reception of something outside the realm of one’s personal experience, something bearing aesthetic weight and absolute value, although the direct communicative power he had in mind was not necessarily that attached to *the classic*. It does approach, however, my concept of the metonymic apprehension of the classic register in musical products by listeners who are not necessarily familiar with its referential aspects through personal experience. Addressing the British-Norwegian Institute in 1943, Eliot described having found “sometimes that a piece of poetry, which I could not translate, containing many words unfamiliar to me, and sentences which I could not construe, conveyed something immediate and vivid, which was unique, different from anything in English—something which I could not put into words and yet felt that I understood. And on learning that language better I found that this impression was not an illusion, not something which I had imagined to be in the poetry, but something that was really there.”<sup>49</sup> Eliot’s experience of unfamiliar poetry (Norwegian or otherwise) was, it would seem, a response to register as it resides in phonological, rather than significative, content.

There is no need to rehearse the extent to which fragments of concert hall and opera house music—“real” classics—constituted much of the treasury of film-music vocabulary in the days of the kinothek pastiche scores attached to silent movies in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>50</sup> But less has been said, from a theoretical perspective, regarding the reception end of the multimedia equation in these “primitive” citation-patchwork scores. A tentative step, however naive by today’s standards, was undertaken in an extraordinary two-volume *Allgemeines Handbuch der Film-Musik*, produced in 1927 by Hans Erdmann, with the assistance of the film-music composer Giuseppe Becce, which offered students of the subject a theoretical framework for the enterprise that emphasized the hermeneutic elements of film-music practice.<sup>51</sup> Erdmann engaged with the film-music problem head on, insisting that the increasing demand for film music on a daily basis called for the establishment of a hermeneutic foundation for the practice. He achieved this by way of a registral edifice of monumental proportion, rather in the spirit of Friedrich Ludwig’s musicological monster the *Repertorium*.<sup>52</sup>

Erdmann’s first volume is devoted to his wide-ranging and learned general essay, and to instructions for use of the second, *Thematisches Skalenregister*, a library of musical examples surrounded by elaborate

systematic notes and symbols. Presented in regular type with Friedrich Ludwigan small-font glosses running concurrently along the outer edges of every page, the approach—users are told—is based on a sort of “musikalische ‘Hermeneutik’” that puts into words the principles of musical expression fundamental to the practice of film accompaniment. The *musikwissenschaftliches* format of the book notwithstanding (indeed, the copy I consulted contained an autograph inscription from the author to Otto Kinkeldey), Erdmann warned that his was not a precise or complete “scientific system.”<sup>53</sup> Clearly, though, it was an attempt to systematize for the sake of professional pedagogy the communicative act between composer and audience, based on a hermeneutic system of register variation. Musical excerpts in the second volume are taxonomically classified according to subjective qualities (passionate, melancholy, religious, etc.), dramaturgical function (music for dramatic climaxes, low points, etc.), musical elements (mainly expressive markings familiar to most keyboard players, such as *lyrisch*, *ruhig*, *ruhig bewegt*, etc.), and markers not unlike those of early linguistic register theory (e.g., music appropriate to a religious setting, a scene of royalty, etc.); most of these elements are indicated by a graphical system of letters and geometric shapes, the tome’s most charming, and bizarre, feature.

Critiques of Erdmann’s creative model (essentially a scholastic summa of existing practice) were, and continue to be, inspired by the tenuous status of two canons, one of which was undergoing a process of Osiris-like dismemberment and another that was being generated from the parts of the first. The classics, so named, had been subjected to the hatchet jobs of theater musician-recomposers, while the film score was aspiring to a location among the genre fields constituting the classic domain. Louis Silvers, in the kinothek-style score for *The Jazz Singer* plays with Chaikovsky in a classic register, operating within the standard hermeneutic system of 1920s movie music, and commits, the critics would maintain, an aesthetic violation. Max Steiner’s invocation of Chaikovsky in the register of the classic in *Now, Voyager* (the citation is introduced by an on-screen orchestra in a concert hall) was something else: an inset within Steiner’s continuous, “original” film score. At either end of this musical Osiris myth lay the integrated body of the canonized art work, framed by the doctrines of high-art genre, most especially those linked to creative, rather than receptive, authority.<sup>54</sup>

## THE MUSICAL HUMANISM OF MICHAEL JACKSON

When in the second century Aulus Gellius propounded the notion of the classic, his selective approach was no less slapdash than that of the modern executives hawking “classic” paper products. The classic was from its inception a grab-bag miscellany of items whose value was (perhaps) literary and linked to specific linguistic turns but also judged by its value to move a reader in an ethical direction, in other words toward a life well lived. Ethical resonance in the apprehension of the classic will be considered further in another chapter. For now I would emphasize that the classic’s origins lie in the notion of citational pastiche, precisely the aspect of quotation “outside the hall” or—recalling Julian Johnson’s implicit criteria—outside the grammatical, formal aspects of the systematic whole of a work. Gellius’s classic possessed the features that now move musical and social critics to target especially vernacular music’s aesthetic insignificance, inauthenticity, and commodified or culturally retrogressive posturing. As Leofranc Holford-Strevens put it, “who are we to throw stones” at Gellius or his enterprise? Gellius gathered bits of material he deemed appropriate for his *Noctes Atticae* (*Attic Nights*), a haute-bourgeois florilegium that was—in the words of another scholar—a “Reader’s Digest of antiquity.”<sup>55</sup> Gellius’s *classicus* was sewn together from fragments meant to inspire, through an abundance of worthy *sententiae* (the quotational stuff that came to enliven much of later medieval rhetoric), new confrontations with the past and the sound of its messages, sometimes flavored by atypical words or syntactical forms. Gellius did more than define a new sense of the word; he laid the foundation for what would be known as “humanistic” study, and he understood, before Sainte-Beuve or Eliot, that exposure to the right fragments might render a citizen “better.” If the classic has been defined in no small way by hinting at some inherently ethical quality, the question will arise at each invocation: whose classic and whose ethics?

Contemplation of the eternal scope of the issue is enriched by remarks recorded in Julie Shaw’s now notorious 2003 documentary *Living with Michael Jackson*. In pointing out the amusements of his Neverland estate to interviewer Martin Bashir, Jackson described the music he programs for his carousel, explaining that he preferred the ride to be accompanied by “classical music” and citing by way of exempla several familiar standards, including “Childhood,” “Smile,” and, in his words, “‘People’ by Barbra Streisand.” As an act of hearing classic implications this might seem even more inscrutable than Eliot’s appreciation of Norwegian poetry. All of

Jackson's selections are movie theme songs and thus drawn from the twentieth-century's main repository of classic bits, although they are hardly of the kind patched together in early kinothek practice.

The first, his own song from *Free Willy 2*, suggests an aesthetic position close to Eliot's in a creative sense: the notion that a classic aesthetics might be defined by the practice of one's own work. "Smile" is the song David Raksin elaborated upon Charles Chaplin's tune for *Modern Times*, and Jule Styne's "People" is from *Funny Girl*. In the concert hall of the conventional musical museum, the classical style—that of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven—was, according to Charles Rosen, marked especially by a group integrity, and so Jackson's elevation of the repertoire for his merry-go-round lies perhaps not so far away from E. T. A. Hoffmann's evaluation of the conventional triumvirate (even if he called Mozart and Haydn "romantics") cited by Rosen in the opening paragraphs of *The Classical Style*.<sup>56</sup> For Jackson's classical repertoire, that integrity, it seems, lies first in the sermonistic or aphoristic elements of a song, particularly as expressed in its lyrics (in terms medieval rhetoric would borrow from Gellius's notion of the classic, its moral *sententiae*). In this, his position is fundamentally Gellian: he hears song as an expression of an ethical position, however rudimentary. Moreover, all three of his merry-go-round tunes share a certain acoustical profile in their standard realizations. Jackson's remarks suggest that being classical is largely a matter of reception, but even here his "classical" music shares certain aural markers of register we have encountered before.

A close analysis of "Childhood" and "People" reveals that Jackson has reiterated many significant gestures (melodic, harmonic, lyric) in his own song for *Free Willy 2*, not the least of which is the high registral placement—in the ordinary musical sense of "register"—of the word "people." But more significant for register in the linguistic sense is the acoustical environment produced by Jackson's choice of vocal timbre (as close to Streisand as any male singer is likely to get) and the arrangement that relies on symphonic strings supplemented by a concertizing piano, eschewing big concerto-style chords (a register marker found throughout hybrid vernacular musics), however, in favor of a lyrical expressiveness characteristic of concerto slow movements. Streisand's performances of "People" were also usually embedded in a wash of strings, and the original Broadway score in fact intertwines with that a discreetly concertizing piano. If Jackson's own performance of "Smile" (included with his "Childhood") on the *HIStory* album is less conventionally classical in its acoustical wash, this is mitigated by the fact that the song's regis-

ter was securely established long before, when it was appropriated by Liberace as a signature tune.

When Liberace performed the Chaplin number on his television show in 1956, his classical-style pianistic virtuosity was supplemented by the sudden appearance halfway through the song of a strolling violinist (his brother, George), thus filling out in abbreviated form the timbral environment expected in “concerto register.” The song’s lyrics, of course, are aphoristic and didactic; a classical utterance that Gellius himself might have recognized. Visually, Liberace’s performance provides a remarkable snapshot of media’s claim to transmission of the classic and its related registers, marking the song as a literal classic while underscoring the freshness of its mediated presentation: the pianist’s trademark candelabra is fitted with safe and efficient electric bulbs while behind him rests the blank, expectant screen of a television upon which sits an Emmy award, testifying to Liberace’s rank as a new kind of laureate. “Smile” was sufficiently registered through decades of media awareness and televisual reiteration that Jackson could take liberties with his arrangement without fear of sacrificing the song’s access to the expressive register of the classic.

#### RAPPING UP REGISTER

Embedded musical entities may signal the classic register regardless of their original intention or context (i.e., they needn’t be literally classical in the conventional sense) so long as the material operates within or projects the communicative parameters of the register, as witnessed by Jackson’s position and by Frank Nugent’s “Romantic” hearing of Copland mentioned earlier. Since the advent of digital sampling, subversion and shuffling of registral expectations has metamorphosed into one of the fundamental creative options in vernacular music genres. Choice of material and its expressive registers can be manipulated with increasing flexibility and acoustical effectiveness.

Some examples drawn from a particular corner of the “new” museum of late twentieth-century historical reception—the field of rap and hip-hop sampling—reveal two strands of “rapport-response” situations such registrations may initiate.<sup>57</sup> For rap musicians, sampling involves a relationship with the source that is intentionally “meaningful” and often respectful: most practitioners of digital sampling are serious “collectors.” In any case, the spectrum of potential relationships between original and borrowed sound is extensive.<sup>58</sup> From a wide range of possibilities, two

help to illuminate an important distinction between the classic register, *generaliter dictum* (i.e., in the general sense as medieval word theory might have it) and the register of the classic, *specialiter dictum* (in the specific sense). “What’s My Name,” by DMX, and “Gimme Some More,” by Busta Rhymes, both successful products that circulated just prior to the turn of the twenty-first century, commence with introductory samples that “classicize” the sound environment and emphasize their own remoteness from the sound world of the main rap.

This is mainly accomplished through the presentation of registered timbres. In fact, for “noncompetent” listeners (those who do not “recall” the original source of the sample), acoustical color provides the only registral marker. In each case the introductory sample will reappear as part of the number’s long-term form. They follow dramatically different functional paths, though, each revealing the operational dynamics of a new cultural product, in which the nature of the sample’s registration as intended and presumably received prefigures the shape and reception of the rap as a whole. Neither sample originated as what might be termed, in general parlance, a piece of classical music, but the first considered here, Richard Addinsell’s “Warsaw Concerto,” is a sort of liminal classic residing since its introduction in the mid-1940s on the borderline between the popular imagination and “authentic” concert hall consumption. The second is borrowed from one of the most lauded Hollywood film scores, Bernard Herrmann’s music for Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*.

In rap, the opening sample often serves a psychological and aesthetic goal parallel to that of title music in the cinema. Sometimes characterized as “mythic” or “spectacular” (i.e., linked to the historical tradition of “spectacle”), film title music does (or at least did, prior to the subversion of opening title conventions in the last decades of the twentieth century) provide the accommodative imaginary space in which a viewer-auditor recalculates the relationship between “real” sensory input and the interior envisioning required for successful reception of a filmic environment.<sup>59</sup> Raps are, for the most part, intentionally cinematic.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, a cinematic aspect, in which music promotes novelistic constructions in the listening imagination through reference to multiple registers, became the norm for popular music forms beginning in the second half of the 1960s, prior to which time pop and rock songs ordinarily projected a single register and a unitary affect. Introductory samples can invoke the same registers as film scores; some are even, as I’ve indicated, borrowed from the film-music repertory. While the mainly original portion of the work—the rap and its accompaniment—is, musically speak-

ing, mainly about movement and beat, the listener's body is held at bay in the kind of sample-intro construction encountered in these works, akin to the straitjacket of a concert hall seat, until the drum-kick and the bass slip in.<sup>61</sup>

In this, rap rehearses an experience that might have been savored by European listeners to fifteenth-century polyphonic structures in which the familiar, grounded, and grounding material of a tenor cantus firmus was characteristically withheld from the listener's ear for an indefinite period of two-voice "free" compositional fantasy, during which expectations and envisionings were the only psychological and aesthetic possibilities. Among these anticipations is that of the moment when the tenor drops, to lend a palpable weight to the soundscape. Prior to the bass drop in rap, the sample is essentially "background" music with no foreground (remember Manilow's introductory performance of the Chopin prelude). Yet it possesses the impetus, the potential, to lay a foundation for and set in motion the envisioned diegetic world against which the text and rhythms of the rap will be projected. Such samples can, at this point, only be registered in an absolute context, outside the range of the still unencountered work "itself."

"What's My Name" confronts the listener immediately with an excised bit of piano music implicitly framed by aural quotation marks. In popular media of the mid- to late twentieth century, the manifestation of nonintegrated piano sound was often associated with the registers of the heroic or the demonic. Its first utterance here is disfigured by an editing "cut" that effects a double amputation. DMX's source, the first bars of The Warsaw Concerto, was firmly fixed in the register of the heroic at the time of its composition, but especially because of its decontextualized status in the song and in the realm of rap effects in general it takes on the darker aspects of a "severed hand," a horror-genre topos encountered more than once in this book.<sup>62</sup>

The piano's timbre seems unnaturally sharp and dry against the background of the dark, smooth outlines of the bass sounds when they enter, further emphasizing its resonance in a dimension outside that of the real or the mundane.<sup>63</sup> One of the most enduring fetishes shared by artistic and anthropological cultural practice, the severed-hand topos was fully inscribed in aesthetic literary products by the nineteenth century (e.g., in works of E. T. A. Hoffmann and Gérard de Nerval) and in Hollywood by the mid-1930s (e.g., *Mad Love* and later *The Beast With Five Fingers*).<sup>64</sup> DMX's musical soundscapes, according to *Rolling Stone* magazine, were imbued with precisely such an atmosphere. They are described, through

a chain of timbral-sensory analogies as “*skeletal*, drawing on the *brittle* sounds of dance-hall reggae, the pulse of old-school hip-hop and *ominous* keyboard swells that resemble horror-movie scores.” (Emphasis added.)<sup>65</sup> DMX’s musical poetics here are clear: by selecting from the register of the classic an item that bears resonances in its own and other repertoires that are both oratorical and annunciatory (i.e., the standard big-chord piano concerto opening), he capitalizes upon its high expressive value potential. This stands in marked difference to other forms of “theosophical” rap that represent death in homelier or more sentimental fashion.<sup>66</sup>

In “What’s My Name” a kind of prophesying is set in motion by the piano’s voice, conjured, whether from the grave or the realm of the divine, and authorized by precisely the aspect of “classic” technique, in this case the pianistic “power chord” that, two generations before, allowed *Dangerous Moonlight* to sell the short, one-movement work as both an act of musical heroism and a special aesthetic object: a concerto. The “imaginary” power of the chords, in registering Addinsell’s work and others like it, cannot be underestimated, and I explore this power further in chapter 7. One would be hard-pressed to distinguish the melodic substance of the opening material of Addinsell’s composition and the main theme, composed by Bronislau Kaper for Victor Saville’s film *Green Dolphin Street* (1947), were it not for the invocation of concerto register as understood by mainstream consumers in the piano chord flourish of the former.<sup>67</sup> No surprise that Kaper would turn to that model for Saville’s adventure. Kaper was a pianist himself, born in Warsaw. Conservatory-trained in Berlin, he left Nazi Germany for Paris in the early 1930s. Al Tinney’s performance of “Green Dolphin Street,” a melody that has become a jazz standard, exploits the aural confusion between the two works. Tinney begins the song not with the “Green Dolphin Street” tune but with the first section of the Addinsell.<sup>68</sup>

As the rap proceeds, the opening chord (repeated three times by the piano soloist in Addinsell’s original) is here thrice reiterated jerkily and artificially through cuts and short loops, producing a new rhythm that will serve as the background for the rapper’s recitation of his name, “D-M-X,” and the title command/interrogative “What’s—My—Name.” Architecturally the piano sounds serve as columnar supports for the monumental temple of dark prophecy on which DMX raps, while within this implicit mise-en-scène Addinsell’s chord remains stiff and unnatural, a reanimated Frankenstein monster, a sonic Karloff analogue. DMX plays the role of the charismatic, an agent of divine revelation, supported by the sample. Addinsell’s aesthetic (abstractly “beautiful”) chord, prior to the launch-

ing of DMX's rap, is a "monster" in its literal and original connotation: a divine, if terrifying, omen that points the way. The scriptural elements of the album on which the song appears, . . . *And Then There Was X*, elaborate upon scriptural originary mythography, starting with the title paraphrase of Genesis. The cover art features a giant papyrus fragment in the form of the letter X (the *chi* of Christomythic orthography). Upon it is inscribed a fragmentary text that includes references to the Nativity ("a star") and the Crucifixion ("if it takes for me to suffer for my brother"), along with a prayer of thanksgiving. Self-sacrifice (for the sake of one's "brethren"), in its aspects of spirituality and violent carnality, is central to the thematic content of the collection, as it was—perhaps coincidentally—to Addinsell's inspiration for the wartime "concerto," and DMX positions himself as both priest and prophet with respect to its message; he is an interpreter and a vessel. His acoustical assembling of effects that conjure sensations of terror, sacrifice, and ethical positioning is representative, however—whatever DMX's personal faith—of the musical melodramatist. The track projects to listeners a sort of ethical drama that, as Peter Brooks has argued, is fundamental to the melodramatic gestural mode of authors operating outside a social environment grounded in common acceptance of a single "true Sacred."<sup>69</sup>

René Girard has stressed the fundamental importance of sanctioned acts of sacrifice, in antiquity, in Old Testament narrative, and in more recent third-world cultures, as a balance to societal violence: "In a universe where the slightest dispute can lead to disaster—just as a slight cut can prove fatal to a hemophiliac—the rites of sacrifice serve to polarize the community's aggressive impulses and redirect them toward victims that may be actual or figurative, animate or inanimate, but that are always incapable of propagating further violence."<sup>70</sup> The form taken by the "Dead Sea Scrolls" *chi* of the cover art on the DMX recording sends the consumer a signal of this thematic element by applying to the visual register of the scriptural a violent inflection. Resembling crossed daggers that take the shape of scissors or shears, the image of the *chi* mitigates the born-again aspects of the rapper's poetry (in particular, the prayer recited on track 16 of the CD), and maintains the mythography of urban chaos, real or imagined, that has been consistently re-created in rap music imagery. Similarly Addinsell's borrowed chord is momentarily reregistered in the domain of the urban rap vernacular at one point in the song where it backgrounds the phrase "suck my dick," while its registration is ambiguous, or double, in the phrase "I shed blood," evoking both the street and the deity.

Envoiced on the three competing tiers of textual identity: the subjective (“What’s My Name” and “DMX”), the universal or divine (“*What’s My Name*”), and the profane, the concerto chord offers a musical field on which the rapper may experience several positions of power or, alternatively, the potential for a terrifying loss of subjective self in something greater. Such awareness—of being in the presence of some force (the intuitive apprehension by metonym I mentioned previously)—is simultaneously projected onto those listeners who buy into DMX’s cinematic construct.<sup>71</sup> In the end, though, despite the elements of co-optation expressed in DMX’s scissors-job on the concerto flourish, the rap, in fact, straightforwardly rehearses a number of (*pace* Feld) “hegemonic” features of classic Western music, including those of contrafact, refrain, and concerto ritornello structure. Addinsell, in his home register of the classic, is not “acted upon” but recited; the recitation is tweaked by no procedures other than abridgement and wholesale transposition (the sample appears at two pitch levels separated by a tritone), which is to say, by no process at all. It remains, true to the register of “the classic,” a pure quotation operating within a melodramatic expressive mode not far removed from the literal citational accompaniments of pre-sound cinema.

In Busta Rhymes’s highly successful “Gimme Some More,” those elements that tend to impose form in the classic sense are subsumed under the “counterhegemonic” impulse of Rhymes’s rap, which is percussive and antivocal; the rap’s contrary position is not with respect to high art or concert practice, however, but to the conventional practices of pop and mainstream vocality.<sup>72</sup> The song is distinguished especially by its quite effective illusionary projection of an unconstrained (infinite) cyclic looping of the digital sample, by the restrained and potent use of cuts, and, especially important, by the wholesale incorporation of the sample into the rhythmic lifeblood of the number. In drawing on Bernard Herrmann’s classic score for *Psycho*, Rhymes chooses not the ubiquitous shower-scene music but eight measures first heard in the film’s title sequence, music that within the body of the film was eventually associated with Marion Crane’s anxious preoccupation with having stolen some money from her employer. (I discuss Herrmann’s own references here to the music of Stravinsky and Antheil in chapter 6.) The musical cue backgrounded the visual of Marion’s famous (seemingly endless) drive along the highway that brought her to Norman Bates’s hostelry and to the end of her road. As in DMX’s rap, there is a narrative appropriateness to the selection. The sample amplifies, or at least complies with, the meaning of the song, another instance of the fundamental cinematicism of the

genre. In an interview, Rhymes indicated that the song is about “what people want more of,” a terse summary of Hitchcock’s dramaturgical set-up for Marion’s demise in the first part of *Psycho*.<sup>73</sup> But with respect to the real dynamics of the musical environment, there is more.

Rhymes and DMX shared a similar understanding of or at least adherence to a practice based in the implicit cinematicism of sampling from past classic referents. In terms of musical language (as a language system), both samples are, in Julian Johnson’s terms, “undeveloped.” The interesting distinction between them rests in the register invoked not by the originals (they are both classics) but by each rapper’s musical discourse, Rhymes calling on the classic register—rich with expressive implication—and DMX on the register of the classic, that is, the literal mode. Each register determines a particular approach to pre-existent material. From the standpoint of the reimaginative workings within each, DMX’s Addinsell, a decapitated architectural artifact, remained uninvolved in the process of DMX’s song. Conversely, Busta Rhymes truly co-opts Herrmann’s music, nurturing the cyclic germ inherent in but never realized in the original, owing to the constraints of the visual to which it was attached. Along the way, but not primarily, they perhaps specifically highlight the ambiguous status of repetition as a “cultural force” in African-American musics, as outlined by Tricia Rose.<sup>74</sup>

In “Gimme Some More” Herrmann’s theme is not just reanimated but reincarnated and set loose. More a musical Osiris than a Frankenstein monster, the amputated original here has been “re-membered.”<sup>75</sup> Most extraordinary about the metamorphosis is that Herrmann’s music already seemed, in the original, a perfect complement to Marion’s state of mind, wherein the music resided.<sup>76</sup> As a body, she was—as Hitchcock indicated by those memorable windshield shots with Marion dead center—*frozen* in place, *constricted* by the car, *tight* with fear, *motionless*; her forward trajectory was effected only by the agency of the machine in which she was imprisoned. This aspect of Hitchcock’s exploration of a novelistic topos of time and space that Bakhtin called the “road” chronotope—in this case the physical and mental distance she traverses prior to her arrival at the Bates Motel—was effectively enhanced by the music, whose repetition patterns are long-range.<sup>77</sup> She, in her mind, moves backwards, as her gaze is directed consistently toward the rear-view mirror, and she recalls—as realized within the *mise-en-bande*—echoes of past conversations.<sup>78</sup> In “Gimme Some More” that backwardness of gaze is reproduced through Rhymes’s recitation-remembrance of childhood that precedes the bass entry. Creating a cross-registration, it is a nostalgia element inflecting the

classic register elements of the sample away from the neurotic model of Herrmann and Hitchcock and more toward earlier cinematic Romanticism. Elements of register that allow for this substitution include the legato orchestral strings, the classically balanced 4 + 4 phrase structure, and the “artfully” chromatic line.

Musical cyclicality is released from the grinding wheels of the mind, its rhythmic force paramount and directed at the body and the body’s natural rhythms: an extraordinary sense of short-range ebb and flow emerges from Herrmann’s music. Rhymes accomplishes this by framing and relocating the sample’s pinched strings in the environment of rich bass and the percussive attacks of his vocal phonemes. Still a classic register object, to be sure, Marion’s music now operates in a new field of somatic, rather than interpretative, reception. To borrow from Bakhtin’s analytical terms of novelistic authorial discourse, I might say that both rappers are “in the *zone*.” Whatever register that phrase occupies in late-twentieth-century vernaculars, for Bakhtin it is the area of authorial negotiation between present audience and past stylistic and generic referents. DMX, however, also plays within the sample’s *field*, Bakhtin’s frame of form and genre, on which the original “concerto” had been deployed.<sup>79</sup> Busta Rhymes’s Hitchcock sample retains only its psychic energies, redeployed on an entirely new field: that of the vibe of movement.<sup>80</sup>

As I suggested with respect to Steiner’s Puccini, the classic register of Herrmann’s procedures borrowed from Stravinsky and Antheil is now classic cinematic, but the quotation in “Gimme Some More” is mined for its inherent expressive potential in a linguistic sense, invoking an effectively psychographic environment involving recollection and motion, indeed the very circularity Herrmann had cultivated decades earlier. In *Psycho* the score’s participation in its multimedia environment was rendered insistently graphic by the jagged visuals of Bass’s title sequence, and later psychographic by the image of Marion to which the music is eventually attached. Marion’s road curves back on itself and drills into her psyche, stifled by the music. Busta Rhymes reinterprets not just the music but the music-visual mediation, maintaining its core aspect of self-reflection by invoking in his opening words an autobiographical narrative stance, that is, a cinematic voice-over. Throughout, the sample’s value is its sheer expressionistic capacity, accessible without any interpretive strategy or intellection of meaning.

Sampling, and the consumption of music containing samples, raises issues related to familiarity and the cultural capital that pertains to acculturated objects in different social sectors. That is, we are handicapped—it

might be maintained—in judging some sorts of referential reception if we can't be certain of the consumer's familiarity with the original. The narrative aspects of Marion's musical anxiety will be lost on the "noncompetent" listener, for example, as would any of the cinema-history details of the Addinsell I described above. In these cases, I have emphasized the presence of other nonspecific, acoustic markers of register; this, in fact, is one of the virtues of invoking the concept. But how to approach the measurement of "competence" with respect to a broad and only generally defined audience base? Pierre Bourdieu's statistical, sociological approach to class habitus and its construction seems to offer one way in.<sup>81</sup> In the end, though, it leaves little room for accidents and thus little for history.

#### MAINSTREAMING

"Let Joyce be unconfined," punned Groucho Marx in a 1960 letter to Leonard Lyons of the *New York Post*. Lyons had written the comedian to inform him that Thornton Wilder had identified a Marx Brothers "Napoleon" sketch, in which the trio wore three-cornered hats, as the source for Joyce's "three lipoleum Coyne Grouching down in the living detch" in *Finnegan's Wake*.<sup>82</sup> Groucho and his brother Marxes were accustomed to parodistic discourse on literature: they participated at times in Alexander Woolcott's Algonquin circle in New York, as well as in his Neshobe Island Club in Vermont, and had maintained throughout their careers social and epistolary contacts with many of the now classic literati and theater artists that intersected with Manhattan and Hollywood society.<sup>83</sup> Groucho's response satirizes a particular variety of literary criticism that his sometime correspondent T. S. Eliot had described in "The Frontiers of Criticism," where he linked *Finnegan's Wake* with John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu*, a monograph in which Lowe "ferreted out all the books which Coleridge had read . . . and from which he had borrowed images or phrases to be found in *Kubla Khan* and *The Ancient Mariner*."<sup>84</sup> Groucho answered Lyon's and Wilder's speculation:

Tracing this item down from the "Wake" could be a life project and I question whether I'm up to it. Is it possible that Joyce at one time was in the U.S.A. and saw "I'll Say She Is!"? Or did a New York policeman, on his way back to Ireland to see his dear old Mother Machree, encounter Joyce in some peat bog and patiently explain to him that, at the Casino Theater at 39th and Broadway, there were three young Jewish fellows running around the stage shouting to an indifferent world that they were all Napoleon?

Marx in this text may reveal to us the fundamental silliness of our critical-historical enterprise; but, simultaneously, his presence within the field of such heady conversations reminds us of the elusive and often unexpected paths that reception of individual canonical works, in this case *Finnegan's Wake*, may follow.

In the daunting statistical analysis provided in Bourdieu's study of class-based taste distinctions, Stravinsky's *Firebird* appears among the collections associated with middle-class lower-income groups of high cultural aspiration such as teachers.<sup>85</sup> He is, in fact, especially sensitive to the subversion of "art" toward pedagogical service through mainstream presentations.<sup>86</sup> The mainstream, however, derives its flow from more than a few tributaries. In a famous tale, director George Cukor related that Katherine Hepburn, Olivia de Havilland, and Bette Davis were being treated to Stravinsky's drawing-room performance of *Firebird* at the same time Groucho's cigar was accidentally setting fire to the dining room tablecloth during a "witty" evening in the composer's honor at Cukor's home.<sup>87</sup> Apocryphal or no, and whatever the personal aspirations behind Cukor's big dinner parties, *Firebird* is lodged in this tale within the conversational register of a group well outside that characterized by well-intentioned schoolmarmishness, a group whose musical experience—one that would be passed along to generations of audiences—was configured by the odd assortment of creative individuals who contributed to the accidents of Hollywood history (which include many of the most important accidents of twentieth-century music history).

While the incorporation of concert music into film scores has accounted for a certain mode of circulation in vernacular culture at large, original film scoring has played a significant role in widening the range of expressive options for vernacular music. David Raksin, a favorite among Schoenberg's students, surely expanded normative musical registers via his wildly popular score for Otto Preminger's 1944 classic *Laura*. Its most famous scene, the build-up to Laura's on-screen appearance, is accompanied by a psychodramatic barrage of background music in the composer's early style. Over the top in its expressionism (not merely in the melodramatic but in the music-historical sense as well), clear as a bell in its Schoenberg references, Raksin's own music for this portion of the film lodged something new in the standard registral collections of audience expectations through the accident of the film's special success (a success linked in no small part to Raksin's famous opening theme music, which drew upon an entirely different musical register

associated with the harmonic conventions of jazz). This new sound was intense, mesmerizing, even breath-taking attached to an otherwise normative multimedia context. Neither a safe space for petit-bourgeois escapism nor a pretentious collectible in an unused record library, Raksin's Schoenberg served as a node between existing registers, between those of "real" expressionism and of the familiar melodramatic expressiveness of older Romantic film scoring. As imitators filled that in-between space with more vernacular practice, some musical gestures were reregistered, while extremes found their way to the middle, leaving room for other musical gambits to enter registered, and thus intelligible, expressive collections.

No question that Hollywood—especially as it formed a haven for émigré composers—represented its own odd "culture elite," and that the "consumption" of Stravinsky's music, accidental or otherwise, at a dinner party thrown by a culture maven like Cukor is only one short step removed from the concert hall or museum gallery or its domestic imitation. But the special blend of artistic and commercial motivations, of authenticity and pretension, that characterizes media-centric socio-economic aggregations invites material that is not necessarily bland, "lite," or pointedly pedagogical to enter the stream: cultural efflux that otherwise would never find its way into our vernaculars.