

Prospects

Postmodernism and Musicology

Early in 1992, *The New Republic* published an omnibus review of four recent books by American musicologists under the headline “The Strange New Direction of Music Criticism.” The books in question, by Carolyn Abbate, Susan McClary, Rose Subotnik, and myself, are really too diverse to be lumped together so casually, but they are like-minded enough in taking “classical” music out of its cloister to have sent a common signal. Or, rather, to have touched an uncommon nerve: as the headline indicates, the review was no Schumannesque praise of new paths but a warning against being seduced by these books, even those the reviewer rather liked, into straying from the straight path to the strange.¹

But was this new direction really so strange? Was it even really new, or more like a renewal of something lost or forgotten? From one standpoint, nothing could be more ordinary than what these books have in common. The new direction in musicology as I understand and support it is simply a demand for human interest. It chafes at the scholastic isolation of music, equally impatient whether heaps of facts or arcane technical anatomies furnish the scholar’s frigid cell. “Talk about music,” the demand might run, “should bear the impress of what music means to human subjects as thinking, feeling, struggling parts of a world.”

But not just any impress will do. The demand for human interest should lead to a reevaluation of impressionistic, figurative ways of de-

scribing music, but that will not be enough to satisfy it. The object sought is meaning: concrete, complex, and historically situated. The search runs counter to the widely held principle—half truism, half aesthetic ideal—that music has no such thing; that, as Theodor Adorno put it, “Time and again [music] points to the fact that it signifies something, something definite. Only the intention is always veiled.”² The best way to satisfy the demand for human interest is not to prove this powerful statement false but to reveal it as a *historical* truth. If the intention is always veiled, that is because we accept a conceptual regime that allows us to experience the human interest of music but forbids us to talk about it. It is because we accept—perhaps even while rejecting it elsewhere—a hard epistemology that admonishes us not to impose our merely subjective interpretations on the semantic indefiniteness of music. When it comes to musical meaning, the famous dictum of the early Wittgenstein has long been exempt from critique: “Where one cannot speak, there one must be silent.”³

This admonition cannot, I think, simply be discarded as a once-estimable but now naive error. Its underlying intention, to make sure that claims to knowledge are open to genuine collegial debate, would be difficult to abandon responsibly. But hard epistemology is oppressively and even phobically narrow in its notion of contestable knowledge. Seeking to protect truth from human fallibility, it defines subjectivity as the negative of objectivity and denies the legitimacy of any claims to knowledge in which traces of the subject—the historical claimant—have a constructive role. In its zealous will to truth, it promotes the rhetoric of impersonality into an epistemological first principle. (The resulting oddities merit separate study. The hard epistemology of eighteenth-century science, for example, took experimenters’ reports on their own bodies to be untainted by subjectivity if the experimenters were genteel males.)⁴ A more flexible approach might accordingly begin by separating the concept of knowledge from the rhetorical opposition of personal and impersonal expression and resituating it in the historicity of human subjects and their discourses. What if our subjective interpretations of music do not falsify its semantic indefiniteness but recognize its semantic capacities as a cultural practice? What if these interpretations are, not substitutes for a lack of knowledge, but contestable, historically conditioned forms of knowledge?

Hard epistemology depends on oppositions of fact and value, the intrinsic and the extrinsic, that may seem commonsensical but do so only because the routines of their enforcement have long since dulled our ability to see them otherwise. In order to empower new musicologies, to move from the negativity of critique to the positivity of human interest, we need to defamiliarize and deconstruct those oppositions as they apply to music. We need to reconsider what the disjunctive “and” means when we speak of music and language, or the musical and the extramusical, or subjective musical response and objective musical knowledge. There is no problem about acknowledging that each of these contraries has real historical import. The idea is not to make them disappear, which they are unlikely to do. The idea, rather, is to relativize them: to reduce them from first principles to contingent moments, temporary limits, in an ongoing conceptual dynamic.

The best means to do this, I would suggest, lie in the conceptual and rhetorical world of postmodernism. The aim of the present chapter is to characterize that world and to show its specific pertinence to understanding music. The characterization will proceed along broad lines. It will seek to establish an orientation, not to work up capsule summaries of the various modes of deconstruction, feminist theory, archaeology and genealogy of knowledge, psychoanalysis, ideology critique, neopragmatism, history of sexualities, popular culture studies, and so on that make up the crowded field of postmodernist discourses. The characterization will also be somewhat idealized. It will try to encourage, by envisioning, a generalized climate of postmodernist thought that is at best still nascent. At the same time, it will fight shy of promoting that contradiction in terms, an official or normative or definitive postmodernism. The specifically musical half of the chapter will address the disciplinary oppositions mentioned earlier and connect their postmodernist undoing to past and possible future ways of thinking about music.

For those who care about “classical” music, the possibility of tapping new sources of cultural and intellectual energy may come not a moment too soon. It is no secret that, in the United States anyway, this music is in trouble. It barely registers in our schools, it has neither the prestige nor the popularity of literature and visual art, and it squanders its capacities for self-renewal by clinging to an exception-

ally static core repertoire. Its audience is shrinking, graying, and overly palefaced, and the suspicion has been voiced abroad that its claim to occupy a sphere of autonomous artistic greatness is largely a means of veiling, and thus perpetuating, a narrow set of social interests.

In its present constitution as an object of knowledge and pleasure, classical music holds at best an honorific place on the margins of high culture. No one today could write a book such as *The Song of the Lark*, Willa Cather's novel of 1915: a book that translates the traditional narrative of quest romance into a young woman's career as a diva, a book that climaxes at the Metropolitan Opera as the heroine sings Sieglinde in Act 1 of Wagner's *Die Walküre*:

Into one lovely attitude after another the music swept her, love impelled her. And the voice gave out all that was best in it. Like the spring indeed, it blossomed into memories and prophecies, it recounted and foretold, as she sang the story of her friendless life, and of how the thing which was truly herself, "bright as the day, rose to the surface," when in the hostile world she for the first time beheld her Friend. Fervently she rose into the hardier feeling of action and daring. . . . Her impatience for the sword swelled with her anticipation of [Siegmund's] act, and throwing her arms above her head, she fairly tore a sword out of the empty air for him, before *Nothing* had left the tree.⁵

The rhetorical and symbolic action of this passage cries out for comment, as does its Wagnermania, but I must focus here on something else. Unlike Sieglinde, Cather's heroine has friends, all of whom are in the audience to witness her triumph, which forges them into a kind of spiritual community. And perhaps the key figure in this community (saved, as best, for last mention) is an uneducated mariachi artist named Spanish Johnny, "a grey-haired little Mexican, withered and bright as a string of peppers beside an adobe door," from whom the heroine in her girlhood learned to associate music with wildness, freedom, and the sharp savor of cultural identity.⁶

One reason for our remoteness from Cather's image repertoire is the lack, or rather the loss, of a viable public discourse about classical music. During the nineteenth century, esoteric conceptions of music based on its apparent transcendence of signification coexisted and contended with semantic conceptions that imbued music with poetic, narrative, or philosophical meaning and with sociocultural agency.⁷

Traces of both conceptions appear in *The Song of the Lark*. But the twentieth century would witness a decisive victory for the esoteric side, at least as far as Western music is concerned. There were many causes for this: the erosion, in the world of sound recording and mass entertainment media, of musical amateurism and the culture of home performance; the complementary failings, literal-mindedness and fancifulness, of the available semantic approaches; the appalling misappropriation of the great Germanic tradition by the Nazis; and the increasing professionalization of musicology, music analysis, and music theory. The net effect was that by the mid-twentieth century, classical music had passed out of the public sphere.

In trying to reverse this development, the so-called new musicology, like most intellectual movements, is in part a revival. But it is not just a reproduction, like a new piece of period furniture. Its purpose is to recapture, not the content of an earlier discourse, but the role of that discourse in society and culture. If it succeeds, it can help revivify classical music by demystifying and de-idealizing it: by canceling the Faustian bargain that lofts the music beyond the contingencies, uncertainties, and malfeasances of life at the cost of utter irrelevance.

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To start on a note of candor: the term *postmodernism* is something of a catchall and susceptible to mere modishness. But it is also, for better or worse, at the center of a momentous intellectual debate. As I use it, loosely following Jean-François Lyotard, the term designates a conceptual order in which grand, synthesizing schemes of explanation have lost their place and in which the traditional bases of rational understanding—unity, coherence, generality, totality, structure—have lost their authority if not their pertinence.⁸ An order so hostile to grand syntheses cannot, of course, willingly admit of one itself. Postmodernist strategies of understanding are incorrigibly interdisciplinary and irreducibly plural. Like the theories that ground them, they make up not a system but an ethos.

These strategies are localized, heterogeneous, contestatory, and contested. Rejecting traditional concepts of both subjectivity and objectivity, they focus on diverse, culturally constructed subjectivities

and objectivities at diverse levels of entitlement. They are critical, both cognitively and politically, of the ideal of impartial reason, and even more so of claims to embody it; they seek to enhance rather than reduce the mobility of meaning. They insist on the relativity of all knowledge, including self-knowledge, to the disciplines—not just the conceptual presuppositions but the material, discursive, and social practices—that produce and circulate knowledge. They situate human agency, however problematically, within the dynamic processes, the so-called economies, of such production and circulation rather than in the conscious self-possession of a centered and autonomous human subject. And, though they run the risk of fostering fragmentation and intellectual razzle-dazzle for their own sakes, postmodernist strategies of understanding offer, as I hope to show, new and badly needed means for the criticism and historiography of the arts to meet, not only their aesthetic, but also their social and conceptual responsibilities.

We can get a prismatic, partial, but credible image of the postmodernist ethos by focusing on new turns in the conceptualization of four important topics of modernist thought: rationality, generality, subjectivity, and communication.

Rationality. For present purposes, the term *modernism* refers to the conceptual order inaugurated by the European Enlightenment. Taking certain Renaissance (or “early modern”) tendencies to their logical, if unforeseen, conclusion, the Enlightenment called on impartial reason to know the world and guide its progress, independent of religious and social authority and unintimidated by them. “All things,” wrote Diderot in the *Encyclopaedia*, “must be examined, all must be winnowed and sifted without exception and without sparing anyone’s sensibilities.”⁹ As this statement testifies, however, the use of reason requires the suspension of other, less severe faculties such as sympathy and imagination. Reason, a function of the subject, operates as objectivity by assuming a sovereign detachment from its objects.

Familiar critiques of modern reason, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, hone in on this detachment.¹⁰ Although the social aim of Enlightenment is emancipatory, the mandate of detachment produces a fatal slippage toward instrumentality and domination. The effect traverses, not only the disci-

plines of knowledge, but also the social class, the bourgeoisie, whose interests the Enlightenment chiefly served. A major effort of modernist thought has been to humanize reason without entirely sacrificing its detachment from its objects, which serves as the measure of truth.

Postmodernist thought abandons the second part of this effort. It repeals the mandate of detachment, resituating reason in the midst of the dense, multiform world that reason seeks to know. It treats claims to knowledge as always also political claims, inescapably affected by and affecting the knower's position in a cultural, social, or psychical matrix. Postmodernist reason always serves interests other than truth and *by that means enables itself to serve truth*, however imperfectly. Partial perspective is, not a constraint on knowledge, but its very condition, and not coincidentally the condition of sympathy and imagination, too. As Donna Haraway has argued,

The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constituted and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another. . . . We do not seek partiality for its own sake, but for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings [its] situated knowledges make possible. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular.¹¹

Put in Kantian terms: in the postmodernist ethos, all reason is practical reason.

A few versions of postmodernism, notably those of Jean Baudrillard and Richard Rorty, frankly subordinate the claims of reason to an extreme skeptical relativism. This position has drawn sharp criticism, especially from thinkers on the political left who see it as a hapless surrender to the mystifications of the status quo. Without some appeal to standards of truth and falsehood, reality and illusion, reason and unreason, neither social institutions nor consensus beliefs can competently be criticized.¹²

The majority of postmodernist discourses, however, take the effort to surmount such skepticism as part of their calling. As Haraway, again, puts it, the challenge is

to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own "semiotic technologies" for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense

commitment to faithful accounts of the “real” world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.¹³

Admittedly, this conceptual order is a tall one, even given the tough-minded modesty of its social and moral ambitions. At the very least the simultaneity Haraway calls for needs to be reconceived as a fluctuation or negotiation among different standpoints. Yet an order such as this should be feasible if we can get beyond the modernist frame of mind and recognize that contingency and rhetoricity are, not antithetical to reason, but interdependent with it. Each of these terms can illuminate or obscure, adjoin or displace, enable or disable the others. The effect of this interdependence on critical judgment is, not to disarm it, but to expand both its resources and its responsibilities. Truth, in Christopher Norris’s words, does not “simply drop out of the picture (or become just a piece of redundant conceptual baggage) as soon as one concedes the fact of its involvement” with contingency and rhetoricity.¹⁴ At the same time, contingency and rhetoricity do profoundly alter and ramify the truths involved with them, some of which *do* drop out of the picture.

Generality. As Diderot suggests with his “all things must be examined,” the pursuit of totality is basic to modernist thought. Both conceptual and social reasons can be given for this. Modernist master narratives break with the contents and procedures of dogmatic schemes of explanation but not with their intent to frame a comprehensive system of general truths. The critical force of modern reason could not question this intent because the constructive force of modern reason depended on it. As Jacques Derrida has argued, epistemic modernity depends on the relocation of universals such as form and essence from an “objective” ideality to a human subject “conscious and certain of itself.” The result for the subject, the agent of reason, is “a sort of infinite assurance.”¹⁵ This assurance, meanwhile, proved indispensable to the social and moral aims of modernism, which quickly evolved from breaking through to modernity from some sort of ancien regime to overcoming the alienating effects of modernity itself. Modernism is shot through with nostalgia for the unity of the world it shatters. It seeks to remedy the dissociative modern conditions of secularity, market economics, psychological fragmentation, and

social heterogeneity by advancing the march of science, the ideal of the organic society, or the ideology of the aesthetic.

One way to understand postmodernism is as a critique of this modernist nostalgia, an attempt to enfranchise the forces of decentralization that modernism sought (and seeks) to contain. Given the dangers of a social (de)formation in which mutually indifferent, incomprehending, or hostile groups blindly jostle together, it seems fair to say that this agenda currently makes more sense conceptually than it does practically, a point not lost on critics of postmodernism such as Jürgen Habermas.¹⁶ The practical issue is not directly at stake here. Nonetheless, it may be possible to steal a leaf from Habermas's book and regard the heteroglossic discourses of conceptual postmodernism as models for a viable polyphony of social and communicative actions.

These discourses can be said to seek a *localized generality*. In the place of the comprehensive truths of the master narratives, they install what Lyotard calls the "infinity of heterogeneous finalities" and Haraway the "politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating."¹⁷ They operate by assuming that any formulation of or within a master narrative can be read as responsive to a set of more local interests—local, that is, with respect to the general terms of the master narrative but still general with respect to the phenomena that the narrative seeks to cover. (It can be argued, for instance, that the new science of eighteenth-century microscopy conceived of protozoa in terms meant to protect the image of the *human* body as smooth and self-contained, an image especially important at that point in the history of manners.)¹⁸ One way to write postmodernist criticism, history, or theory is to trace the interplay of the locally general with the local, the general, or both. Only the direct subsumption of the local under the general, which produces what Haraway calls the "god-trick" and the "view from nowhere," drops out of the picture.

Subjectivity. The normative characteristics of the modern subject include identity, boundedness, autonomy, interiority, depth, and centrality. Even acting only as ideals, these supply the subject with much of the "infinite assurance" proper to it. Probably the most familiar of postmodernist claims is that, like it or not, this vaunted subject is an exploded fiction. The true human subject is fragmentary, incoherent, overdetermined, forever under construction in the process of signifi-

cation. But talk of the decentered subject can be cheap; the concept quickly becomes specious if it is used to deny rather than problematize the force and responsibilities of human agency. The rhetoric of denial was much bandied about during the heyday of structuralism. The conclusion of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* provided a watchword, with its questions about the disappearance of "man": "is not . . . [man] in the process of perishing as the being of language continues to shine ever brighter on our horizon? . . . Ought we not give up thinking of man, or, to be more strict, think this disappearance of man—and the ground of possibility of all the sciences of man—as closely as possible in correlation with our concern for language?" Often forgotten was the cautionary statement that followed: "Of course, these are not affirmations; they are at most questions to which it is not possible to reply; they must be left in suspense, where they pose themselves, only with the knowledge that the possibility of posing them may well open the way to a future thought."¹⁹ A subject decentered is a subject still.

Decentered subjectivity typically figures in modernist discourse as alienated, deviant, or comic. And it figures often: by one account, decentering itself is a phenomenon of the modern era, born of the Enlightenment principle that "symbolic tradition" can "no longer contain the subject, no longer bind him to its . . . mandate."²⁰ Postmodernism is in one sense the project of undoing modernist efforts to distance and regulate decentering. Its own mandate is to establish the means of conceiving, valuing, and practicing a subjectivity that is *unexceptionally* mobile and contingent. In the postmodernist ethos, decentering is not a departure from rational, communicative subjectivity but the very condition of its possibility. Human agency arises, not as a radiation from a central core of being, but as a circulation among positions to be taken in discourse and society.

Communication. Modernism favors models of communication based on the capacity of a single medium, language, to classify, refer to, and make truth claims about the real. It does not matter whether these functions are meant to be cherished or begrudged, cultivated or transcended; what matters is their status as foundational. Whatever their social or aesthetic value, they are epistemologically primary. Put in terms suggested by J. L. Austin, modernism privileges the *consta-*

tive, that which is judged true or false, over the *performative*, that which is judged successful or unsuccessful.²¹

Postmodernism takes much of its impetus from the deconstruction of this hierarchy. It privileges neither the constative nor the performative as such, but the recognition that while all constative acts are also performative, not all performative acts are constative. The performative is the “originary” category within which the constative is produced, enfranchised, recast, subverted, and ramified. In this context, communication appears as a process in which socially and discursively situated subjects act by meaning. Communicative acts arise in signification and at the same time constitutively exceed it.²²

The effects of this paradigm shift are far-reaching. The constative declines from a first principle to a distinguishing feature of language as a medium, in the process losing some (but by no means all) of its epistemic authority. In its performative or “illocutionary” aspect, language combines with all other media to form a continuous manifold—call it a field, a dynamic, a current, a network, an economy—of communicative acts. Whatever signifies affects, in so doing, the situation(s) recognized or misrecognized, believed or imagined to envelop it.

Both this process itself and the meanings it generates are protean. Particular communicative acts can nearly always be realized in a variety of media and must in principle be capable of varied repetition in an indefinite number of situations. Each must be freshly interpreted rather than merely received, and even the plainest resonates with alternative uses and realizations, with displacements, substitutions, and revaluations, with unexpected alliances and antipathies. This *general transposability* is a hallmark of the communicative economy. One effect of it is to break down the customary divisions between different spheres of action and the motives and meanings proper to each sphere. In the dynamics of acting by meaning, psychological, social, and cultural agencies can intersect and mutually implicate each other at any point. Meanings and values characteristic of each undergo transferences onto the others and invest the communicative economy as a whole.²³

This economy, in sum, is the locus of what Derrida calls *dissemination*: a process of sowing meaning without hopes of reaping a har-

vest thereby, a broadcasting of seed/seed/semiosis without claims to possession/paternity/mastery of what grows therefrom. “Lapidarily: dissemination figures that which *cannot become* the father(s).” It can return to no origin, and, unlike polysemia, subtends no ultimate unity, however remote. Dissemination opens out the play of surplus and lack within signification with no prospect of stabilizing or closing it. The result is to unsettle symbolic traditions in both their general and locally general forms, and to do so *affirmatively*, “undoing the eider quilt of the ‘symbolic’ . . . [with] all the [attendant] risks, but without the metaphysical or romantic pathos of negativity.” Dissemination is “an infraction *marking* the ‘symbolic’”: denoting it, characterizing it, defacing it, branding it, inscribing it with countersigns.²⁴

Derrida’s uses for the concept of dissemination include a critique of Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic concept of a symbolic order. Nonetheless, Lacan’s work has been mined effectively and often for the means to think about the communicative economy.²⁵ The focus of this work is not the “self” of individual psychology but the subject as constituted within a multiform process of signification. Particularly in historicizing adaptations, Lacanian psychoanalysis is not a psychology at all. It is, rather, a theory of how certain articulations of identification and alienation, desire and law, continually “mark” the field of communicative action: investing the field as a whole, traversing it (disseminally), and breaking down (but without merely obliterating) the boundaries of its psychical, social, and cultural subfields.

Lacan constructs two “orders” or “registers” of signification which he calls the imaginary and the symbolic. These constitute the terms of a developmental allegory, roughly along Oedipal lines, but they are also, and more importantly, coextensive. The subject must negotiate with and within both registers continually. The imaginary involves proximity to nurture and gratification of the kind first sought from the mother; the formation and disruption of identifications (with self-images, imagoes, idealized others); and the privileging of nonlinguistic representation. The symbolic involves acceptance of distance and privation, consequences of the antithesis between law and desire imposed by the father, or rather in the judicial name-of-the-Father; the collapse of identificatory schemes; and the privileging of language. The imaginary values fantasy over discourse while the symbolic does

the reverse; the imaginary misrecognizes its own signifying character while the symbolic signifies avowedly.

Despite all these contrasts, however, the two registers do not form a traditional binary opposition. Both address the same fundamental issue—the subject’s constitutive lack of unity and self-presence; they are both more ambivalent than I have been able to indicate here; and they are deeply implicated in each other’s workings. Both are also set over against a register outside signification that Lacan designates as the real. But it can nonetheless be said that the imaginary continually revives the hope of plenitude despite continual disturbances and that the symbolic continually disturbs the hope of plenitude despite continual revivals. The musical pertinence of these processes will begin to appear shortly.²⁶

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Musical pertinence, indeed, has now resurfaced as my topic. As the preface intimated and the next chapter will show, modernist conceptions of music are profoundly at odds with the postmodernist ethos. No wonder, then, that Harold Powers, delivering the plenary address at the 1990 meeting of the American Musicological Society, should warn his colleagues against rushing incautiously to embrace alien disciplines and perspectives, “casually abandon[ing] traditional modes in favor of ones taken over from easier fields.”²⁷ In the process, Powers joked that the belated arrival of newfangled thinking in musicological circles could hardly be explained by the innate dull-wittedness of musicologists. And he was right.

Modernist forms of musical understanding ascribe a unique self-referentiality to music that renders it largely opaque from “extra-musical” standpoints. Music must somehow be understood from the inside out. This construal is so basic that failures to observe it, let alone efforts to question it, may plausibly count as deviations from reason and common sense. Traditional musicology warded off such deviations by marginalizing the historico-critical interpretation of music, a disciplinary action (in every sense) whose history is written in Joseph Kerman’s watershed text *Contemplating Music*.²⁸ Such interpretation, to be sure, has since gained a musicological room of its own, but devaluing it is still a healthy practice. One need only say, with

Powers in his address, that “musical data are more resistant to verbal explication than the data in other humanistic fields. Indeed, musicology is only partly one of the humanities, which otherwise deal with the visible and above all the verbal arts.”²⁹

The heart of the matter, indeed, is the relationship of music and language. Preceded by both opera, with its perpetual war of music and words, and philosophical aesthetics, with its parallel opposition between music and definite concepts, musicology has presumed that music and language lie on different sides of an epistemological divide. On this point, the dominant esoteric and marginal semantic traditions agree. And consistent with one strain of nineteenth-century valuation (the other will concern us in the next chapter), as well as with traditional figures of cosmic harmony (which will concern us in the chapter after that), the superior position belongs to music.

This polarity comes in both dualistic and dialectical versions, predominantly the former. The latter can be represented by Theodor Adorno, whose little-known essay on the subject actually insists on music’s likeness to language, but only the better to insist that this likeness must be transcended. Both music and language ideally seek to integrate concrete “intentions” into a comprehensive whole. Their efforts, however, have very different ends: “Signifying language would say the absolute in a mediated way, yet the absolute escapes it in each of its intentions, which, in the end, are left behind, as finite. Music reaches the absolute immediately, but in the same instant it darkens, as when a strong light blinds the eye, which can no longer see things that are quite visible.”³⁰ For present purposes, what is most striking about this statement is not its claim—questionable but familiar—that both language and music seek the absolute, but the buried metaphor by which music completes the sacred quest at which language fails, reaching the quasi-divine light even if only for a fleeting glimpse. Language is defined by the aftermath of what it fails to do, music by the aftermath of what it succeeds in doing. Still, even music does not attain to Dante’s privilege of actually gazing into the light, and Adorno’s conclusions are accordingly sober, even stoical: “Music suffers from its similarity to language and cannot escape from it. . . . Only music that has once been language transcends its similarity to language.”³¹

The dualistic version of the music-language polarity can be repre-

sented by Charles Seeger. In his well-known formulation, “the core of the [musicological] undertaking is the integration of speech knowledge in general and the speech knowledge of music in particular (which are extrinsic to music and its compositional process) with the music knowledge of music (which is intrinsic to music and its compositional process).”³² Language on the outside, music on the inside: sounded out deconstructively, the passage is a variation on a classic theme. The inside is a figure of music as a full, immediate presence, music in the metaphysical position of form or essence. The phrase “music knowledge of music” is a circle that fuses the terms for reflection and immediacy. The first “music,” designating a means of knowledge, folds over on the second “music,” designating the object of knowledge. Knowledge itself, both conceptually and rhetorically, is enveloped by the identity of, fills the (non-)interval between, the one music and the other.

In contrast, the outside is a figure of language as rupture. The phrase “speech knowledge of music” is a series of isolated terms, monads alienated from each other, lumpy substantives. Knowledge is abraded by the nonidentity between speech as the means and music as the object of knowledge. Like “music knowledge of music,” “speech knowledge of music” places music in the metaphysical position, but this time as precisely that form or essence which speech cannot capture. In a neat departure from traditional usage, speech, usually a metaphysical term, the privileged figure of presence, is *displaced* by music.

Seeger’s opposition between language and music is exemplary and quite helpful in the lucidity of its underlying logic. Beyond a certain point, all too quickly reached, language and music cannot (or is it *must* not?) mix. The fact that language has, and music lacks, a constative dimension becomes foundational and determinative. Language is denied access to music, it cannot represent musical reality; music, indeed, becomes the very means by which the epistemological limits of language, that would-be omnivore, are set. (Here Seeger’s dualism and Adorno’s dialectic converge.) But if this is so, it leaves musicologists with only two disciplinary choices. Either they can use language to present positive knowledge about the contexts of music—its notation, provenance, performance venues and practices, material and