1. The Recorded Musical Text

Just what is a musical performance? This is a difficult question, one that music scholars have been slow to ask and even slower to answer. We could begin our definition by saying a performance of Western art music transpires with a reading that is more or less normative and executed according to the composer’s instructions. But such a description comes up short because it makes no room for interpretation and variance, leaving Furtwängler’s view of Beethoven’s Third Symphony much the same as Toscanini’s, for example, while it is those very different approaches that make the “Eroica” the “Eroica,” that make it so enticingly performable in the first place.

Drawing on ideas of Edward Said and Peter Kivy, Peter Johnson concludes that performances are important for what they do above and beyond the notated music. The observation has not been widely shared by scholars of Western art music, who, as Nicholas Cook observes, have been so intent on “locating the aesthetic centre of music in the written text”—in other words, on isolating musical invariance—that they have taken little notice of the variance that defines performance. Johnson goes further to say that a performance, when heard as an aesthetic whole, in fact embodies “necessary otherness”: it emerges as a function of the score only to the extent that it presents the right pitches at the right time and supplies appropriate articulations and dynamics. Its fidelity to the printed page might well enhance its value qua performance but by no necessity establishes such value. I would add that the sounding rendition is “other” in that it can never be wholly comprised or predicted by the inner ear and the mind’s eye: we are rarely surprised by a third or fifth visual, silent reading of a printed score in any circumstances, but acoustic happenstance or other unforeseen factors can have a considerable effect when we hear the same
score in performance. Unanticipated vibrato, variation of tempo, a reverberant performance space, or simply too much coffee are more likely to change our impressions of a work than would irregularities of paper, ink, or notation in a score.

If these thoughts get us a bit closer to understanding musical performance, the even more vexing questions remain: Just what is a recording, and what is its relationship to the performance it contains? Is it a transparent vehicle, or a medium that recontextualizes or even transforms performance? Does it work for or against performers’ concerns, or is it a neutral conduit for interpretive thought? In the next chapter, we will address the fate of a performance’s “necessary otherness” when that particular foreignness can be repeated—and therefore familiarized—ad infinitum. In this chapter, I address performance of art music as a phenomenon unto itself, and one that stands transformed when inscribed into permanency. But there are also important questions to ask regarding the ontological role of recordings vis-à-vis performance: Does the recorded performance supplant the musical work any more or less than the live performance, whether it is understood as a sounding entity (“Menuhin recorded a beautiful Beethoven concerto”) or as a physical or commercial object (“Menuhin’s Beethoven concerto is out of print and getting expensive on eBay”)? Or does the recording have the function of performing the performance? And how useful is the conventional notion of recording as documentation of a particular musical “interpretation,” at least in the basic sense that interpretation involves rendering a thought from one language to another?

THE RECORDING AS WORK OR TEXT?

Without referring to recordings, Peter Kivy emphasizes the permanence of art music performance. He does this by describing the musical performance itself as a work, explaining, for example, that Artur Schnabel’s rendition of Beethoven’s “Waldstein” Sonata or Rudolf Kempe’s particular actualization of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony is an aesthetic object that endures through time much like the sonata or the symphony itself. But how would such a performance-work relate to the composition-work that is being performed? Adopting ideas from Paul Thom, Kivy says that the performance in essence “quotes” the work in an act of musical and declarative assertion. It is because he emphasizes the work aspect of performance that Kivy must invoke quotation rather than interpretation or rendering. The former falls in line with the inviolate character of works in that it entails
no added nuance: a person quotes an earlier statement not in order to elu-
cidate that statement, but as an attempt to clarify the present in light of
the past. If Kivy had emphasized the interpretation aspect, he would have
had to acknowledge the fact—problematic given his premise—that perfor-
mance is a function of the aesthetic value of the composition being per-
formed. No other art form comes to mind, except perhaps acting, where
a performance-as-work would have such a deeply contingent relationship
with a written work.

Kivy points out a basic uncertainty in our understanding of art music
performance, namely: where does the work’s inviolate work-quality end and
the enduring, even replicable, aspect of a performance—what we might, in
line with Kivy’s thinking, call the work-quality of a performance—begin?
Two answers, two different conceptions of the performance-text, are
possible. The first is suggested by Eric Clarke, who tells us that a perfor-
mance is necessarily self-enclosed and self-defined in that it presumes to
supplant or subsume the work at the moment of performance. Clarke writes:
“Whether listeners believe they are listening to performance or to ‘the
work itself,’ there is no escaping the reality that it is a performance (or
recording) that they hear.”4 Kivy’s notion of performance-as-work suggests
a second conception, one stemming from the performance’s reproducibility,
its identifiable quality—whether by virtue of interpretive color, narrative
posture, or personalized articulation—above and beyond “the work itself.”
The second, Kivyesque understanding allows separation of musical work
from performance-text. The first, Clarkean notion takes the work and
performance-as-text together as one organic, inviolate experience. As I will
argue in this chapter, the differences between these two views stem from ba-
sic textual-ontological differences and allow for contrasting performance
styles.

In the final analysis, the work concept is not very useful as a repre-
sentation of performance because it is too restrictive a notion, too monopolis-
tic, too caught up in authorship and intention. We might better under-
stand the performance, to turn to a related but more fluid and synergistic
concept, as a kind of text—a system of signs, an organism of inter-
connected meanings. The notion of a text is indeed so adaptable that it has
taken on various, even contradictory, meanings. Over time there have
been two basic understandings, with the second, inclusive, poststructural-
ist sense coming to dominate: (1) the means by which the work is trans-
mittted, as demonstrated in the phrase “the printed text”; and (2) any sys-

"The Recorded Musical Text / 29"
analysis: Beethoven’s autograph manuscript of his Second Symphony, for example, is the source for all we know specifically musically about that composition, but it needs analysis and interrogation whenever it refuses to answer our musical and paleographical questions. Less commonly acknowledged is the fact that recordings of that symphony also represent texts in both these senses: they have replaced concert performance as the dominant means for hearing this music, and they require a particular form of attending-to, a singular manner of “reading.”

As already mentioned, recordings embody certain aspects of both written and oral texts. They are readable texts, first, because they are coded entities requiring a specific form of literacy above and beyond taking in the performance in the concert hall, aurally, without mediation. Much of this phonographic literacy lies with the ability to enjoy music away from the place and perpetrators of its performance, a culturally instilled skill that the San people of Namibia, say, have had no real reason to develop. The most influential recording artists—Glenn Gould, Herbert von Karajan, and Leopold Stokowski serving as key examples—have understood this phonographic literacy, savoring it and developing it.

Even beyond basic aspects of phonographic literacy, recordings are texts in that they are closed, circumscribed, structured, posed, edited, and otherwise mediated in a way that requires “reading” as well as listening. They are discrete commercial products, booklike in that they are designed to be read and reread. In discussing the differences between live performances and studio recordings, Alfred Brendel associates the latter with certain practices and states of mind that I would say are redolent of written texts and the reading of them: he mentions the need for “control over a mosaic” rather than the “broad sweep” of the concert; the search for “an interpretation that will bear frequent hearing” instead of acoustic projection; the capacity for immediate listening and feedback offered to the performer rather than the demand placed upon her in concert for simultaneous musical imagining, playing, projecting, and listening; and “critical awareness” in place of spontaneity and adrenaline. Acuteness of reception, presumed repetition, attention to detail, scattered modes of awareness—these all presume an ever-present critical distance, an interposed subjectivity involving mediation and anthologization of experience rather than experience itself. This is the general poststructural idea of something we could call textuality—an experience that asks the reader to “produce a text,” as literary critic Michael Riffaterre puts it.

Or we could define the text more broadly yet as a cultural nexus, a center of discourse: something is textual in this sense when it represents a
coming-together of negotiated imaginings and estimations. Recorded performances are perhaps more textual than worklike in that they are crafted through cooperative authorship, at least in comparison with the concert performance. Studio recordings are collaborative not only by way of the musical performance itself, which can be influenced by internalized dialogues the performer might have had with, say, a teacher or a colleague, but also through the intercession of other sensibilities by way of microphone design, mixing, editing, and burning onto disc, even sleeve design. With the live performance we might hear the collaboration of a piano tuner and the acoustician who designed the concert hall, but those subjectivities are not involved in moment-to-moment negotiations between music and musician. More immediate negotiations and renegotiations are audible in the balance engineer’s microphone setup, the editor’s skills, and perhaps something of the producer’s advice to the pianist and verdicts on individual takes. Because of the lingering Romantic legacy of the single and singular artist, however, these agencies of discourse tend to hide behind the textuality of one performance: people habitually refer to “Schnabel’s ‘Appassionata’” and not to “Beethoven, Schnabel, Fred Gaisberg, and Edward Fowler’s ‘Appassionata.’” The performer, as the one who usually holds final veto power, can also effectively reduce an authorial multiplicity to one by rejecting the recording for release until she feels it accurately reflects her sensibility.

While some recordings have multiple authors, most are eminently “read-erly” texts in that their worth, meaning, and even function are ultimately decided not by their makers but by the people who listen to them. They are objects to be used as well as read, and those two processes become one and the same. While some novels and films have had double lives as public failures and critical successes, saved from oblivion by critical opinion, this is rare with art music recordings. With decades of experience in the world’s great opera houses, James Levine must have had very good reason for taking such slow tempos in his two Parsifal recordings; but critical reception has declared them too slow, and there the matter rests. When the Benedictine monks of Santo Domingo de Silos recorded the Roman Christmas Mass for Spanish EMI in 1973, they could not have foreseen how an international 1994 CD reissue would sell some six million copies, and how their particular singing style would go beyond defining spirituality for many mid-1990s listeners to create a new commercial franchise for aural monasticism. The ultimate meaning of both these texts sits not with the author/performer but with the reader/listener. Perhaps it is simply the commodity aspect of recordings—the fact that they are bought and
sold—that makes them readerly texts? That cannot be the only reason, for
some readerly texts are not commercial: William M. Schniedewind remarks
how “meaning has reflected its readers more than its writers” in the case of
two other communal and nonauthorial but not really purchasable texts,
specifically the Bible and the United States Constitution. Conversely, not
all commercial texts are readerly: readers are not interested in Agatha
Christie, John Grisham, and J. K. Rowling for life lessons but read them to
be entertained, distracted, and indeed transported outside of themselves.

As agents of cultural and religious authority, writing and orality have
competed with each other throughout history. Such competition is clearly
visible with recorded performances: as recordings divide listeners more
and more categorically from performers—the former increasingly alien-
ated from the act of making music and the latter more and more strin-
gently acculturated into the same activity—the printed musical text be-
comes less and less important in the grand scheme of things, irrelevant to
most listeners and something of an obstacle to promoting many perform-
ers in the marketplace. Such a situation would seem to demand, by way of
compensation, an increasingly specific semiotics of performance, an in-
crease in the interpreter’s aesthetic and ontological authority. One could
also describe the situation in terms of literacies: art music involves two lit-
eracies, a literacy in performance and a literacy in hearing, with the former
presuming the latter but the latter not necessarily involving the former. In
this context, we could say art music has become a unique cultural phenom-
enon in that the two texts it involves—the means of transmitting the work,
and the musical countenance immediately presented to the listener—have
drifted farther and farther apart as musical literacy has changed. And
rushing in to close that gap, that growing disconnectedness, are types of
meaning—for example cinematic, commercial, and ethnic—that were once
thought antithetical to music embodying the l’art pour l’art aesthetic.

The recordings by Artur Schnabel and Glenn Gould would help flesh
out these contrasting forms of textuality as well as the recording’s differ-
ent possibilities for cultural import. Discussions of Schnabelian and Goul-
dian manners of interpretation soon degenerate into tired and ultimately
irrelevant contrasts between Schnabel’s “faithfulness” and Gould’s “eccen-
tricity” or even “obstruction” of a work. A readerly perspective would be
more fruitful, for reasons given above. We could pattern such a point of
view on the “birth of the reader” that Roland Barthes proposed in opposi-
tion to age-old authorial impulses “to impose a limit on [the] text, to fur-
nish it with a final signified, to close the writing.” So we should speak not
of interpretation, but of Schnabelian and Gouldian conceptions of text, as
based on their own predilections as readers—traits that Schnabel’s and Gould’s fans necessarily share with their favored pianist, since a musician can only connect with a listener who shares her textual beliefs. Those Schnabel and Gould textual perspectives are so different that we can never hope to hear the same musical work in their respective recordings of, say, Beethoven’s Sonata op. 109—unless, that is, we take into account the varieties of textuality that Barthes and other literary theorists opened up in the 1960s and 1970s.

THE BIBLICAL PARADIGM

Recordings of art music represent mass distribution of so-called high culture, but they have proved more divisive and puzzling than, say, paperback editions of Shakespeare plays. We could summarize the strange ontological situation of recordings by saying that they are partly pornographic and partly biblical. They have become objects of depersonalized yet very individual pleasure, a peculiarly twentieth-century exercise in Kantian disinterestedness (Uneigennützigkeit). They have taken on a character more fetishistic than functional—thus the pornographic aspect. At the same time, like most written documents of “higher” cultural import, they are subject to the powerful textual-critical attitudes and ideologies that developed with Judeo-Christian scripture over the course of a millennium. Printed music scores have been subject to the same thinking, of course, but—to return to a persistent theme of this book—they have ceded more and more of that cultural and textual authority, more and more of that “biblicality,” to recordings.

For Western societies, the Bible has served as the original and paradigmatic text—at least since the advent of Protestantism, the disappearance of an interceding glossa ordinaria, and the institutionalization of a vernacular. The first circumscribed and self-standing system of meaning after antiquity that demanded to be widely read in Europe, it served as a model for all later ideas of textual analysis and became the basis for the theories of interpretation called hermeneutics. The Bible represented a kind of victory of the written over the oral in Western civilization, its writing, compilation, and translation into the vernacular spanning two millennia. In the words of William M. Schniedewind, the Bible represents “an eyewitness to [an] epic shift in human consciousness, the shift from an oral world toward a textual world. Central to this shift [is] the encroachment of the text upon the authority of the teacher.”

Before the general rise of literacy in
ancient Israel and again among the laity in modern Europe, writing had a numinous aspect. For the Jews as well as the early Christians, the written word was exclusivist and an instrument of government and empire, and orality was populist and the domain of kinship relations. When literacy emerged and literature flourished during King Josiah’s reign in the seventh century B.C.E., there resulted—to quote Schniedewind once again—“one of the most profound cultural revolutions in human history: the assertion of the orthodoxy of texts.” Josianic religious reforms were based upon the spread of literacy, and by enabling a widespread ability to read scripture they facilitated “the religious authority of the written text.” The older ethos of the written text is suggested in the book of Isaiah (Isa. 1–39), where writing is invoked in terms of magic and power.14

During the Protestant Reformation, however, the written text—or, more accurately, the printed book—allowed the laity to evade the church’s textual authority and read God’s word on salvation directly for themselves. The phrase sola scriptura (scripture alone) served as the reformers’ battle cry, emphasizing the individual’s personal relationship with the text over any kind of communal articulation of the authority wielded by that text. Anyone wondering exactly which scripture was to be followed could look to Erasmus, who in 1516 published a Latin translation of the New Testament directly alongside the original Greek (which appeared in print here for the first time). Erasmus’s edition, and the so-called Complutensian Polyglot published in Spain in 1522, allowed believers—at least those who could read Greek—to see for themselves the mistakes Jerome made in the Vulgate translation that had served the Roman Catholics for some seven hundred years. The timing was bad for the Vatican, the new textual developments giving budding Protestants one more reason to circumvent the institutions of oral culture surrounding the scriptures and embrace the Bible as a personal, readerly, written text.15

How to describe the “tipping point” between the suppressive and the liberatory potential of texts as regards readers’ access to such texts? Is a situation where a text sits in the hands of a few a limiting situation, and a scenario where a text is in the hands of many a liberating one? Though simplistic, such an explanation does have some bearing on present art music communities, which are relatively small and relatively elite. The world of art music has indeed been likened to a museum, with professional curators preserving artifacts that have no direct cultural connection to the present.16 But we could just as well call it a postbiblical culture. This quasi-religious basis is still seen in the aura that surrounds musical explanation and interpretation, and in the zeal or even anger people show when defending
their own readings of a musical work. The scriptural paradigm also helps us understand why many musicologists and other scientifically inclined humanists believe that texts must involve writing on paper. The Western mind-set would be very different—and more music scholars would probably recognize performance as an intellectual discipline—if the Hebrew Old Testament and the Christian scriptures had come down to us in oral traditions rather than as a set of canonized writings. As it is, musicians speak of “the work” as a locus of authority in much the same way Christian ideologues refer to the Bible, and invoke “the work” as the seat of “divine” composerly intention. The very term “the Bible” is a clear misnomer for a collection of texts, even apocrypha, that cover a wide historical swathe, compiled from far-flung sources in several languages. In the case of both the musician and the Christian, then, the argument is really numerical: the singularity of the composition or book is contrasted with the multiplicity of interpreters, and the singularity must retain authority in order to prevent a breakdown of meaning. How might one react to the shocked report that “Friedrich Gulda played the ‘Hammerklavier’ with very slow tempos”? Probably by invoking the authority of the work, as invested in the definite article: “But that’s a profanation against the sonata!” Borrowing a category from Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, Lydia Goehr describes the musical work-concept as regulative, meaning that it acts, by power of its own identifiable aesthetic weight and cultural authority, to rein in unorthodox readings and perhaps unorthodox musicality more generally. Goehr points out the quasi-ethical and even quasi-theistic aspect of the work’s regulative power, but she might have gone further to say that someone making prohibitive statements on the basis of Beethoven’s tempos also betrays textual, logocentric, paper-based thinking. To the extent that they are even separable, the cultural authority of the work largely hinges on its connection with a specific written text, as is true of the Hebrew Old Testament, if not originally with the Jewish Torah.

Notions of textual authenticity—as manifest in the Urtext—formed the central nexus in an age where the recording was, at most, accessory to the performance. Now the best-selling recording has—as if in imitation of popular music practice—usurped the authority of the written text. Gunther Schuller has complained of exactly this, observing that the sheer multiplicity of recordings, and the marketplace thinking that produced them, have led to a collapse of musical authority:

Conductors, battling it out in the fiercely competitive recording market, have now learned that they will stand out, will be reviewed and discussed more readily, and will thus attract more attention the more they
can interpret a work differently from the several dozen recordings of it that are already in the market place. This has become more than a trend in recent years: it has become an obsession and a specific skill, eagerly supported by managers and, of course, most record companies. At that point the composer’s score becomes, alas, a total irrelevance, an annoying burden.18

The poststructural revolution was literary in orientation, its semiotic play representing, or at least springing from, reevaluation of the printed text and the reader’s relationship to it. But if the poststructuralist turn had begun some twenty years later, one might well see it as a response specifically to a crisis of meaning in art-musical texts, induced by the exponential proliferation of recordings that began in the mid-1980s and slowed only at century’s end; for devaluation of an authored text will inevitably result from proliferation of more or less permanent and more or less equally viable interpretations of that text, viable not in the sense of an original being amenable to the individual reading, but rather in the sense of surviving in the public mind. Literature has not faced such a situation the way classical music has, except to the degree that a set of competing performances of, say, Hamlet may have accumulated over the decades on film. For readings of Twelfth Night, Langston Hughes, or Emily Dickinson there is nothing like the kind of competitive marketplace that exists for the “Moonlight” Sonata (though such a statement of course begs the question of whether performances of a Beethoven sonata are indeed equivalent in any real sense to readings of a lyric poem or short story).

One could argue against Schuller by saying recordings have led neither to sacrilege nor to breakdowns of meaning but have, in essence, brought forth a musical “Reformation.” They have fragmented authority invested in the work and inspired a kind of sola musica movement wherein “the word of Beethoven” became liberated from increasingly institutionalized and rule-driven ideas of performance. (In the statement above, Schuller does rather sound like a Roman prelate fighting to keep control of church texts during the Counter-Reformation.) According to such a recording-reformationist viewpoint, the question isn’t whether a performer should observe a crescendo in the score, but instead centers on the issue of just what the crescendo means within the reality of a specific performance of a specific piece. Recordings have widened the field of possibility here, perhaps suppressing some attentiveness, as Schuller claims, but certainly doing more to make musicians sensitive to the question of just how many different ways a crescendo can unfold. Would a conductor from 1890 or a conductor today be more likely to know how a crescendo from Schubert’s
“Unfinished” Symphony differs from one in Richard Strauss’s *Don Juan*? Schuller’s impractical and selectively Cartesian exhortation—to wipe all texts and all interpretations, except the composer’s, from one’s mind—can also be found in the philosophy of Artur Schnabel, to mention one like-minded musician-thinker. “All good composers mean each score to stand on its own,” writes Schnabel student Konrad Wolff in conveying his master’s textual philosophy, “as though there were no other music in existence.”¹⁹ Is such a scenario possible, one can only ask in disbelief, even hypothetically?

Neither Schuller nor our musical reformationist could explain the phenomenon of the so-called definitive performance, whether it be Toscanini’s *Falstaff*, Callas and de Sabata’s *Tosca*, Bruno Walter’s Beethoven “Pastorale,” or Martha Argerich’s Prokofiev Third Concerto. The definitive performance epitomizes the recording as a textual function and is political and authoritative in that sense. It shows the public—the art-music-loving public, such as it is—“getting textual” with interpretation, and doing so in a way that most musicians refuse to do. The definitive recording is anathema to the more closed mind-sets of the academic, the connoisseur, and the working musician, three figures who are too busy teasing out and relishing music’s many ambiguities to want to nail down a composition in such a way. “Getting textual” is usually not the public’s wont outside of organized religion, since texts are really a private matter, an issue of reading and personal explanation. “Definitive” and “referential” are terms that music-lovers reserve for a vital recording, not necessarily the version they love and want to spend time with, but one that has proved influential, lasting, and worthy of respect. It is a version that has stood the test of time and promises to shape future tastes and judgments. Self-enclosed and in a sense tautological, it suggests centrality and endurance and seeks to establish the very interpretive criteria by which it is to be validated. Seemingly isolated from passing fashion, the definitive recording typifies the great interpreter’s ability to imbue even the most improvisational music with a sense of decisiveness, and to convey a sense of musical understanding through performance. The definitive recording says what needs to be said about the music in question, even though the “what” only becomes clear after the performer in question has indeed said it. The definitive performance presumes a known work (there must be enough discourse behind the composition) and indeed entails a work that has a separate life and importance well beyond individual performance (for the definitive performance needs something larger than itself to be definitive of).

Here we come back to the question of performance-as-work. When Kivy describes Vladimir Horowitz’s “Revolutionary” Étude as repeatable and
enduring, he really characterizes it as definitive or paradigmatic. The paradigmatic rendition imposes a single and closed, what Mikhail Bakhtin might call centripetal, meaning on the composition: it presents an interpretation for immediate use. To grasp the meaning of these enduring artwork-performances, it would seem necessary also to understand their negative counterparts: those nonartwork-performances that do not endure. But Kivy is evasive when it comes to these, and to the questions of whether all performances are enduring artwork-performances, and if not, what that could mean for the others’ qualities of endurance and aesthetic value. “Performances are events,” Kivy avers. “Do they, or some of them, endure? They do not need to do so, on my view, to be ‘art.’ But some of them . . . are repeatable; they are types with tokens.”20 Glenn Gould’s 1955 recording of Bach’s Goldberg Variations is perhaps the preeminent example of a work-as-performance, or performance-as-work. With the arrival of this paradigmatic performance, the wider public saw a great musical work delivered from dormancy. This must be part of what Said meant when he said the release marked “a genuinely new stage in the history of virtuosity.”21

It is worthy of fiction that such an international spectacle could emerge from an unknown musician essaying a then-obscure composition. But that relative obscurity served to enable this Bach-Gould paradigmatic text, and it is hard to imagine such an influential performance as the “Gouldbergs”—as the pianist himself jokingly dubbed the record—originating in different circumstances. Music and performer became indissolubly linked, perpetrator and perpetrated suddenly snapping into public view together, more like a political assassination than a musical performance. Intermittent repertoire for four internationally known pianists at most, the Goldberg Variations were unfamiliar enough in 1955 that they were still a malleable piece for the public. Then as now, they were also an unusually “open” work with regard to the manifold issues of repeats and tempos; indeed, there can be no other major work that entails performances ranging anywhere between 38 minutes (the time of Gould’s 1955 version) and 104 (the duration of Rosalyn Tureck’s 1957 recording).

Gould’s 1955 Goldberg Variations demonstrate, in short, how textual fluidity of a composition allows fixity in its performance. This textual mutability opened Bach’s work to Gouldian annexation, while the late Beethoven sonatas could not be thus opened. The pianist’s very next recording, of Beethoven’s opp. 109–111, enjoyed nothing like the sales and popularity of his Goldberg Variations. In fact, the recording of the sonatas was panned by the critics, fell out of print quickly, and wasn’t reissued for almost forty
Gould’s late Beethoven sonatas were a failure largely because Schnabel’s centrist, centripetal performance-text had rendered superfluous, before the fact, Gould’s attempt at a centrifugal performance of the same music. The paradigmatic performance-text either requires a blank slate or creates one, for it cannot tolerate the kind of split aural consciousness by which a listener hears the new continuously against the old. As Eric Clarke writes of conventional performance practice in art music, “Hearing expression, emotion, style and ideology in performance requires the listener to identify properties of the performance which stand out against an implicit background of neutrality—a kind of theoretical ‘norm’ in relation to which expression, emotion, style and ideology are marked.”

In this sense, the paradigmatic text, and certainly the best-selling record of music from any era, are not to be related to traditional notions of art music performance, but to ontologies of popular song. In popular music, specifically, the cover version is synonymous with the paradigmatic performance to the extent that both have a parasitic relationship with an earlier text yet aim to obviate any such connection. The cover version must by definition effect a new and equally (if not more) viable rendering of an existing song, in essence a replacement of it, or it becomes a simple copy of the original. Cook’s shrewd words about pop practice apply just as well to Gould’s performances of Bach as to Led Zeppelin’s covers of Willie Dixon: “The distinction between authorship and reproduction,” Cook observes, “is a very slippery one.”

EMPOWERING THE READER/LISTENER

Conceptions of the text are still rooted in pre-Reformation biblical history in the sense that they are predicated on authority and centrality. The structuralist text represents a declaration of power, its consolidation of authority eliminating individual readerly freedoms. What does this mean for a specific body of music, exactly? Charles Rosen finds an example of such entrenchment with the Beethoven piano sonatas, induced by recordings. According to Rosen, recordings have all but eliminated the role the sonatas once played in amateur and domestic music-making. Recording introduced these sonatas to a wider public, which might suggest a fragmentation of textual authority. Rosen notes, however, that records did not create a grassroots movement of individual Beethoven performers but helped bring about a centralization and professionalization of these pieces. “Only when recordings finally dislodged the tradition of playing music at home,”
Rosen remarks, “did the Beethoven sonatas lose their special status in which the interests of the amateur and the professional were united.” In this instance, to upend a statement from Barthes, we could say entrenchment of the author necessitated the death of the reader. Rosen’s conclusion holds true when we consider the number of individual Beethoven musician-interpreters, an eager population that—confronted by master interpreters on vinyl and CD—succeeded in a kind of intensifying Darwinist struggle. A person patiently wandering Leipzig in 1901 might have been able to catch thirty home-grown versions of the “Moonlight” Sonata filtering down into the street, not all of them of equal musical “competence” but all more or less peacefully coexisting. A century later, however, the number would probably be closer to five—not played at the piano, but mechanically reproduced from a specialist elite including the likes of Alfred Brendel, Maurizio Pollini, Evgeny Kissin, Vladimir Horowitz, and Artur Schnabel.

Rosen’s is only one perspective on the role of the recording in textual authority, and it is probably a minority view. Others of a poststructuralist bent, citing numbers of nonperforming listener-readers, believe recordings of absolute music have helped loosen up conceptions of the text. Barthes described such dissolution of textual authority thus:

Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphralistical recriminations of good society in favor of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.

Music, of course, has listeners (of recordings) as well as readers (of printed notation). These two demographics correspond in some ways, and in other ways do not: music is different from literature, though perhaps not from plays, in that the readership for its printed form—the score—has always been smaller than the listenership for its public performance. (Of course, questions arise regarding musical literacy and what form such literacy takes, questions that I address in chapter 5 and elsewhere.) To state this another way: art music requires translation, but translation of a written source that is largely unknown and irrelevant to the listener except to the degree that it is conveyed through performance.

Gould was passionately Barthesian in his views, largely because of his deep allegiance to the individual listener and his disregard for the printed text as a function of authorial intention and design. He anticipated
something like Barthes’s “birth of the reader” and saw it transpiring through recording. A recording could, in his view, provide the most readerly musical experience by giving the listener various takes, edits, and versions of the composition, allowing her to assemble her own optimal performance and thereby participate in the musical recreation. In this “Haus-musik activity of the future,” as Gould described it, home editing would become “the prerogative of every reasonably conscientious consumer of recorded music.”27 You love the recording when it gets to the development section but don’t like the performer’s way with the coda? Simple substitutions will solve the problem and give the listener a new experience of creative participation going beyond conventional notions of musicality.

T. W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer described a culture of distraction—a disengagement of sensibility toward the work of art—as a condition immanent in the age of mechanical reproduction. Gould described such a condition in different terms. In one of his defenses of Richard Strauss as post-Romantic, Gould prophesied a devaluation of musical-compositional innovation, after recordings collapse the chronological sense that had supported notions of originality. Recordings disengage ideas of novelty, in short, by neutralizing historical philosophies:

And there is little doubt that the inherent qualities of illusion in the art of recording—those features that make it a representation not so much of the known exterior world as of the idealized interior world—will eventually undermine that whole area of prejudice that has concerned itself with finding chronological justifications for artistic endeavors and which in the post-Renaissance world has so determinedly argued the case of a chronological originality that it has quite lost touch with the larger purposes of creativity.28

Gould foresaw audio technology turning music-lovers into “individuals capable of an unprecedented spontaneity of judgment,” and to the degree that his Barthesian vision placed the listener at the level of composer and performer, or even above, it did indeed entail the archetypal author’s death.29 This kind of thinking could qualify Gould as a populist, an artist who enjoyed sales and wide popularity outside the usual markets for art music. But Edward Said came closer to the crux of the matter—namely, the delightful paradox of this pianist’s insensible individuality—when he described Gould as every inch a humanist, a practitioner of “a critical model for a type of art that is rational and pleasurable at the same time,” and also an artist who developed “an alternative argument to the prevailing conventions that so deaden and dehumanize and derationalize the human spirit.”30
SUBSTANTIIVES VS. ACCIDENTALS

A textual-critical stance, holding sway in English-language literary scholarship at least through the 1970s, emphasized authorial meaning over details of production. Writing in 1950, the influential Shakespeare scholar W. W. Greg described this duality as

> a distinction between the significant, or as I shall call them ‘substantive’, readings of the text, those namely that affect the author’s meaning or the essence of his expression, and others, such in general as spelling, punctuation, word-division, and the like, affecting mainly its formal presentation, which may be regarded as the accidents, or as I shall call them ‘accidentals’, of the text.31

If we wish to explain musicology’s relative disinterest in performance, we need look no further than the wide influence of such attitudes in textual criticism. In its basic division between substantive and accidental, Greg’s duality upholds the idea of information and information transmission in a way that other potentially useful dualities—for instance Leonard Meyer’s differentiation between “primary” musical characteristics like pitch and rhythm and “secondary” aspects like timbre and dynamics—do not.32

Writing in 1977, bibliographer D. F. McKenzie lamented his colleagues’ disinterest in any material history of the book. He deplored Greg’s substantive-accidental duality and censured the “defeatist pragmatism” of Hans Zeller and Morse Peckham, a scholar who insisted authorial intention is ultimately unknowable. “The book itself is an expressive means,” McKenzie protested. “To the eye its pages offer an aggregation of meanings both verbal and typographic for translation to the ear.” He accused the inductivists of reading texts as nothing more than words and criticized their self-limitation to trusted hermeneutic circles of meaning:

> Their sense of difficulty derives partly, I believe, from our commitment to inductive method and its use in the natural sciences. It is a method that tempts us to assume that the only evidence that counts is physical, not behavioural. Thus we are led to place undue emphasis on the symbolic images of manuscript or printed word-forms rather than on the interpretative act of responding to them.33

Shakespeare—the greatest writer in the English language and the classic mainstay of twentieth-century English-language textual criticism—unwittingly helped further such notions. By apparently taking a haphazard attitude in bringing his own stage works to print, the Bard encouraged the attitude that words float free of the pages, ink, and bindings that carry
them to the reader—though even in the best of circumstances stage drama of the time had a tenuous relationship with the London book trade.

Across the first half of the twentieth century, such literary-critical disinterest in “presentation” and “the interpretative act” found a direct parallel in formalist composers’ belittling of musical interpretation and its own “accidentals.” A self-avowed *homo faber,* Stravinsky fetishized paper and pencil and invented a rastration gadget for drawing staff lines. Not coincidentally, he also cultivated dual aversions to musical interpretation and nebulous Romantic aesthetics, which he called a “ponderous heritage” that served as the basis for all bad musical breeding. In his *Poetics of Music,* Stravinsky proposed that “the musically extraneous elements that are strewn throughout [the Romantics’] works invite betrayal, whereas a page in which music seeks to express nothing outside of itself better resists attempts at literary deformation.”

These musical ontologies have followed in the footsteps of literary ontologies, and I attribute the formalist composers’ denigration of “interpretation” to the same basic prejudice that caused the midcentury literary-critical disinterest in material “presentation.” I am speaking of a stance that, under the influence of Saussurean linguistics, spread from literary studies to music hermeneutics. It’s worth quoting at some length from McKenzie’s 1985 protest against what he calls the synchronic bias in textual criticism:

> Saussure’s insistence upon the primacy of speech has created a further problem for book-based bibliography by confining critical attention to verbal structures as an alphabetic transcription of what are conceived only as words to be spoken. Other formalized languages, or, more properly perhaps, dialects of written language—graphic, algebraic, hieroglyphic, and, most significantly for our purposes, typographic—have suffered an exclusion from critical debate about the interpretation of texts because they are not speech-related. They are instrumental of course to writing and printing, but given the close interdependence of linguistics, structuralism, and hermeneutics, and the intellectual dominance of those disciplines in recent years, it is not surprising perhaps that the history of non-verbal sign systems, including even punctuation, is still in its infancy, or that the history of typographic conventions as mediators of meaning has yet to be written.

Acoustic space and ambience, equivalents to margins and white portions of the printed page, are typically considered “accidentals” to the recorded performance, if not irrelevant to it. Yet they become entirely different elements in a recording than they are in live performance. The liveness of
an acoustic will affect tempos, of course, but beyond that the interaction of musical interpretation and acoustic—whether recorded or heard in concert—becomes more mysterious, personal, and perhaps arbitrary. While it is usually not very difficult to separate the sound production from the acoustic in the concert hall—depending of course on the hall and where one sits in it—it becomes much more difficult to do when making a recording or listening to one. Ambience and acoustic space become intrinsic to the sounding conception, indeed at times inseparable from it. Two significant factors that make a recording very different from a concert experience are directionality and what people in the stereo industry call imaging: with the help of the eyes, the ears are freer in concert to isolate and separate sound sources across 360 degrees than when they are confronted with a pair of speakers.

Technology has had a reductive and restrictive effect on books, serving to contrast that cultural form with calligraphic traditions—and specifically, as McKenzie notes concerning page layout, to “dull our sensitivity to space as an instrument of order.”36 While typography and white space were conscious aspects of mise-en-page in medieval scriptoria, most English-language books of the twentieth century are reductive in ways that make the fewest literacy demands. They hone texts down to stringently two-dimensional experiences of pure information, allowing the eye to move in only one direction, left to right. In contrast to the mise-en-page of medieval illuminated manuscripts, modern books also rarely cultivate any organic interrelation between text, white space, and—to mention another “accidental” aspect of textual history—illustrations. Image and information tend to be segregated, even in children’s books, and the text is usually pure black against more-or-less pure white. Some of this segregation, endemic since Gutenberg, must be attributed to the limitations of printing and the habits brought about by those limitations. But technology has generally had the opposite effect in musical reproduction than it has with the printed word. To compensate for the quixotic properties of recording horns, engineers of acoustic (preelectric) recordings found it necessary to substitute instruments and rearrange musicians, placing the instruments without carrying power, like the strings, up front and relegating the brass to the back. Unable to capture and recreate any real sense of acoustic space or place, these old records are like books without margins, coherent layout, or typographical sense. But acoustic space became a significant aspect of recorded performance with the technological advances of electrical recording in the mid-1920s, digital playback in the early 1980s, and higher sampling techniques around the turn of the millennium.
One cannot say this of RCA’s Toscanini issues, even those done at about the same time the company was making excellent early stereo tapes in Chicago and Boston. The Toscanini recordings still puzzle listeners with their dryness. We know this conductor emphasized textural clarity above all else, and after the introduction of tape insisted that instrumental lines—on occasion, even individual notes—be dubbed in if the orchestral textures weren’t as clear as they were in his inner ear. Abetting that impression was NBC’s infamously claustrophobic Studio 8H, originally designed for spoken radio productions. Toscanini’s RCA records didn’t present music resounding in a particular space so much as—to use Decca producer John Culshaw’s description of other productions of the time—a “transcription of the notes” into acoustic terms.37 The description Walter Toscanini gave of his father’s recording philosophy recalls Greg’s substantive-accidental dichotomy, perhaps no surprise considering the conductor and the textual critic belonged to the same generation. Walter Toscanini claimed that his father “liked the unresounding acoustics of Studio 8H in which the purity of orchestral tone was not marred by hall reverberations and echoes.”38

But all this talk of aural aesthetics ignores the fact that Toscanini was a practical man working in an especially impractical profession. He owed his single-minded emphasis of the substantive over the accidental to his early life in the trenches—namely, his work in the 1890s with provincial Italian ensembles, where getting people to play clearly and together must have taken priority over sonic beauty. Studio 8H certainly exposed the kind of ensemble shortcomings that Toscanini had confronted in his home country: critic Olin Downes described how 8H gave the impression that “you listened to each instrument under a microscope” and that it thereby demanded the orchestra “be a particularly good one, exceptionally accurate.”39 The advent of the recorded acoustic mise-en-scène was thus a generational matter, a sensibility that followed standardization of instrument construction and playing styles, and the modern notion that mechanical reproduction could turn out art as well as documentation. Whatever its origin, Toscanini’s basic disinterest in “sound for sound’s sake” was aided and abetted by Studio 8H, according to Mortimer H. Frank. In this respect, we could contrast Toscanini with his slightly younger colleagues Leopold Stokowski and Sergey Koussevitzky, both of whom reorchestrated some scores for sonic effect. “Toscanini might alter a bowing to modify timbre or redistribute voices to enhance clarity,” Frank points out, “but such changes were founded on a structural or expressive point that transcended sound for its own sake.”40
RECORDING AS FACTUAL OR EXPRESSIVE MEANS?

Such Platonistic divisions between musical sound and musical acoustics soon disappeared, especially with the arrival of stereo techniques and virtuoso conductors who were not only record-savvy, but also good businessmen who understood the commercial potential of recording. Musicians take the performance acoustic into account both in concert and during recording, of course. But a few luminaries, Herbert von Karajan and Leopold Stokowski among them—men who stood in front of great orchestras while only in their twenties—consciously manipulated the sense of ambience in recording for musical as well as acoustic effect. For them, ambience became a substantive; or, to borrow McKenzie’s statement on “the non-verbal elements of . . . typographic notations,” Karajan and Stokowski used ambience as “an expressive function in conveying meaning.” Stokowski urged free bowing upon his orchestras, asking string players not to bow together as had been widely done in orchestral playing since Jean-Baptiste Lully, but to stagger their up-bows and down-bows inconsistently within sections, in accordance with their own individual instruments, bow grips, and musculatures. The resulting string tone, seamless and weighty, was Stokowski’s attempt to build a kind of deep acoustic resonance into the orchestral sound itself, regardless of the actual space where the music-making took place. This distinctive, indeed ingenious, brand of sonic illusionism also had the practical benefit of making the smaller pickup ensembles that Stokowski took into the studio in the 1930s and 1940s sound considerably larger on record than they actually were.

Free bowing—and free breathing, its equivalent in wind sections—is but one example of Stokowski blurring Platonistic distinctions between “artificial” sound production techniques and ambience as a “natural” aspect. It shows him instituting a kind of preelectronic sound-enhancement technology, and therefore differs in quantitative rather than qualitative terms from the imaginative and unorthodox recording methods that he also developed. It would be hard to imagine a more non-Toscaninian approach to recording than Stokowski’s: he “played” sound technologies as if they were musical instruments, from his presiding over the first American orchestral commercial radio broadcast in 1929 through his involvement with Bell Labs’ stereo experiments in 1932, presiding over the sound mix at a three-channel Bell broadcast of the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1933, and his embrace of Decca’s twenty-channel techniques on their “Phase Four” label in the 1960s. Some of his more obviously interven-
tionist RCA records of the 1940s and 1950s allow us to see what, if any, specifically “musical” goals such recording-studio techniques served. If each of the studio techniques could be substantiated in a specific aspect of the score, then Stokowski’s uses of technology could be said to serve a composition-textual function. As my test cases, I choose his July 1950 recording of the Sibelius First Symphony and his September 1954 version of the Second Symphony, both recorded in New York, the first with “his orchestra” of hand-picked players, and the second with the NBC Symphony.43

Both these Sibelius recordings show, especially as clarified on CD, obvious multimiking and sound-level manipulations between the orchestral choirs. On both we hear the gain being raised and lowered, especially in tutti passages—creating an effect much like the swell pedal of an organ, another preelectronic sound-manipulation technology and one that Stokowski would have known from his earlier career as a church organist. These Sibelius recordings allow two generalizations about Stokowski’s volume and balance maneuvers vis-à-vis the score: Stokowski enhances crescendos and decrescendos at strategic points in the compositional structures, and he points the listener’s ear to particular textural details that would otherwise be lost—not always aspects that the composer himself chose to foreground in the score. The first of these practices now reminds one of old photo highlighting techniques: the gain knob flourished like India ink, an instrument for extracting half-buried truths that uncooperative reality had done its best to hide. Taken together, these techniques made Stokowski’s records of the 1930s and 1940s electrifying at a time when it was common for orchestras and recording equipment to be set up without much thought, and then compensated for with frequent adjustments during actual recording—a process of “riding gain,” as it was commonly called. While those other recordings tended to have a confusing sound, with no decisive sense of dynamic expression, Stokowski was able to spin out overwhelming crescendos that weren’t even possible in the concert hall. The most obvious example on the two Sibelius records is the end of the Second Symphony, which begins quietly in G minor and unfolds gradually over a long scalewise vamp in the strings. With the gain turned far down eight measures before Fig.P, the orchestra is able to unleash an especially impressive crescendo as the volume is increased three pages later. More frequent and perhaps more interesting are those instances where Stokowski lifts the drama of transitional and developmental passages by exaggerating hairpin dynamics and making the confrontation of voices more acute within the texture.
Stokowski’s reseatings of his orchestras, some of them boldly experimental, are another sign that he was happier creating new acoustic scenarios than conforming to existing ones. Recording gave him the liberty to do entirely as he wished in dividing the ensemble. An RCA photo of a 1955 session at Manhattan Center, New York, shows a common Stokowski setup: instrumental choirs separated by ten feet or more and each given its own microphones, the brass and strings at roughly a twenty-five-foot distance. These distances and the sound baffles, preventing diffusion or bleed-over into the next section’s microphone feed, are designed to isolate the audio tracks, allowing them to be easily manipulated at the mixing desk. This is really a pop recording setup, the kind of studio arrangement oriented to electric and electronic instruments fed directly into the mixing board, the acoustic elements like voices or drums, distinct enough that they can mixed alongside them. The arrangement shows just how Stokowski and producer Richard Mohr were able to adjust balances so quickly and easily on the Sibelius records and demonstrates how strict control—if not complete elimination—of ambient sound could allow the strictest control over the “accidentals” of a recorded musical text.

It is difficult to separate technology from musicianship in Stokowski’s work and thinking: the two converge in service of beauty, expression, and convenience. In this way, his beliefs go far beyond the bibliically oriented textual-critical attitudes discussed above. In Stokowski’s sense of history and music-making, we can draw ever more meaning from the musical texts of the past, and the greater the music the more imperative it is to go beyond what the composer herself might have had in mind. As Stokowski wrote in 1943,

Physicists, engineers, and musicians will combine to improve continually the recording of music. The first step is to make recorded music exactly like the original. The next is to surpass the original and, through future possibilities of recording, to achieve the dreams of musicians—of making music still more beautiful and eloquent—music they heard within themselves but which was unattainable in the past. . . . Everything will be possible in the realm of sound—and music will reach new heights of tonal quality, power, delicacy, beauty.

Stokowski’s sense of musical hermeneutics becomes twisted at times to his utopian vision, but in a way characteristic of technologically oriented musicians. In reference to recording Beethoven’s “Pastorale,” he suggests that studio-technological capabilities can help make the score truer to its own self: “Certain important features of the music only dimly heard or even inaudible in a concert hall can be brought out with the full eloquence and
richness of tone which is their true nature.” Problems of balance and scoring can be corrected in Beethoven’s thunderstorm scherzo: “Because of the inherent lack of balance in the orchestration, I have never before heard these phrases [for bassoon, clarinet, and oboe] given their due prominence and tonal importance.” But Stokowski’s most interesting example of technology-based antifundamentalism concerns interpretive “impossibilities” in Musorgsky’s *Night on the Bare Mountain* in the Rimsky-Korsakov edition. Here he laments that in concert performance the furious descending scale in the strings at Musorgsky’s last big climax is never the decisive moment it “ideally” should be:

These downward-rushing tones should sound like an avalanche—beginning loud and increasing in tonal volume the lower they go. In the concert hall this is impossible to achieve because the instruments have more strength of tone in their higher registers than in their lower, so that no matter how much the players try to increase the volume as the tones become deeper, exactly the opposite happens—the volume of the tone becomes less. In *Fantasia* we were for the first time able to achieve the ideal in this music—increasing the tone as the scale passage descended—because recording for motion pictures puts techniques at our disposal whereby the ‘impossible’ can sometimes be achieved. When these techniques are further developed the whole idea of ‘impossible’ will be forever set aside—because everything will be possible in the tonal sphere.46

Stokowski offers a marvelously contradictory Platonism where textual meanings (“these downward-rushing tones should sound like an avalanche”) surface whenever and wherever technology allows them, or perhaps a form of radical Jamesian empiricism where no portion of lived experience is off-limits. The conductor’s expressive palette widened here as a result of his conviction that nothing was “accidental,” and everything “substantive,” in the musical experience. Textual criticism here becomes a kind of game where meanings are incumbent upon the techniques used to ferret them out—a practice many critics would condemn as self-serving or at least tautological, and which pragmatically inclined minds would say simply embraces the hermeneutic circle for what it is. Stokowski needed recording technology to close his own hermeneutic circle in the Musorgsky, since—contrary to his assertion—both the composer’s original score and Rimsky-Korsakov’s edition indicate a *diminuendo* at this descending scale, not an “increase in tonal volume.”47 Whether this shows the conductor intentionally falsifying the score or simply misremembering it in pursuit of a personal *mise-en-scène* is ultimately irrelevant.
Karajan would just as likely claim ambience as a “substantive” part of the recorded performance in a way that it is not in concert. Like Stokowski, he had such firmly defined conceptions of musical sound that on records he bent any sense of acoustic space to the music making, and not vice versa. Starting in autumn 1973, he recorded with the Berlin Philharmonic in the Philharmonie, Hans Scharoun’s hall in the round, which was a fairly radical design for its completion date of 1963. The increasingly dry sound of these Philharmonie records led many record critics to complain about the acoustic, when in fact some of the orchestra’s tapings in this hall—usually with other conductors and record labels other than Deutsche Grammophon—enjoyed a wetter ambience. We can only conclude that Karajan made a conscious decision to control acoustic impressions for playback at home, as dictated by the music being played. Occasionally—in exceptions that proved the rule—Karajan made a record in the Philharmonie that ended up sounding just as “wet” as if it had been made in their earlier recording location, the reverberant Jesus-Christus-Kirche in the Berlin suburb of Dahlem. One such is the Philharmonie recording of the Fountains of Rome and Pines of Rome, where Respighi’s luxurious and coloristic—perhaps “accidental-ridden”?—orchestration must have encouraged a pull-back of the microphones.

Karajan devoted part of his essay “Technische Musikwiedergabe”—written in 1974, shortly after he and the Berliners changed recording location—to a rather enigmatic concept that he called Raumgefühl. Raumgefühl might be translated as “sense of space,” “feeling of space,” or “feeling for a space.” In invoking a form of Gefühl, Karajan stressed sensibility over science, one’s personal response to the sound of a space. He thereby used it in specific contradistinction to the more mainstream and institutional word “acoustic.” So a Raumgefühl is—unlike an acoustic—subjective and immeasurable; a comparable linguistic term, Sprachgefühl, refers to the native speaker’s internalized knowledge of what is right in an expression and what is not. One might expect an internationally known conductor to limit himself to concert halls when discussing sonics, but Karajan discusses a startling array of sound spaces in his essay. At one point he lists four unusual electro-acoustic situations and describes their distinct Raumgefühle in affective terms: a voice heard in a resonant catacomb seems “strange and ghostly”; the same voice in a clothes closet will sound “like someone suffocating”; heard over a walkie-talkie with the high frequencies removed, it will become “incomprehensible noise”; hearing someone over a
high-quality stereophonic telephone, “we experience the voice *and the actual person* with a warmth and nearness that seem almost physical.” Karajan’s *Raumgefühl* is not ambience, which would be *Umwelt* or *Umgebung*. The conception might relate to *Akustik* but is not synonymous with it nor with the interior of any particular building: he mentions acoustics in the essay but declares it only one among many important factors and suggests he is less interested in such institutional and rationalized ideas than he is in an individual, subjective response to sound. The essential and fundamental acoustic, in short, is the one formed within the individual listener’s ear and brain:

The *Raumgefühl* that a hall lends to the music is very important. This depends greatly on the reverberation time. But many other factors contribute to the wonderful impression that the music supports itself [daß die Musik sich selbst trägt], that the space is boundless, and that for instance a wind solo seems not two meters distant but, embedded in a warm string sonority, as if coming from infinity. Three recordings will serve as examples of Karajan’s subjective *Raumgefühl* taking priority over customary seating practices, Platonic notions of acoustics, or obeisance to “the listener’s ear.” In all three instances, the recording itself acts—to use a phrase from McKenzie—as a “determinant of meaning” equal to, or sometimes exceeding, the authority of the composer’s score. The first example is Karajan’s 1953 taping of Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony with the Philharmonia Orchestra in Kingsway Hall, London. Karajan dragged out these EMI sessions because he was unhappy with the way the opening motto on *forte* horns was sounding on the tape. He experimented moving the horns to various positions in the hall, to such an extent that the players decided to play a joke on him at one point and hid themselves up in the farthest gallery. The conductor was finally satisfied with leaving the players in their customary place but seated the wrong way round, with their backs to the conductor and the bells of their instruments aimed at the microphones. The second recording is Karajan’s 1981 version of Saint-Saëns’s Symphony No. 3, where he, like a number of conductors before him, had a large cathedral organ dubbed over the orchestra in post-production. This overdubbing practice has helped inflate the sonic vocabulary of the “Organ” Symphony in the public mind—inflated it above and beyond the score, which says nothing about the organ beyond thirty-two-foot pedal and *voix celeste* stops. Perhaps it is a symptom of this postrecording inflammation that everyone ignores the simple *forte* marking at the big C major and G chords that open Saint-Saëns’s last Maestoso, and instead plays them at a towering *fortissimo*. Musicians playing the
work in concert must now look wistfully at the composer’s *forte* marking and remark to themselves how overplaying the chords on record has made anything quieter seem anticlimactic.\(^{51}\)

The third example is Karajan’s version of the Schoenberg Variations, op. 31, where the conductor reseated the orchestra from one variation to the next in the interests of realizing the composer’s shifting orchestral balances or, as Karajan himself put it, “to create the acoustic that one sees and imagines when one looks at the score.”\(^{52}\) When he set about recording this score, he created his own text (or, perhaps more accurately, his own subtext to the printed score) and did it in acoustic terms. Adapting a term from film studies, one could speak of Karajan developing a specific acoustic *mise-en-scène* for Schoenberg’s op. 31. Schoenberg scored the introduction, theme, nine variations, and finale of his op. 31 for a set of different ensembles, often breaking his large orchestra down into small chamber groups of one player per part. Variation 2 is for solo violin and solo cello against a set of between four and nine solo winds. The Variation 4 waltz begins with three solo strings and two solo winds accompanied by harp, celesta, mandolin, and tambourine. Variation 5 centers on full-section first and second violins doubling a line in octaves, beginning *fortissimo*, in full Romantic orchestral style. Karajan strongly believed in a chamber-music approach to orchestral performance and often required his players—and, in full orchestral situations, section leaders—to get their cues from each other rather than from him. In preparing operas, he was known to insist that the singers sit in on orchestral rehearsals—actually within the ensemble, and not in the auditorium or on stage. With a constantly changing orchestra like Schoenberg’s, and the leading voices moving around within individual variations, such a listening-based approach would be difficult to institute, without the ensemble being rearranged variation by variation, which is what Karajan ended up doing for the microphones in 1974.

Karajan said he reseated the orchestra in direct response to Schoenberg’s score, but his acoustic text for op. 31, and his reformulation of the Saint-Saëns symphony as well, go rather further than that. To borrow McKenzie’s statement on page layout and typography, they show the conductor using “space as an instrument of order” and doing so in a way that reflects his own thinking at least as much as it does the composer’s. One might think I am confusing the typographer’s definition of space as a schematic margin, a background to cognition, with the musician’s notion of space as a fundamental sonic arena, an acoustic palette for mixing musical timbres. Space on the printed page is blank, after all, while the musician’s space is never empty. But I believe that these two ideas of space represent much the
same thing, and propose that—in line with McKenzie’s rebuttal of Greg—we are as wrong to suppose that the musician exercises as much control of space in recording as the author does in publishing. Karajan is of course the exception that proves the rule here. Note that he explains his retextualization of Schoenberg according to acoustics rather than musical substantives. He doesn’t describe the differences between variations directly in ensemble terms, but according to the kinds of acoustics such ensembles would entail.

The particular subtext that Karajan establishes for Schoenberg’s op. 31 is, in short, architectural—with each variation articulated according to its own distinct Raumgefühl, this one presuming a cavernous auditorium space, another a small room. One benefit is that this trades difficult, contentious taxonomies like “symphonic,” “chamber,” “orchestral,” and “soloistic” for a less problematic series of aural acoustics, strung together in a personal vision that is, at most, accessory to the composer’s conception. But this does some justice to Schoenberg, who aimed to continue Bach’s example by transcending such compositional divisions. When we move from the Raumgefühl of Variation 5 (written for thirty-three players plus the strings) to that starting Variation 6 (an ensemble of nine soloists), the second cellist has to hear and perhaps see precisely what the first clarinet and other winds are doing, even though they don’t usually sit near each other in the orchestra—and so Karajan followed a full concert hall acoustic with a large-ish salon.

I have no doubt that a listener could, if she worked at it, learn to hear Karajan’s recording of op. 31 as a specific series of implied Raumgefühle rather than—or simultaneously with—a particular performance of a musical composition. I return here to my point that the recording by its nature overlays many texts, authored not only by the composer, but also by the performer, the recording engineer, the remastering producer, and so on. While none of these various texts usually crowds out any other, not all of them can be counted equally interesting or equally listenable. It must be possible to hear Martha Argerich’s recording of the Chopin B-flat Minor Sonata in terms of the microphones used—something along the lines of “Did you hear how those Schoeps omnidirectionals give a pleasantly crisp-and-crunchy physicality to the finale’s opaque textures?”—but one imagines even the most bookish engineer might tire of “reading” such a text.

ACOUSTIC CHOREOGRAPHY

The master of the recording as “determinant of meaning” was of course Glenn Gould. Like Karajan, Gould made drier and drier-sounding recordings
as the years went by. Some were so determinedly arid and close that they seem to propagandize against sonic causes. Given his general need for control and his dislike for surprise, which even led him to script his own interviews, one might think Gould resisted ambience as an encroachment on his own domain as musical organizationist.\(^{53}\) He wrote little about acoustics per se, though in his 1966 essay “The Prospects of Recording” he did invoke a “cathedral of the symphony” and hypothesized a link between quasi-religious conceptions of absolute music and classical music-lovers’ interest in “acoustic splendor.” But that was past practice, in Gould’s view, a practice we have largely left behind “as our dependence upon [music] has increased.” That increasing dependence has made it necessary for us not only to secularize music but also to domesticate it: “The more intimate terms of our experience with recordings have since suggested to us an acoustic with a direct and impartial presence, one with which we can live in our homes on rather casual terms.” In a letter he wrote five years after those comments, Gould displays a more obviously substantivist philosophy as he refers to

the relatively close-up, highly analytical sound which has been the hallmark of our recording at CBS and which reflects, not only my own predilection in regard to piano pick-up but, more significantly, a continuing persuasion as to the validity of the recording experience as a manifestation divorced from concert practice.\(^{54}\)

Gould shows a Toscaninian anxiety over ambience as an uncontrolled variable, an aspect of the sounded musical performance that cannot be scored, perfectly predicted, or repaired in postproduction. Further details of Gould’s acoustic apprehensions emerge in a short diatribe against Manhattan Center that he slipped into his 1978 essay “Stokowski in Six Scenes.” Manhattan Center became a favorite recording locale for CBS Records in the 1950s and 1960s, Leonard Bernstein making most of his New York Philharmonic recordings there before Philharmonic Hall opened in 1962, and Stokowski and RCA using it in the 1950s. But Gould scarcely hid his sarcasm when he attributed “only one natural blessing” to the place, “a generous decay which adds ambient interest to music that is neither contrapuntally complex nor intellectually challenging.” Strictly differentiating between music as conceived and music as sounded, Gould here declares himself a formalist and Platonist. He sees acoustics as accidentals: acoustic luxury, an accessory to music as a craft of substantives, might help compensate for compositional poverty. Other apologia for such an ample space, and the demands it placed on musicians, he dismissed as so much Romanticist mumbo jumbo: “One’s natural tendency while playing there,
I felt, was to surrender to the Center’s ‘wet’ sound and settle for a diffused and generalized approximation of ensemble—sometimes referred to in jacket notes as ‘sweep and grandeur.’ I had, in fact, vowed never to work there again.”

Gould’s distaste for “sweep and grandeur” seems part and parcel of his disinterest in the “accidentals” of musical sound, as does his humming and singing while playing, making light of the quirks of his pianos, listening to and approving his final edited tapes over the telephone, showing apathy toward period performance practice, and, not least, emphasizing motivics over timbre and instrumentation in his own compositions. But in the 1970s Gould made quite a reversal when he turned acoustics to interpretive use in several studio projects, the only one released in his lifetime being the 1977 record of Sibelius’s op. 67 Sonatinas and Kyllikki, op. 41.

Several ranks of microphones, ranging from close-up to pointed toward the back wall of the hall, were cued in and out to reflect textural and harmonic changes in the scores. The published record was so avant-garde in this shifting aural perspective that producer Andrew Kazdin wrote a kind of caveat auditor on the sleeve, describing a technique of “acoustic choreography.” In his jacket note, presumably written with Gould’s consent and perhaps his encouragement, Kazdin justified this practice by appealing to acoustic authenticity: “The acoustic ambiance must be ‘right’ for the music,” he writes. “Debussy seems to require a more reverberant surrounding than Bach. Rachmaninov should be bathed in more ‘grandeur’ than Scarlatti.” Kazdin then introduces the “acoustic choreography” notion, saying it contravenes any assumption of aural-aesthetic unity for each musical composition—an idea that I would claim derives from nineteenth-century werktreu cultures. “No cognizance ever seems to have been paid to the variations of mood and texture which exist within an individual composition,” writes Kazdin. “Why should the staccato articulation of an opening theme be wedded to the larger sense of space required by the lyrical second subject? Long intrigued by this subject, Glenn Gould offers here a bold and fascinating statement on the appropriateness of space to music.”

Such a division between music as conceived and music as sounded might seem to clash with Gould’s embrace of recording—an embrace so passionate and progressive that he predicted concerts would disappear by the early twenty-first century. But any such contradictions seem lesser if one goes along with a basic assertion of the present book: that absolute music and its attendant cultures have in important respects been embodied—even encouraged—by recording. In the strange-bedfellow aspect of Gould’s selective aesthetics, we find one key to this perpetuation.
Cued by what he saw in these Sibelius scores, then, Gould included ambience as part of his expressive means, a performance aspect alongside dynamics and phrasing. He rethought the recorded text as thoroughly as Karajan did several years earlier with his reseating of Schoenberg’s op. 31. Stokowski did much the same with his creative use of multimiking and the mixing desk, techniques he had prophesied with typical zeal already in the early 1940s. Karajan might well have spoken for all three musician-visionaries when he rejected shibboleths of “naturalness” and defended recordings from accusations of manipulation: “Manipulated? This is truly one of the most misused and misunderstood words of our time.” He describes music making as a process of constant manipulation, from the composer’s transcription of her thoughts to paper to the conductor’s internalization of the piece, and the composer’s and the musicians’ interactions with the hall. “What in life is not manipulated?” Karajan asks. Indeed, he finds too much emphasis placed on imaginary and arbitrary conceptions of the listener’s ear. “According to the ear of which listener?” he queries. “Even in a hall with a truly good acoustic, there are no two places with the same conditions.” In a good hall with two or three thousand seats, Karajan continues, only about three or four hundred listeners will be able to enjoy the optimal acoustic—the quality of sound drops perceptibly beyond that number.

Here Karajan touches on the central legacy of music’s basis in scriptural ideals: the assumption that everyone “reads,” or, better said, hears, the musical work in the same way. Recordings have grown out of and encouraged that idea, implicitly allowing new forms of auteurist control over musical “accidentals” and giving all listeners the same perspective—whether oriented to an idealized best seat in the hall or modeled on one specific musician’s inner ear. Recordings, in other words, have been patterned more on an oral gospel model of transmission—the “Amen, I say unto you,” Sermon on the Mount aspect—than on individualized modes of silent reading; they model themselves on the Mosaic Law before it was written down. But the three musicians discussed here were eager to get away from such centralized notions, and to develop new and individualized—written rather than oral, and post-Reformation rather than pre-Reformation—forms of literacy.

But a readerly and individuated document isn’t necessarily made in an inclusive, open, and receptive atmosphere. What were the social rather than technological aspects of Stokowski’s, Gould’s, and Karajan’s studio work? They were certainly more autocratic processes than when popular musicians entered the studio. In the 1960–1990 golden age of recording, many
internationally known conductors tended to treat recording staff like musical subordinates and weren’t very open to discussing studio practices. It’s difficult to imagine even the most temperamental heavy metal guitar hero, not to mention a skilled studio auteur like Brian Wilson, doing what Fritz Reiner did at one of his first RCA sessions in Chicago, which was to announce to producer and engineer that he would hear correct balances on the first try or pack up and go home. According to his biographer Philip Hart, Reiner was “naïve about the recording process, unaware of the editing and technical capabilities of audio tape. . . . From playbacks in recording sessions or from edited masters, he listened for the musical result, unconcerned with how it was attained.” But this didn’t prevent him from being the dominant figure at his sessions: “Reiner applied to his recordings even more exacting standards than he set for his concert performances. . . . If balance or ensemble did not satisfy him, he consulted with Mohr on how to achieve what he wanted, preferably from the podium and only as a last resort at the control panel.” It was not only conductors who tended to take such authoritarian approaches but, more generally, many classical musicians born before the 1930s. At one session, Emil Gilels proved just as imperious as Reiner—but even more naïve—when he absolutely insisted on a certain microphone he had heard about. The engineers obliged but then neglected to tell their pianist that the mike in question, though prominently stationed, never got turned on.59

In classical music-making, perhaps more than in popular musicianship with the exception of vocalists, sound per se is both highly personal and fiercely attended-to. When those musicians are conductors given music-director authority over large and heavily endowed ensembles, not to mention civic roles of some influence, the quest for individuality—and indeed singularity—of sound was pursued even more aggressively. I presume, on the basis of his interventionism and lifelong interest in sound technologies, that Stokowski was largely responsible for decision making in the studio. Richard Mohr was RCA producer for his records at this time, though Stokowski left the impression that their work was less cooperative than agreed-upon, and generally calculated and Machiavellian in a way that didn’t always hinge upon the score.60 Both Stokowski and Karajan had highly personal conceptions of orchestral sound that were based on a certain sense of le son c’est moi. Claudio Abbado offered an astute analysis of the Austrian conductor in 1988: “Herbert von Karajan has created an orchestral sound that is closely linked with his own personality, and unique in our century.”61 Considering the fact that “the Karajan sound” was as much a product of studio procedure as concert practice, Abbado was describing the
visionary idealism of a studio auteur. The two memoirs of Michel Glotz, whom Karajan conscripted as his long-term producer for both Deutsche Grammophon and EMI, are unhelpfully quiet on the subjects of recording per se and Glotz’s specific relationship with Karajan in the studio, beyond his job of insisting on retakes, which his boss resisted. Perhaps Erich Leinsdorf best accounted for Glotz by describing him as a functionary of Karajan’s own sonic project, “an individual who was not furnished by any record company, who never became a producer for anyone else, and whose ear was evidently in tune with Karajan’s own.”

Textual philosophies have changed dramatically over the decades since these three musicians passed from the scene. Developing audio technologies made acoustic space available to Stokowski, Karajan, and Gould as a substantive, a creative, tool. The recorded text, as it developed in the 1950s and 1960s, was able to liberate these individual musician-hermeneuticists from the authority of community-held tradition. But the pendulum has now swung the other way, and more recent audio advances have—in tandem with new ideas of musical-cultural authenticity—taken audio space away again. A minimalist approach to recording first appeared in the early 1950s with Mercury engineer C. Robert Fine’s single-microphone technique and led to an aural purist culture at about the same time popular music developed multitracking. Several other classical labels, Telarc among them, took up this kind of purist approach and made it a house trademark. The audio-technological progressivism that once aided creativity has thus been pressed into serving transparency—and effectively underlined earlier brands of aural creativity in retrospect, isolating them, and making them sound mannered and perhaps even neurotic. At the same time, changed attitudes toward authorship and modernism have made written-ness and creative vision passé, to the point where Stokowski’s, Karajan’s, and Gould’s freedoms with musical texts have somehow become conflated with their—what now sounds like—sonic arrogance. The risk is that their particular brand of textuality, as heard in our current time of objective and obsessive “atextuality,” of authenticity and restoration, will sound only odd or defective.

The basic differences are again text-based and text-inspired. Earlier musicians like Artur Schnabel, Felix Weingartner, and Edwin Fischer approached Bach and Beethoven according to scriptural and exegetic traditions—the masters as godheads, their works as sacred writ, and the musician as mouthpiece for divine pronouncement. Gould, on the other hand, teased out a freer relationship—a musical equivalent to the popular 1966 Good News Bible, maybe—between the work and its representative texts. Those who raise
their eyebrows when they hear Stokowski or Gould, or at least praise them as performers while denying them as interpreters, tend also to blame Barthes for the poststructuralist, Saussurean notion that “anything and everything can be a text.” A textual argument hides under a dispute between authenticity and performance, and our three musicians—like Barthes himself—are implicitly linked with promiscuity and presumption.