Event or Ephemeron? Music's Sound, Performance, and Media

A Critical Reflection on the Thought of Carolyn Abbate

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All hear the sound gladly,
that rounds itself into a note.
(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *West-östlicher Divan*)

… if our ears were ten times more sensitive,
we would hear matter roar—and presumably nothing else.
(Friedrich Kittler, *The Truth of the Technological World*)[1]

Mimesis Awry

"What does it mean to write about *performed* music? About an opera live and unfolding in time and not an operatic work? Shouldn't this be what we

* This essay would not exist without the considerable benefits of interlocution. In particular, I would like to thank Giorgio Biancorosso, Gianmario Borio, Alessandro Cecchi, James Currie, Carlo Lanfossi, and Emilio Sala for their engagement and encouragement in the writing of this text. I would also like to thank Carolyn Abbate, Amy Bauer, Seth Brodsky, Amy Cimini, Michael Gallope, Stephen Decatur Smith, Lydia Goehr, Berthold Hoeckner, Maryam Moshaver, Kelli Moore, Alexander Rehding, Holly Watkins, Emily White, and many others (too numerous to name), for their generous engagements with me over the years. The themes I raise here weighed upon our thinking particularly in the early years of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and are today marked by a certain nostalgia for the strident gaze toward the future we shared as young scholars at the dawn of a new era. This essay is dedicated to them all. One of the eight sections ("The Privileged Audility of Performance") of this essay appears in my "Music's Techno-Chronemics," in *Investigating Musical Performance: Theoretical Models and Intersections*, ed. Gianmario Borio, Alessandro Cecchi, Giovanni Giuriati and Marco Lutzu (London: Routledge, 2020), 69–88 and another section ("On the Ethics of Abstinence") appears in "The Ambiguous Ethics of Music's Ineffability: A Brief Reflection on the Recent Thought of Michael Gallope and Carolyn Abbate," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 145, no. 1 (2020): 229–250, reproduced here with permission.

[1] Both quotations are from Friedrich A. Kittler, *The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 170–171.

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do, since we love music for its reality, for voices and sounds that linger long after they are no longer there? Love is not based on great works as unperformed abstractions or even as subtended by an imagined or hypothetical performance."[2] These are the opening lines of Carolyn Abbate's much-cited essay "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?". The essay, written almost two decades ago, is a fine-tuned elaboration of what can be described as a general turn to affect in the Humanities at the turn of the century. In particular, Abbate's text functioned as a kind of clarion call to North American music scholarship: if Lawrence Kramer's *new musicology* decentered music's perceived formalism by way of *hermeneutics* in the 1990s, Abbate's text decentered both formalism and hermeneutics (newly allied in her analysis) by way of *affect* in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

What follows is a granular reflection on some of the central claims in "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" as well as some of the argumentative maneuvers deployed to make them. This involves scrutiny not only of the tensions grounding the definitional reach of the terms of argument, but also of their influence on the dialectics of musical performance, the role of media and technology in human sonic experience, and, finally, the question concerning morals, ethics, and perhaps politics. I will conclude with three primary points. First, I will locate in Abbate's prescient text an unexpected gnostic-determinate thrust (or ontological commitment), awkwardly situated in the context of an argument about the drastic-indeterminate character of music (characterized by ontological withdrawal). Second, I will show that, given the successful overcoming of this contradiction, the argument for the drastic is not properly allied with the ethical or political positions to which it lays claim. Instead, the radically open-ended construal of drastic experience engages ethics and politics in a way that paradoxically forecloses its element of incipience and recalcitrance. Third, although they specify their ethico-political commitments quite differently, I will show how then-contemporary texts addressing the concept of affect—in particular, those by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht—too bear the marks of a similar foreclosure. The uncanny return of unwanted fixed meanings, basic categories, and gnostic determinations in a philosophy oriented toward presence and drastic openness is symptomatic of a hyperbolic construal of the opposition between language and affect—held firmly in the inertial grip of a centuries-old Western dialectic.

[2] Carolyn Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 505, emphasis added. Page numbers for references to this article will be given directly in the main text.

Allow me a few scattered remarks about my approach to this critical reflection. Against the reticence advanced as an ethical response to music's drastic core (in Abbate's account), my approach is perhaps exaggeratedly loquacious. It is an attempt to track the nuance of Abbate's argument down to the *letter*, thereby consciously even bypassing its *spirit* from time to time. But mobilizing a mode of literalism (or what one might call *affective aphasia*) is one of the central points of this reflection. In other words, it refuses the unspecified spirit of the argument to act as a clandestine handhold for its deeper significance. This is an attempt, one might say, to sing to music's drastic potential a tune of its own making—a case of mimesis awry, or even mimicry. In other words, what is most important about Abbate's essay is not necessarily the coherent philosophical picture it frames, but all manner of brilliant observation it proffers along the way. In the years following its publication, Abbate's essay was met with considerable (and often surprisingly) negative reaction. But the vivid reaction to the essay was itself symptomatic of a kind of fascinated protesting, as if to strike a nerve at the heart of an institutionalized inertia. In reality, the essay had a lasting impact on music studies; and to the extent it was not actually influential on them, the essay catalyzed (or at least prefigured) a host of new inquiries in the first two decades of the twenty-first century—the turn to musical performance, the turn to musical timbre, the turn to musical ineffability, and of course the turn to affect.[3]

One important critique to emerge in the context of contemporary affect theory today relates to the way the libidinal drives (of the drastic) are coopted in the context of advanced capitalism. The perceptual specificity of music's drastic experience—and *mutatis mutandis* its autonomic affective intensity, pre-attentive timbre recognition, irreducible ineffability, etc.—about which visualizations and representations (from notations and transcriptions to cultural and social associations and *qualia*, by way of spectrum plots, temporal envelope outlines, and spectrograms) are ostensibly mute, is nonetheless increasingly mapped, measured, ordered, and predicted by new

[3] The proliferation of music scholarship in these domains is far too innumerable to list here. For prominent interventions in the respective fields, consider Borio et al., *Investigating Musical Performance*; Emily I. Dolan and Alexander Rehding, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Timbre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190637224.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190637224; Robert Fink, Melinda Latour and Zachary Wallmark, eds., *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Michael Gallope, *Deep Refrains: Music, Philosophy, and the Ineffable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

statistical models for computing. One may speak here of the industrialized transmutation of music's listening systems into reflex response systems today, a subject of considerable importance in an era of industrial populism. In short, the turn to performance, affect, timbre, and ineffability marks a decisively symptomatic turn *away* from the material infrastructures of contemporary digitality—characterized by discretization, abstraction, statistical and symbolic orders, and the modeling of formal systems directly. The disavowal of industrialized computation, however, is generally *not* the tenor of the critique of the drastic that emerged in musicology in the past decade; nor is it my aim explicitly to raise this important critique in the context of this essay. To my way of thinking, the (often dismissive) musicological criticism itself had implications for scholarship that sometimes absorbed the weakest elements of the argument and simultaneously missed the insights layered into the axioms, observations, and conclusions formulated in Abbate's essay. Far from endorsing this chorus of critique, therefore, I hope to reveal some of the unintended consequences of thinking the drastic in music within Abbate's framework, and thereby marking more prominently the strains of insight that nonetheless persist therein. Above all, I hope that, without losing its critical edge, this reflection may be regarded as genuinely responsive to the central challenges raised by Abbate's riveting ideas.

Since the publication of "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" Abbate has considerably expanded her theoretical ambit, engaging questions concerning the ephemera of silent film, the curious metaphysics of mundane sound objects, and their relation to technological mediation.[4] In other words, aspects of the critique to follow have to some extent been addressed in these later writings, even as one detects a capacious consistency of argument throughout this *oeuvre*. For example, while technological mediation is downplayed, practically be definition, in the experience of the drastic, it is acknowledged in these later texts—but then, crucially, also devalued. The discussion of ephemeral sound in "Sound Object Lessons," for example, allows us something resembling an Archimedean point from which to break out of the grand tradition of technological determinism—an *enchained* narrative that "cites a device or technology and then sees its reflection in a musical work or technique."[5] While "Sound Object Lessons" tends to acknowledge

[4] See, for example, Abbate's "Overlooking the Ephemeral," *New Literary History* 48, no. 1 (2017): 75–102; and "Sound Object Lessons," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 69, no. 3 (2016): 793–829.

[5] Abbate, "Sound Object Lessons," 794.

the capacity of technologies to shape sound, these do not drive the startling "musicalizations" Abbate seeks to retrieve.[6] In other words, her basic philosophical position betrays a determined disinterest in non-sounding elements that may inhabit the phenomenological scene of listening. Therefore, while operationally present, sound technologies ultimately *subtend* musicalization. Instead of tracking the nuanced differences between Abbate's recent writings—the changing calibrations of the technology/music dialectic, for example—this essay explores the impulse to draw out the inherently sound-centered exposition of musical listening, most vividly experienced in the throes of live performance. Notwithstanding a certain fatigue for the drastic, this essay attempts to outline the limits of thinking musical performance as drastic experience.

Technophobic Transmissions of the Drastic

Abbate's opening lines again: "What does it mean to write about performed music? About an opera live and unfolding in time and not an operatic work? Shouldn't this be what we do, since we love music for its reality, for voices and sounds that linger long after they are no longer there? Love is not based on great works as unperformed abstractions or even as subtended by an imagined or hypothetical performance." Within the simplicity of a handful of inquisitive questions, we find a language that—consciously, perhaps—performs a kind of trick. Readers are presented less with a group of casually associated questions than with a questionable chain of casual associations. Listed as if to bear elementary likeness, we find the concepts of performance ("performed music") and liveness ("live and unfolding in time") set alongside music's realness ("its reality"), its sonorous dimensions ("voices and sounds") and its sonorous persistence ("linger[ing] long after they are no longer there"). This set of sound-centric ideas is extended in the

[6] Abbate, "Sound Object Lessons," 797. Abbate's resolutely sound-centered analytics are perhaps the most influential uptake of her work in musicological writings in the wake of "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" For an excellent commentary on the turn to music as heard sound, for example, see Suzanne G. Cusick, "Musicology, Performativity, Acoustemology," in *Theorizing Sound Writing*, ed. Deborah Kapchan (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 25–45. In her analysis of the "human microphone" (which formed part of the expressive resistance of the Occupy Wall Street movement), Cusick, on the one hand, draws on Abbate's attention to the "physical reality of music-as-sound," but mediates its hold on the listener, on the other hand, with reference to "nonmusical acoustic practice" (27, 40).

next three sentences to include "actual performances," "music that exists in time," "the material acoustic phenomenon," and the like. These are the ideas that come to define what Abbate calls the *drastic*—an irreducible (yet largely overlooked) realm of musical experience. In contrast, we find terms like "unperformed abstractions," "imagined or hypothetical performance," "meanings or formal designs," and "the abstraction of the work"—incapable of confronting music's presence; preoccupied instead by "something else," something "behind or beyond or next to" the actual music—congealing into an antipodal set (505). In short, performances are set against works; liveness against abstraction; sonorous presence against meaning and form; the drastic against the gnostic.

The first, almost obligatory, point to make about these dichotomous sets is that some of the terms are burdened by internal contradiction. For example, *liveness* is an arguably unstable idea, paradoxically constituted in our times. Phil Auslander argues, for example, that liveness is often constituted in *dissimulatory* fashion—an auratic effect both logically and practically produced in contexts of saturated technical reproduction.[7] Second, the attempt to elide drastic experience with liveness specifies a relationship between auditor and event that is, in social practice, quite constrained. Abbate resolutely stakes out the "material present event"—the "actual live performance (and *not a recording*, even of a live performance)"—as the central object of absorption and attention (506, emphasis added). On one occasion, if only to inoculate their evident power, musical *recordings* are faintly nudged toward the possibility of ushering drastic experience: "Even recordings," Abbate writes, "as technologically constructed hyperperformances, which we can arrest and control, are not quite safe as long as they are raining sound down on our heads" (512). But does the affective intensity to which the drastic lays claim have a more privileged relation to live performance—in the strict sense of the term, entailing both the spatial co-presence and temporal simultaneity of auditor and performer—than it does to modalities of reproduced sound? The idea, of course, is hotly contested and in doubt.

First, the idea is at variance with a widespread anthropological reality—the ubiquitous affective investments in streams of recorded music no less than music that possess no *live* counterpart at all. In the context of a world where representational technologies have overwhelmed presentational

[7] Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

ones, modes of contemporary affect can be shoehorned into the specificities of strictly live encounter only under considerable strain. The dominant mode of musical production, marketing, and engineering today cannot be divorced from the technological resources—computer-imaging methods, beat matching, sampling, studio looping, multi-tracking, mixing, overdubbing, vocoding, autotuning, etc.—that underwrite its "material acoustic" character. If the historical *raison d'être* for sound recording was mimetic—a documentary impulse—its mid-century reality had shifted toward a constructive one. Indeed, I would describe the history of representational technologies in terms of a great shift from representational *fidelity* (in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) to *hyperfidelity* (in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries). In the context of hyperfidelity, the musical copy is itself a *surrogate*-original (skeuomorphically called the *master* copy) while the live rendition of it is a subordinate reproduction, not infrequently aspiring to the condition of the official recording. This is not to say that figures of music's ostensible *loci* will remain under the grip of this rubric in decades to come (especially as the financialized logics of digital musical streaming take increasing monopolistic hold), but that the figure of hyperfidelity still characterizes the dominant contemporary mode of musical consumption today. This leads to a second, more important, point concerning the role of technology in drastic musical experience. A host of twentieth-century composers and theorists—from Pierre Schaeffer, Roland Barthes, and Gilles Deleuze to Helmut Lachenmann, John Oswald, and Michel Chion, to name only an obvious few—turned their attention to the question concerning the technologies of music's *non*-gnostic components. What generally distinguishes these arguments from that found in Abbate's text is that they do not align contemporary modes of sonic presence most immediately with live performance, but rather with its antithesis—sound manipulation and reproduction. This reversal of fortune for technology is itself symptomatic of a paradoxical post-Cold War shift in conceptualizing the affective dimension of music's ineffability.

Schaeffer's phenomenological reduction, for example, shares with Abbate an effort to re-direct listening toward *non-appropriated* sound. In other words, his is an attempt to free auditory acts from the linguistically-mediated circuits of naturalized listening. For Schaeffer, such listening involves what he calls écouter *réduite* (reduced or acousmatic) listening, which is distinct from *ouïr* (the inattentive audition associated with persistent soundscapes), *comprendre* (listening directed at the reception of languages and the extraction of messages), and écouter (listening directed at

registering indices of objects and events in the world).[8] Acousmatic listening brackets sound from the communicative or indicative significations to which listening is all-too-easily enjoined, encountering sound instead as *objets sonores*. This is a kind of listening that leads "from pure 'sound' to pure 'music,'" bringing to earshot declensions of sonorous potential—"previously unheard sounds, new timbres, dizzying modes of playing," and so on—in short, a kind of drastic "*listen*[*ing*] with a new ear" (not to be equated with psychoanalytic listening, about which more below).[9] Despite an evident proximity of reduced listening to the drastic, however, Schaeffer's position *vis-à-vis* technology is diametrically opposed to that of Abbate. For Schaeffer, radio, phonography, and tape are the technological incarnations of Pythagoras' acousmatic ideal. Far from lamenting the losses, Schaeffer focuses on the perceptual affordances of new technologies, especially those of sound reproduction. Schaeffer's neo-Benjaminian leanings, for example, lead him to construe repeat-listening as ushering "different perspectives" that reveal a "new aspect of the object"; indeed, repetition even has the effect of "exhausting th[e] curiosity" for indexical or linguistically-based hearing.[10] For Schaeffer, in short, new technologies are the assistive vehicle for the anti-gnostic "acousmatic state"; not its antithesis.[11]

The technocentric turn in twentieth century accounts of drastic musical experience, broadly construed, extends well beyond Schaeffer's treatise. Even Barthes' famous notion of the voice's *grain*, to which Abbate's writing owes a loose allegiance, actually echoes *Schaeffer*'s notion of the grain, which he detects in the technological context of slowed-down tape recording. In Schaeffer's view, the slowed-down portion, "acting on the temporal structure of the sound like a magnifying glass, will have allowed us to distinguish certain details, of *grain*, for example, which our ear, alerted, informed, will also find in the second playing at normal speed."[12] In other words, tape recording is the technical support mechanism for a non-hermeneutic attentiveness to sound *qua* sound. The composer Lachenmann expanded this technical insight into a compositional procedure—*musique concrète instrumentale*—which foregrounds listening to the way "materials and energies" are afforded (and undermined) by specific instrumental tech-

[8] Pierre Schaeffer, *Treatise on Musical Objects: An Essay across Disciplines*, trans. Christine North and John Dack (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 64–69.

[9] Schaeffer, 69.

[10] Schaeffer, 66.

[11] Schaeffer, 68.

[12] Schaeffer, 67, emphasis added.

nologies.[13] Likewise, the film theorist Chion argues in the context of cinema that technical reproducibility is a necessary condition for "reduced" listening; a mode of listening that focuses on "traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning."[14] While Chion's reduced listening cannot be conflated with drastic listening, its embrace of the "inherent qualities of sounds" in real time, and especially its disavowal of the "sound's cause or the comprehension of its meaning" is uncannily common to both.[15] As it is with the object of drastic listening (music's "material acoustic phenomenon"), reduced listening also involves an aspect of wildness, ephemerality, and caprice: "There is always something about sound that overwhelms and surprises us no matter what—especially when we refuse to lend it our conscious attention; and thus sound interferes with our perception, affects it."[16] In short, Chion's nonconscious, overwhelming, affected perception is the technophilic twin of Abbate's nonsignifying, unassured drastic experience.

Finally, Deleuze and Guattari, whose two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* lay the groundwork for Brian Massumi's theory of affect in the early 2000s, likewise construe affect (or "desiring-production") as an abstract *machine*, modeled on the musical synthesizer—a technology that could assemble and combine sonic elements outside of *a priori* nomenclatures.[17] Drawing on their reading of Pierre Boulez's analytic writings, the philosophers claim that the "synthesizer places all of the parameters in continuous variation, gradually making 'fundamentally heterogeneous elements end up turning into each other in some way.' The moment this occurs there is a common matter. It is only at this point that one reaches the abstract machine."[18] In other words, desiring-production resists taxonomic organization and plugs instead into machinic assemblages: "Philosophy is no longer synthetic judgment; it is like a thought synthesizer functioning to make thought travel, make it mobile, make it a force of the Cosmos (in the same way as one makes sound travel)."[19] These composers

[13] Helmut Lachenmann, "Musique Concrète Instrumentale," Slought, conversation with Gene Coleman, April 7, 2008, https://slought.org/resources/musique_concrete_instrumentale.

[14] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 29.

[15] Chion, 31, 30.

[16] Chion, 33.

[17] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

[18] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 109.

[19] Deleuze and Guattari, 343.

and philosophers of techno-presence amass new sound technologies—ranging from phonography, radio, tape, and telephone to musical instruments, auditory projection in cinema, and the sound synthesizer—as resistive forces to guard against our naturalized tendencies toward gnostic (indexical, formal, hermeneutic, etc.) musical engagement. For Abbate, in contrast, technology *itself* is largely to be resisted; indeed, "the very fact of recording" comes into presence only as a "repeatable surrogate" (534). Like musical works, recordings transform the event into a "souvenir" (513); an "artifact, handheld and under control" (534). Placed alongside the work of Schaeffer, Barthes, Lachenmann, Chion, Deleuze and Guattari, and others, Abbate's construal of the drastic becomes a striking outlier. Ostensibly caught up in the wild ephemerality of its "temporal wake" (511), we now find the drastic experience itself subject to the kind of "arrest and control" (however differently inflected) associated with the "hyperperformances" that Abbate rejects (512). In short, for Abbate, drastic listening can be secreted only within the confines of a single conduit for music's mediatic transmission—the live event.

Of Auditory Relocations: Lingering or Loitering?

But what of the chain of associations that characterizes the drastic auditory experience? What of the litany of terms accruing to it—performance (505), presence (512), strangeness (508), liveness (509), sonorousness (505), actuality (509), temporality (511), reality (505), materiality (510), acoustic phenomenality (505), physicality (510), ephemerality (513), opacity (510), capacity (to transfix, bewilder, etc.) (512), ineffability (521), sociality (514), carnality (529), and so on? What do we make of this capacious ballooning of characteristics within the narrowing contexts of music's transmission? By what desire is more packed here into less? And by what inscription does drastic listening have the capacity to affect everything from love (505), fear (508), consolation (508) and peril (510) to wildness (512), desperation (510), exhaustion (533) and elation (533)? It is true that the expansive list of drastic attributes is occasionally moderated with reference to music's patently banal dimensions. In fact, we find in the text two references to the drastic mundane. First, Abbate's momentary reflection on a piano accompaniment—"*doing this really fast is fun* or *here comes a big jump*" (511)—counts as an experience closer to the music's "reality at hand" than the "bizarre" mental inquiries (511, 510)—the music's "Enlightenment subjectivity" (510),

for example, or the political order it reflects—that are associated with gnostic inquiry. Second, we find a brief reference to music's potentially "boring" effect on performers and listeners (513). *Some fast fun, a big jump*—the quotidian, if drastic, experiences of a piano performance—and something *boring*—the uneventful, if drastic, experience of an event—basically sums up the dull side of the drastic, as it is represented in Abbate's text. For the most part, however, the drastic carries an exciting Dionysian luster—it is unearthly (508), wild (509) and mysterious (513). Even the reference to boredom is abbreviated in its fuller argumentative context—a solitary adjective in a long list of alluring effects, characterized by semantically unhinged intensities. Here is the full sentence: "Music's effects upon performers and listeners can be devastating, physically brutal, mysterious, erotic, moving, boring, pleasing, enervating, or uncomfortable, generally embarrassing, subjective, and resistant to the gnostic" (513–514). In short, therefore, the drastic liberates the wildness of musical experience; while, against odds, the beleaguered gnostic tries to tame it—the gnostic tries "to domesticate what remains nonetheless wild" (508).

What *remains* wild? What remains at all? I phrase these questions this way, because in Abbate's text, one answer to them can be detected in the space that opens in the immediate aftermath of our encounter with music. Abbate repeatedly explores variations within these spaces of *auditory relocation*. In fact, therein lie the stakes of the expansive list of Dionysian attributes of the drastic. Let me explain. The uneasy affiliation of unlike terms in the list characterizing drastic experience is partnered with the uneasy *non*-affiliation of *like* terms accruing to both drastic and gnostic experience. On the one hand, for example, we are told we "love music for its reality"—specifically for those voices and sounds that "*linger long after*" they abate (505, emphasis added). On the other hand, Abbate simultaneously insists that "real music is music that exists in time, the material acoustic phenomenon" alone (505); an experience "*not enduring* past the moment" (512, emphasis added). A few pages later the point is intensified when Abbate strikes a vivid contrast between music's vanishing temporality and its *ex post facto* interpretation: "In musical hermeneutics, … effects in the here and now are *illicitly* relocated to the beyond" (514, emphasis added). Here, the attribute attendant to the hermeneutic act of *relocating* listening away from the *here and now* raises considerably the ethical stakes with which the essay began its polemic.

The essay's opening gambit about the limits of hermeneutics and formalism cohere largely around the principle of *withdrawal*. Drawing on

Vladimir Jankélévitch's writings,[20] Abbate here argues that these musical engagements "encourage us to retreat from real music to the abstraction of the work and, furthermore, always to see … 'something *else*,' something *behind or beyond* or *next to* this mental object" (505, emphasis added). This is the kind of displacement (or relocation) emerging from a mode of refusal—the *retreat from real music*. The point is reiterated throughout the essay. For example, elsewhere Abbate writes: "Between the score as a script, the musical work as a virtual construct, and us, there lies a huge phenomenal explosion, a performance that demands effort and expense and recruits human participants, takes up time, and leaves people drained or tired or elated or relieved" (533). In other words, the refusal to put in the effort, pay the expense, take up the time, and so on, amounts to a kind of retreat from the present reality of musical performances. Indeed, withdrawals such as these "lack that really big middle term, the elephant in the room," which, summed up in the next sentence, amounts to "music's exceptional phenomenal existence" (533). The point is that these acts of refusal and retreat are then *amplified*, by assertion alone, to constitute something forbidden, as if to be laundering meanings from murky origins. In less than ten pages, for example, we witness a *retreat* from something morphing into an *illicit* relocation therefrom—a metamorphosis that constitutes a particular *rhetorical relocation* all of its own (521).

The fascinating thing about relocating the musical experience in the hermeneutic/formalist manner, however, is that it blocks a kind of affective becoming that, for Abbate, remains central to musical experience. Again, the logic of *refusal* underwrites this point. She writes: "Retreating to the work displaces that experience, and dissecting the work's technical features or saying what it represents reflects the wish *not* to be transported by the state that the performance has engendered in us" (505–506). Here, a mode of gnostic repression obstructs a drastic experience—to be *transported* by sound—paradoxically wholly in keeping with romantic theories of music as processual becoming, the transfiguration of the commonplace, and so on. But, aside from archaic resonances, *whence* the overwhelming drastic *transport*? To wit, *whence* the *long lingering* in sonorities that are no longer there? What kinds of *relocations* are these—the transport, the lingering—that immunize them from their *illicit* fellow travelers? It appears that—in the wake of the vanishing presence of music's *phenomenal existence*, its ef-

[20] Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).*

fects in the "*here and now*" and no further or later—certain types of *relocations* are permitted, after all (514, emphasis added). But these are the movements of a *policed relocation*—movements along a *particular, constrained* path, steered precariously *away from* anything conceivably construed, in Jankélévitch's formulation, as "something else" (505). In other words, this is the "transport" that *steers clear* of the Scylla and Charybdis of anything that can be conceived as lying "behind or beyond or next to this mental object" (505). What to make of this mental *object*—this entity from whence music's *reality* lovingly issues forth; from whence audibility receives a wink of recognition from unsullied *phenomenal existence* itself? Is this the entity one is paradoxically compelled to describe as a dogmatic presentiment of *real music's mysterious a priori?*

Lingering in the quiet wake of music's drastic sounding thereby constitutes a mode of *supra*-audibility that breaks through the conventional barrier associated with the drastic event—fully respectful of music's essential "disappear[ing]" act (513); "not enduring past the moment" (512); the "vanished live performances" (514) and so on. As it is with the implied wish *to be* transported, this lingering-type of engagement is the privileged supra-audible truth that paradoxically transcends the supra-audible "meanings" (509) "content" (516) "import" (518) "message" (521) and "social truth" (526) to which the ear seems all-too-gnostically enjoined. The latter contents and messages and truths are *illicitly* secreted out of *enigma machines, cryptograms, seismographs*, and so on (524–529), in a process that is broadly summed up as "clandestine mysticism" (513–534). As it is with money laundering, these accounts arrogate contents and messages and truths by hiding their obscure origins and routing them through all manner of supra-audible theoretical machinery—historical, formal, linguistic, social, economic and political. In other words, the hermeneutic and formalist "inscription devices" (514) and "enigma machine[s]" (524) are the illicit middlemen laundering meaning from musical sound—a process that works "as if by magic" (528). Drastic engagement, in contrast, requires a radical de-signifying step, a shedding of devices and machines. Following a long tradition of thinking sound outside of theory, Abbate argues that, with the drastic, "there is no a priori theoretical armor" (510). This is a version of the drastic, in short, that is construed as *supra*-supra-audible.

How, then, does one tie up Abbate's central reflections on the question concerning *retrospective concern* for musical experience? What persists beyond music's definitional circumspection (or what I have described above as the real music's *mysterious a priori)*? The answer is shoehorned into some

version of the following formulation: the content of drastic *transport* and *lingering* must relocate listening *licitly* toward the absence of theoretical armor. *Ce n'est pas un a priori*. Licit relocation, in other words, takes the listener not *next to*, but simply *to* the elephant in the room; not to the mysticism of gnostic decipherment, but to the non-conceptual drastic *music qua music*. To be transported by music, in short, is to be taken not *beyond*, but to *within* music's conceptual no-place—*u-topia*. Spending-time in the wake of the vanishing live, in short, comes in two distinct forms: lingering and loitering. A maelstrom of questions arises at this juncture. First: When—in the wake of music's vanishing present—we stick around longer than music's actual sounding, are we experiencing a form of drastically (utopian) lingering or a form of gnostically (laundered) loitering? Second: Given the fact that a certain *persistence in the vanishing present* is common to both lingering and loitering, can the ontological inscription of music's ephemerality alone secure an argument that elevates the drastic experience, by casting Schopenhauerian shadows on the gnostic version of things? Third: Would such an argument both arrogate the powers of radical vanishing and disappearance in the context of emergence and appearance, and, furthermore—through its clandestine withholding in the context of the gnostic—asymmetrically so? Finally: What can happen if, instead of listening within the horns of an asymmetric dilemma, we return musical experience to the crossroads of the drastic and the gnostic, if only to ponder the road not taken?

The Privileged Audility of Performance

The gnostic seems to leave out the undomestic, untamed aspects of musical experience—its irreducible aural presence; its material sensual dimensions (triggering fear, peril, and much more) which leave listeners with no handhold in signification. James Currie would, in a well-known essay written a few years later, describe music's beriddling specificity as "the blank transformative hole" into which we fall in the moment of musical encounter.[21] The drastic, in contrast, is characterized by examples of uncanny resemblances, experiential alchemies, cracked notes, hallucinations, and so on (more on these below). Given that the gnostic attitude is "precluded" thereby, the drastic resides, above all, in *performed music* (Abbate, 510). In other

[21] James Currie, "Music After All," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 62, no.1 (2009): 184.

words, it is at the site of performance that drastic experience is most vividly at play: "It is virtually impossible to sustain [gnostic speculations about subjectivity or politics] while playing or absorbed in listening to music that is materially present" (510). How do the examples of performance function as demonstrations of the drastic? Abbate reflects on an occasion where she accompanies an aria from Mozart's *Idomeneo*. As an experiment, she poses some distracting questions, while playing, grounded in speculations she had read about the monarchic regime and the Enlightenment subjectivity said to be reflected in the music. She concludes that, interjected *in media perficientur*, these "consciously bizarre" mental inquiries could, finally, only be "dismissed as ludicrous" (510, 511).

Interestingly, while vividly upholding the difference between drastic and gnostic, Abbate loosens the distinction between actual playing and absorbed listening in the over-arching context of performance, where one is undoubtedly "dealing with real music in real time" (511). This is the privileged site of audility—"*the reality at hand*"—which, practically by definition, sabotages the "metaphysical distance" required for gnostic arguments about politics, subjectivity, or any other modes of meaning-making or signification (511). Abbate expands the argument against gnostic approaches to musical works by appealing to their affective *value* as well. In the throes of "real music in real time," she writes, gnostic engagement is both "almost impossible" *and* "generally uninteresting" (511). A simple, practical fact hereby evolves into a judgment of value. To "depart mentally" (511) from music's reality at hand is both not practical and largely less interesting. Aside from the fact of its impracticality, why is the gnostic construed as less interesting at this point in the argument? The answer lies in the wild affective intensities associated with the drastic, and the narrowing affective reach of the gnostic: "Listening as a phenomenon takes place under music's thumb, and acoustic presence may transfix or bewilder; it frees the listener from the sanctioned neatness of the hermeneutic" (512). The drastic is liberating, in other words—it heralds states of wonder, astonishment, mystery, confusion and awe—and the gnostic is confining—it is *neat* and *sanctioned* (512) instead of *wild* and *mysterious* (513); it *locks down* meaning instead of leaving it *open*; it is a *safer haven* (512), instead of *free* (516) and *exceptional* (533) in its phenomenal existence; it traffics in abstractions *under the aspect of eternity* (512) instead of engaging the *labor* and *carnality* (514) of music's vanishing liveness.

The striking point about formalist and hermeneutic approaches, then, is not only that they have "little to do with real music" (512), but rather that

they foreclose the wildness and mystery, the open-endedness and the freedom; the labor and the carnality of drastic experience. The alluring power of the drastic is such that it can traverse all manner of affect, at once ephemeral—bewildered, mysterious, fallen into silence, etc.—*and* embodied—physically brutal, erotic, carnal, etc. (510–513). The gnostic, in contrast, is atemporal and disembodied; punitive even—it repays "the freedom" of the drastic by trapping the "gift-giver in a cage" (517). None of these attributes of the drastic are objectionable as such, but their antithetical relation to hermeneutic and formal engagements, on the one hand, and musical performance, on the other, can be sustained only with difficulty. In fact, not infrequently, Abbate's text must bend curious and complex phenomena to the scriptural pattern of a dichotomous theoretical mold. For example, the assertion that homosexual subjectivity is somehow reflected in what Susan McClary calls the "enharmonic and oblique modulations" of musical sound can hardly be described as a gnostic attempt to "*domesticate*" drastic wildness (508, 510–511).[22] In fact, Abbate's rhetorical maneuver gains traction here precisely from the seeming *absurdity* of McClary's statement—its risky wildness, its weirdness—made palpable in the paradoxical context of a *banal* performance (512). What we detect here is a *drastic* encounter unwittingly domesticated under the guidance of an instruction ("*here comes a big jump*," 511), while the gnostic engagement escalates its claims ("narrative structures" of "gay writers and critics," 511), well beyond the logic and grasp of its *a priori* instructional apparatus. Abbate's doubts about McClary's claims, at this argumentative juncture, have less to do with domesticating the drastic—the prison of sanctioned *neatness*; the entrapment of a *gift-giver*; and so on—and more to do with the unruly over-reach of their interpretive freedom—their *illicit* wildness.

This is not simply to reactively endorse the validity of McClary's claims without scrutiny, but to demonstrate the way attributing privileged audility to performance creates the conditions for the undermining of Abbate's general argument. Abbate claims that "during the experience of real music"—or, more precisely, in the context of actually "playing" it—"thoughts about what music signifies or about its formal features do not cross [her] mind" (511). Gnostic considerations such as these appear as if in "the wrong moment," departed from the "reality at hand" (511). This reality, however, is

[22] The reference is to Susan McClary, "Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 223.

highly unstable, for it encompasses both the quotidian scan for directives from the score (or its mnemonic supplement)—"*doing this really fast;*" the "*big jump*" to come; etc.—*and,* by the next paragraph, the wildness of an "acoustic presence" that can "transfix or bewilder" (512). This juxtaposition of terms associated with the drastic serves to sharpen a distinction between, on the one hand, performing music and, on the other, listening to it (while not performing); a distinction that has been clandestinely elided here. Are wholly different attentional regimes blended here in service of the drastic? How *bewildered*, for example, or how *transfixed* (or fearful, desperate, erotically aroused, uncomfortable, and so on) can one actually afford to be by the sounding passage under one's musically-performing hands? The specificity of performance—*its* reality at hand—in fact *demands* that such wild affective intensities are kept at arms' length. The successful execution of the *big jump* to come actually requires a narrowing of attention towards the physical task at hand and away from the allure of such drastic drift. To posit performance as the site of a privileged engagement with the drastic (in the *full* range and sense of the term) is paradoxically to simplify the complex audilities at play in any actual performance. There is, in other words, a strange dance between close listening and un-listening (engaging *and* suppressing real-time evaluations, alertness, affects, etc.) that characterizes actual musical performances and cannot be simply collated—under the paradoxical rubric of *freedom* (517)*, wildness* (508–509) and *openness* (516)—to the drastic.

For Abbate, "while one is caught up in its temporal wake and its physical demands or effects," the performer (at least in the context of live performance) cannot readily "depart mentally" from actual music (511). But from what event, precisely, can the performer not depart? By what inscription is the performer enjoined to remain? Again, what exactly remains? Does the idea of the *work* play no part in this remaining? What of the precarious *devastation* (513) and *dread* associated with the *departures* (511) pertaining to mismanaged performances? Why are they dreadful and how is the dread overcome? What remaining features guide the dread and its overcoming? Do all the "*formal* features" associated with this site of remaining, for example, *depart* from the performer's audility—to the extent that they do not even "cross [her] mind" (511)? How is derailment from the musical event at hand circumvented, if not by way of an appeal to at least some of these formal features some of the time—a specific affective rubric (*bravura*, say), or a guiding harmonic scheme, to offer an avenue out of a series of missed notes; or an internalized feel for specific metric coordinates, or a set of gestural

rhythmic conventions, to offer an avenue out of a missed page turn, and the like? And what sense of "real music in real time" prohibits *every* audile departure (511)? What if sustaining the temporality of a distinct motor pattern entails ignoring the inherent pattern emerging from an interlocking situation? What if driving the melodic line towards an oblique modulation entails the momentary suppression of presently unfolding heterophonic details? What if the momentary cracking of the singer's voice that one is accompanying must be suppressed in order successfully to execute a big leap that is lying in wait (beyond the moment of cracking)? Are these not the necessary aspects of *un*-listening required for the proper functioning of both solo and ensemble work? Indeed, are these not the small "reflective distance[s] or safer haven[s] from the presence of musical sound" (unilaterally associated by Abbate with the gnostic) that are, in fact, the conditions for the possibility of music's "proper object" (512, 513)?

The point is that gnostic knowledge is not the only knowledge that takes temporary leave of music's "proper object"—construed as its "ephemeral phenomenal being" alone (513). It is true that drastic and gnostic engagements differently mediate their comings-and-goings from actual performed music but neither can be immanently construed as either departed or remained; either relocated or located. The distinction between the drastic and gnostic cannot be sustained at this level of generality. Abbate argues, in contrast, that the gnostic approach alone has "misplaced its proper object," no less so when it treats performance as an "object awaiting decipherment" or as a "text subject to some analytical method yet to come" (513). Abbate writes: "To treat them this way would be to transfer the professional deformations proper to hermeneutics to a phenomenon or event where those habits become alien and perhaps useless" (513). Acts of decipherment and analysis, in other words, are habituated professional gestures that turn a deaf ear to performance—indeed, performance "is inaudible to both in practice" (513)—thereby relocating their findings to an irreducible outside, and hence *without use*. What do we make of this professional site of habituation, not infrequently associated with elitism (510, 516) in Abbate's text—and its peculiar uselessness (513)? For Abbate, this elite site (for "privileged eyes only," 528) is the clandestine mysticism deeply abstracted from actual performance, conceived (at this point of the argument) within the contours of an informal, but constitutive, *Gebrauchs*-context. But, outside the logic and grasp of these elite habits, what exactly is properly *useful* to this musical *reality at hand*? In other words, what are the performers' listening techniques, body habits, and trained reflexes that lie in wait for

the task at hand? We might frame the question thus: Are *these* habits not *ready to hand* (*zuhanden*, to invoke Martin Heidegger's formulation of such matters) for the performance's *reality at hand*? If the drastic resides but in the flux and flow of actual performance, are its freedoms not endangered by the force of these useful habits? Is the interface between the musical instrument and the human body not a fertile training ground for embodied comportment? Are these behaviors not brought under the direction of both the instrument's technical designs and (in the case of traditional European concert music at least) a host of additional mediatic inscription practices? Abbate briefly acknowledges the performer's "servitude, even automatism" (presumably to notational prescriptions) early in the argument (508), but, for the most part, the drastic is characterized by the Dionysian attributes (ineffability, ephemerality, desperation, peril, and so on) already amply listed above. If performance were taken more seriously than it is in Abbate's text, one would necessarily encounter, in a not insignificant sense, entirely new mediations of body and affect. If this were the case, in other words, one would be compelled to characterize the drastic component of music in paradoxically antithetical terms: the drastic now as conformism to prescribed codes of technical conduct; as yielding to the regulatory forces that govern the mastery of a skill set; as cultivating the automation of a host of physical human actions, and the like. In short, in the performing body we bear witness not to wildness, mystery, openness, and subjectivity, but—at least in equal measure—to cultivation, repetition, discipline, technique, and interpellation. In short, what is *useful* to music's *reality at hand* is a site *par excellence* of what could be called *coiled-up dressage*. The true drastic performance is noteworthy here not so much for its uncanny wildness and magic—its "strangeness" and "unearthly … qualities" (508)—but for its internalized familiarity, its disciplined domesticity? One is reminded of the parade of unremarkable stock gestures accompanying so much music and operatic performance.[23] Dare one be nudged even further here, and speak of the privileged audility of the performative *formula*, the *commonplace,* the *cliché*?

[23] Mary Ann Smart, "The Manufacture of Extravagant Gesture: Labour and Emotion on the Operatic Stage," (presentation for the seminar *Investigating Musical Performance: Towards a Conjunction of Ethnographic and Historiographic Perspectives*, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, July 9, 2016). See also Smart's *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

On the Ethics of Abstinence

It is not without ambiguity that Abbate suggests that due deference to the drastic may entail silence. On the one hand, she seeks to expand the limits of "remain[ing] mute" (513) in the experience of musical performance, while on the other hand, she resists the "loquacity" of music scholarship—a "professional deformation"—suggesting that, in the final analysis, this "might even mean falling silent" (510). Mostly, however, the essay is a critical story about the gnostic arrogation of meanings and forms beyond its remit. Hermeneutics and formalism summon authority by way of clandestine mysticism, an institutionally-sanctioned proffering of "messages," "cultural facts," "associations" and "constructed objects" across the terrain of music's sounding (517). Abbate, in contrast, calls for reticence, abeyance, abstinence ("leaving open or withdrawing," 516), resisting the rush to meaning. Given music's subsistence in a state of "unresolved and subservient alterity" (524) it is frequently "used or exploited" to commercial ends, a temptation that responsible scholarship should resist (517). Following Jankélévitch, music's very capacity for unleashing "potential meanings in high multiples" is therefore linked to an ethics of restraint; it is music's "ineffability" and "mutability" that ultimately "frees us" (516). This is the freedom that should not be repaid by ensnaring the *gift-giver in the cage* of gnostic coercion. Instead of "taking advantage of" music—by pinning to it a determinate meaning or form—Abbate advances "hesitating before articulating a terminus," and "perhaps, drawing back" (517). We read repeatedly of the appropriate ethical stance toward music—characterized by "grace, humility, reticence," and so on (529). In fact, the closing lesson of the essay elevates such withdrawal to a kind of principle, grounded in the acknowledgment that "our own labor is ephemeral as well and will not endure" (536). Resisting the temptation to lay bare a "cryptic truth" concealed in the performance, and "accepting its mortality" instead, she writes, may itself amount to a "form of wisdom" (536). *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.*[24]

What is fascinating about this kind of ethics of hesitation and humility, as it is described by Abbate, is the way a gesture of abstaining—from *coercion* (535)*, authoritative conjuring* (522)*, taking advantage* (517), and so on—produces an ethical position that is as simple and eloquent as it is complex and incoherent. First, the simple of act of withdrawal recapitulates a kind

[24] "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 108.

of postmodern hesitation in the experience of impossibility/undecidability. This is a curious return to a quasi-deconstructive emphasis on troubling the certainty of embedded significations, placing prevalent concept-metaphors under erasure, and so on. In fact, Abbate regards postmodernism as *soft hermeneutics*—with "trickle-downs from skepticism"—substituting notions like "embedded or encoded" meaning for "*trace* or *mark*" of meaning (516). Despite the softening of the metaphoric attribution of meaning, both, she argues, read cultural data as inscription. In other words, deconstruction is read here as a kind of cloaked gnostic operation. Abbate also dismisses the deconstructive approach directly, associating it with masculinity, and by extension, with a differently formulated coercion that denies materiality and presence. She writes:

> Adopting a deconstructive apparatus and scoffing at presence like a man can truly seem perverse when real music is at issue. Unlike another aural phenomena [*sic*]—language or literature in oral form—real music does not propose a "simultaneity of sound and sense" that in thus positing a signifier and signified can itself be "convincingly deconstruct[ed]." Real music is a temporal event with material presence that can be held by no hand.[25]

To buttress her anti-deconstructive claims, Abbate recruits Gumbrecht's philosophical turn to presence. Against the "metaphysical" project associated with the "insights of Saussurean linguistics" (531), she advocates a discourse of "movement, immediacy, and violence" associated with events "born to presence."[26] Meaning culture, she argues, is above all anathema to the presence of performed music.

Given Gumbrecht's argumentative centrality at this juncture, it is instructive to compare the ethics of his position with those of Abbate. Gumbrecht too takes great interest in the materiality of musical experience—"I can hear the tones of the oboe on my skin," he asserts in the context of an example of the production of presence—but his ethics are in stark contrast to the reticence advocated by Abbate.[27] In Gumbrecht's

[25] Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" 531. The quotations are from Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 15.

[26] The last two quotes, cited by Abbate, are from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Form without Matter vs. Form as Event," *MLN* 111, no. 3 (1996): 586–587.

[27] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 97.

universe, there simply are *no ethics* to be found in moments of presence, deixis, or epiphany. He writes: "There is nothing edifying in such moments, no message, nothing that we could really learn from them," which is why he refers to them as no more than "moments of intensity."[28] These moments depart from all scripting ("there is no reliable, no guaranteed way of producing moments of intensity");[29] they simply veer away from the taxonomies of signification, including ethical ones. In sum, there is simply *no* "convergence between aesthetic experience and ethical norms."[30] Not only is presence empty of ethical content or significance, for Gumbrecht, but—in stark contrast to the invitation to reticence or withdrawal—presence is actually perceived as a kind of brutal assault. Indeed, the reason we should be drawn to presence at all, given its lack of edification, ethics, or meaning, is, for Gumbrecht, something of an enigma: "How is it possible that we long for such moments of intensity although they have no edifying contents or effects to offer?"[31] For Gumbrecht, the fascination lies in the fact that they transcend the everyday—which is so "insuperably consciousness-centered … and perhaps even mediated by clouds and cushions of meaning."[32] It is this insight that leads Gumbrecht to link moments of intensity and presence to power and violence—the violence of "blocking spaces with bodies"—which turns out to be "irresistibly fascinating for us."[33] For Abbate, the gnostic impulse is the brutal play of authority—"taking advantage" of music's indeterminacy, arrogating and foreclosing the drastic, and so on—but for Gumbrecht, to momentarily transpose the dichotomous terms, it is in fact the *drastic* that arrogates and forecloses all remnants of the gnostic. It is presence that overwhelms us—"occupying and thus blocking our bodies"—producing a kind of drastic fascination with "losing control over oneself."[34] Gumbrecht's is a story of the assault *of* presence, not the assault *on* presence. Finally, in a neo-Schopenhauerian twist, Gumbrecht actually describes the material assault of presence in terms that resist even a residual sense of reticence toward the gnostic impulse—the wisdom of the momentary or the ethics of withdrawal. For Gumbrecht, instead, presence ultimately signals our

[28] Gumbrecht, 98.
[29] Gumbrecht, 99.
[30] Gumbrecht, 115.
[31] Gumbrecht, 99.
[32] Gumbrecht, 106.
[33] Gumbrecht, 114, 115.
[34] Gumbrecht, 115, 116.

desire for integration into the world of things; our desire to yield to an existential longing for "pre-conceptual thingness."[35]

Given Abbate's recruitment of Gumbrecht to oust the masculinist impulse of deconstruction, it is perplexing to ponder the extreme difference in their respective ethical stances. Again, for Gumbrecht, the intensity of presence is violent and agnostic of all ethics, while for Abbate the drastic is open-ended and grounds an ethics of humility and grace. Gumbrecht's position is consistent with his rejection of the linguistic turn in the Humanities, while, confusingly, Abbate's position resonates with the very deconstructive paradigm it seeks to avert. Symptomatically, we therefore witness an uneasy account of the role of so-called *non-conscious* embodiments in Abbate's text. For Gumbrecht, the assaultive character of presence lies outside of all conscious intention. For Abbate, the matter is more complicated. Here we read that a scholarly appeal to non-conscious responses is a form of "clandestine mysticism" (517), attendant to a kind of romantic gnostic chicanery. Taruskin's assertion, for example, that composers respond to circumstances "below the threshold of their conscious intending" is denounced as "Freudian romanticism," in which political circumstances are mystically said to "speak directly through the unconscious to the musical imagination" (520).[36] Abbate allies this maneuver with a "rich history" that associates music with the unconscious, and the unconscious, in turn, with "*occulted truth*" (520, emphasis added). Addressing the workings of clandestine mysticism directly, Abbate detects how references to cryptic, non-conscious, oblique, hidden and secretive contents and meanings assist in paradoxically leveraging objectivist authority. She writes:

> There are the distinct verbal signatures produced by clandestine mysticism—music reveals things "*below* … conscious intending," "*deeply hidden* things," "secrets," "*genuine* social knowledge." Words like *code* and *cryptogram* and *decipher* usher this chthonic discourse into broad daylight because hieroglyphs are at once material objects visible to the naked eye and the enigma these objects promise so persuasively as a hidden secret beyond their surface.[37]

[35] Gumbrecht, 118.

[36] Abbate is quoting from Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xxxi.

[37] Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" 526. The quotations are from Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, xxxi; Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 62; Elizabeth Wood, "Lesbian Fugue: Ethel Smyth's Contrapuntal Arts," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music*

In other words, in a context where laundering meanings, forms, and contents functions as a cipher of a buried truth, the appeal to non-conscious operations stands as a useful alibi.

The problem with this formulation is not only that it contradicts the dimension of Gumbrecht's argument upon which Abbate relies, but that it also contradicts itself. Music's immediate aural presence is paradoxically construed as both event *and* ephemeron. On the one hand, its *vanishing act*—characterized as "not enduring past the moment" (512), "ephemeral phenomenal being" (513), "perpetually absent object" (514), "subject to instantaneous loss" (532), etc.—assures its fundamental resistance to gnostic over-reach. In other words, the *a*temporal character of gnostic investigation—"under the aspect of eternity" (512)—such as we find in formalism and hermeneutics is, practically by definition, a categorical distortion of music's reality—a kind of "professional deformation" (510) or "illicit relocation" (521) to a fixed space outside the flow of time. It is this aspect of music's ontological status—its ephemerality—to which Abbate's ethics most prominently respond. On the other hand, music's *irreducible presence*—characterized as "physical force and sensual power" (509), "material presence and carnality" (529), "the event itself" (532), "exceptional phenomenal existence" (533), etc.—assures its voluminous *being-there* for arresting embodiment. In other words, music's almost ballistic materiality, in stark contrast to its ephemerality, endows it with the physical force of an external object.[38] With *this* information about music's ontological status in mind—its event-ness—Abbate's ethics take an interesting turn. Far from being annexed by acts of gnostic arrogation, immediate aural presence now annexes the *receptive body* and even alters its state. In an act of *drastic* arrogation (momentarily in sync with Gumbrecht's conception of presence), it now "acts upon us and changes us" (532).

What is troubling about this reversal of fortune for ethics as it is *weighed upon* by the *event* (instead of *released* by the *ephemeron*), is that it indulges, fleetingly but tellingly, the very clandestine mysticism once associated with the cryptographic sublime. Let me explain. Non-conscious sonorous objects now promise embodiments that are as much a "hidden secret beyond their surface" (526) as any gnostic seismograph (528). In other words, pres-

Scholarship, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 164–183: 164; Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 5.

[38] Currie's gravitational metaphor of *falling* into a transformative gap is relevant here (Currie, "Music After All," 184).

ence effects, like their gnostic arrogations, are "tandem flights" (531) toward *a threshold below conscious intending* (520): "When it is present, [music] can ban logos or move our bodies," she writes, before adding "*without our conscious will*" (532, emphasis added). But whence this drastic unconscious? It is not only that drastic encounter now shares with gnostic interpretation the "Freudian romanticism" Abbate hopes to reject (520), but that this very mode of romanticism secures the principal ethical import of Abbate's position. How so? On close inspection, the simple ethics of withdrawal described above metamorphose, as Abbate's argument unfolds, into something new—an ethics of *incorporation*. Far from mere *schweigen* (falling silent, leaving open, etc.) the ethics of the drastic in its *material* and *carnal* moment introduce a moral confrontation with alterity. The gnostic now forecloses the value of the quasi-ballistic force of the drastic—the "*value*," that is, "both intellectually and *morally*, in encountering a *present other at point-blank range*" (532, emphasis added). This encounter with a present other expands into an ethics of the other that is given voice throughout the essay. Recall, for example, the gnostic enjoinment to "articulat[e] a terminus, or [restrict] music to any determinate meaning within any declarative sentence" (517), to which Abbate responds with an appeal to freedom. The appropriate engagement with this encounter involves "not taking advantage," "hesitating," and "drawing back" from the (gift-giving) musical configuration (517). Anthropomorphism aside, Abbate argues, this kind of abstinence resembles "an ethical position" (517). Musical works are not living things, "but the way we cope with them may reflect choices about how to cope with real human others or how not to" (517).

The point is that this ethical position recapitulates the clandestine mysticism of gnostic interpretation, which too operates on the logic of resemblance, reflection, and revelation. Gnostic arrogation occurs when some configuration detected in beautiful sounds—an oblique enharmonic modulation, say—is said to *resemble* or *reflect* something alien to it—a certain subjectivity or political regime or so. By what inscription may the reticent attitude, hesitating before the call of (narcissistic?) gnostic reflection, come suddenly to *reflect* forms of social interaction (with real human others) after all (517)? By what clandestine metamorphosis did abstinence become a seismographic *reflection* of socially-mediated ethical encounter? Or does the encounter with real human others at stake here operate more by way of non-reflective *immediacy*—at point-blank range, and so on? It is unclear. But perhaps this counter-point is overdrawn, for the reference to affirmative ethics in both cases quickly recedes as the essay resumes the task of

raining down critique on the head of gnostic mysticism. Toward the end of the argument, however, Abbate actually ups the ante on this construal of ethics by *spiritualizing* the physicality of music in performance. Following Jankélévitch, she claims that music's "physical action can engender spiritual conditions, grace, humility, reticence" (529). With reference to Neoplatonic philosophy and apophatic theology, Abbate articulates acts of "understatement and silence" to a kind of "social reality" with ethical implications (530). She advances the idea that "engagement with music [is] tantamount to an engagement with the phenomenal world and its inhabitants" (530). The encounter with the other that emerges, first, by way of *point-blank immediacy* and, second, by the *logic of reflection*, emerges in this third articulation by way of a *grammar of equivalence*. The ethical consequences of all three modalities of engagement seems to be the same. In a scenario where social engagement is considered as alike to musical engagement, for instance, we take away the following *moral* lesson: "Playing or hearing music can produce a state where resisting the flaw of loquaciousness represents a moral ideal, *marking* human subjects who have been remade in an encounter with an other" (530, emphasis added). Here we find—in the paradoxical name of an ethics of abstinence—a tangible encounter with a human/musical other that leaves on its subjects a kind of (deconstructive?) *mark*. Is this a kind of *soft hermeneutics redux*? Perhaps. The larger points, however, are, first, that these are *clandestine* rubrics—rubrics that deploy drastic musical encounter as a cipher for an ethics in the *social* world; and, second, that the fact that a *diversity* of rhetorical rubrics—reflection, immediacy, and equivalence—lead to the same goal in the context of the drastic encounter probably marks a site of desire—a *wish* for social relevance in the stark silence of withdrawal.

In the final analysis, the ethics of drastic encounter, however tangibly arrested by presence, resemble less the agnosticism we find in the starkly unedifying productions of presence in Gumbrecht's formulation than they do the deconstructive abeyance we find in the thought of Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction of course rejects the self-uttering claims of presence, and marks instead the differential mediations attendant to our very hold on presence. In Abbate's text, presence is at once embraced *and* denied the violence of such claims. Far from the violence implied by Gumbrecht's arrested bodies, that is, presence in the context of the drastic is held at arm's length, kept unsullied by gnostic determination, set *free*. Herein lies one of the conundrums faced by simultaneously tethering presence to the event, on the one hand, and to the ephemeron, on the other. Caught in the crosshairs of this riddle-like suspension, we now find a noteworthy reversal of fortune for ethics in the

context of theories of presence. Of the strained claim to social relevance—gnostic abstinence in the face of drastic experience—one might say its value resides in the proximity of deconstruction. However, where a deconstructive operation such as *différance* nonetheless engages the nominal accretions and attendant effects of presence (via the internal structures of differing and deferring, etc.), the ethics of drastic encounter—at risk of ensnaring them in gnostic determination—disengages from them entirely. The political and social relevance of deconstruction is contested and in doubt, of course, even as Derrida (in his final years) insisted on the importance of the *decision* in the experience of the undecidable.[39] For the purposes of this argument, however, it is important to note, first, that Abbate's ethical abeyance is more allied with Derrida's deconstructive maneuvers than it is with Gumbrecht's story about presence; and, second, that even the (minimal) social relevance of deconstructive undecidability withers in the context of drastic withdrawal—its totalizing gnostic prohibition. This is the radical blank of the point-blank.

Technomystical Repetitions

> Suppose music really does know best ("the matrix of sounds explains the structures of power") and gives access to otherwise lost information, revelations about humankind or its societies that no other art can transmit. Suppose music has important secrets pouring from it and our enigma machine with the correct cylinder merely needs to be put in place; that is a tempting vision.[40]

These are the suppositions that modulate from Abbate's reflections on music's radical openness toward a critique of technology—the *machining* of an enigma—in the context of drastic musical experience. By endowing a machine (with appropriately fitted cylinders) the power to decode a hermeneutically-slippery medium, gnostic knowledge takes on the character of decryption. Abbate calls these machinations of the machine the "cryptographic sublime" (524). Far from actually approaching the sublime, however, this knowledge amounts to little more than sonified *fraud*. For Ab-

[39] See, for example, Jacques Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2005).

[40] Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" 524. The quotation in parentheses is Abbate's own translation of the blurb from the original dust jacket of Jacques Attali, *Bruits* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977).

bate, the symptomatic fallout from techno-trickery of this sort is twofold. First, real music is eroded, if not entirely eliminated, by the technological apparatus, and second, embezzled gnostic determinations are granted an aura of technical objectivity.

First, on the loss of real music at the hands of technological intervention, Abbate writes: "That technology, codes, inscription metaphors, and mechanisms flow into musical hermeneutics is not, however, just an entertaining foible. They represent the excluded presence of real music, the material and carnal as displaced onto technology" (527). Theodor Adorno's seismograph and Jacques Attali's magnetic tape constitute so much "technomysticism" to (fraudulently) spirit forth gnostic secrets as it spirits away drastic presence (527). Left in the wake of music's banished materiality and carnality, these technical decoding devices proffer a kind of fake presence—the "false Eros and synthetic carnality" of a technological metaphor (529). Under the spell of gnostic technomysticism, we are left with a music without music. This is a curious upshot for a position deeply immersed in music's ephemerality—*real music*—"so personal, contingent, *fugitive to understanding*" (529, emphasis added). Whence this fugitive? If music's vanishing act entails its escape, even hiding, from all understanding, under what conditions can one posit a music *with* music—a music that will not betray the site of its hiding? The question arises: How, where, and when is banished sound—a particular instance of its disavowal—distinct from vanished sound—a general condition of its ephemerality?

Second, on the aura of technical objectivity in the context of gnostic fraud, Abbate writes, "music qua machine traces what is there without subjective bias, thus when music and my argument run along the same lines my argument cannot be assailed" (529). In other words, the precarious hold on gnostic thought in the throes of drastic experience is pitted against the gnostic secrets that are paradoxically amplified by complex decoding machines and inscription devices. Abbreviated in value—"a state of *unresolved and subservient alterity*" (524, emphasis added)—the drastic is left to linger in the confines (at best) of subjective bias, while—bolstered by the full audio-visual technological apparatus—the gnostic reigns supreme, "untranscendable" (527). Abbate's essay seeks to upend this hierarchized opposition, of course, by advancing a seemingly irreducible fact about listening—the *de facto* overwhelming character of its live presence. At one point in her experience of Laurie Anderson's performance piece *Happiness* on March 15, 2002, for example, Abbate heard a devastating sound emerge from the clicking of teeth: "a loud boom with no reverberation" (533). The sound,

which triggered "*real terror*" (conjuring, as it did, "the sound of bodies hitting the ground from great heights"), leads Abbate to reflect on the importance of what happened "*at that moment*;" the trigger that occurred in the "*right now*" (533–534, emphasis added). In contrast to the drastic experience elicited in this radically temporalized present, Abbate examines the kinds of experience attendant to *a*temporal technologies of reproduction. She rhetorically asks: "The very fact of recording—as any future audience can experience this event that came into presence (to echo Gumbrecht) only via its repeatable surrogate—does that not alter a basic alchemy, making the event an artifact, handheld and under control, encouraging distance and reflection?" (534). Although Abbate briefly acknowledges that both drastic and gnostic elements can "furnish a simultaneous ground under the sonic circus" (533)—indeed, it is this simultaneity that constitutes an *alchemy*—the true insight to which this kind of statement points is that the recording is, *of itself,* substitutive. In other words, the recording only implausibly approaches the radical presence of the event. It offers repetition for singularity, control for wildness, and distance and reflection for immersion and absorption in the actual event. Interestingly, Abbate's skepticism toward reproducibility and repetition is, if not fully argued, repetitively asserted throughout the text. The example of an unrepeatable drastic encounter in 2002 thereby paradoxically *repeats* a central tenet of Abbate's text. As if under the guidance of the formal demands of a *rondo*, we read again a slightly varied version of what we read before. The "repeatable surrogate" that makes of an event an artifact, "handheld and under control," imitatively echoes the point, made over twenty pages earlier, that recordings are "technologically constructed hyperperformances, which we can arrest and control" (512). This is the idea, as it were, that the essay arrests under its own "aspect of eternity" (512). Even if repetition is the primary rhetorical vehicle for asserting the idea, we are warned once more of the technical conditions for placing the drastic fugitive under arrest—the drastic, in other words, as always-already arrested and controlled in contexts of technological repeatability.

But therein lies a key aspect of the dialectics of repetition. "Gnostic satisfactions can become pale," we are told in connection with Abbate's riff against the technical reproduction of the drastic experience of Anderson's performance (534). But, as with Walter Benjamin's aura, repetition can both wither (or render pale) *and* amplify (or brighten) the drastic experience. Without rehearsing once more the valorization of reproduction technologies (phonography, radio, tape, etc.) we find in the writings Schaeffer, Chion and others, it is clear that repetition actually triggers drastic experience in

Abbate's universe as well. After all, the alchemical amalgam—"live presence and secret knowledge" (534)—accruing to the moment of terror was itself "guided by earlier references to the World Trade Center's destruction" (533). The troubling return to earlier references in the drastic moment here is not simply meant to rehearse that often-repeated insight that gnostic knowledge sponsors drastic experience. This truism constitutes the crux of Karol Berger's insubstantial response to Abbate's challenging text. The takeaway of Berger's response can be summed up in a single sentence: "There is no such thing as pure experience, uncontaminated by interpretation."[41] While Berger is attempting to demonstrate that musical perception is in fact subtended by a broader sphere of human experience, this kind of truism—a tautology in recoil from the drastic—can quickly organize itself into a system for containing the frictions of nature, history, and perception. Indeed, it is the *imposition* that material presence brings to such conclusive organized systems to which theories of affect, the drastic, etc.—to their credit—attend. Although it is inconsistently articulated, Abbate's appeal to *unbidden* materializations of presence—such as the "neurological misfire" in the context of a scene in an opera, for example (535)—bear witness to the challenge of frictional encounter. The closed-circuit production of meaning, in contrast, issues a new set of perils that cannot simply spirit away the impositions of tangible experience in its own systematic maelstrom of interpretation and mediation. What is troubling about Abbate's return to gnostic invocations—"earlier references to the World Trade Center's destruction," and so on—is distinct from this catch-all coign of vantage.

There are two specific points to be made at this juncture. First, the reversion to the gnostic—the "secret knowledge of the hidden signified" (534)—which triggered the terror, was itself attributed to, first, a microphonic amplification of teeth clenching; and, second, a documentary recording by the Naudet brothers of the 9/11 disaster. Abbate adds, "No one who has seen the documentary forgets the sound [of bodies hitting the ground from great heights]" (534). Of course, Abbate concedes that this is a site of "hermeneutic alchemy" (535)—not an unfettered presence—but the matter is not settled by way of a simple acknowledgement. To begin with, all aspects of an elaborate argument about the clandestine operations of technomysticism are now placed under strain. How so? First, the gnostic signified that sets off the drastic intensity of terror is issued by way of the very *seismographic*

[41] Karol Berger, "Music According to Don Giovanni, or: Should We Get Drastic?" *Journal of Musicology* 22, no. 3 (2005): 497.

technology that is construed as more than mere amplification, registering instead "imperceptible shifts below the threshold of perception" (528)—the "technomysticism" that rejects vulgar representation for "buried, underground, tectonic vastness," inscription, and so on. Second, the triggering is issued by way of the very *technology of reproduction* that is construed as the "repeatable surrogate" that alters drastic experience—brings it "under control," solicits "distance and reflection," and so on (534). But this is not all, for the particular terror it triggers falls, above all, *under the aspect of eternity*—"no one who has seen the documentary forgets the sound." *No one forgets*. In other words, the drastic experience *qua* experience is here lodged firmly in the *a*temporal structure Abbate once associated with gnostic investigations—"abstractions … under the aspect of eternity" (512)—and not, strictly speaking, in the ephemerality of the moment alone. The fact that there is no unforgetting the sound, as well as the fact that the recorded sound was repeated by other technological means, is structurally central to the experience. This is not the place to dissect the dialectics of trauma, but it remains evidently open to discussion whether what is at stake here is a species of repetition compulsion or, as maintained, simply held in the grip of a singular ephemeral event alone.

The Gnostic Redux (Of White Elephants)

The second problem attendant to Abbate's reversion to gnostic knowledge for leveraging examples of drastic encounter is more paradoxical still. Take Abbate's experience of despair when Ben Heppner's voice cracked on high notes early in the performance of *Die Meistersinger* at the Met in 2001. While most of the singers belted forth in a kind of "psychotic … joll[iness]," Abbate bore witness to the "raw courage and sangfroid" of a singer who refused to give up—"a unique human being in a singular place and time, falling from the high wire again and again" (535). Abbate writes, "I was transfixed not by Wagner's opera but by Heppner's heroism … the singular demonstration of moral courage, which, indeed, produces knowledge of something fundamentally different and of a fundamentally different kind … drastic knowledge" (535). What is fascinating here is that Abbate connects drastic knowledge with the question concerning morality. Again, it would be an inadequate truism to simply point out that Abbate's intimate knowledge of the operatic work is the condition for the possibility of this drastic experience. Indeed, given that Heppner's voice cracked in the first

strophe of the preliminary version of the Prize Song, she made "a quick calculation that he had five more strophes in two full verses in the preliminary version," not to mention the many versions of the song, still to come (535). *Of course* the work-concept here circumscribes the event; it is the metaphysical *a priori* that is the condition for the possibility of this despairing experience, no less than the neurological misfire to come a few days later. But this insufficiently registers the challenge of Abbate's experience of the scenario at the Met. Neither will it do to simply point out that Heppner's *morality* is cut of a drastically different cloth from the ethics attendant to drastic experience, as it is understood by Abbate. In other words, the moral courage of Heppner's plunging-forth can hardly be recreated under the rubric of an ethics of hesitation and withdrawal. But this is where Abbate's insight into the moment may actually provide a basis for revising her more-or-less deconstructive ethical stance, and, especially, for moderating the starkly agnostic one held by Gumbrecht. Heppner's is the courage of persistence, not that of reticence.

But the more vexing problem emerges when we consider these kinds of experience in relation to an aesthetic tradition that valorizes the unexpected in art—the aesthetics of radical becoming, innovation, and transformation; the transfiguration of the commonplace, and so on. The terror triggered by an alchemical blend of drastic and gnostic in Laurie Anderson's performance of *Happiness*, no less than the despair launched in the context of a quick calculation (and a subsequent neurological misfire) of Ben Heppner's performances in a production of *Die Meistersinger,* are transmutations *of this sort*. In Heppner's case, a vocal misfire on the high notes A and G suddenly launched the real possibility of total embarrassment and scandal; and in Anderson's case, an echoless thud suddenly launched the listener into the horror of processing again an event of real death. Without diminishing their intensity, these drastic experiences are wholly consistent with the romantic aesthetics of transfiguration—Christian Friedrich Michaelis's *powerfully startling* experience, Edmund Burke's *sublime suddenness*, Immanuel Kant's *transcendence of empirical standards*, and so on—updated here for the era of post-postmodernism. Art becomes life. First a boom without reverb propels the listener into an unbearable confrontation with an actual scene of murderous death and, second, a vocal misfire catapults the living struggle of a great hero onto the opera stage. This crypto-romantic maneuver is not objectionable in itself, but it does raise a set of different questions, which, again, create the conditions for the undermining of large swaths of Abbate's general argument.

In what sense? First, recall the importance of the non-conceptual import of the drastic—its direct tethering to *music qua music*—the "elephant in the room" (533). How exactly do the examples provided by the specific experiences of performances by Anderson and Heppner tally with this aspiration toward registering affects and effects of *music qua music*? How responsive are these examples to qualities and problems peculiar to music? In both cases, the answer to this question is unsatisfactory. Not only is Heppner actually trying to *hide* and *disguise* his errors for most of the performance, but the cover-up actually registers the fact that the cracking high notes constitute the *noise* that undermines the *music*. Of course, the *possibility* of a vocal misfire constitutes an element of opera's considerable aesthetic pleasures, but, nonetheless, the drastic despair is located not in the music as much as in its ever-lurking noisy other. Furthermore, the moral of Heppner's courage resides in his ability to *continue* in full knowledge of what happened and what awaits. This—the crux of the drastic despair—is not, however, peculiar to music. Suppose a marathon runner leading the pack suddenly sprains an ankle a mile out from the finishing line, pushes through the pain, and despite competitors closing-in, persists to the end, victorious: Is this drastic event not of the same species as that in December 2001 at the Met? Does this form of "drastic knowledge" not likewise register "a unique human being in a singular place and time," "the singular demonstration of moral courage," and so on (535)? But if a sporting event so easily recapitulates the affective crux of the musical one, does the precise modality of drastic despair experienced by Abbate not equally bypass the elephant in the room, the phenomenal reality of *music qua music*? The same problem accrues to the example on March 15, 2002. Suppose the smoke rising from the ash of a cigarette triggers unbidden images of the smoldering World Trade Center: does this not constitute a similar traumatic trigger to that experienced by clicking teeth? In fact, are traumatic flashbacks not, by definition, deeply unpredictable—seeking out capriciously dispersed outlets? As a trigger of this media-indifferent sort, is not the quest to unpack what is peculiar to the inherently *sonic* dimensions of that echoless resonance a troubled one? In short, has the elephant in the room—*music qua music*—become the white elephant once more?

Paradoxically, Abbate's demonstration of the drastic in these examples is at once too abstracted from the materiality of presence unique to music qua music (as shown above) *and* too immersed in the gnostic specificity of their actual musical workings. Let me elaborate on the latter point. In connection with the Heppner incident, Abbate writes: "I was transfixed

not by Wagner's opera but by Heppner's heroism … the singular demonstration of moral courage … [what] one could call … drastic knowledge" (535). Abbate rehearses the fact the she is in fact well acquainted with the "literature on *Meistersinger*," with its "unspoken anti-Semitic underside," its problematic "reception history," and even its own claims to a "nonsignifying discourse" that may give voice to "something appalling" (535–536). However, the drastic trigger that produced the despair and, later, the hallucination were set adrift from this entire *corpus* of hermeneutic knowledge no less than the formal qualities of the actual work. Abbate's experience emerged in a *schism*—"essentially, a split where the performance drowned out the work" (535)—whereby perception, ensnared in the immediacy of drastic presence, veered irredeemably away from the protocols of the opera itself. But is this in fact so? Here is a basic (hermeneutic) outline of the opera: Richard Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* is more or less a comedic musical drama about musical creativity and its relation to social reproduction. The masters' guild of musicians in Nürnberg is populated by, on the one hand, pedantic conservatives and, on the other, open-minded liberals. The central protagonist of the story, Walther von Stolzing (sung by Heppner in the performances Abbate attended), is not in the guild, but his superior musicianship is indisputable. Unorthodox as they are, his musical gifts are matched only by his passion for Eva, whose hand shall be received in marriage by the best singer in the midsummer song competition. In fact, the erotic striving associated with the prize is narratively allied with the passionate voicing associated with the song. Despite a series of setbacks (hence the ongoing revisions of the prize song with its demanding high Gs and As), Walther is eventually able to harness (marry!) his creative penchant for rupturing established musical norms with the sanctioned musical forms established by the guild. Walther endures numerous obstacles and struggles with the institutional politics around him, but he eventually wins the hand of Eva. Indeed, it is Walther's final prize song that ultimately exemplifies the appropriate integration of inspiration and form.

With *Eva im Paradies*, one might ask, how is this unimaginable joy properly resonant with a case of drastic despair? In fact, by the time of the happy scene-change of act 3—"full of candy-store delights," with its "sunny meadow," and the chorus belting theme songs "at the top of its lungs" (535)—Heppner's rickety vocalizations (potentially careening toward a melody-killing quandary) seem to mark a stark *disconnect* between the signifying order and affective intensity. Abbate's uneasy feeling about the demeanor of the other performers onstage—which transformed into a *psychotic jolliness*

in the moment of Heppner's vocal misfire—now probably counts as a kind of *premonition* of the "optical hallucination, a genuine neurological misfire" that occurred three days later (535). This remarkable moment—Abbate "saw stage figures not as they were, in Technicolor Germanic finery, but shrouded in black with white faces and tragic eyes under bright white lights" (535)—became a kind of unbidden *neurological restaging* of the second performance. Officially, the *meaning* of Abbate's drastic encounter is that there is a fundamental asynchrony between drastic and gnostic orders; that the drastic attitude had *prevailed* against the hermeneutic pull of the gnostic. In Abbate's words: "The second performance would not have fractured had my experience of the first not been so radically attentive to what was taking place, so inattentive to Wagner's *Meistersinger* and what its music means or conceals" (536). This is the official story. Unofficially, however, the drastic *affect* of Abbate's hallucinatory restaging actually *recapitulates* the wholly gnostic central dialectic of *Die Meistersinger*'s narrative. As it is with the fictional Walther von Stolzing, the real Ben Heppner must now harness his "extraordinary raw courage and sangfroid" to overcome the odds of disrupting the musical forms to which his singing is socially and institutionally enjoined (535). The hallucination is an uncanny recapitulation in real life of the *Wahn* that may ensue the entire operatic scene should our heroes' (respective) moral courage fail them. It is not only that the musical *work*—the content of a romantic *Meisterwerk*—makes an uncanny return in the event of a neurological misfire, but, more than that, it is that a nonconscious *Werktreue* actually leaves an indelible mark on it. This story about affect—about the drastic encounter so "inattentive" to the gnostic—is nonconsciously, but tellingly, a story about a gnostic *second coming*. Is this a paradoxical *return*—apparently caught in drastic throes of intensity—of the cultivated *gnostic repressed*?

The point of this re-telling of an encounter so apparently personal and ephemeral is not to dismiss outright the claims of the drastic, but, far from it, to reposition the force of the drastic in a region unfamiliar, not only to its gnostic fellow traveler, but also to the experienced reality at hand. I want to draw attention to the curious imbrication of the obvious and the obscure in these drastic encounters. The experience of terror attendant to Laurie Anderson's performance, too, is not a case of the off-script drastic as much as it bears the marks of the all-too-gnostic figure of the drastic. In other words, aside from the acknowledged *alchemy*, Anderson's 2002 performance piece was awash in anecdotes that referenced the destruction of the World Trade towers in September 2001. These included direct referenc-

es—the way Anderson had watched and listened to the towers being built over the years, a few blocks from her home, for example—and, perhaps more importantly, indirect ones, which, in their own way, illustrated traumatic reminders of the past event. For example, she recited a story of her rat terrier, Lolabelle, out on a walk in the safe-seeming mountains of California shortly after 9/11. Following an uneventful preamble where the narrator recollects little more than the character of the dog's ambling and rambling, she suddenly notices a new expression on the dog's face; one she had not seen before. This was the expression marking Lolabelle's realization, with large birds hovering over her, that she was *prey*; and that, furthermore, the once neutral sky had now been transformed into a menacing presence, as if there was *something wrong with the air*. It was the look on Lolabelle's face, in turn, that triggered for Anderson an expression she had, in fact, seen before—the expression of her neighbors in New York City right after 9/11. This was the look that too marked the realization that danger could come *from the air*; and that, furthermore, from this menacing realization, there would be *no turning back*.

Having been primed with anecdotes such as this—not simply images of 9/11, but references to the uncanny mechanisms that trigger these images—the reaction of terror to the clicking of teeth is what one might describe as a case of *getting it*. This is not to say that the reaction simply makes sense, but that it is *in keeping with* the fundamental points of Anderson's performance. It is, as it were, an accurate response to contextual cues that cannot be subtracted from the scene. In other words, the drastic experience hereby appropriately recoups the gnostic dimensions of the work. The point could be amplified in the context of Anderson's observation in *Happiness* that many of the horrifying images of the smoldering towers circulating on television at the time were mostly without accompanying sound. This led her to reflect on whether the microphones were shut off, or the cameras too far from the action, or whether the explosions and cries were simply unrecordable. In other words, the terrifying intensity of the event here obliterates an aspect of representability, leaving us with the repetitious dream-like silence of the television loops. Anderson's reflection on the event of 9/11 and its peculiar recording reveals a surreptitious linkage to Abbate's theory of the drastic itself, equally pitting representation and recording against the perplexing intensity of the actual event. But for the purposes of this argument, it suffices to note that the gnostic not only sponsors the drastic *a priori*, but that the gnostic here makes another uncanny return, *a posteriori*. While the event of the performance does not necessarily spell out gnostic scripts

of cultural data, the appropriately-immersed viewer is nonetheless held in the arms of their conditioning force. In other words, this is not a simple recapitulation of the clandestine cipher of the hermeneutic object that Abbate carefully puts into question throughout the text, but rather its uncanny *gnostic redux,* coiled up within drastic experience.

Sound Fraud: From Illicit to Complicit Relocation

If it is true, at least in some significant senses and cases, that the latent gnostic recurs at the core of the blatant drastic, it behooves us to consider more seriously—in the contexts of ethics and politics—the force of audile *reflex* and its *habituation*. One may speak here of the *habitus of sensory experience*, which regards drastic encounter not as the nonconscious, open-ended material experience of the ephemeral presence of a live event, as we find in Abbate, but instead as the unconscious recurrence of cultivated assumptions, reflexes, instincts, habits, and techniques within that experience. What is fascinating about this reconfiguration of the drastic is the way music's seemingly inherent ephemerality and ineffability falls prey not only to the gnostic determinations of hermeneutics and formalism, but also to the drastic overdeterminations of sensory *habit*ūs. The gnostic redux can be characterized as the recurrence of a certain guiding *foreknowledge* in the context of variable reflexes of the body. In other words, the cultivation of body techniques is a partial *condition for the possibility* of their nonconscious drastic reflexes—again, the *coiled* drastic *dressage*.

What do we make of those phenomena said to fall outside the logic and grasp of the gnostic? What dimensions of music, in particular—given the uncanny duplicitous layers of its cultivated entanglements—remain outside of the second enclosure of the gnostic? What remains of its dimensions of ephemerality and ineffability? Is the event of *music qua music*—enveloped, as it were, by dual (and dueling) *a*temporal specters of temporal experience—therefore *more ineffable still* than the concept of the drastic can permit? Or is music's claimed or real ineffability—in a dialectical *Schulterschluss* with its "broad shoulders"—in fact a useful alibi for disavowing its genuine capacity for social danger—manipulation, discrimination, fear- and hatred-mongering, and so on (521, 523)? To situate this point in the context of the previous example, what if the resistance to gnostic error in the drastic experience of terror reveals itself rather as a resistance to its truth (or, at least, its accuracy)?

For Abbate, gnostic attributions in the context of music are dismissed *tout court* as so many forms of *clandestine mysticism*: "Any argument that discovers legible meanings or significations within music is granting music certain grandiose powers" (517)—powers it simply does not possess, subsisting, as does music (after all), in a state of "unresolved and subservient alterity" (524). Paradoxically, however, these powers accrue in *inverse* proportion to their legitimacy. Furthermore, music's "messages," "cultural facts," or "associations" also gain authority paradoxically because of their misplaced media-specificity; they become "more signally important, more persuasive—than the same cultural facts or associations or constructed objects as conveyed or released by *any other media*" (517, emphasis added). In other words, it is music's very ineffability—its nonsignifying mediatic condition—that mystically intensifies the significations that are illicitly attributed to it. As it is with "film and advertising," musical works are thus "conscripted" to be "used or exploited" by music scholarship in its gnostic moment (517). By *decking out* these messages, facts and associations with "acoustic aura and sonic gift wrap," they become "less banal than they are by themselves"; in short, "the ordinary becomes a revelation" (518).

Interestingly, Abbate connects this understanding of music's revelatory force to the theoretical inclinations of nineteenth-century metaphysics, and its afterlife in twentieth-century psychoanalysis. Nietzsche's interest in listening to the musical aspect of language—"with the third ear"—for example, is a forerunner to the transverbal mode of listening—attentive to "phonic or musical element[s]"—that are said to register the unconscious (518).[42] It is this alluring association—between music's "pre-specular" character and what Theodor Reik calls the "substructures of the soul"—that Abbate puts into question: "Because the musical element is so open to interpretation, so unable to contest whatever supra-audible import it is assigned, conceptions about the psychic ill drawn from outside the musical domain become what the music is saying or revealing" (518). This is a fascinating paradox. Music is construed here as a kind of *whore* for meaning—it is "so open to interpretation, so unable to contest"; it "unleashes potential meanings in high multiples"; it has "'broad shoulders' to bear whatever specific meaning we ascribe to it and 'will never give us the lie,'" and so on—and, at the same

[42] Abbate refers to Nieztsche's expression in *Beyond Good and Evil*, §246, as elaborated in the writings of Theodor Reik, *Listening with the Third Ear: The Inner Experience of a Psychoanalyst* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1948) and Roland Barthes and Roland Havas, "Listening," in Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 245–260.

time, the *virgin* of meaning—music's "ineffability"; its "indeterminacy"; its "mutability"; its "freedom," of which one should "not tak[e] advantage," and so on (516–517). Recall that the ethics of drastic encounter lies in a mode of abstinence: *hesitating* before the act of exploiting, using, or taking advantage of music. As a medium that is all-too-yielding, music becomes a fertile site for opportunistic fact-, meaning-, and truth-making. In other words, music's very lack—resistant, that is, to the genuine art of encoding cultural phenomena—is constitutively linked to its excess—its abundant dissemination of coded phenomena, as diverse as they are implausible.

On the one hand, Abbate astutely identifies, and then beautifully articulates, the peculiar magic of this link, but, on the other hand, not enough surprise is expressed at the mechanism by which a transdiscursive experience actually *amplifies* the discourse it is erroneously said to encode. By what magical mechanism do the constructed significations—meanings, cultural phenomena, sublimated "truths"—metamorphose into significations that are actually "*more* authoritative," "grandiose," "revelatory," "*more* securely affirmed when *music* is seen to express them," or "made monumental and given aura by music" (517–520, emphasis added)? In other words, what is it *about* the acoustic aura and the sonic gift wrap that allures its beholder not only to take the hermeneutic bait, but to do so *more affirmatively* than its soundless counterpart? This increase in music's signifying *gravitas*, paradoxically again, appears to be tethered to extra-musical media. In other words, music's inherent *aversion* to encoding is actually marked by its ability to *switch* signification according to visual and verbal cues and contexts. In this sense, it is not absolute or autonomous, for Abbate, but all-too-programmatic, all-too-heteronomous. She writes that "physical grounding and visual symbolism and verbal content *change* musical sounds by recommending how they are to be understood" (524, emphasis added). The paradox, then, is that music's wild indeterminacy—its effortless facility for actually *switching* signification, under the weight, say, of "oculocentric and logocentric" inputs—is allied to its peculiar capacity for raising the ontological stakes of that signification—how it is to be *understood* (524). Music's evident facility for switching meaning, in short, secures an authoritative affirmation for when it does not. If gnostic arrogation puts the *gift-giving bird in the cage,* as it were—and, concomitantly, deconstruction attempts to set free a caged bird—then, in contrast to both, the drastic power of music is such that it *holds the uncaged bird in the hand*. The drastic, after all, is *wild* even at *point-blank range*. This is the manipulative magic not of bait-and-switch, but of *switch-and-bait*.

The problem with simply announcing the alchemical alliance between image/word and music/sound is that it passes over precisely the *drastic* aspect of music's materiality that is the object of inquiry. Not only do sonic gift wraps and acoustic auras rarely count as evidence in any fields *outside* of musicology and (to a lesser extent) music theory, but, as articulated above, the force of music's interpretability seems to be leveraged by its drastic *indeterminacy*. What if, as announced above, the antithesis is true? What if the drastic is the site *par excellence* not of open-endedness but of nonconscious overdetermination? Take the case of racism in sound: Abbate is skeptical of claims that Wagner's anti-Semitism can be sonically sublimated into musical works, for example, in spite of the composer's ample attestations to that claim. Abbate argues that Wagner's argument itself partakes of the clandestine mysticism associated with the hermeneutic process—he reads "certain formal conventions in music by Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer as ineradicable signs, and truths by the basketful are discovered embodied in musical configurations" (519). Wagner's hermeneutic maneuvering may attest to "truths" that amount to "anti-Semitic slanders," while those of commentators like Richard Eichenauer or Richard Taruskin actually attempt to *expose* for critical scrutiny such anti-Semitism. For Abbate, in contrast, both positions share a fundamental *kinship*—"the hermeneutic process is the same on both sides" (519). As it is with Wagner's riff on Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer, Abbate contends, Taruskin's evidence of Stravinsky's anti-Semitism seems "less mundane and more securely affirmed when *music* is seen to express [it]" (520). What is interesting about this methodological association between Wagner and Taruskin is that the outcomes of their thinking across the terrain of musical expression arguably lead to opposing moral positions. In fact, one consequence of this argument can be summed up in the following formulation: Because of music's drastic indeterminacy, its actual gnostic determinations are in fact *morally variable as well*. In gnostic mysticism, *angels* and *devils* may freely dwell. The key point is that, given the uncanny, but *constitutive*, link between drastic openness and an emboldened gnostic closure, the assertion of a moral position is ultimately determined not by music in its material presence, but by the contexts of its *use* alone.

The trouble with this kind of analysis of the drastic in music is that its utilitarian consequences cannot be sustained in the context of reflex audibility. In other words, this construal of the drastic insufficiently grasps the force and inertia of certain *gnostic* intensities. Abbate is skeptical of all claims that associate "music with the unconscious," and, even more so,

"the unconscious with occulted truth" (520). The first tension here is that the drastic, defined as nonsignifying intensity, actually bears something of a resemblance to the variously construed concepts of the unconscious Abbate seeks to critique. More importantly, however, the overarching skepticism toward the unconscious and its occulted truths does not sufficiently grasp the sonorous intensity that accrues to fixed gnostic commitments and reflexes of listening. At this point it is important to disentangle the gnostic handiwork of film, and particularly advertising, from that of music scholarship. These had been earlier affined in Abbate's text—"conscripted," in her words, "for similar duties" (517). However, the actual mechanisms by which advertising, on the one hand, and scholarship, on the other, exploit music, can be lumped together only awkwardly. Where branding, advertising, and propaganda actually deploy music's *drastic* qualities—its nonsignifying, nonconscious sensuous immediacy—to clinch an association, to sell a product, or to induce a political commitment, gnostic scholarly inquiry (especially that wedded to the social contingency of things) actually de-emphasizes the sonorous presence—the seduction of the performance experience—in service of *meaning*. Otherwise put, where advertising hitches a ride on them, musicology stops up its ears to drastic sonorities. The latter, after all, is the "antihedonist patholog[y]" of musicology, which refuses "encountering a present other at point-blank range" (532). The distinction is important because in sonic branding, advertising, and propaganda, the sensuous materiality of the music determines the value of its (commodified or political) sociological object, while in musicology, the sociological object determines and ultimately limits the value of the music's sensuous materiality. Without addressing the complex dialectics of mood and meaning here, one may conclude that, surface affinities aside, the gnostic equivalence between branding, advertising, and propaganda, on the one hand, and music scholarship, on the other, cannot be assumed.

At the risk of igniting a stale debate about music's meanings, it is clear that industry executives in sonic branding and advertising, no less than those in cinema and the music and gaming industries, do not share the view that music's material presence and carnality is, at bottom, wholly ineffable. In the interests of brevity, a few brief examples will suffice. Recording artist and video game composer, Tom Salta, experimented with using an orchestral work by Ralph Vaughan Williams for the soundtrack of *Grand Theft Auto*.[43]

[43] Tom Salta, "The Art of Composing for Video Games" (keynote lecture, Music and the Moving Image, New York, May 21, 2010).

In Salta's view, straying so far from the stock sounds associated with the action of the game produced results as absurd and confusing as those of alien visual imagery. Music's shoulders in Salta's studio are not as broad as those found in Abbate's argument. Concomitantly, the production of drastic presence is a central concern for commercial music engineers. These are the unique effects, alluring details, and expensive-sounding moments that characterize industrial song composition. John Seabrook describes this practice in the context of commercial ballads:

> The money note is the moment in Whitney Houston's version of the Dolly Parton song "I Will Always Love You" at the beginning of the third rendition of the chorus: pause, drum beat, and then 'Iiiiiieeeeeeiiieeii will always love you." It is the moment in the Céline Dion song from *Titanic,* "My Heart Will Go On": the key change that begins the third verse, a note you can hear a hundred times and it still brings you up short in the supermarket and transports you … to a world of grand romantic gesture— "You're *here*."[44]

There is no doubt that these money notes (and even money silences!) are productions of presence that are overdetermined by cultural scripts, constructions, and conventions. However, they are not *experienced* as gnostic meanings, but rather as drastic intensities—a shiver down the spine, a widening of eyes, a tremor of the skin.

Herein lies the key paradox of the kinds of affective experience attendant to significant arenas of musical listening. Drastic moments—deeply anchored in culturally-scripted techniques (from simple sonic effects to laundered money-notes)—are heard as immediate material acoustic phenomena. This is not a simple reconfiguration of Abbate's position for it adjusts the analytic gaze toward the obstinately *a prioristic* ear. Abbate casts doubt upon the arts of reading racial characteristics from purely musical sounds, for example, because the reality of drastic experience is nonsignifying. When Richard Eichenauer "read[s] out of the disembodied lines of a musical work the face of a particular racial character," Abbate responds by mischievously associating this maneuver with Wagner's troubling grasp of music's embodiments of racial characteristics (519).[45] The problem with Abbate's construal

[44] John Seabrook, "The Money Note: Can the Record Business Survive?" *New Yorker*, July 7, 2003, 45.

[45] Abbate is quoting Richard Eichenauer, *Musik und Rasse* (München: Lehmann, 1932), 13 from the translation provided by Leo Treitler, "Gender and Other Dualities of Music History," in Solie, *Musicology and Difference*, 40.

is that racism *requires*, as a condition for its efficient ideological functioning, a *nonsignifying substrate*. In other words, sonic markers of race—vocal idiolects, for example, or musical tropes—are functional sites of *autonomically experienced* audile profiling. They play out in the ballpark of reflex—that which cannot *not* be experienced. While Eichenauer's account (or that of Taruskin) may be overdrawn, Abbate's construal of the drastic, in vivid opposition to the gnostic, cannot spirit away the *dialectics of the nonsignifying signifier*. It is a mistake to place the problem of racism squarely in a field of gnostic representation. Racism is infrequently the result of deliberative thought, but embedded instead in connotations and cues that operate surreptitiously. The music and the sounds people make can solicit judgments about them that are as instantaneous as they can be brutal. To simplify a little: the *grain* of African-American or Mexican-American voices, for example, or, of the melodic traits of Islamic calls to prayer, or even, of the rhythmic *topoi* and sharp-sounding harmonizations of African music, may in itself be a fully culturally-determined *habitus*—an ingrained grain—but, for better or worse, it is all-too-often *experienced* as nonconscious reflex for racialized apprehension.[46] If the drastic component of this experience—nonsignifying, ineffable, etc.—amounts to (even if only *on occasion*) a sublimated cultural *topos*, then the act of withdrawal and abstinence risks becoming ideological—the mute witness to potential injustice and inequality. One of the primary modes of listening involves a deictic function—involuntary triggers of collateral meaning—which we find in Schaeffer's écouter, Barthes' alertness, Chion's indexical listening, and so on. Although this mode of listening is construed as the least musical one in these writers, the paradox of presence in Gumbrecht and Abbate is that it partakes liberally of *deixis*. Unless music is construed as absolutely autonomous of such listening, the repudiation of such collateral—pretending not to have what one in fact has—ushers the routine *fraudulence of sonic dissimulation*.[47]

[46] There is a vast literature on the intersections of race, music, and sound, which cannot be listed here. A few instructive recent writings on vocal timbre include Nina Sun Eidsheim's *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African-American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), Jennifer Lynn Stoever's *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), and Grant Olwage's "The Class and Colour of Tone: An Essay on the Social History of Vocal Timbre," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, no. 2 (2004): 203–226. See also *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[47] For Schaeffer, Barthes and Chion, of course, the deictic function *is* cordoned off from other modes of listening—such as the musical écouter *réduite*, psychoanalytic listening, and reduced listening respectively.

The trouble with apparently nonsignifying (high-speed) sonic embodiments of the drastic is that their exaggerated retreat from *illicit relocation* transforms what goes as the *licit* presence of drastic experience into a *complicit* gnostic one. To remain with the example discussed above, racism (no less than other forms of routine discrimination) *requires*, for its systematic production, a surreptitious disavowal of its own existence. This is not to say that all musical and sonic events are socially legible *tout court*, but to recognize that in practical contexts of prevailing intersubjective communication, it behooves us to grapple with those sonic markers—markers that identify, signify and discriminate (in all senses of these terms)—in whose sensuous grip we are reflexively engrossed. Discussions of affect and presence in music might need to be released from the Kantian idea that music amounts to no more than imaginative flight without conceptualization—a traditional position rehearsed here as the nonsignifying drastic—and tethered to the equally Kantian idea that sound and music thereby freight signification without accountability. Just because the meanings translocated by sound and music are rarely decipherable in easy correlationist terms (Abbate's critique accurately captures the excessive dependence on these terms in hermeneutics and formalism), does not mean that it is either entirely ineffable or ephemeral. In the silence of the drastic we find the reign of the gnostic.

Finally, the productive aspect of drastic experience—a subject that would require an essay unto itself—is, for similar reasons, equally spirited away within the organizing axioms of Abbate's account. As a final gesture toward the contours of such an inquiry, two brief examples will need to suffice. In a lone footnote, Abbate makes an important nod towards Elaine Scarry's argument that beauty does not, as claimed, *distract* us from the phenomenal world, but actually *intensifies* our awareness of it (532).[48] Although it is harnessed to buttress a claim against the hedonist rebuke mounted by gnostic scholarship, Scarry's point actually poses a challenge to Abbate's figure of the drastic, illuminating instead the clandestine gnostic entanglements—its capacity to intensify worldly engagement—of beauty. This is the antithesis of the racist reflex in sound, but the systematic tethering of drastic and gnostic is similar in both cases. Likewise, legal scholars are beginning to argue that affect does not lie outside of legal interpretation and protocol, but may in fact be a necessary ingredient for its proper functioning. In the words of Emily White: "The affective aspects play a role in

[48] Abbate's reference is to Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 58–68.

setting the emotion's constituent desires for action. Without the affective dimension, emotions might, counterintuitively, be less answerable to their own distinctive built-in rationales."[49] Affect, in other words, operates not as an exterior element, but as a constitutively linked catalyst for sharpening gnostic rationales. The drastic encounter hones in on the gnostic collateral. For White, these affectively-refocused rationales actually scale to judicial interpretations of the values of human dignity itself. In contrast, the ethics of drastic withdrawal—which register the other only as (point) *blank* presence—risks serving as an ideological alibi for freighted meaning, effectively beating a retreat from holding the habituated reflex to account. Abstinence and withdrawal tarry here with refusal and denial. Where the drastic is understood as constitutively exclusive of the gnostic, we find the embodied reflex *in medio musicorum* posing as irreducible presence.

It is this radically inarticulate reflex, now reducible to a network of neurons mapped by sensors on networked subjects—symbolic orders without accountability *par excellence*—that is readied for statistical expropriation in an era of industrialized computation. Separated by a chasm between music's material event and its ineffable ephemeron, the drastic functions like software itself—executing effects without explanation, accomplishments without understanding, realizations without representations. But that is another story…

[49] Emily Kidd White, "A Study of the Role of Emotion in Judicial Interpretations of the Legal Value of Human Dignity Claims" (PhD diss., New York University School of Law, 2017), 45.

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Abstract

The study of music's production, reproduction, and circulation is today suspended between two ruling paradigms—the methodological inclinations of musicology, on the one hand, and ethnomusicology, on the other. If the central referents for musicology (and especially its technical support system, music theory) exaggerate the importance of fixed texts (archival documents, audiovisual media, technical inscriptions, musical scores, recordings and transcriptions, the organology of *instrumentaria*, etc.), their antithesis—the central referents for ethnomusicology—exaggerate the value of dynamic contexts (social processes, cultural practices, affect flows, conventions, interactions, agents and networks, etc.). This essay turns toward an intermediary point of focus—the role of *performance* itself as an opening into reflections on music *qua* music. In particular, this essay engages the challenges posed by a prominent theorist of sound, media, and performance, Carolyn Abbate, and the conception of the "drastic" in music. Written almost two decades ago, at a time when the Humanities underwent an ostensible *turn to affect*, Abbate's essay "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" detects in music scholarship an abundant engagement with music's texts and contexts, and a simultaneous aversion toward music's phenomenal reality, exemplified by its live performance. In "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" Abbate redresses the imbalance and offers avenues for addressing music's material, embodied, and even spiritual presence. The essay is notable for catalyzing a series of shifts in music studies in the decades after its publication.

My counter-argument is organized around four primary themes. First, it considers the precise performative modalities of music's mediatic transmission for drastic listening. Second, it outlines the entangled moral and ethical operations that are freighted by drastic encounter of musical performance. Third, it assesses the affordances and limits of rejecting music's technological reproducibility. And fourth, it detects an uncanny return of the gnostic repressed at the core of drastic experience in real time. The conclusion of the essay demonstrates music's paradoxical ontological status as both *event* and *ephemeron*, arguing that the drastic must be reconceived to genuinely acknowledge the sonorous presence of its socio-political collateral. The primary working example for the essay's conclusion addresses the question of race and music. Its critical impulse notwithstanding, this essay also attempts to highlight the insights of Abbate's account of musical performance and the inadequacy of the largely negative reaction to it.

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