MUSICURATUM: COMPENDIUM

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2012-2019
Voor BtB, in liefde, bewondering, en vriendschap
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Preface

One should always be a little improbable.
– Oscar Wilde

This book is a compendium of all the texts that have been published on the Musicuratum website from the project’s launch onwards, arranged in chronological order from the beginning, omitting merely a few notifications of technical matters pertaining to the Internet platforms themselves, and incidental updates either relating to the playlists I’ve assembled on Youtube, or else presenting a new track from Soundcloud by someone or by some group already featured – and accordingly I intend to augment it with the writings which appear on the website subsequently, at least until the point perhaps when the compilation in its entirety will have surpassed a certain length.

Presenting these postings in their original sequence in the form of a single computer file, is intended as a convenience to those who may well find it difficult to read them on a screen with any degree of concentration or for any extended period of time, given that the book or parts thereof may be printed out and then perused ad libitum on paper. Earlier, some of the longer texts were offered individually in just such a way, and so it is but a further step to do the same with nearly all of them together. Although it has not proven feasible to include videos from Youtube or Vimeo, nor audio tracks from Soundcloud, Bandcamp, or other systems, in the present document, not even in the form of hyperlinked phrases or sentences – unhappily so, as these items in fact constitute the text, as it were, whereas my words amount to simply a sort of commentary – I hope that readers of these pages when printed will not fail to consult again the
respective entries on the website, in order to listen to the pieces of music featured in them, which remain nach wie vor the raison d’être of my entire undertaking.

The Musicuratum project began towards the end of the first half of 2012, and initially the texts–cum–commentaries were quite short – I was, to say the least, a mere beginner and more concerned to take the lay of the land than to say little with many words. In truth, the first several rounds of entries comprised not much more than blurbs, though then the postings lengthened gradually until, a month or two having passed, they would frequently assume the shape of essays, sometimes short or middling in length, at other times quite long; but throughout it has been my aim to avoid taxing the reader’s patience unduly, not dilating in prolixity beyond a due measure, even though, in the attempt, I recognize that my paragraphs at points tend to a terseness and compression which may leave readers with the feeling of intellectual tinnitus or pangs of vertigo: thus, beyond a certain point, the overall course of the more abstruse passages might be hard for some to follow. Well, believe me, even after more than a year has elapsed, and more than two hundred entries later, I still feel rather unsure of myself and of the ideas that occur to me concerning the subjects I’m touching on, and yet, on the other hand, in my musical project I often think that precisely in the midst of this uncertainty is where I want and ought to be and to remain, if only for the sake of whatever sense does get conveyed in the end. So perhaps, under the circumstances, disorientation can itself become a minor virtue, by means of which some insights which otherwise would flit by unapprehended by an author or unremarked by a reader, may be gleaned after all – even if only by a neophyte.

“Cela, dire cela, sans savoir quoi,” says Beckett in L’Innommable, and that is what I too still hope to be capable of doing on occasion, leaving truth, validity, and method for once out of consideration, in favor of particular perceptions or judgments which strike me, however great the surprise of it, as plausible. No authority is needed to support this position, of course, yet here Lessing’s very famous public statement (even though it was contained in the privacy of a letter*) does spring to mind and may fit-

* Dated April 6, 1778, to Johann Albert Heinrich Reimarus.
Jeder sage, was ihm Wahrheit dünkt, und die Wahrheit selbst sei Gott empfohlen!

With a little bit of luck, some fermenta cognitionis – to speak Lessing’s language – may actually bubble up from the present book.

All the same, I am aware that these texts tend at times to stumble about, evincing some inattentive errors and glaring missteps (though not too many of them, I hope) which would rightly irritate those who know more about and have done more with music than I do. The forbearance shown by my various interlocutors leaves me feeling very grateful indeed.

In any case, within the span of a month and a half after I set up the website, the texts began to be numbered more often in pages than in lines, and thus, on the basis of my own case, I can verify the claim made by Morton Feldman in his essay “Give My Regards to Eighth Street”: “Six weeks is all it takes to get started.”

I account myself quite fortunate that the locale and the circumstances joined together to clear such a span of time for me and my project during the summer months of 2012.

Thinking back now over what’s been done thus far under the Musicuratum title, what I recall most strongly is the feeling of the project’s sheer unlikelihood – a sentiment which enveloped its first steps and for quite some time thereafter continued to attend it in the direction it’s taken since.

It would have squared much more neatly with my own background and the history of my interests – and thus everything would have happened so much more predictably – had I turned my attention last year not to a new subject I had never before explored seriously, music, but instead back to one or another of those of which I previously had had some depth of experience, such as literature, theatre, the visual arts, philosophy, or political science; while a project of establishing a website as a forum for the publication of short texts would have posed several technical challenges to me in any scenario, the written content thereof, if I had pursued any of those more familiar paths, was likely to have ended up as being very tedious indeed: and what then would have remained of the admirable love of risk
that gave rise to Wilde’s bon mot, let alone its rougher cousin, Nietzsche’s notorious dictum?

To speak plainly, during those months more than a year ago, I was seeking a challenge (or had the challenge sought me?), and then music entered the scene and seized me with something of the force of one of those ideas that one reads of in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, the ones which take hold of people and then at a stroke turn them and everything around them upside down or inside out.

In fact one of the things that drew me into this venture from the beginning was the risktaking it seemed to demand of someone like myself who, being neither a practicing musician nor a professional musicologist, would in writing about musical topics at best be an interloper *in a foreign field*, or rather, a stranger veering amongst several of them, given how frequently it happens that the different varieties of music hold one another at a considerable distance in pronounced distrust and thus convene in a single space only rarely. Generalizing from this prospective embrace of risk, what I envisioned the website as constituting was a virtual arena wherein those who entered would be wrenched out of the spheres to which they’d gotten accustomed, thrown into musical encounters that might not be the most comfortable initially but which would make up for it afterwards, by one’s new familiarity with the other sorts and perhaps also by a number of new acquaintances or even friends.

For I had taken note, too, of Youtube and Soundcloud’s role in fostering something like a virtual community of musicians worldwide, and was especially struck by one thing the pianist Dejan Lazić had said while prefacing a performance of Giovanni Dettori’s “Lady Gaga Fugue” at a concert in London: he identified the composer as “a friend of mine I’ve never met.”

Before I leap any further ahead of myself, however, a brief explanation regarding my choice of moniker is called for.

A portmanteau coinage, I felt sure, would be the best flag to fly on my project’s behalf, and I spent some hours testing various possibilities
before the word *Musicuratum* occurred to me; then, a quick consultation of the Internet having revealed that it was in fact quite unheard-of, I hastened to lay claim to it.

The second part of my portmanteau is *curatum*, which as an adjective evinces the varied meanings of the basic concept of *cura*, ranging as the latter does – this is no more than a rough summary – across a semantic spectrum from the *custodianship over or care of ...*, through *great worry about ...*, to *a cure for something*; thus, at the one end, the adjectival derivative signifies *well-cared for*, at the other, *solicitous or anxious*, and it also comprises several of the meanings situated between these two, such as *earnest or tempered*. Now, while etymological study should itself probably be pursued with caution, as it is certainly possible that intellectual endeavors may succumb under its weight, here I am mentioning these bits of etymology mainly in order to intimate in some manner that the underlying term matched and still matches rather precisely the character of my own concerns, whenever I think seriously and/or in levity about music, I mean, about both what it is and what it can do.

What interests me most in music, is its current state (and on the occasions in these texts when I’ve lit out to inquire into a region of the past, an implicit reference to our present has generally accompanied me), but I also tend to think that what is called *the present moment* usually is itself afflicted by the impending arrival of some futurities, and indeed not incidentally so but right in its very essence, however aware or unaware of their influx one may happen to be. Now, as regards the notion of the strange imminence – or perhaps, as it were, the pre-imminence – of this or that future, I may by no means find myself alone, insofar as the very devotion the musical show to music often seems that at bottom it’s an index of this fundamental condition, if such in fact it is. Accordingly, if one takes the precarious situation of the present vis-à-vis the future to be a given, what then could come to the fore and manifest itself in the shared experience that is music, with a force possible in few other fields, is the *care* which seems to recommend itself as a fitting attitude to embrace by way of response.

All the more so, perhaps, at a moment when neither the present nor the future appears to bode well. Häßlich ist die Gegenwart, die Zukunft
noch häßlicher, von der Vergangenheit ganz zu schweigen – thus one might vary one of Nietzsche’s notes from the first half of the year 1888* – der Musik widmen sich die Musiker und deren Publikum, damit sie nicht an ihnen zu Grunde gehen.

Well, may the extremes of one’s trepidation lead where they will. – In any event, to disclose and describe the fundamental structure of care, was one of Martin Heidegger’s main aims in his major work *Sein und Zeit*. Moreover, as one might plausibly infer from that tome, though I have now no time to go in search of citations with which to bolster my contention, it is within what Heidegger would call the “horizon” of care that the peculiar priority of the future in the order of time can strike one’s awareness with the greatest weight: the various ways in which it can do so, are taken note of by him at length and rendered in a variety of formulations. Not wanting here to enter much further into these topics, however, I should simply like to register my impression that frequently he writes of futurity as though it were fundamentally twofold, comprised both of one kind which recedes away from me, and of another which comes towards me, where each of these two can proceed along its own specific path only insofar as the other is brought to do likewise: thus a future which recedes from me must push another closer towards me, and conversely, a future advancing into my vicinity can do so only once another has been thrust farther away. Now, if the foregoing represents a defensible interpretation of Heidegger’s thinking about this topic in his book, at least in some of its Stimmungen, one might plausibly conclude that, according to him, all these future moments are as though jostled together in a crowd and can move at all only by exerting the modicum of violence required to make those around them move as well, all of them being displaced step by step in various directions along the way – and that this prospect, discerned best by those who attend to the future with care, would then in their cases intensify the latter even more.

Whether such prospects or vistas onto some future may not actually be more performative than they are constative, to cite two concepts from present–day theoretical linguistics, or, to remain with Heidegger’s own

* Numbered 16 (40) in Colli and Montinari’s edition.
terminology, what the precise nature is of the “Zeitigung der Zeitlichkeit” that is bodied forth through this attitude towards futurity, are interesting questions in themselves, but, as seems obvious, this is not the place to pursue them, either – even though the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy may readily spring to mind when one reflects on this part of the philosopher’s thought. No, here I merely wish to suggest that he understood this attitude as being other than a visual one in the first instance, and so to call its orientation a prospect or a vista is already inadvertently misleading, though always avoiding this error could prove difficult on account of the paucity of the vocabulary currently available. In the descriptions in his text, in any event, this attitude often seems to assume a fundamentally aural and acoustic character, with future time figuring there in effect as an extensive swarm whose buzzing is heard long before it ever can be seen, such that the greater the degree of one’s care, the louder the premonitory buzz in one’s ears will be.

The foregoing, however accurate or adequate it might be as a summary, may be taken as indicative of Heidegger’s considerable sensitivity to the sense of hearing in particular and his consistent interest in aural experience in general, as well as his attempts throughout the course of his career to situate these at the center of a philosophical inquiry (or to re-locate the latter within an acoustic horizon). These features of his thinking are evident and incontestable, it seems to me, and accordingly, when Heidegger looms up from time to time in these pages, the reason why ought not to be so very mysterious.

To those whose curiosity has by now been aroused sufficiently to want to inquire further into this Heidegger, I should like to recommend a work that is both provocative and incisive, Marlène Zarader’s Dette impensée, for several portions of her exposition, quite apart from the great interest of its own topics, have also contributed more than a little to the ways in which I am attempting to understand the acoustic sphere generally and music in particular.

A single example of this should suffice. In part it is to a consultation of her book that I’ve owed the impetus to unfold an idea sounded throughout this compendium in several variations (of which the more characteristically Heideggerian are not the only ones): namely, something as fraught
as the rapport between the present and the future can be registered through perception that is above all aural in nature – and especially by virtue of the intent listening one knows from the experience of music – with a precision far better than we could ever think to attain in the case of the forms under which the adjacency of the two periods of time would reveal itself whenever the one, the other, and whatever interval there is between them, are all regarded from a standpoint over which the eyes hold the greatest sway.

Now, to end this disquisition on the moniker *Musicuratum*, a few words may be offered about the decision to utilize one to begin with. Why did I not simply proceed under my own name? Leaving aside my own private reasons for doing so, adopting a pseudonym had much to recommend it, as regards the risk–taking mentioned before, if only by way of encouraging myself not to withhold the results merely on account of their ultimately tentative or experimental content. Above all, the choice to refrain from entering into the academic discussions in which one must defend whatever consistency may be contained in one’s own position – at the outset this felt like liberty, and it continues to afford a freedom which by now I should not want to surrender. Furthermore, there being as it seemed to me already quite a lot of overbearing care in these pages, it’s largely due to my pseudonymous authorship that along the way I’ve felt myself free to interject various humorous notes in order to diversify the mood as needed.

The following collection of texts does not exactly constitute a whole, but neither is it merely an assemblage of unconnected notices. Although some are ephemeral and others the work of a week or longer, when read in the original sequence an underlying coherence should begin to appear, with actual themes coming to the fore and particular ideas being playfully developed, varied, opposed, and contradicted, generally in a more or less tentative vein, especially when from time to time the zones between music and other subjects are also explored. Yet the diaristic aspect of the entries will remain evident throughout – the influence for better or worse of the
vagaries of the climate is recurred to rather frequently! – or even their often epistolary character, as it may not be so wrong to say that many of them are akin to missives to those whom they were written about.

Missives, not missiles! The role played in these commentaries by the negative, even on those occasions when they flirt with criticism, has been I hope kept to a minimum, for this question represents considerably more than a mere matter of etiquette vis-à-vis those whom I’m writing about. Generally speaking, I’ve eschewed not only any forays into outright negation, but also the indirections by which such a treatment might then be administered more efficaciously – preferring instead in these cases to observe something like a careful rule of silence. Along these lines, every so often I’ve found it to be (inverting a maxim from the first chapter of Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften) notwendig und freundlich, lieber nicht zu schreiben, als nichts zu schreiben. After all, isn’t it true that there are times when sending out sweet nothings may be worse, incautiously opening more room for nothingness to strike, than simply to write nothing?

One last point remains to be addressed. Those who delve into the following texts may notice a progression whereby some of them circle more and more frequently around the topic of the human heart, most often in connection with that uniquely resonant instrument, the voice, for the latter’s enormous power seems to consist not least in its singular capacity, if not also to share, at least to sound out without significant falsification the former’s inner life, which can be revealed deliberately in all other modes only at the price of undergoing an adulteration fatal to itself – occurring before, concurrently, or after the fact. Or at least this has been my unspoken assumption thus far.

However tempted one might be under certain conditions to put one’s own heart on display, I am inclined to agree that the very desire to do so is already rife potentially with grave perils, which may then be realized most disastrously in the sphere of political life: this was the dangerous prospect against which Hannah Arendt cautioned us all so presciently, precisely fifty years ago, in what has proven to be her most profound book.
There she insisted that the human heart indeed has reason to protect its own inscrutability, for it “keeps its resources alive through a constant struggle that goes on in its darkness and because of its darkness”* – while in the not quite parallel passage in her own edition (Über die Revolution), in her mother–tongue she amplified the thought even further. “Was das Herz hervorbringt, sind Kräfte, aber keine Gestalten, und diese Kräfte haben die Neigung, miteinander in Streit zu geraten. Durch dieses streitende Spiel seiner Kräfte erhält das Herz sich lebendig, und eindeutig wird es erst, wenn seine Kraftquellen versiegt sind.”

Accordingly, the human heart would already have been conquered entirely by one of its several, most often mutually counterbalancing forces, whenever the attempt were undertaken by the one whose heart it was, to display it to others, as though it had been transformed into an artifact of virtue or an exquisite work of art – but by the same token, its resources would then already in effect have expired, perhaps even irreversibly. So, however admirable risktaking may be in general, it too has its limits, and from this cliff one would do well to hold one’s heart back.

And yet, although the struggle within the human heart without which it would perish, is literally not fit to be seen, for its sake and our own, it may perhaps be overheard, if one knows how to listen carefully to the human voice, and to teach this may indeed be not the least of the prerogatives of music.

* Musicuratum
August 2013
Amsterdam

* On Revolution, chap. 2.
The Texts
Tiago Braga

(June 17, 2012)

Tiago Braga, from Portugal, is a pianist, singer, and – it’s becoming clear – a born presence on stage; he’s a performer with a strong sense of the way English should sound, not to mention how he handles his own language (and even Spanish too on occasion).

Landon Gadoci

(June 17, 2012)

Landon Gadoci is a singer and piano-player living in Austin, Texas – though he travels often – who excels in conveying inward feeling; he knows a thing or two about the human heart.

Recently he’s collaborated as a vocalist on a few numbers with a duo called Read and Return.

Jan Kerckhofs

(June 17, 2012)

A musician in the Antwerp area, Jan Kerckhofs is especially fond of acoustic material, whether British or American, and he delivers it marvelously. And he’s one of a number of talented musicians whom he’s befriended and with whom he often performs; currently he’s also working on a project to assist musicians in Flanders called “Music Matters – Belgium.”
Shan Malaika

(June 17, 2012)

Hailing from Geneva, Switzerland, singer and songwriter Shan Malaika imbues everything she sings – in flawless English no less – with an abundance of soul, and she doesn’t avoid even some of the hardest songs to cover of all.

On her Soundcloud page there are also two other songs, “Floating” and “People Always Leave.”

Jakub Rizman

(June 17, 2012)

In Jakub Rizman’s hands – a Slovakian harpist with a conservatory training – the harp becomes an instrument as fierce as it is beautiful, thus doing away with the slight disdain in which it is generally held. Moreover, an Italophile (“Giacomo Rizmanotti”) and a “little monster” too, he eschews neither classical nor popular music.

The Shures

(June 17, 2012)

Currently a duo (a trio originally, up until early this year), the “Internet band” The Shures now comprises Gabriel Cabrera, from Sydney, and Chris Kennedy, from London (with, in a recent collaboration, Kristen Justine, from Cleveland, Ohio); each has a very distinctive voice, which harmonize with
great feeling over the *distance between* them. In fact, that distance also represents one of their major themes, in their solos as in their duets.

**Avant la Lettre**

*(June 19, 2012)*

A young band from Amsterdam, Avant la Lettre – Laurens Radstake (vocals, guitar, keys, bass, programming), Erwin Stoepman (keys, guitar), Lyangelo Vasquez (bass, keys), Titus Zeldenrust (drums), and Martin Beusker (guitar) – has started to gain notice this year, with the release of a first album, *Belief*, and several performances for Dutch radio and television. The name may be French but the band thus far performs entirely in English (though the text on their website is in Dutch; they also have a Facebook page in English as well as channels on Youtube and Vimeo); it wouldn’t be surprising to see them touring abroad in the near future.

On the band’s Soundcloud page there are three numbers not on Youtube, “Masquerade,” “Ages of Man,” and “Isolator.”

**Samm Bennett et al.**

*(June 19, 2012)*

Born in Alabama and having lived in Boston, in Nigeria, in various European countries, and in New York – where he was well–known in the experimental music scene – before settling in Tokyo, Samm Bennett’s music is just as unusual and variegated. He performs both by himself and in combination with quite a few other musicians, and has set up a small record label, Polarity Records (the website also functions as his own), for his and their work. And
he’s very prolific, in combination with quite a few other musicians; this playlist includes a sampling of his recent work. In addition to his label’s Youtube channel he also has one on Vimeo.

Two other pieces on his Soundcloud page are “Burn My Souvenirs” and “I’m Going Home If I Can Find It.”

Boogie Belgique

(June 19, 2012)

These days there’s some very witty dance music being made in Ghent, Belgium – by an outfit with the name of Boogie Belgique. Who knew that dialogue from the classic Hollywood cinema would lend itself so readily to the dance floor? And don’t miss the videos on its Youtube channel (or in the playlist), as they are equally smart, thanks to the animation skills of lead man Oswald Cromheecke.

On its Soundcloud page are three other numbers, “The Ogres,” “Boogiem-[man’s Penthouse,” and “Moriarty.”

Ali Brustofski

(June 19, 2012)

Ali Brustofski is a singer in New York with a voice and a band whose sound could – and probably will – rock whole stadiums. She’s got great volume! And she also excels in duets, for instance in her cover of “Princess of China,” with her brother, Connor. And, thanks to Theory Films, in some of her videos the city itself is well represented.
Caleb

(June 19, 2012)

Dan Halamandres and Elyza Nicholas, hailing from Southend-on-Sea in England, together form the duo Caleb, and their music partakes of the melancholy of seaside regions, as do their videos. Or, as in “Little Boat Song,” it’s quite a darkness that sweeps in. Their voices are haunting in all their songs, including “Glory’s End,” which they’ve placed on their Soundcloud page.

Stephen Carmichael

(June 19, 2012)

Stephen Carmichael, a young singer and musician in Brisbane, Australia, with a striking performance persona, has been reviving the pop music of the early 1980s for the last couple of years, assisted by a talented crew of band-members, producers, other performers, and videographers: their work is thrilling to watch, and one has the sense that one may be watching an international star in the making.

On his Soundcloud page he’s posted a cover of “Tainted Love.”

There are also some remixes of his song “Falling for You,” by Matthew Laming and Gavin Edom, that are perfect for the dance floor.
The Life and Death of Marina Abramović

(June 22, 2012)

What a superb piece of theatre! Biographical it was, but with much omitted and even more that had been stylized for the stage, Abramović and Wilson’s work was both beautiful and sharp. The singer Antony (of the New York band Antony and the Johnsons) was a real discovery, while Willem Dafoe could hardly be recognized at first (he has quite a way with accents).

Brava and bravo!

Jamie N. Commons

(June 22, 2012)

There are some singers in the uk with a special feel for the accents of the southern part of the United States, and Jamie N. Commons, from London, is one of them; his version of the South is pretty gritty, filled with whiskey, rivers, and folks who don’t settle down. A strong performer in concert, the videos on his Youtube channel, too, are very moody.
Cornelia

(June 22, 2012)

In London, recently relocated, there’s a young Swedish singer and master of the remix, Cornelia Dahlgren, whose nom d’artiste is simply Cornelia; there she’s found herself amongst several like–minded musicians, most notably perhaps the Portico Quartet, an adventurous jazz ensemble with whom she’s performed.

On her Soundcloud page she’s posted quite a few tracks, originals, remixes, and other items as well.

Giovanni Dettori

(June 22, 2012)

Increasingly well–known for his work in bringing back the fugue as a musical form, Giovanni Dettori, a composer in Milan, is active also in composing in other forms as well. The former is represented on Youtube under the title “Art of Counterpoint,” the latter under his own name – both equally interesting.

Michael Wyatt has published an informative interview with him on the Reichel Recommends website.

His most prominent work is without a doubt the “Lady Gaga Fugue,” which has even been played at the BBC Proms (where, in a thought–provoking phrase, Dejan Lazić, who performed the piece, called Dettori “a friend of mine I’ve never met”); there are numerous performances of it by younger musicians, in various arrangements for different instruments, sometimes for more improbable ones. It is a composition that exemplifies how the fugue could open itself to popular music and thus emerge as a form that might help reinvigorate contemporary classical music. (He has also written a few other fugues along similar lines.)
Also on his Soundcloud page are “Plach Domrabortnizy (The Weeping of the Maid),” and “Alcoholic,” while on his Myspace page there’s a composition called “Prologoexcerpt.”

Gregory Douglass

(June 22, 2012)

A singer/songwriter in Burlington, Vermont, Gregory Douglass has built up an extensive body of work over the last fifteen years or so; but it’s his covers that are most readily available on Youtube. And at his best they are memorable indeed – he doesn’t hesitate to tackle some of the hardest numbers, and he does so with an inimitable aplomb. His version of Etta James’ “At Last” is stunning.

Prabhu Edouard

(June 22, 2012)

From southern India, the tabla player and vocalist Prabhu Edouard – he’s skilled in several other instruments as well – has made his home in Paris, where he often works with other musicians, most often jazz masters such as Nguyễn Lê, and even on occasion contemporary classical composers, but nor does he avoid pop music, collaborating frequently as he does with his partner, Seheno, a singer from Madagascar.

His own vocal technique is memorable.

On his website he has several audio recordings of his work, while on his Myspace page there’s a smaller selection, which includes “Lasa” and, with El Hadj N’Diaye, “Jaly.”
Stephen Edwards

(June 22, 2012)

Soon to finish an advanced course of study at the Johns Hopkins’ conservatory in Baltimore, Maryland, Stephen Edwards is a young American composer who’s already written quite a few pieces, in some of which a revival of musique concrète is afoot, while in others it’s a subtler influence that that kind of music exerts. In both he shows himself to be playfully serious.

To be more specific: the skill with which he transforms the noises made by animals – insects at the one extreme, whales at the other – into the sounds of something like percussion or wind instruments, and integrates them into real compositions, is remarkable.

Nico

(June 22, 2012)

Nico (Christa Päffgen, 1938–1988) remains a fierce presence even nearly twenty-five years on. Some of the most prominent female singers of today owe quite a bit to her and to facets of her image, whether or not they realize it.

I’ve put up a playlist dedicated to her, which begins with “I’m Not Sayin’” from 1965 and moves forward from there, through songs from around 1970, which are less well-known, and including some live performances she gave later of her hits with The Velvet Underground and of her own numbers, of which the most haunting was and still remains “Reich der Träume,” written for her by Lüül (Lutz Ulbrich), and then concluding with a few noteworthy covers and remixes by other musicians, such as Dirtmusic, Skist, and Trance Groove, whom she hasn’t ceased to inspire.
Onra

(June 22, 2012)

A most sophisticated sense of how yesterday’s records or those from the day before yesterday, found while on longer trips abroad, may be sampled and incorporated into music that one can dance to while yet appreciating aesthetically, is exhibited by the Parisian music producer Onra (Arnaud Bernard) in his two albums entitled *Chinoiseries* – the first of which is such a complete work in its own right that I’ve included it whole in the playlist (having found it uploaded in five parts), while from the second ample selections are featured.

On his Soundcloud page there are some other numbers.

Downtown New York

(June 22, 2012)

It’s early Friday evening, and time for a change – so how about a playlist that presents some of the music, satire, and humor circulating in one particular corner of downtown New York – the one where the rapper Cazwell hangs out, Amanda Lepore presides, and Sherry Vine entertains (and where Peaches is to be found when she’s in town)?

The playlist features some of their music, some of their fun self-promotion, and some of their spoofs and comedy. Amongst other items, the last episode of Vine’s hilarious miniseries “The Flames of Hell’s Kitchen” is included: it’s entitled “Trouble.”

This is an “after hours” playlist – most likely it’s NSFW (though that depends on where one works, of course).
Ørjan Matre

(June 23, 2012)

There’s a young composer in Norway whose pieces are already being performed in his own country and abroad: his name is Ørjan Matre. A recording of his “Four Miniatures for Orchestra” has been uploaded on Youtube, and I’ve included it in a playlist, but he has composed quite a bit more over the last several years – for instance, “Logitech® Noise” or “Händel Mixtapes,” which is quite inventive musically. As the titles may suggest, he is interested in the instrumental use of technology.

On his website he has posted audio recordings of some of his works.

Milosh

(June 23, 2012)

The singer and electronic musician known as Milosh (a.k.a. Michael Milosh) hails from Toronto, Canada, but moves about frequently, as he states on his Facebook page: he’s lived in Berlin, Thailand, and Los Angeles, and his music, as it’s developed, owes something to each of these places. But his musical style is both dreamy and disturbing on all of his four albums, and his voice does its share in fostering an oneiric state in those who listen.

His latest album, New Territory, released under the name Milosh Pfisterer, represents a collaboration with Paul Pfisterer.
Luiz Henrique Yudo

(June 23, 2012)

Luiz Henrique Yudo is a contemporary Brazilian classical composer who’s lived for many years in Amsterdam. Educated in his native country as an architect and in this city at the Film and Television Academy, the marks of both courses of study may be heard in his compositions – there are quite a few, sometimes of great length (as is the case with “On Phobia,” which premiered last year).

Often his pieces are paired with works of visual art; abstract geometric painting and his music can go well together. And he himself has created visual accompaniments to pieces by Morton Feldman, whom he esteems highly, as with the looped sequence of images entitled “Labyrinth,” meant to be watched while listening to the organ piece “Principal Sound.”

As he notes of his own work on his Soundcloud page, “His music can be adapted to many situations.”

Cem Özçelik

(June 24, 2012)

Cem Özçelik is a member of that group of composers whom one can encounter on Soundcloud – if one has time and patience enough to wander about there a bit. Just as on Youtube, though in a somewhat different way, there’s such an abundance of talent to be met with in unexpected or unsuspected corners, although in this audio–only domain, amongst those musicians who’ve found one another even over great distances, the bonds of camaraderie may be still tighter.

Be that as it may: Özçelik is completing his musical studies in Istanbul, and has already been honored to have a recent composition performed by the
Mivos Quartet while it was in that city on a visit. And in his spare time he maintains a website, a Youtube channel, and a Facebook page – now why does this sound familiar? – by the name of the Contemporary Classical Music Database, where many lesser-known recordings may be perused at one’s convenience.

Christophe Ruetsch

*(June 24, 2012)*

Another interesting discovery on Soundcloud is Christophe Ruetsch, who’s active in the hub of musical activity in Toulouse that the composer, conductor, and performer Pierre Jodlowski has been fostering. As a member of that circle, it’s not surprising that he has also created a number of works for video, where dance and music are integrated; and these can be seen on Collectif Éole’s channels on Youtube and Vimeo, as well as on another Vimeo channel that is presumably his own personal one. (He also has a Myspace page.)

Perhaps his most well-known work is “Atomic Radio 137,” which premiered in 2009 and has been performed (and broadcast) a number of times since then; it was inspired, if that’s the right word, by the disaster at Chernobyl in 1986 – suffused with snippets of narration and other remarks, eerie droning and tickings, and a certain amount of fuzzy static (though also – and this offers perhaps a ray of hope – by the noises of ordinary animal life). Somehow while listening one thinks that this is how radiation would sound, if it were an aural phenomenon at all.

Also in 2009, Ruetsch collaborated with Jodlowski and others to perform improvised music for the screening of a short film assembled from extracts from *The Great White Silence*, Herbert Ponting’s later cinematographic documentation of the 1911 expedition to Antarctica which ended so terribly; this music has evidently since been added as a soundtrack to their film.
But to come back to his Soundcloud page: on it there are some other striking pieces of electro–acoustic music, “S.L.O.T.,” “Six Doors,” “Sympathy Express,” and “V” (“d’après V de Thomas Pynchon,” says Ruetsch).

Xavier Baert

(June 24, 2012)

The hour’s gotten late and some silence is in order. But silence isn’t just one thing – some silent films are actually rather musical.

Some of Xavier Baert’s short films represent good instances of this, by virtue of the subtle manner in which in them the sequences have been composed, layered, and modulated – his procedures offer an analogue in the realm of the moving image to musique concrète, but much softer, so to speak, than much of the music of that kind, and more melodious. This is particularly the case in the film *Empreinte*, made in 2004, but the way in which the footage in *Révélation*, from 2001, has been absorbed from another source, cut up, and reassembled into a new sort of dance, also evinces a strong musical sense.

Baert, a programmer at the Cinémathèque de la danse in Paris and the co–ordinator of its centre for Danses et images actuelles, avers in an interview with Cécile Giraud, published in *Objectif Cinéma* in 2004, that he was a musician before he became a film–maker.

In the same interview he confides that when making each of these two films he was tempted by the idea of extending the actual silence to the screen: “J’ai même pensé mettre une piste optique vide, pour rendre l’absence encore plus sensible, et que les haut–parleurs n’émettent que du silence,” he said, though the financial means to do so were lacking. Well, it would have been an interesting filmic experiment – testing perhaps how far we’re prepared to go to see and hear nothing, rather than not to see or to hear at all – but I’m rather glad that in the end he chose to place some music on the screen.

These two films are available on his Vimeo channel.
French Cassettes

(February 27, 2012)

The band French Cassettes – a group from San Francisco – makes music that vibrates with youthful uncertainty, overassertive one moment and bashful the next; in the downtempo numbers as in the more upbeat ones, these moods are all mixed up in a manner that’s very true to life. And the arrangements corresponding to them are full of interest in their own right.

Currently the group (these bandmates go by their first names: Scott, Mackenzie, Thomas, and Ben) is fundraising to help realize their next album – for which they’ve already written ten songs: their Facebook page has the details.

Neil Jansen

(June 27, 2012)

Neil Jansen, a classically–trained euphonium player in Los Angeles, is a musician whom I first learned of not through his Youtube channel but actually on account of Google, which led me to his Soundcloud page, to which he’s given the whimsical name of “Beangolem”; what took me there was the wish to hear his arrangement for euphoniums of Giovanni Dettori’s “Lady Gaga Fugue,” which he’s uploaded under the witty title of “Fugaga.” But on both sites he offers a nice selection of his wonderful playing – including a premiere of a piece written in the 1960s by his grandfather, James Bankey, called “Tristesse.”

There is also a performance of “A Song for Japan” by Steven Verhelst.
Jornt Karel

(June 27, 2012)

Another of those discoveries that a system like Youtube, at its best, can make possible, is Jornt Karel; he’s a musician and singer who lives in a village called Easterlittens in Friesland (this location was gleaned by Google, as there’s only a little information on his channel), whose cover of “Heavy Metal Lover” is somehow perfect, even though it does not end but rather terminates too early. Yet Karel doesn’t seem like a one-number wonder: he’s not even twenty years old and is already someone whom one ought to be hearing more from – much more, and by no means only covers of other people’s material.

Grégory Marteau

(June 28, 2012)

Another participant in the circle around the Collectif Éole in Toulouse, is a young composer named Grégory Marteau, whose work has already been performed at numerous festivals throughout France, as well as having been played or broadcast in Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. His “Rituel métallique,” in five parts, is a very eerie piece of electro-acoustic music.
René Baptist Huysmans

(June 28, 2012)

René Baptist Huysmans is not a professional musician, but rather a linguist specializing in one of the languages of Nepal, who divides his time in Europe between Amsterdam and Berlin – though listening to his compositions, one would not know it. On the contrary, his works (he’s only recently begun to post them on Soundcloud) are quite accomplished, eliciting the interest and approbation of no less than Michael Bonaventure, Bart de Vrees, and Luiz Henrique Yudo.

It’s a sort of musique concrète that he makes, utilizing found sounds that are submitted to extensive alteration by his preferred instrument, the computer, and modulated into the material of his compositions. “My favorite percussion instruments turn out to be trains in stations, my favorite ensemble construction workers at a site,” he writes. “A train journey from Amsterdam to Berlin can be a six–hour–symphony.”

(During the last month or so, Huysmans has also been uploading samples of Sampang music as well as the sounds of everyday life in Nepal onto his Soundcloud page, so perhaps he’ll find a way to bring his profession and his passion together after all.)

Valentin Stip

(June 29, 2012)

Signed last year to the Clown and Sunset label for an EP, Anytime Will Do, Valentin Stip is a Parisian transplant in Montréal who, as could be expected of one of Nicolas Jaar’s associates, excels at appropriating all manners of music – including, in his latest piece, “Hiathaïkm,” a short passage from some piece of film music that’s as familiar as can be, so familiar that I can’t recall its
name (it may be that Boogie Belgique has also recently made use of it) – and mixing them up into something rather new.

On his Facebook page he relates that he began to compose computer music (“No specific genre, only what pleases my mind,” he says) upon arriving in Canada, having left his piano behind in Paris – after a decade or so of playing. And, though I don’t mean to descend into pseudo–biographical “explanation,” there’s something wistful about his works, yet in them there’s also, perhaps as a compensation of sorts, quite a lot of acoustic irony, for instance in “Gravels,” as well as numerous flashes of wit, especially in “War Telegram.”

Peter Hollens

(June 29, 2012)

Peter Hollens, of Eugene, Oregon, is prominent as one of the best of the current wave of beatboxers, musicians who replicate all the various sounds in a musical arrangement by means of their voice and vocal apparatus, and reassemble the results in the studio into music that often matches a conventional instrumentation tone for tone – but he’s been making music of the more usual kind for quite some time as well, having founded (amongst his other activities) a well–known a cappella group at the University of Oregon, On the Rocks.

Recently he’s released an album (which includes an original song, “Sleepwalking”), and he also works as a music producer.

His singing and beatboxing is elaborate, and it’s fascinating to hear just how complex the results of this approach to music can be. And to see them: his videos are fun to watch, and often instructive too (frequently he includes a breakdown of the various vocal tracks in them).
Gossip

(June 29, 2012)

As it happens, next Monday the band Gossip – singer Beth Ditto, guitarist Nathan Howdeshell, and drummer Hannah Blilie – will be stopping in Amsterdam on their current European tour to play at the Melkweg (it’s a sold-out performance), and so it won’t be amiss to make a playlist of some of their more recent numbers, including several from their new album, A Joyful Noise. (For what it’s worth, I’d assembled the playlist before hearing that they’d be coming here; the timing is fortuitously felicitous.)

Gossip, hailing from Portland, Oregon, made its breakthrough in the UK some years ago, and they’ve outdone themselves with the two albums that have been released since then: the present one includes the hit “Move in the Right Direction,” which has been circulating widely through the Internet these last couple of weeks.

Michael Kiwanuka

(June 29, 2012)

With the March release of his debut album Home Again, Michael Kiwanuka has been making a name for himself not only in Great Britain (he’s from London) but in the US and on the Continent as well; he recently returned from a tour of the former and will be giving a number of concerts in several European countries later this year.

His voice speaks for itself when he’s performing his acoustic material solo (even live on the street, as he did earlier this year in Brussels), and when he lets loose with his band he’s irresistible.

His live performance of Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love” may or may not receive – well, a lot of love, but it is inspired.
North American Nihilists in London

(June 30, 2012)

In many ears it must sound like a strange phrase, most likely, but it actually refers to something: London as an American city (for many hundreds of thousands of Americans live there, augmented by the Canadian cohorts) would not be complete without a nihilist underground, and some of the expatriate musicians there have been willing to leap into this void. They’re a fixture on at least one local scene, evidently, which includes a bar, The Macbeth, a recurring dance night, “Never Come Back,” a performance venue, The George Tavern, and a party or two, along with a record label, Misanthropop; and some of them have even gone on tour abroad. (Central Europe – Berlin, Vienna, Budapest – was recently honored with a visit.)

It is true, however, that nihilism encompasses multitudes and any number of shadings. A softer tinge, relatively speaking, is to be met with in the music created by Jack Duckworth, a Canadian from Vancouver who’s lived and worked in London for more than a decade as an artist, graphic and web designer, and musician and composer; on the musical side he’s been involved in numerous projects over this course of time, and has recently been engaged in two: Savage Furs and Soft Riot, the former a band and the latter it seems a one–man enterprise.

Given Duckworth’s involvement in art and design, the videos on Soft Riot’s Youtube channel are as much visual statements as they are sonorous ones – in them the droning images and the blurry sounds, so to speak, go hand in hand. At times dark and on occasion even slightly bucolic, they embody one mode of self–distanciation from ... from what, exactly? It isn’t so easy to say, but then, it amounts nearly to a category mistake to expect an answer to that question, doesn’t it.

It would also be something of a mistake to expect long playlists in the case of these musicians – but on Soft Riot’s Soundcloud page there are some additional tracks and even the whole of the album Hyperbolic Masses.
Duckworth is at work more or less concurrently on a second musical project, the band Savage Furs, in which he is joined by Del Jae (vocals, synthesizers) and Chris Flatline (synthesizers) – or was joined, it’s not quite clear from its Facebook page whether or to what extent the band might be on hiatus or disbanded. Yet that hardly matters when one’s following the band’s live performance of its song “Sick Lamborghini” (disregarding the rough quality of the visual and audio recording), included in the playlist and which complements nicely the much snappier studio arrangement of “Thrones of Young Ice.”

On Savage Furs’ Soundcloud page there is the studio version of the first song as well.

Alongside Duckworth’s two projects, and having accompanied Soft Riot on its Central European trip, is “a dark electronic three piece from London” – as it’s described on its Facebook page – called Nói Kabát (a phrase which, evidently, means a “woman’s jacket” in Hungarian). The band itself may be mysterious – and it’s doubtful that it too is composed of nihilists from North America – but its sound is compelling (with some witty aural touches): while Savage Furs may take some cues from a band like Duran Duran, with Nói Kabát the major influence is New Order.

All of the aforementioned musical ventures range from dark to darker, but though nihilist experience too has its varieties, to call these North Americans “nihilist” would be something of a stretch, were it not that in these circles there is another performer who is openly, avowedly one – the expatriate from Kansas, Robert M. Fenner, who performs from time to time under his own name but more often under the moniker Nurvuss (a reduction of the word nervous), assisted or not by a couple of other bandmates.

Of this performance permutation his Facebook page notes simply: “Sometimes autobiographical. Sometimes not. Always NURVUSS. What you take away from it is up to you.”

A cheeky statement – but it’s shock that he deals in. It may be hard now to conceive how shocking the first appearances of the Sex Pistols must have been, back in 1976 and 1977, but Nurvuss’ act gives a pretty good idea of what
it was like. And anyone who is not shocked by it, at least a little, is probably too inured to get what Fenner is up to.

Admittedly, Nurvuss does have his humorous side, as a number of tracks on his Bandcamp and Soundcloud pages reveal.

But these are like jeux d’esprit or exercises in wit, whereas his song “American Made” is shocking, there’s no denying it. (Last week I noted of some of the videos in the “Downtown New York” playlist that they were actually rather mild. The same cannot be said of this one. And out of squeamishness I have not included the song “Lobomotomobile,” which has a particular eerie pertinence in the brave new world of official health services entrusted blindly to the administration of far-away actuaries and utilitarians.) Be advised: it’s Rimbaud raw and Henry Miller heavy (Fenner has been inspired by both of them, it seems), not to mention blasphemous – and very hostile to all politicians.

And yet even in this heart of Fenner’s nihilism, even when he hisses the loudest, there’s something like a wistful allusion to an earlier time. It’s barely present to be heard, of course, but when he gets around to blurt out the words that are, on a first hearing, the most offensive thing of all in his song, somehow it sounds as though it’s sung with something other than merely a snarl of loathing or self-loathing. Those three words are “the united snakes,” and as for the faint sound of his concern – will you hear it?
Stephen Dedalus

(John, 2012)

A Joycean composer in Clermont, Stephen Dedalus is another discovery made thanks to Soundcloud, although he also has a Youtube channel (which he doesn’t use very often) as well as a Myspace page (which he does). He is a composer of electro–acoustic music – this sort of music seems to be something of a French specialty at present – which he also performs live, adjusting the dials on his console as nimbly as other musicians press their keys or pluck their strings.

17 Hippies

(July 10, 2012)

Established in 1995 in Berlin, the band 17 Hippies – they aren’t hippies, though they tour very often and far, nor are there currently seventeen of them, rather it’s now a twelve–piece group – began as a weekly meeting of musicians who would as far as possible play other instruments than the ones each was most accustomed to. Even then they wanted to mix things up, and during the years since they’ve done so with verve: in the music they make, zydeco and klezmer, Cajun and Balkan music (to name some of the sounds that move the band) flow together as though they were all destined eventually to encounter one another in just such arrangements. (That the central meeting point should be in Berlin lends an especial poignancy to the very spirited cross–fertilization that results.)

The musician and songwriter Lüül (Lutz Ulbrich, the man who wrote that haunting song “Reich der Träume” for Nico back in 1980) was a member from the beginning; the diverse biographies of the others can be consulted on the band’s website, of course, but here mention may be made of Kiki Sauer,
likewise a member from the start, whose voice can be as sweet or as sad as she
wants or needs it to be, whether in German or in English or very often in
French (she credits her university studies in French philosophy with lending
her the equanimity requisite for participation in this collective undertaking):
her delivery of the line “Ich bin gekommen um adieu zu sagen,” leaves one
feeling very quiet indeed.

On its Youtube channel the band has posted a charming informative video
about itself, while in addition to those featured in the playlist, on the band’s
Myspace page there’s another very interesting number, “Biese Bouwe,” which
gives one some idea of a people’s music and song that might possibly have
emerged if – by virtue of an alternative history in which Germany, somehow
having united and become a colonial power two centuries earlier than the
Wilhelmine era, had found “its place in the sun” not in the South Pacific but
in the Caribbean – the German language, alongside French and English, had
contributed in a major way to the formation of the Creole vernaculars of the
West Indies.

Ben Carey

(July 10, 2012)

Ben Carey is a saxophonist, a composer, and a wizard of technology – the spe-
cifics of this side of his activity, I must admit, go over my head, though I can
still admire, assess, and appreciate the results – in Sydney who’s also studied
at the Conservatoire in Bordeaux. Currently at the University of Technology
in his city, he’s pursuing a doctorate “focused upon the design and develop-
ment of interactive musical systems for improvised performance with instru-
mental musicians,” as he writes on his Soundcloud page. And indeed, one of
the most fascinating aspects of his work is the notion of extending the role of
the computer in the musical process beyond its common functions of register-
ing, recording, reproducing, and reworking sound.
He has no Youtube channel of his own, but there are videos of performance he gave (on June 11, 2011) of works by two young Australian and American composers, Mark Oliviero and Dan Tramte, “Sikinnis” and “Download,” respectively, and these I’ve put together in a short playlist. Yet on Soundcloud and on his Vimeo channel his work is very abundant, and those sites offer a good introduction to his various musical enterprises.

**Detroit Swindle**

*(July 10, 2012)*

On its Soundcloud page, the Amsterdam duo Lars Dales and Maarten Smeets notes that they did not grow up in each other’s proximity and came of age still further from Detroit – and yet had very similar affinities for that city and its music, which led them to join forces. Detroit Swindle is the result, and it’s coming into its own last year and this with the release of three separate EPs (not to mention several mixtapes, some of which have been uploaded in their entirety on Soundcloud) and numerous gigs a bit later this year, in this country, Germany, and the UK.

The duo’s brand of house music should go over really well on the other side of the Atlantic, too.

**Forestears**

*(July 12, 2012)*

Forestears – the pun, or in fact the set of puns (there’s more than one sort of tear, after all), in the name is itself appealing – is a band in Brighton which began three years ago as a duo and quickly expanded into its present form,
comprising Elliot Ellison (vocals, guitar), Dale Jones (lead guitar, vocals), Owen Crouch (bass guitar, vocals), Chris Kirkham (drums), Laurie Carpenter (trumpet), and Will Wells (trombone). Although one of the band’s themes is romance gone sour, and notwithstanding that there’s something wistfully bucolic in some of its numbers, what’s remarkable is how much tremulous joy these six can press out of even the darker material, with all the instruments (the trumpet and the trombone are especially noteworthy) complementing one another and the vocalists marvelously. The music that results is exhilarating.

Nicolas Jaar and His Friends

(July 12, 2012)

A little while ago I wrote a bit about Valentin Stip, an electronic musician who was signed to the Clown and Sunset record label, founded by Nicolas Jaar as a home for himself and his fellow musicians; now it’s their turn.

It’s true that in the precincts of metropolitan night clubs and big-city house music, and increasingly amongst many of the art-world cognoscenti, Jaar needs no introduction – in fact, the student of comparative literature at Brown University (it’s his day job, so to speak) may already have gotten a bit over-exposed in those circles – but since this talented DJ and electronic musician is still something of a cult figure generally, a few words may be in order here.

Born in New York and raised in part in Santiago – one of his most affecting numbers is entitled “Mi Mujer” – Jaar grew up with the music of Erik Satie and Mulatu Astatke (a jazz musician from Ethiopia who, incidentally, will be performing later in the year in this city) and began to compose electronic works of his own while a teenager. Some time later, while on a field trip in the Southwest organized by a number of high schools (the accounts of their meeting are somewhat apocryphal), he befriended two other young musicians, Nikita Quasim from St. Petersburg and Soul Keita (likewise an Astatke aficio-
nado) from Addis Ababa, and stayed in touch with them afterwards – friendships which resulted in a number of collective albums put out by the record label he would go on to establish. (Though Jaar has a Soundcloud page of his own, the one maintained by the record label is broader and more varied; the selections are drawn entirely from it.)

Not content to remain in the studio, Jaar has been very busy as a DJ, performing in clubs throughout North America and Europe and at times in South America as well; the playlist on Youtube features several of these appearances, which are really quite fascinating to watch and listen to. The concentration and stamina required of him in this role must be considerable, all the more so as what he does during those hours is, to a great extent, sheer improvisation. (And it could even be – this is a point I should look into further – that during some of them he’s made recordings of ambient noises in the room and then utilized them later the same evening! If so, it would be a procedure that gives a new meaning to the term feedback.)

So it isn’t surprising that these performances have become legendary – especially the one lasting around five hours he gave early this year at the Museum of Modern Art/P.S. 1 in New York (of which an excerpt is included in the playlist): it was called “From Scratch.”

Last year he also began to perform with Dave Harrington in a band they’ve named Darkside; the debut, with Soul Keita in attendance as well, was at the Music Hall of Williamsburg, a venue where he’s been playing with increasing frequency.

Andi Kristins

(July 12, 2012)

In the case of the singer, songwriter, and electronic musician Andi Kristins, a New Yorker who’s from Reykjavik and who has lived in numerous countries and in various parts of the USA, the music (along with the videos, when she’s made them) is prone to transport the listener back to the first flush of synthe-
sizer pop in the early eighties; yet there’s something jittery – or marching-band like – or on “the edge of ...” in her arrangements and vocals that positively exhales 2012 and recalls us to the brute fact: all that transpired thirty years ago!

The march of time notwithstanding, her songs are catchy and her lyrics have depth – and she’s only just begun.

Nguyễn Lê

(July 15, 2012)

A prolific recording artist since the 1980s and esteemed for the ensembles in which he’s participated with other musicians and for his enthusiastic reception of many varieties of music – on his website there’s quite a list of his interests, ranging from rock, jazz, and various kinds of ethnic music to the specifically improvisational jazz of Yves Robert and to contemporary classical composers like Mauricio Kagel, the late André Almuro, and Tona Scherchen – the Parisian jazz guitarist Nguyên Lê frequently tours abroad; the playlist I’ve put together includes videos of some recent gigs in New York and Germany. (In addition to his Youtube channel, he maintains a Myspace page, where he’s uploaded a few tracks in addition to those he’s featured on his website.)

He’s worked especially often with the tabla player, percussionist, and vocalist Prabhu Edouard (who’s already been featured here), but also with Paolo Fresu and Dhafer Youssef; and recently the singer Julia Sarr played an important role on his album Songs of Freedom.

It’s not surprising that he holds Jimi Hendrix in the highest regard and has honored him with some special versions of his songs. A bit unexpected, though, is a memorable cover of Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love.”
Eli Lieb

(July 15, 2012)

An East Village singer and songwriter who’s returned to his Iowa hometown of Fairfield, but who visits the city with some regularity, Eli Lieb recently released a first album of original material, some of which, including a video for the song “Place of Paradise,” he’s uploaded on his Youtube channel, where he also has made available several videos of his cover versions of today’s hits. Whether it’s the originals or the covers – and his version of Tracy Chapman’s “Fast Car” is really the only one I’m aware of (though The Shures’ Chris Kennedy’s version is strong, and the one by Jan Kerckhofs and Marjolijn Vos as well) able to bring back to mind the summer of 1988 when so much was happening and her song was everywhere – in his songs Lieb doesn’t hold back and gives his voice, by turns raspy or refined, full reign: it’s full of energy and empathy, also when he’s performing electronic material live.

Melohouse

(July 15, 2012)

In Nashville – I believe that they’re students at Vanderbilt University – there are a number of talented a cappella singers who have a presence on Youtube under the name Melohouse, which is also a budding music and video production company, founded last year by Shane Stever with his friends Jordan Holland and Suranjan Sen and assisted as needed by other fellow students. Thus far one of their, or rather, his (Stever is the most prominent member of the group) specialties is beatboxing, which in Stever’s hands (hands?) is imbued with musical wit and a soft Southern accent – a very winning combination: “We Found Love” interspersed with moments of barbershop quartet, dubstep, and doo–wop ... ? Somehow Stever pulls it off; and then there’s a
very Southern “Bad Romance” with a killer bassoon (Pieter Valk) and cello (Zan Berry), borne along by another gifted singer, Seth Johnson. Nor should one miss Turi Clausell’s performance, so full of heartbreak, in their cover of “Someone Like You.”

The Musgraves

(July 16, 2012)

Based somewhere in the English Midlands and comprising four musicians who go by their first names only, The Musgraves is a new band (the first LP will be released in September) that’s already been noticed in the UK on account of its very distinctive sound, both musical and vocal. With Matthew handling the vocals, acoustic guitars, banjo, mandolin, and ukulele, Matt the back-up vocals, organs, the percussion, and piano, Lesley-Marie the back-up vocals, glockenspiel, mandolin, the percussion, tin whistle, and violin, and Tom the drums and percussion, it’s a group whose music seems at least in part to stem from the Appalachia of the British imagination – which must be a very interesting locale indeed. On the other hand, some numbers reprise the sound of the pop music of the late fifties and early sixties, the stuff of the high school dances of years long gone by – and yet even those who’ve come of age in the era of house music or later may find themselves dancing to this, if only they’d happen to stumble upon it.

Once the band’s album comes out, the chance of that happening should increase measurably; some passages in their own numbers and in their covers – so very different from the songs they’re based on, especially in the case of (who else?) Rihanna and Lady Gaga – will, it seems to me, soon find their way into the remixes of today’s DJs and thus go on to lead lives of their own worlds away from Birmingham, Coventry, or Worcester.

This is a band that will surely tour the USA before long.
Angélica Negrón

(July 18, 2012)

One of the most active and interesting young composers in New York now is Angélica Negrón, who, with her guest programming for the WQXR radio station and her numerous other projects on the more popular side of the musical spectrum – all in addition to her composing, her doctoral studies at CUNY, and her other pedagogical engagements – seems somehow representative of the energy of the emergent generation of classical musicians in various countries. (Of this generation a few have already been featured on this site, and further profiles may be expected; Amsterdam too has its share.)

When she’s not playing the violin or accordion or singing as a member of the band Balún, creating more experimental or ambient music under the title Arturo en el Barco, or participating in the composers’ consortium Circles and Lines (and these three will probably be featured here too in the near future), or collaborating with the experimental theatre ensemble Y no había luz back in San Juan (where she’s from), or composing for films, Negrón must have no time at all on her hands for anything but creating numerous pieces of orchestral music in which less typical instruments are included and computer technology is also utilized, for instance the work “Bubblegum Grass/Peppermint Field,” which had its premiere last year at the Bang on a Can festival.

On the WQXR website there’s an article about Negrón by Daniel Stephen Johnson, which she has commended for its insight; it includes short recordings in which she introduces several of her works.

In addition to the works featured in the Youtube playlist, there’s an interesting one entitled “Fono” on her Soundcloud page.

And on Circles and Lines’ Soundcloud page two compositions have been uploaded, entitled “Jonas Master” and “Technicolor,” while a few other compositions may be found on her Myspace page as well.
Nick Pitera

(July 20, 2012)

Nick Pitera is the well-known baritone who, with an astonishing falsetto range and a voice that’s protean, is able to interpret male and female parts with equal ease, a talent he puts to good use as a singer, underscoring a passage with his thrilling growl one moment and reaching the very high notes à la Beyoncé the next. Frequently the transition from one to the other is so sudden it’s vertiginous; so I’d almost recommend that one only listen to his videos and close one’s eyes – were it not for the fact that he’s a very confident performer as well, almost brash, and great fun to watch. (If things had worked out for him a bit differently, he’d have made his way in the film business not as an animator but as an actor.)

Portico Quartet

(July 29, 2012)

These days, jazz is percolating in London, where, in the music of the Portico Quartet, it’s invigorated by the beats of the clubs, by the dissonance of contemporary classical and the noises of ambient and electro-acoustic music, and even by the use of a new instrument, the Hang, a sort of drum recently invented in Switzerland – and the music is a heady brew. Whether these four – Jack Wyllie (saxophone), Duncan Bellamy (drums), Milo Fitzpatrick (double bass), and Keir Vine (Hang and percussion) – are aiming to sweep audiences off their feet or intending with their aural land- and seascapes to foster a more meditative mood, they succeed admirably. Especially memorable are the acoustic ὠμοιωσεῖς in passages that are pervaded by spaces or places (just listen to their number “Ruins”) with a degree of specificity that makes one think
(pardon the comparison) of what John Coltrane does, in “On Green Dolphin Street” or “Blue Train” for example.

This band is part of a nexus in London comprising several other musicians and singers, such as Cornelia – who adds her vocals to one of the numbers in the playlist – or the Circle Traps, which has remixed some of its numbers, and perhaps even including the enigmatic DJ known as SUBTRKT, who has done the same. On Portico Quartet’s Soundcloud page a number of these remixes have been uploaded – they’ve got them covered.

Pursuit Grooves

(July 29, 2012)

Pursuit Grooves, as the multitalented New Yorker Vanese Smith is known in her work as a DJ (in this capacity she performs frequently on both sides of the Atlantic) and music producer, creates a rather cerebral sort of house music: it’s filled and even deliberately overfilled with aural juxtapositions whose effect is probably to induce an uneasy feeling of being in too small a space. It may not be too much of a reach to say that her music is about – or, moves around, circumvents – confinement in its various modes; and when her light free-floating lyrics – or actually, the lines she speaks which are like a stripped-down kind of blank verse – are set above all the electronic sounds, it can be doubly unsettling. Assuming that one is listening closely, of course.

On her Vimeo channel she’s also posted a few of the video works with which she sometimes accompanies her gigs as a DJ (she’s a film school graduate).

In the last couple of years, under the name GuSHee, Smith has been working with the Toronto DJ Cheldon Paterson. And even more recently she’s devised yet another moniker for herself, as she seems to be turning her energies to creating longer pieces of music that are specifically filmic. For the first of these she’s donned the name 91 Fellows (in honor of her late grandfather, she explains); the work that’s resulted, a score for a film that doesn’t actually exist
but which if it did would no doubt contain some sort of dystopian vision, amplifies by an order of magnitude the disturbing qualities of her earlier works. “Terrapin Sky Dome” is its title, and there’s nothing light about it at all; the sounds that trundle through it recall the overladen acoustic atmospheres of that other musician from Toronto, Milosh, at his darkest.

Pursuit Grooves, or whatever is the nom d’artiste that Smith will next assume, is one to follow.

Matthias Rascher

(July 30, 2012)

Youtube’s character as a (in theory at least) worldwide forum, where one may catch sight or hear of interesting people worlds away whom one otherwise would never have come across at all, is a topic that deserves careful attention in its own right. For my part, I don’t doubt that it provides a very worthy service in this respect; how else would I have become aware of a wonderful organist in Bavaria, Matthias Rascher, who’s not a professional musician but rather a very gifted amateur? (For the curious: he’s an English teacher at a gymnasium near the town of Knetzgau where he lives, as his Facebook page states, as well as an author at the Internet periodical Open Culture, and the compiler of a Twitter feed that’s one of the very few that actually are interesting.)

His repertoire, as represented by the videos he’s uploaded, is wide-ranging indeed, both in terms of time, beginning with baroque compositions and going pretty much to the present day, and of geography, with Italian, French, English, and American composers featured along with German ones – and of music history, as several of the composers he favors devoted themselves mainly or exclusively to writing for the instrument and thus aren’t well-known outside the realm of that specialty. So it’s all the more exciting to make their acquaintance as well, through the good offices of this splendid interpreter!
Rascher seems incapable of playing poorly – and skilled quadridexterity is always fascinating to observe in action. And in some pieces in his repertoire, in particular Richard Elliott’s arrangement of “Go, Tell It on the Mountain,” he does have to work the pedals.

His rendition of that devastating piece of music, “Gymnopédie” (no. 1), is stunning, and “Take Five” sounds as though it were written just for him! Also of particular note is his performance of Giovanni Dettori’s “Lady Gaga Fugue” on the organ in the church in Maria Limbach.

Saelors

(July 30, 2012)

Here in this harbor city (such as it continues to be) there’s a two-piece band called Saelors which, as it performs in English, alerts us to its preoccupations with its name – the sea and what pertains to it. In this duo, Alexandra Duvekot handles the cello and Thijs Havens (there’s probably a Dutch joke here) a panoply of other instruments, while both share the singing: as one might expect, their music – “darkly sweet minimalist pop” or “folk noir” as it’s termed on the band’s Facebook page – is suffused by the sort of shadows that impinge on maritime cities in particular, and if the part of Amsterdam that’s been called “le dernier cercle” still existed as it once did (if ever it did, outside the pages of a novel), it would most likely constitute this music’s regular habitat. As things stand now, though, it could pop up anywhere.

Apart from the playlist, which includes video of some of the band’s live performances, on its Soundcloud page there are some other numbers: “No No Cars,” “Pavement Flowers,” and a studio version of “Blue, Red, and White.”

(Havens is also a member of another Amsterdam band, The Vagary, which will be featured in a separate post sometime during the next few days.)
The Soft Moon

(July 30, 2012)

This is a band that makes “music for the end of the world,” as it declares grandiosely on its Facebook page, and though it’s highly likely that the term the end is intended in the most obvious sense, The Soft Moon (is that how it looks when liquefying over the bay?) does hail from San Francisco, so perhaps what Justin Anastasi, Keven Tecon, Luis Vasquez, and Damon Way are undertaking is meant more along the lines of a sonorous “voyage au bout de la nuit.” And what a night it is that these four take us through!

The visual aspect of their videos is interesting in its own right (and there’s a noteworthy bit of local history stretching out behind it) and it can be fun to watch the band perform live – but I’d suggest that one close one’s eyes for a while and just listen to its thunder and see (pardon that expression) how different it makes one feel, and, in a very strange way, how much reinvigoration it brings. I shall not invoke any number of fashionable terms or names to describe this experience, but simply state that the sound of The Soft Moon does successfully insert itself into the body – it could be called “acoustipuncture” – whereas any number of other bands only manage to make mere ear-splitting noise.

Some months ago The Soft Moon performed in Amsterdam; I regret that I only heard of the band afterwards.

The band’s videos are works in their own right, full of visual static and reverberations and areas of light used as formal elements, all sequenced together – edited and stretched out – with skill: they can actually be watched. (Here too this band succeeds where so many others only make an ocular mess.) Now, those of a certain age or with long memories may be forgiven for thinking that they’ve seen this all before, for in fact with these videos The Soft Moon is bringing something specifically San Franciscan full circle: namely, the first musical lightshows as devised by the artist Seymour Locks sixty years ago, long before the 1960s (and eclipsed by that later decade) and coeval in fact with the Beat Poets’ early period, lightshows which, in this form, compressed into two dimensions, are being transported into the present.
Whether the term *end* besits such a procedure, or whether a quite different one is better, is a question.*

**Daisuke Tanabe**

*(July 31, 2012)*

The erstwhile art student Daisuke Tanabe is a DJ and electronic musician in Tokyo who’s lived in London and is currently represented by the Berlin record label Project Mooncircle, and while a lot of what he produces is club music, and of the rest much is what one would listen to after the party or the afterparty, there’s an unmistakable artiness about it – it’s done with considerable artistry, to be sure – and the influence of electro–acoustic and ambient music is nicht gering, but nor, for that matter, though it’s a bit less outspoken, is contemporary jazz absent from this mix. (It seems he knows the singer Cornelia in London, so it’s likely that his and the Portico Quartet’s paths have crossed as well.) Rather more unexpected are the natural sounds he’s sampled and has incorporated from time to time (are those monkeys screeching now and again in the background, and were we really just whisked past an aviary?): but it all works together and the composite result is never annoying.

While he doesn’t seem to be aiming at instilling the proverbial trancelike state in his audience, Tanabe’s music does conduce to a certain amount of hallucinatory daydreaming (if someone drifts off while moving on the dance-floor, what could one call it? sleepdancing?); and some of his admirers have even created videos as accompaniment in which this tendency is underscored: a good example of this has been furnished by the Youtube member known only as One1968, and I’ve included it in the playlist.

* Concerning Seymour Locks and his role in this history, Robin Oppenheimer, David E. James, and Golan Levin may be consulted, and also the overview by Robert R. Riley, in his short contribution to the book *The San Francisco Tape Music Center* (University of California Press), “Liquid to Light.”
Patrick Thomas

(July 31, 2012)

Hailing from Dallas, Patrick Thomas is a country singer and songwriter who’s currently studying at Vanderbilt University and whom fellow student Shane Stever of Melohouse has befriended there (this is how I heard of him), assisting him in the production of a recent video in which Thomas demonstrates his skill in accompanying himself on the piano while delivering a moving performance of his original song “Stay.” But the less polished and more spontaneous videos Thomas has made on his own are just as remarkable, as his very strong voice comes through flawlessly in them as well, with passion and finesse in equal measure.

Heartbreak, as one might expect, is his main theme, in his original numbers and in the songs he chooses to cover, and yet it’s a little bit hard to believe that someone of his age could evidently know it so well – for from what other source could one sing so convincingly about it? Unless there is, alongside the famous paradoxe sur le comédien, also something like a paradoxe du chanteur.

This is not the place to pursue that question; and anyhow, who am I to try to tell the singer from the song? The main thing is the music itself, and I expect that Patrick Thomas will indeed be taking his talent a long way, even, as he says, all the way to the top.

Jasmine Thompson

(July 31, 2012)

Jasmine Thompson is another instance that makes one reflect upon the paradoxe sur le comédien, or rather, in her case, the paradoxe de la chanteuse, even if the word chanteuse is not now the right one for her at the present
time, as she is very young indeed – just eleven years old! And yet her singing is astonishing and if one did not know, one could hardly guess how young she is, nor would one hesitate to honor her with that title. And if what she’s accomplished thus far, after being on Youtube for a year, offers any indication, it won’t be all that long before the term will truly begin to suit her.

Somehow this Londoner already knows how to pair subtle and sharp while covering some pretty bleak love songs (and it is by no means easy to do a fitting cover of Lana Del Ray), and with further experience, training, and work, her capacity is going to be one that an audience won’t soon forget.

Thompson has been recognized by some other young singers and musicians on Youtube such as Tiago Braga, who collaborated with her recently in a duet (it was the first time I heard her), and it’s a form in which I think she’ll shine; I hope she’ll participate in more of them.

The Vagary

(August 1, 2012)

The Amsterdam two–piece band Saelors is not the only one that the singer and guitarist Thijs Havens participates in; alongside it there’s also a four–piece called The Vagary, whose other members are Julien Staartjes (guitar), Lukas Verburgt (drums), and Bowie Verschuuren (bass). In this band’s name, too, a nautical reference may be contained, though much more softly than with the other – it could be that whoever thought of it was dreaming of the waves. Or perhaps of the nouvelle vague (on the header of his Facebook page, endearingly, Staartjes has placed a still of Jeanne Moreau and Henri Serre out of breath and laughing on that bridge). Or, which is most likely, both at once – for why should the sea and the cinema exclude one another?

When some “enigmatic cityscapes” and, a bit more literally, “dark walls of sound” – as the band’s Facebook page describes it – are thrown in, one will have circumscribed, approximately, the music and its moods. Several parts, especially when the guitars take the lead, exert a sort of aurally hypnotic power
that is a bit reminiscent of the longer passages in which The Doors did their thing, so long ago; and in order to highlight this, the playlist tilts towards the band’s live performances.

On The Vagary’s Soundcloud page they’ve uploaded another number, entitled “Time Machine.”

Whenever they are not busy with the band, Verburgt is an aspirant theoretician at the University of Amsterdam and Verschuuren a photographer specializing in desolate people and places.

Wise Blood

(August 1, 2012)

As one might already surmise from its name, the Pittsburgh band Wise Blood – a.k.a. Christopher Laufman, who, in his own recounting, at an earlier point in his life found work in some sort of paupers’ field or as a hired hand elsewhere in the morgue – makes macabre music, and it’s not surprising that his videos feature their share of zombies and the like, praeternatural events, and, as expected, the various shades of death. But even apart from the disturbing visual accompaniment (for which, in the case of perhaps his most disquieting video of all, he enlisted the assistance of David Parker behind the camera and Daphne Guinness in front of it), his music is haunting and even more so his vocal delivery.

What Laufman does can’t really be called singing in the strict sense, and it isn’t exactly rap (though in his live performances it begins to sound like it). And while it has a certain declamatory character, it isn’t some sort of declamation either – the content is much too personal for that. (Disregarding the considerable differences, his delivery reminds me a little of the performance style of the American expatriate in London, Nurvuss.)

Probably there’s little point in trying to state what it is.
Much more than in the studio numbers, in his live performances Wise Blood bares his wild side, veering in pitch and timbre from showing his wounds (usually amorous ones) to denying that he could ever be hurt; in them he’s openly raw whereas the studio productions have been seared around the edges – and yet each heightens the taste of the other.

Chen Zhangyi

(August 2, 2012)

One of Stephen Edwards’ friends and fellow students at the Johns Hopkins conservatory, Chen Zhangyi is now making a name for himself in the United States, back in his homeland, Singapore, and elsewhere in the world, in the UK and Japan in particular (with his works being performed by major orchestras there) – and not solely as a composer but as a conductor and a violinist as well.

The playlist includes recordings of two premieres, while on his Soundcloud page he’s uploaded a performance by the London Symphony Orchestra of his work “Ariadne’s Love.”

In these orchestral works, those who have their ears open for Angst will seek in vain for chances to tremble. Rather it is luxe, calme et volupté to which the tones conduce and in which they hold us; even though it be late at night in the world of this music, and already “towards dawn,” here, borne along by the short swelling crescendos and tickled by hints of jazz, one feels quite fresh while awaiting the sunrise or doing whatever else it is that one has been staying up for.
Daphne Guinness

(August 2, 2012)

The English heiress Daphne Guinness (she divides her time between New York, London, and Paris) is renowned for her couture, but less often recognized is the fact of her early operatic training, and in a few short videos created in collaboration with London’s Showstudio she interprets some passages from the traditional corpus – “L’ho perduta, me meschina” and “Ebben! Ne andrò lontana,” for instance, and, memorably, the first stanzas of the second Canto in Longfellow’s version of the *Inferno* – in a striking manner, as one might expect she would. The woman has a presence that borders on the forbidding, to be sure, but it serves her as some sort of defense, as though it were a suit of armor, as she herself has remarked.

These short films by themselves probably would not have moved me to put them in a playlist, but her role in the video made for Wise Blood (see yesterday’s post) did incline me to create one – and her readiness to assist others in their work extends further: earlier this year, rather spontaneously, evidently, she responded to a request from the New York band Element 4 and joined them at one of their gigs on the Lower East Side. Some of the numbers she sang were captured on video, and I’ve included her impressive version of “Because the Night” in the playlist (the occasional faltering, and the roughness and truncation of the video itself, matter little). She herself may or may not regard it with diffidence, but it ought to circulate.
Klaus Nomi

(August 3, 2012)

With the Canal Pride weekend commencing here in Amsterdam, I’ll cast an eye back three decades to the birthplace of today’s gay movement, New York, and offer a playlist featuring the work of one of that era’s personalities.

At the end of the nineteen–seventies and in the early eighties, one of the most striking denizens of the New York underground was Klaus Nomi, who first got himself noticed, amidst voluble incredulity and puzzlement, with a rendition of “Mon Cœur s’ouvre à ta voix” – this countertenor could do a very striking falsetto – delivered in outlandish or otherworldly garb, before flashing lights were set off, smoke poured in, and he vanished off stage. And, with that performance during one of the first events of the New Wave, he made his grande entrée onto the scene.

Nomi (Klaus Sperber, 1944–1983), was a Bavarian transplant to New York (by way of Berlin) whose musical range was extensive, running from New Wave to opera – Purcell was one of his favorites, it seems – and nor did he neglect to pay homage to the most well–known German chanteuse of all or to one of the most famous of American popular singers. And, even after thirty years, his renditions seem nearly as evergreen as the originals themselves.

But much of his original material should not be overlooked, either. From his own unfinished opera Za Bakdaz I’ve included a couple of songs in the playlist: more can be found on the website dedicated to that project. And there’s another more general website devoted to him that’s worth perusing as well.

In 2012, Nomi’s music and his style remain alive. To vary what a famous German once wrote of a famous American: wir wissen es schlechterdings nicht, wie alt sie schon sind und wie jung sie noch sein werden.
At the Stroke of Midnight ...

(August 4, 2012)

Well, it’s the stroke of midnight, so let’s kick off the Canal Pride weekend with some music that should appeal to everyone, shall we – Aretha Franklin! Here in one special short playlist are “You Make Me Feel,” “Satisfaction,” and “Respect,” from her legendary appearance at the Concertgebouw in 1968.

Tonight, Since ... It’s Time for “Nessun Dorma”

(August 4, 2012)

For a night like this, when – in this city on this day – not so many will in fact be sleeping, it seems time for that exquisite aria from Turandot, “Nessun Dorma,” and given the quality of what’s readily available on Youtube, it is difficult to impossible to settle on just one single version; so to turn this situation around, I’ve included four different ones, two each by Björling and by Corelli. All are in their own ways superlative.

To refuse to choose in this manner was not so hard to do, as this is a piece of music I think I could listen to forever.
Von Rosenthal de la Vegaz

(August 6, 2012)

The Netherlands in general and Amsterdam in particular do not lack for DJs whose sound tends towards the memorable or the unusual, but in a class all his own is Von Rosenthal de la Vegaz. Where others raid the domains of electro–acoustic or film music for sonic treasure to pile upon their basses, he, with his earlier musical training at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague, has his sights set on classical music. In practice this means, most often, that he will refrain from making his samplings move to a beat – though he’s quite capable when he wishes of getting them jumping, and not even necessarily (this is an especial piece of finesse on his part) to the pulse of a bass; his music, therefore, is not really intended directly for the dance floor, but works very well at parties that have a different kind of tone: and for such events he and his frequently witty music have been quite in demand in this country and in Belgium recently.

Though he has a channel of his own, there isn’t much of his work available on Youtube, unfortunately; and the playlist is accordingly short. But on his Soundcloud page there’s more, including the longer piece “Nuit Classique” from his second CD, which was released earlier this year.

Dirtmusic

(August 7, 2012)

While assembling the playlist featuring Nico, I came across a cover of “All Tomorrow’s Parties” by Dirtmusic, which I included in it, and the character of that number convinced me to compile a short playlist for the band in its own right.
An occasional trio, Dirtmusic comprises the itinerant Australian rock musician Hugo Race and two American counterparts, Chris Brokaw (who was a member of the band Codeine) and Chris Eckman (a member of The Walkabouts and L/O/N/G), and its music has been shaped by sojourns in Mali and the collaboration it entered into with the group of young Tuareg musicians called Tamikrest, with whose participation Dirtmusic recorded its album BKO and with whom it’s gone on to perform live.

Dirtmusic may reassemble later this year in Mali in order to record a second album.

College

(August 7, 2012)

Those who, having missed it the first time around or paid insufficient attention back then, require instruction in electronica of a sort of which more than a few scores for Hollywood films were made during the 1980s, could do worse than to turn to College for a crash course. Now, what is College? It’s a musical project of the Frenchman David Grellier in which he realizes what is evidently a great love for this music that was (or became, by adoption) specifically American, paying it the honor of renovating it somewhat, tightening and above all speeding it up a bit, with an ear to today’s tastes – as a consequence, the music, thus restored, is beginning to live a second life on dance floors throughout Europe and North America.

And, in this revitalized form, it isn’t so surprising that it once again graces the screens in cinemas: the EP he made (in collaboration with those two kindred spirits from Toronto, Electric Youth), A Real Hero, was utilized last year in Nicolas Winding Refn’s film Drive.

When not busy with College, Grellier devotes his time to the record label he established as a home for his kind of music, Valerie, and other bands such as Anoraak have begun to congregate there.
College and Anoraak have collaborated on a number that’s been posted on Grellier’s Soundcloud page, “The Light of Your Dress,” while on his Myspace page he’s uploaded the song “Amira.”

Who’s ready for some late-night – studying?

Rory Smith

(August 9, 2012)

A young composer living in Midhurst, England, Rory Smith is well-known in Soundcloud circles throughout the world on account of having been chosen as the “Soundclouder of the day” last February 15, an honor bestowed in view of his pledge to write and publish a composition once a day during the entire month beginning at the end of January – a resolution he managed to fulfill. But more importantly, and what probably was of greater relevance in the award: what pieces of music these thirty compositions were! None was mere filler or mediocre, but on the contrary they all manage to astonish and many are positively magical and new.

He has very helpfully grouped these compositions into a set on his Soundcloud page (though he also maintains a Youtube channel and a Myspace page, they are little used), entitled “Thirty Pieces in Thirty Days,” and, since I would otherwise have featured so many of them individually (though the resulting post would have been unwieldy – which it may yet become, even so), I shall simply recommend it.

Now, Smith’s February accomplishment was something of an athletic feat involving considerable exertion and even greater stamina on his part, a one-man Tour de France in music; so it’s not entirely surprising to find that many of his compositions would in turn demand the utmost from the musicians performing them – above all from the pianists (the piano being a favorite instrument which he himself plays very well indeed) who’d have to hold to a tempo
that often pushes, so it seems, to the very limit of the speed with which human hands could move without forfeiting their dexterity and skill. Or rather, at times, quite a ways beyond that limit.

Of course, it may not be safe to assume that these works are meant to be performed at all in their current or a similar form by human beings; but if that be the aim, it puts one in mind of the fact (and this summer of athletic competitions is propitious to such a line of thought) that the capacity of human limbs and bodies in general – I’m not speaking mainly of those of any one individual – has indeed been increased over the course of the last several decades through participation in organized activities whose character is concerted and competitive by turns or concurrently. This fact is incontestable in the sphere of athletics (e.g., the four–minute mile), but it is a feature of other fields as well, and in instrumental music it has a special importance in those instances where technology has been devised which could conceivably supplant the musician – notably, the player piano, able to out–distance the human performer in terms of tempo and perhaps in some other more subtle respects also. Here an invention entered the musical arena to throw down a gauntlet to the latter, who, generically speaking, did not refuse to take up the challenge and develop the capacity of his or her instrument – the pianist’s own hands – beyond what had been considered desirable or even possible; and with this inducement to new or greater effort and exertion there appeared on the musical scene something like (to invoke a pair of perennial notions) a good Ἔρις* to underscore its existence as an ἀγών and to spur the pianists and other musicians onwards.

(To compress the foregoing into a brief thesis: had the player piano not been invented, there would have been no Georges Cziffra.)

But be that as it may, as some of the piano passages in Smith’s compositions rush by at their nearly superhuman speeds, one finds oneself reflecting on technology’s effect upon the physical basis of musical performance – and consequently about its character as a specifically human activity and the nature of the pleasure and the beauty that are intrinsic to it.

In this context too it may conduce to a better understanding to consider musical performance not as an art like other arts, but rather as being some-

* This notion debuts in Hesiod, Works and Days, l. 24.
thing like a sport. (And actually, a similar line of thought might be pursued in
the case of painting as well: just think of the practices of Jackson Pollock or
Yves Klein, in which the physical act is brought to the fore as what painting is
or ought to be all about.) I realize that this comparison of music and athletics
could well sound either banal or entirely inapt – but why, exactly, is that?
After all, on an impartial consideration, both of these activities appear to suf-
fice in themselves, or are in other words ends in their own right, and as such
each could qualify as a constituent part of the βίοι that represent in Aristotle’s
canonical definition* the various possible modes of “the good life” – and this
similarity would furnish a basis for the comparison.

Well, to put the matter in this way may provide the beginning of an answer.

If the comparison of music and sport is found to be misguided or just
wrong, this could be due to a preconception that the latter properly belongs to
the third of those βίοι, namely the “life of pleasure,” whereas the former,
music, the art of arts, simply must be brought over to the first of them, the
βίος θεωρητικός, and comprehended – that term is something of a euphemism,
and it would be better to say: neutered, disarmed – primarily in accord with
the experience that typifies it, θεωρία in all its necessary tranquility. (The ob-
ject of this assimilation would seem to be the music itself and its audience, but
not the musicians, who cannot be assimilated in such a manner, obviously;
and hence they are simply ausgeblendet by this procedure.)

Or, if this comparison is accepted but then dismissed as being too obvious,
trite, and uninteresting, it would bespeak, it seems, a lack of curiosity as
regards that third βίος and its specific constitution – which is to say, a notewor-
thy disinterest in the question of the essence of pleasure, perhaps from unease
in the face of the startling discoveries that such an inquiry might conceivably
bring to light, once athletics and sport as one main activity of this “way of
life” were considered as they would deserve to be.

* Nicomachean Ethics, bk. 1, chap. 5.
In either case, one has before one’s eyes an example of the way in which the βίος θεωρητικός has nearly monopolized the common understanding of the nature of the other two βίοι and of the various human activities of which they are comprised. Now, while my main concern here is music and its nature as a physical activity, I should like to acknowledge that what I’ve said thus far owes much to Hannah Arendt’s investigation of the relationship between the βίος θεωρητικός and the βίος πολιτικός in her book *The Human Condition* (something which will not have escaped the notice of any political scientists or theoreticians who happen to be reading this), although in touching on the third of these βίοι I’ve extrapolated from the results of her investigation, as the sections of that work wherein she deals with the topic of the understanding and experience of pleasure in antiquity and in the modern age, are written in an especially telegraphic manner and can thus be difficult to decode – and, apart from that, those parts of her book just are not as satisfactory as the rest. (For the sake of completeness, perhaps this is the place to mention that in the passage cited even Aristotle himself seems to slight that third βίος, also terminologically: he does not dignify it with a compact technical term, as he did in the cases of the βίος πολιτικός and the βίος θεωρητικός, though he certainly could have done so, had he chosen to.)

So, the comparison of sport and music – first and foremost the actual performance of it, but also perhaps the activity of writing and composing it, and possibly also the listening to it, insofar as the latter requires of the listener an active effort and exertion – might render a bit more distinct what the pleasure and the beauty in music are, or at least help to situate the question more adequately.

The pleasure taken by athletes in their activity would seem to be balanced or even exceeded by a great deal of strain and pain, and thus alloyed the whole could probably be characterized as painful more readily than as pleasurable, at least in the common sense of these terms; what’s involved is a prolonged strenuous effort punctuated by moments of relief and relaxation and the peculiar kind of pleasure that flows from them (the well-known but less well-understood negative pleasure that’s often more intense but also more fleeting than the positive kind) over which there arches an anticipation of a satisfactory and satisfying completion. On the other side is the prospect of considerable personal risk, of injury of one sort or another, and even perhaps of per-
manent disfigurement or deformation. (Jacob Burckhardt* does not overlook the broken noses and fingers, the poked–out eyes, and the cauliflower ears of the Greek boxers and participants in the pankration.) And yet from all this there emerges much beauty and much pleasure – an astonishing amount of enjoyment for the athletes themselves and for the spectators too.

To bring this train of thought back to Rory Smith over in Midhurst (lest I stray even further afield), it’s the daring exertion of the athletes that might provide a better paradigm than any characteristic feature of the βίος θεωρητικός – a better paradigm for understanding what could be involved were a performance of his delightful super–rapid music, which now seems to exceed the capacity of musicians to play and which might expose them to some occupational wear and tear should they nonetheless attempt it, somehow to come about in the future; while to comprehend what it is that might actuate the audiences of these works, one could look at the mode of involvement of the public at athletic events, impartial or not but never disinterested and, for its part, straining on the edge of the seats to take in so much action all at once – engagement so very different than θεωρία in any of its variants visual or auditory.

As for what led Rory Smith to compose these works and the nature of the exertion that he took in stride to create so many of them in so short a time, well, I suppose that he himself would have a thing or two to say about it ...

Those who have their doubts whether in fact a quasi–athletic character can be attributed to this music and its intention, may find more to their liking a somewhat different comparison between music and dance. For Smith has also composed specifically for choreographers, and even his other music sounds as though it might also have been written with movement in mind; in any case, many of his compositions, such as “We Had Snow Last Night,” would lend themselves readily to contemporary dance: in this connection the choreography of Garry Stewart at the Australian Dance Theatre springs to mind, or closer to home and perhaps an even better fit, that of Wayne McGregor of the British company Random Dance.

* Griechische Kulturgeschichte, vol. iv, sec. 9, chap. 3.
This other comparison is sharpened by the fact that, with its great tempo, its atmospheric acoustic effects, and its use of technical malformations such as tape glitches as musical elements in their own right, Smith’s music often leaves one feeling that it itself is a dance.

One of Smith’s compositions from February, “I Probably Drink Way Too Much Coffee but How Much Is Too Much?” was already selected by Catherine Haynes to accompany one of her videos, and the resulting work gives some idea of how well his music might undergird kinetic stage action.

☛ Before concluding – this text must already have gone to the edge of the reader’s patience – I’d be remiss not to draw attention to a few of Smith’s compositions that aren’t included in his February set and yet which will I’d wager delight the reader as much as they’ve pleased me: “Tip Toes,” “Rain Bad Today,” “Calm After Storm,” “100 MPH,” and “۝” (no, I don’t know what that symbol is intended to mean, but does it really matter?).

Yogev Freilichman

(August 11, 2012)

Yogev Freilichman is a music student in Jerusalem who’s been uploading some eerie pieces of electro–acoustic and ambient music on his Soundcloud page, including one or two that feature his spoken words, although these are admitted as much for their sonorous weight as for their significance – or so it seems to me, but then, I don’t speak Hebrew, so what do I know. And in others he makes an effective and disquieting use of sub–significant vocal noises, grunts and panting and the like, spacing them out into a sort of counterpoint to the arrangements of electronic sounds, which in their own right are already quite spooky.

The total result sticks in the listener’s mind, and I have a feeling that Freilichman is going to be a sonic artist of note.
Son Lux

(August 12, 2012)

Glimpsed from across the Atlantic, the current new music scene in New York looks and sounds as though more and more is happening on and off the grid there, where the paths of contemporary classical music, of experimental electronica, and of the sounds of the street have begun to crisscross with such frequency that one can’t tell anymore if these various kinds of music are coming or going or where each might be heading – even if it seems that they are tending to converge, things could yet turn out very differently.

But right now, the places to be in the musical life in New York are in those bustling intersections: it’s where one will encounter one of the most interesting of young composers and musicians, Ryan Lott, who is better known under the nom d’artiste Son Lux, which he assumed some years ago while completing an album of his own, *At War with Walls and Mazes*, after a period in which his professional activity had been divided between being a music producer and composing for various sorts of commissions, including for modern dance and for film. At that point, he was still living in Cleveland, Ohio – where he already had gained recognition for his work – and it’s possible that the prospect of moving to New York played a role in leading him to adopt it: as a moniker it does catch one’s attention, after all.

On that first record he also contributed the vocals, and while his voice is not likely to win any prize for beauty – he himself says as much in an interview conducted by Robin Hilton at NPR – he makes an excellent use of its tremulousness and limited volume to convey the self-chosen state of frailty and defenselessness around which the lyrics or texts frequently appear to revolve. In the beginning he was still hoping to find a proper singer to replace him in the vocalist’s role, but that aim came to naught: fortunately so, one can say in hindsight. And given the way in which he works – to begin with, there’s a lot of improvisation that takes place, the results of which he then samples, reconstitutes, rearranges (his skills as a music producer, and his employment at Butter Studios still requires them, do serve him well here) in an experimental fashion, with some trial and error – it’s probably all to the good that he has
every freedom to fit the vocal performances to the music during the later stages of work on a composition.

In that interview with Hilton they explore in some detail how Son Lux works, and the composer’s readiness to divulge something of his process is not surprising, as without Hilton, last year’s album *We Are Rising* would not have – well, risen at all: it resulted when he accepted the challenge, issued by a music periodical and conveyed to him by Hilton, to produce an entire album during February of that year. The deadline and the corresponding need for an expeditious process were instructive, he says; and one hears that he has learned something from the effort, as, generally speaking, the tracks on the album that resulted are a bit tauter than those on his first one.

In this playlist I’ve included a couple of live performances alongside a few videos which his record label, Anticon, has had made for some of his songs. (For this artist, after all, it’s right and proper that there be *son et lumière*.)

Yet to provide a better idea of the music and its progression, it will be helpful to mention several of the tracks that Son Lux has posted on his Bandcamp page – but first of all, there is a piece he wrote last year for the ensemble yMusic, entitled “Beautiful Mechanical.” And then, from his first album, “Weapons” and that album’s “Epilogue.”

An EP released two years later recurred to “Weapons” as a starting point for numerous variations. In two of the compositions included on it Caleb Burhans contributed his skill on the violin and viola, namely “Weapons II” and “Weapons V.”

On the album released last year, there’s so much that’s good that it’s difficult to choose anything in particular. But one song, entitled “Claws,” did leap out at me on account of a musical procedure that Son Lux does not employ elsewhere, to the best of my knowledge, namely the appropriation of a potent riff from an external source.

Those who grew up amidst the pop music of the early eighties will no doubt hear throughout this number a reprise of the notes that undergird the refrain of Joy Division’s “Love Will Tear Us Apart,” which many of us probably know by heart and which, re–encountered in the form of this small Leitmotiv, brings that song’s particular sorrowful history forcibly back to mind.

The risk inherent in this kind of procedure of musical appropriation, of course, is that such a Leitmotiv will not lead one through the work but rather
take possession of it and the listener’s ears entirely, and actually something of the kind nearly happens in this case – but not quite, which testifies to Son Lux’s skill as a composer.

A Sunday Evening Interlude: “Bizarre Love Triangle”

(August 12, 2012)

To chance upon an allusion to “Love Will Tear Us Apart” today was unexpected, and the encounter threw me back forcibly to the time when that number was new; it struck me, but not for the first time, that this song is one of those capable of evoking an entire period even decades later. Then, nearly automatically, I started to hum that other old hit, New Order’s “Bizarre Love Triangle,” which is even more evocative of the moment in which it first appeared and circulated –

Every time I think of you
I feel shot right through
with a bolt of blue

– for this was a song which, back in 1986 and 1987, in a city like New York (and could things have been so different in London?), with so many “people in trouble” or in worse states, struck a chord with a lot of those who’d been hard hit, by virtue of its tense music and lyrics, and then, by this sign that their condition was shared, consoled them in some manner. And, to recall how often it was played during those years, the consolation it could bring was understood and appreciated.

Then it occurred to me to draw up a short playlist featuring a few of the best covers that have been done of this song (there have been many) – and it practically assembled itself. So here are five different versions (or four and
one mashup) by, in order, a singer in Oslo, Jonas McDonnell, a Montréal band, Casino, the French cover group Nouvelle Vague, the Filipino–American band The Speaks, and a group in Los Angeles, The New Limb.

Franck Christoph Yeznikian

(August 19, 2012)

That portion of contemporary classical music that is mainly about other music or other artworks which are in some way musical without themselves being music (if it is indeed “about” anything at all) can tantalize our ears with a subtle acoustic experience; although the result need not necessarily sound as though some heavy weight burdened it, only rarely will it be light−hearted or light−footed, either: frequently, however, while it’s being played, all its air seems to become atmosphere, something that can be difficult to move through and yet which is suffused with refractions one will hardly meet with anywhere else.

Such is the case, to my ears at least, with the works of the Frenchman Franck Christoph Yeznikian, whom one can certainly call a composer’s composer – his œuvre includes works that pay tribute to some of classical music’s greats with both deference and distance – and who, although he’s gone to school with the usual French theorists, philosophers, aestheticians, etc., and mentions them by name on occasion in his own short texts, also evinces a selective but at the same time, it seems, a growing interest in developments in art, film, and poetry in German and English−speaking countries. So it’s not surprising that the musical compositions of someone who’s inclined to devote them as readily to Twombly, Celan, or Brakhage as to Mahler and Schumann, should be complicated and dense by dint of the crisscrossing of these references.

A musicologist or a critic could certainly delve into the matter of these references and explicate many of them and their interrelationships or rather – to employ terms that Yeznikian himself might prefer – their interpenetrations
and mutual supplementation, all the while searching his compositions for possible manifestations of an “anxiety of influence,” and the inquiry would perhaps in the end clarify some aspects of things; but here I have neither time nor world enough for a project like that, and even if I were such a professional (which I am not), one or two other questions would still interest me much more.

But first things first. Of especial note musically is Yeznikian’s readiness to compose for unusual instruments such as the sixteen–tone piano invented in the middle of the last century by the Mexican composer Julián Carrillo; this Yeznikian did in “Un Trouble si clair,” and it was a perfect choice for a work in which the Baroque influence is apparent even in the very title.

That influence is not limited to a single composition of his. Even apart from the fact that they often take the form of an homage to this or that other composer or artist, and leaving aside specific references to their works, Yeznikian’s own seem to owe a lot to the music of the Baroque period and also to its painting: in these compositions there are numerous passages that sound as though they are intended as acoustic transpositions of the visual clairs–obscur which were so plentiful then. (This piece of Baroque influence extends so far that in the performance of his piece “Lacrimis Adamanta Movebis” by the Orchestre national de Lyon, with Michael Hall conducting (the end of the recording is missing), the conductor and musicians themselves are lit as though they were figures in just such a painting, with everything but the essential receding from view into the fuscum subnigrum of the background.) The interference of the visual in Yeznikian’s compositions is so thorough that I should like to typify these works as “oculoacoustic” ones in which particular passages or moments are imbued with an energy having a particular color which could be described with some specificity in this or that case, with the whole work gradually beginning to shimmer by their effects upon one another, or, to put the point a bit more, well, colorfully, by their reciprocal irradiations.

Now, if this is a plausible description of what Yeznikian’s music is about (again I leave to one side the reference they make to other works), then a fitting understanding of these works would also be oculoacoustic to begin with – attentive to the various ways in which their different moments musicaux strike our mind’s eye, so to speak – and moreover, it would have to be nimble, ready
and able throughout the course of the composition to register the shimmers and the sparks struck as the sonorous images expand, interpenetrate one another, and are extinguished (to adapt one of Henri Bergson’s characteristic figures of thought).

The task would not be easy in any case, and the particular disposition of time in the measured movements of Yeznikian’s compositions renders it even more difficult; leaving the listener in a peculiar state of suspense which often seems to be one of their programmatic intentions – even a twofold state of uncertainty, as one can be waiting for some musical images to cease to interpenetrate and others to commence (but will they do so?), while the looming end of the composition casts more and more of a shadow over the scene (but when will it arrive?). And then the stage is as though set for the fortuitous occurrence that will throw new light on the work, both from within and from without ...

☛ It’s remarkable that something of the kind actually has been caught on film; it transpired during the performance of his composition “Allmälicht mahlerisant” (the German–looking term in the title actually seems to be a portmanteau word that’s suggestive perhaps of a light brightening gradually – and if one squints one might catch a glimpse of something like an Alma in there too) one evening in Bergamo by the Ensemble Texture Milano, when, at ten o’clock, the bells of the municipal clock tower began to toll – precisely at a moment in the course of the piece when they seemed as though called for and as forming part of the work as written. (And, of course, it had to be a musical homage to Mahler during which such an event took place.)

Not to be overlooked while reflecting on this incident is the fact that it’s actually very funny, though at the same time disquieting – and the audience noticed this, as is manifest in the laughter that was let loose once the music finished, which had, if one listens closely, a nervous ring to it at the same time that it sounded like a sigh of relief.

Now, laughter in which both these traits may be heard is laughter of the sort that weighed on Bergson’s mind throughout his essay on the subject, which arises in the face of an experience that’s very disconcerting precisely because it’s felt to be comical, as he does not fail to note – laughter in the face of
any incident in which an individual’s specifically human freedom of action is momentarily switched off, revealing underneath the operations of some mere mechanism. A most thought–provoking laughter, surely, more bitter than sweet, and accordingly, even after Bergson turned his attention to other varieties, it patently continued to preoccupy him: a circumstance which gives one a reason to educe a general hypothesis from the following sentence even though he framed it with reference to that particular case alone: “Cet infléchissement de la vie dans la direction de la mécanique est ici la vraie cause du rire.”*

What was and remains most thought–provoking – and bewildering – is the suspicion that there may be far more mechanism within the specifically human than one ever had surmised, and then our evident freedoms of action and even of thought look in effect as though they are little more than a thin veneer, or even simply an outright illusion that’s akin to a trompe l’œil painting on a building wall of windows in the very spots where the real ones ought to have been. Whereas those freedoms had been appreciated as by far the most serious matter in our lives, so serious in fact as to require some interlude of comic relief every now and again, once one begins to espy mechanisms nearly everywhere at work in human action and perhaps also in thought, most of life would come to seem comical – terribly comical – and it’s the few moments of serious freedom which remain that might punctuate that awful spectacle and offer some relief from it.

But to return to Bergson. In his time the comic and the serious were exchanging the places they had been assigned in the course of life, and this inversion he was aware of, to judge by what he writes a bit later about the marionette as an image for the risible human being: “Tout le sérieux de la vie lui vient de notre liberté. Les sentiments que nous avons mûris, les passions que nous avons couvées, les actions que nous avons délibérées, arrêtées, exécutées, enfin ce qui vient de nous et ce qui est bien nôtre, voilà ce qui donne à la vie son allure quelquefois dramatique et généralement grave. Que faudrait–il pour transformer tout cela en comédie? Il faudrait se figurer que la liberté apparente recouvre un jeu de ficelles [...]. Il n’y a donc pas de scène réelle, sérieuse, dramatique même, que la fantaisie ne puisse pousser au comique par l’évocation de cette simple image.”** What follows easily from this is that

such an image of a marionette could be called upon so frequently as nearly to
drive that form of a serious life from the field entirely, or – to put the matter a
bit better – afflict it with trepidation at the prospect that whenever it would
need to enter onto the scene of human endeavors, just such a treatment could
or would again be meted out to it. Here the anticipation of ridicule was indeed
intimidating, and from this point onwards that older kind of serious life
would not often be heard from. (Perhaps this is the place to note that Bergson
resorts deliberately in this passage to an exaggerated pathos and enwraps
everything in it; it was an application of tone which should suffice to direct
the reader to consider the larger arena within which he was situating these
questions: to be more specific, his mischievous invocation of that pathos may
be taken to indicate, amongst other things, that while he did not endorse the
old serious attitude, he did not favor its successor either. In fact he was enjoy-
ing a laugh at the expense of both.)

Yet the varieties of seriousness are many, of course, while human freedom
fortunately remains even more manifold, and thus the strife between the seri-
ous and the comic is still bound to be played out on any number of fields – so
let’s hasten back to Bergamo and the pealing of the municipal bells there.

A carefully composed piece of music such as this one which keeps the audi-
ence’s anticipation in play, is a work that bespeaks both seriousness and free-
dom: and when interrupted by the mechanical sound of the time being told it
seems as though it is now complete! We’ve seen that an occurrence like that
can occasion laughter, nervous and uneasy as it may have been, and I’ve
brought in a plausible hypothesis concerning the cause of it: what remains is
to try to put into words the thought to which the event might have given rise
amongst those in attendance and of which they were then perhaps relieved by
their laughter.

This sonic intrusion from without also sounds as though it were emitted from
within the work, and so, if the veil surrounding such a piece of music is un-
folded, as it seems we just have been invited to do, what will we hear and see
ticking away if not a very subtle complication of acoustic mechanisms marking
time in a mode that however fine is still mechanical, in the place of what we
had taken to be an autonomous work of art in its quintessentially human temporalization? And not just this, but do we not also discern in ourselves as an audience that strictly speaking it is not we who are listening, but some musico-temporal mechanisms of apperception, of whose operations we may be able to observe a few if only we are honest enough to admit their existence and their sway?

This very serious line of thought is at the same time exceedingly comical in its consequences. Or ought we instead to conclude that the contrariety of serious and comic is itself outmoded and it’d be better to discard it altogether?

There are some artists whose work can be understood to instantiate a choice in favor of the latter alternative, and it’s not exactly a coincidence that Yeznikian has composed works of homage to two of the best of them: Cy Twombly and Stan Brakhage.

Without delving into the œuvres of the two figures, I’ll just say, very generally, that their abstract works, whether on canvas or film, make good use of associative and other mechanisms in the creative process while not forfeiting the specifically human freedom that may properly be attributed to both the opus operans and the opus operatum. In this connection one might want to devote further thought to the question of the roles that whimsy and randomness can play in art.

At the conclusion of this text that’s already far too long, let me refer to a very nice anecdote of Stan Brakhage’s concerning another artist who was often said to work in an automatic or mechanical fashion: Jackson Pollock. It speaks more eloquently than I have done to some of the concerns raised here, and for this reason I’ve waited until the end actually to offer the playlist of Yeznikian’s compositions – which are, after all, what all this is about – for at the beginning of it, as an hors-d’œuvre, I’ve included the video in which the deft little tale is told.
Yes the Raven

(August 24, 2012)

Born in Belfast but having relocated as a teen–ager to the Appalachian part of North Carolina, the singer and songwriter – in his case those terms begin to sound trite, and actually he has the makings of a bard about him – Alyn Mearns, who has been working under the moniker Yes the Raven for the last couple of years, has traced in his own life one of the main paths by which the music of Ireland, especially that of the Scots–Irish, reached America to begin with.

Amongst the performances which he’s placed on his Youtube channel, there are, as one might expect, some covers, and in these as well as in his own original songs his close rapport with the acoustic guitar is evident. (This rapport he speaks of as follows on his website: “Alyn’s body seems to have grown a guitar and his guitar seems to be inhabited by a voice,” which, the cautious rhetorical attenuation notwithstanding, is in fact a striking and rather apt apostrophe to his two instruments and their relationship.) These covers all comprise sensitive treatments of the songs in which, with love and skill, he lends what he’s got to them while yet not stifling the resonance of their original moment; this is most apparent in his very moving version of The Smiths’ “How Soon Is Now?,” which makes me close my eyes and think – not so much of “nothing in particular” as back to 1985 specifically, when the single was released just about at the right time, so it seemed and seems to me and I’d guess to quite a few others as well. Now, most covers of older songs, of course, fail to achieve an effect of such specificity, and thus those that do are usually memorable in their own right simply on that account, whatever the other qualities they may also happen to display; after all, it’s a special depth of sense that a musician would seem to need if such a thing is to be accomplished, and considerable tact too. Mearns has clearly been gifted with both.

Alongside these covers there are quite a few of his original songs which are entrancing both musically and lyrically. In fact, several of them are ballads, and thus it isn’t so strange to characterize them as having “absorbed modern pop and folk music” while nonetheless at heart remaining “much more an-
cient, something Orphean, Homeric, Davidian,” in the words of Mearns’ website. While those terms may sound presumptuous at first, upon further reflection they do seem to me to suit his music rather well.

The power to charm those who listen and to render them quiet for as long as they listen – which is in essence its Orphic principle (I leave to one side the fables of Orpheus’ musical command over the inanimate) – is evinced to a considerable degree when Mearns takes his guitar in hand: just see if his music and his voice do not transfix you too. And as for the descent into the underworld and the eventual journey back alone, the dark scenes he passes across lyrically, be they impersonal and urban in some songs or private and intimate in others, are in his vision of them bleak indeed: and yet from our point of view what mainly matters is not the hardship but the verses he steps again into the light to sing.

Finding the right words to devote to the memory of one who but for an unlucky coincidence would have remained in the obscurity of private life and whom we otherwise never would have heard of – and who, given the price of the fame, might well have preferred it that way – as Mearns does in putting into a ballad (“Fifteen Loaves”) a poem by the young Irish poet Matthew Rice about the tale of Ginnie Wade, a civilian whose life a stray bullet extinguished near the battlefield at Gettysburg long ago, may certainly be regarded as a pointed expansion of the impartiality that runs throughout Homer’s epos, which would thus clarify and justify the invocation of the term “Homeric” in Mearns’ own case – the Homer who in rendering victors and vanquished, Greeks and Trojans alike their due in song, has shaped as hardly any other has done our common notions of the historian’s task.

What the specifically Davidian in music might be, seems rather obscure at first sight, but with a little reflection and perhaps after consulting the Bible one will think of the manner in which praise, supplication, and lamentation could be lent a musical expression worthy of the one who gives it voice, of the utterance itself, and of the addressee; and as in several of Mearns’ songs we hear how each of these three human postures can be conveyed in a mode that would touch even the hard of heart, this term may properly be applied to his work.
Of course, these three aspects of Mearns’ music – the Orphean, the Homeric, the Davidian – vary in their respective proportions from song to song; but there is one in particular into which all three enter in roughly equal measure, and it’s the song that first attracted my attention to his work: his acoustic version of the aria “When I Am Laid to Rest” (“Dido’s Lament”) from Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*, which, he demonstrates conclusively, may be transposed for a male voice without forfeiting its great power.

Not to descend too far into the specifically operatic detail, let alone into the doleful Carthaginian history in the background – how right was Flaubert when he confided in a letter* during the work on *Salammbô*: “Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour entreprendre de ressusciter Carthage!” – but there are a few points that ought to be mentioned concerning the aria.

A recent article** about *Dido and Aeneas* by Patrick Hunt, a professor of archaeology at Stanford University, informs us that in this aria the librettist, the poet Nahum Tate (who, it should be noted, was born in Dublin), made use of a specific metrical form derived from the type of Hebrew lamentation known as a *kinah* (from the word for a dirge). Now, a quick consultation of synopses in some reference works of relevant parts of the linguistic scholarship, and also of a few of the entries on the blog maintained by Peter Bekins, a graduate student at the Hebrew Union College and an instructor at Wright State University, *Balshanut*, does throw some light on the meter in question and clarifies how Tate utilized it.

According to Karl Budde’s old but still plausible investigation,*** the meter, which is termed an elegiac pentameter, comprises a first colon with three accented syllables, followed perhaps (I should think) by a very brief pause, and then succeeded by a second colon with two – a description which would, if it is accurate, already tend to suggest that any English verses created in such a meter could not be prolonged.

* Of November 29, 1859, to Ernest Feydeau.
*** “*Das hebräische Klagelied*,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, vol. II (1882), pp. 1-52.
And yet, open the King James Bible to the relevant passages and scan some of the most moving lines or parts thereof: they will reveal pairs of these meters, which lend an especial turn to the sense. In these most of the syllables bear weight and are accented, as in the following example: “and likewise all the men that were with him.”* Or in this one (although in the first half of it there is one syllable too many, the last syllable of the word “many” could go unaccented), “for my sighs are many, and my heart is faint.”** And readers will begin to discern this meter, either outright or with various interpolations of unaccented syllables, at other points in the King James as well – and the audience will hear it in Tate’s aria, in particular in the stunning conclusion, which is built of a triad of these meters (I am leaving out of account the “ah!” whose exhalation is marked in the text): twice the words “remember me,” where it’s understood that the second word will be elongated in the operatic performance into two syllables, both accented, and then “but forget my fate!”

So the text of the aria already bodies forth the cadence of lamentation, while its content clearly shows that it is in some manner a supplication; as for the other piece of the special Davidian music, praise, it may perhaps be discerned as an element in Dido’s avowal that she is strong enough to accept her fate alone and does not regret the turn of events that brought Aeneas to her shores in the first place. While it might be a reach to consider her deportment as an instance of amor fati, what is noteworthy is how free she sounds of any ressentiment and thus in the end how she would be prepared to praise.

As for us, her envoi notwithstanding, it’s not in the least likely that we would forget her fate; but nor should we overlook the obvious fact that were it not for Aeneas she’d never have been drawn forth from obscurity at all; and then suddenly one discerns in her story something like the tale of Ginnie Wade writ large, very, very large. Thus the interest that it has aroused amongst a long line of poets, librettists, singers, and now a bard like Mearns, may be understood; in their hands it’s another exemplification and amplification of the impartiality that is so fundamental in the Homeric epos – another case of song tendering their due to the vanquished and the forcibly forgotten, another instance where in retrospect music can render at least some justice to them.

* 2 Samuel 1, 11.  ** Lamentations 1, 22.
The Orphic aspect of Mearns’ entrancing version of “When I Am Laid to Rest,” this last word before a descent into the underworld, is in need of no elucidation – res ipsa loquitur, if only one has the ears to hear it. One will either be claimed by his performance, or not.

Thus his acoustic transposition of the aria is sustained by the three modes of music which Mearns himself identifies – and some similarly sustained balance, in variable proportions, may be heard in his other ballads and songs as well. Probably it’s the co–existence of these three in many of them that leads him so consistently and memorably to “sing of human unsuccess in a rapture of distress.”

N.B. In addition to his work as Yes the Raven, Mearns also collaborates musically in a duo called The Belfast Boys, where he is joined by the well–known Irish poet Adrian Rice, who has likewise settled in Hickory, North Carolina and who may perhaps be family of the aforementioned Matthew Rice (this I was unable to ascertain one way or another): their great love of Irish folk music is evident in the spirited recordings posted on their Youtube channel.

Dan Tramte

(August 29, 2012)

Currently pursuing a doctorate in the music department of the University of North Texas, Dan Tramte is a composer with a great interest in computer technology and its musical usages who’s also, on the more theoretical side, fascinated by the phenomenology of perception and time–consciousness; and these concerns come together in pieces of music for which he’s also seeking at the very same time concepts or clarifications that would help us to hear better what’s at issue. Whether in coming years he will find himself more in the
arena of music itself or pay greater heed to the call of theory, it’s of course too
soon to tell; and so, and in accord with his own current focus on the moment
as musical form, those longer-range perspectives will be avoided here, al-
though already one has some idea of how in his hands this seemingly so one-
dimensional element will unfold and emit a music that might surprise us and
him too.

By way of explanation of his musical intentions in a recent composition,
“Impulsive Moments: For Five Intelligent Musicians” – and I have to say that
this is a piece which, the further I listen to it, the more thought-provoking it
becomes – Tramte invokes the moment-forms which Stockhausen defined pro-
grammatically already fifty years ago.* In view of this, some sentences from
that definition may be excerpted here: these are musical forms “die weder auf
die Klimax noch auf vorbereitete und somit erwartete mehrere Klimaxe hin
zielen,” and which “vielmehr sofort intensiv sind und – ständig gleich gegen-
wärtig – das Niveau fortgesetzter ‘Hauptsachen’ bis zum Schluß durchzuhal-
ten suchen,” with the result that the audience may expect “in jedem Moment
ein Minimum oder ein Maximum” without being able to foresee any “Entwick-
lungsrichtung aus dem Gegenwärtigen mit Gewißheit.” So stated, all these
characterizations pertain as much to the way in which a listener or an audi-
ence experiences the music as they do to the music itself, and so they seem to
constitute straightforward and clear criteria – according to which Tramte’s
composition and the mode of listening it calls forth from us would qualify as
an example of a moment-form.

However, that is not the only reason for bringing in Stockhausen’s own
words. Taking into account his terms and the phrasing, one does wonder
whether the experience of musical moment-forms is still mainly a hermeneuti-
cal one, an instance of Verstehen in any of its modes, whether it’s the Nachvoll-
zehen that aims to retrace and thus to understand and in a sense to carry to
completion the process by which the piece of music was composed, or the
entry into that rather different Zirkel where, if one goes about it in the right
way (bearing in mind Martin Heidegger’s dicta**), in the interpretive move-

* “Momentform.” In *Texte zur Musik*, vol. 1: *Texte zur elektronischen und instru-
** *Sein und Zeit*, siebzehnte Auflage, §32.
ment from part to whole and back again it’s not only or even primarily that one aims to fathom the musical meaning or sense, as above all to increase one’s own Seinkönnen. Rather, instead of those kinds of possibilities, the manner in which Stockhausen phrases his remarks could be taken to suggest that the sort of listening he outlines is something that’s no longer especially hermeneutical in its character and implications so much as it is – I’m using this term only faute de mieux and as a first approximation – erotic.

To be sure, I can anticipate that the term erotic might itself sound innocuous or even a bit ridiculous (if only insofar as it is greatly overused in all manner of contexts); and yet this other definition of what the activity of listening embodies, it seems to me, has some plausibility in general and as regards this composition of Tramte’s in particular, especially on account of the way in which, in “Impulsive Moments,” the musicians are required to improvise together to a certain extent. But, of course, I now need to specify further what it is that Stockhausen’s own definitions have suggested to me.

Stockhausen’s invocation of climaxes, immediate intensities, levels of energy that are to be sustained but which may in the end not be, sudden interruptions, etc., all lacking a teleological orientation such that no definite prediction could be hazarded of where they were heading, leads me to think that in the mode of listening corresponding to such music many sounds and also perhaps whole movements would not be heard by the listeners so much as they would adhere to them, in a nearly tactile manner: in effect these passages would not pass fluidly by, but would slow or divert the course of musical time instead, which – if it’s at all plausible to speak of the auditory experience of music as being akin to a river or a passage – might then pile up into a heap blocking the way or turn into a stagnant and sticky pool, enmeshing or engulfing all who are present more and more in a palpable and unrelenting feeling of disturbance and unease.

In such a case, this tactile–acoustic experience would unveil and instantiate a mode of existing in the world in which literally everything, including, perhaps most horribly, one’s own consciousness and even time itself, either is felt to be sticky or viscous or threatens to become so: this is the particularly slimy mode of existence extruded in a salient paragraph, after a number of pages conspicuously full of padding, by Jean–Paul Sartre in L’Être et le Néant.
(If the sort of music and the sort of listening that Stockhausen sketched out can be correlated to this mode of existence as finally described by Sartre, then the term *erotic* could perhaps also help bring into focus any moments of revulsion and distaste that happen to be intermixed in musical pleasure.)

Omitting the clauses in which he recurred to the “Pour–Soi” and the “En–Soi,” as it’s his description and not his own elaborate conceptual system that is of greatest interest here, this is what Sartre wrote.* "Une conscience qui *deviendrait visqueuse* se transformerait donc par emprunt de ces idées. Nous l'avons dès notre surgissement dans le monde, cette hantise d’une conscience qui voudrait s’élancer vers le futur, vers un projet de soi et qui se sentirait, dans le moment même où elle aurait conscience d’y parvenir, retenue sordiment, invisiblement par la succion du passé et qui devrait assister à sa lente dilution dans ce passé qu’elle fuit, à l’invasion de son projet par mille parasites jusqu’à ce qu’enfin elle se perdre complètement elle–même. [...] L’horreur du visqueux c’est le horreur que le temps ne devienne visqueux [...] C’est la crainte non de la mort [...] non du néant, mais d’un type d’être particulier, qui n’existe pas [...] et qui est seulement *représenté* par le visqueux. Un être idéal que je réprouve de toutes mes forces et qui me hante comme la valeur me hante dans mon être : un être idéal [...] que nous nommerons une antivaleur.”

What Sartre had in mind in writing frequently of “the value” that “haunts” one in one’s being – roughly summarized, it is the prospect that the project that one is, will one day exist in a finished form, an actual project no longer, and as such be subject to assessment and judgment – was evidently a possibility that perturbed him existentially and philosophically; but here he touched on a matter he acknowledged as even more dire: a world constituted like quicksand in which resistance would only enmire one further, or in other words a world wherein one would cease to exist as a project at all. Though he did proceed to write of some ways in which, in the face of “le visqueux,” one might attempt to surpass and appropriate it, he also admitted that one would be far more readily inclined simply to flee from it, lest one become an agent of one’s own reduction into slime: but this admission would seem to throw into doubt the very plausibility of his insistence that human existence necessarily manifests the temporality of a project, and so it’s not only the essentially

* L’Être et le Néant, pt. 4, chap. II, sec. III.
projective mode of time of human existence that would come to naught in the world’s thickening substance, but also, and much more to the point, the quality of the philosophical system he was constructing in his book. One would have thought that he’d have been cognizant of the weakness, and in fact the dramaturgy with which, so late in the tome, he introduced this “antivaleur” might give the impression that he’d waited so long to do so precisely in order that he could make a show of addressing and surpassing this doubt in a convincing manner – but then the concept was hardly heard from again and that full inquiry never attempted, at least in *L’Être et le Néant* itself. (It should be noted that while he employed the term once or twice earlier in his book, on those occasions it was not fraught with the significance it bore during its short-lived appearance late in the work.)

Well, let’s leave Sartre’s failure aside, without “surpassing” it or him, while bearing in mind the service he rendered in addressing so memorably the sheer “horreur du visqueux” – the horror aroused by beings which, in the usual sense of the term, do indeed *exist*, though in a manner that has nearly nothing in common with his particular notion of the project and its temporality. (His statement that such a being is an “*être particulier, qui n’existe pas,*” if it was intended to suggest anything specific at all – and not merely to refer us covertly to the realms of “*l’imaginaire*” – meant just this, given the special sense he assigns to the verb *exister*.)

☛ To return to the moment–form as a musical mode: the question is, whether or in what manner it’s capable of disclosing the world and time in their horrible viscosity.

However, lest I assume facts not in evidence, let me first substantiate or at least exemplify what I’ve been presupposing thus far: that certain sounds can arouse in us the feeling of having come into contact with some sort of slime or something like it and accordingly prompt one to recoil. That he deliberately includes sounds of this kind is one of the reasons that the electronic music made by Milosh is both so disturbing and so effective, and from around the 2:00 mark until 2:06 and then again from around 4:22 onwards in his song “You Fill Me” there are striking examples of how he utilizes them – just listen
to the squishy beats and the sounds of other quasi–hydraulic operations and
gauge your own response.

Now, as regards “Impulsive Moments,” which as music is considerably
more ominous than that song, right from the beginning it’s filled with sounds
that suggest in one way or another viscous things or states (not to mention the
 ocasional noise that is even more redolent of something unpleasant and bod-
 ily); but above and beyond these constituent elements individually, it’s the con-
eglomerate effect that lets us hear what the result would be were a conscious-
ness to become aware of its subliminal permeation by all the scraps of noise,
sound, and music to which everyone is more or less exposed each day and to
register and replay them all with its inner ear. Such a consciousness would
very soon be liquefied aurally and its specific temporality quickly drained out
of it – not to mention what would happen to its other capacities – conse-
quences of which Sartre’s nightmarish visions of “une conscience qui devien-
drait visqueuse” and of “l’invasion de son projet par mille parasites” may be
taken as apt initial depictions. So of course there is good reason why this per-
meation must remain subliminal, generally speaking, and even so, is it not the
case that our consciousness and our temporalization are continually melting
away under this subliminal influence – this viscous influx from all sides – to a
much greater degree than we are aware of or would be inclined to admit? In
truth, were we to be confronted by the full extent of it, would not we then be
entirely overcome by “l’horreur du visqueux,” which usually strikes us, when-
ever it does strike us, with only a very glancing blow?

Thus the incipient awareness of these aurally viscous conditions would it-
self not come without risk, and accordingly one can understand that the theo-
reticians who have touched on them – this is by no means an issue that’s
arisen only recently – have usually framed their inquiries with a great deal of
caut ion: caution that’s palpable both in the descriptions they’ve provided, to
begin with, and then in the suggestions they offer concerning the subject of
what might be done about it. Often one has to listen hard if one is to compre-
hend that some statement actually contains just such a suggestion; this is the
case, it seems to me, with what Stockhausen then went on to write in his defini-
tion of the moment–form from which I’ve already quoted some bits. He in-
sisted that he was speaking of forms “in denen ein Augenblick nicht Stück-
chen einer Zeitlinie, ein Moment nicht Partikel einer abgemessenen Dauer
sein muß, sondern in denen die Konzentration auf das Jetzt – auf jedes Jetzt – gleichsam vertikale Schnitte macht, die eine horizontale Zeitvorstellung quer durchdringen bis in die Zeitlosigkeit, die ich Ewigkeit nenne: eine Ewigkeit, die nicht am Ende einer Zeit beginnt, sondern in jedem Moment erreichbar ist.” On the face of it this sentence could certainly be dismissed as fashionable claptrap or the usual theoretical nonsense; but if one replays it, so to speak, one might hear in it the implicit observation that by concentrating on the aural “now,” on every such “now,” both the composer and the audience can clear their heads of the acoustic garbage that’s been deposited there unawares: and so what Stockhausen was actually speaking about could be an aurally emetic procedure that might be either a felicitous side–benefit of the best musical experience or perhaps even a piece of music’s main subject–matter. (The electro–acoustic composer Stephen Dedalus has actually come up with a jeu d’esprit that bears on this topic.)

One should recall that the “horizontale Zeitvorstellung” Stockhausen wished to slice through was not just any old notion floating around freely fifty years ago; on the contrary, it sounds as though it were derived from Heidegger’s Sein und Zeit, and since I referred to that labyrinth of a work once already, it would probably be a good idea here to resist the temptation to stray much further into it; this all the more, considering the especial difficulties that are involved in comprehending that very elusive notion “Horizont.” And yet I’ll venture a few further remarks, the risks notwithstanding.

On the face of it, Stockhausen’s invocation of the “horizontale Zeitvorstellung” seems also to take aim at the so–called “ekstatische Zeitlichkeit” that Heidegger was at pains to explicate as offering the best way of coming to terms with time, for this temporality, he also insisted, is in some manner spatial: as he wrote elsewhere, and in italics no less, “Die existential–zeitliche Bedingung der Möglichkeit der Welt liegt darin, daß die Zeitlichkeit als ekstatische Einheit so etwas wie einen Horizont hat,” and in accordance with this definition he went on to write about “das horizontale Schema” and “die horizontale Struktur” of the three “Ekstasen” of this kind of time, otherwise

* Particularly in §81. ** §69.
known as the future, the present, and the past; while the question of the interrelationships within this threefold unity of time is of crucial importance generally, what’s even more interesting here is the seemingly minor detail of the “so etwas wie” that Heidegger slipped into the text, for it was a conceptual and rhetorical precaution which, so it appears, was intended to leave one with considerable latitude in deciding how literally or rigorously all this should or could be taken.

However, as regards Stockhausen and the question of what precisely it was that he had his sights on when he set up this “horizontale Zeitvorstellung” as his target, the difficulty derives from the evident fact that the common explanation of time, in Heidegger’s account of it (he called it, quite derisively, the popular one: “die vulgäre Auslegung”), was described in such a way that it too may be said to extend in a “horizontal” manner, though here that term perhaps bears “something like” a different meaning than it does in the other case. This is the explanation of time as akin to a river that flows along, which is to say that time moves across a horizontal plane – at least if one decides to take all these terms literally.

Here is one of Heidegger’s most concise and also most sarcastic passages* about the common explanation of time: “Die vulgäre Auslegung” – i.e., of time – “bestimmt den Zeitfluß als ein nichtumkehrbares Nacheinander. Warum läßt sich die Zeit nicht umkehren? An sich ist, und gerade im ausschließlichen Blick auf den Jetztfluß, nicht einzusehen, warum die Abfolge der Jetzt sich nicht einmal wieder in der umgekehrten Richtung einstellen soll.” Though the term itself was not used here, how would one avoid the conclusion that this “Auslegung” too is essentially “horizontal”?

(Well, I had not wanted to wander through the labyrinth of Sein und Zeit, and yet this passage I just quoted ... “Warum läßt sich die Zeit nicht umkehren?” Martin! Common sense is much more sensible than you say; it has its reasons for looking ahead and not behind itself, even when it is looking exclusively – if such an exclusive glance is even conceivable at all – at the “Jetztfluß” as though the “Jetzt” and they alone were passing by along a horizontal plane, and these reasons have their ground in the very constitution of the human body, whose φύσις lends a special priority to the unique direction

* §81.
called “forward.” One would have to be blind indeed not to see how our bodily constitution is heard from in the irreversibility that is generally, naturally assigned as a primary datum to time, regardless of how one would then explain the fact or grasp its direction; and so it’s hard to avoid thinking that you – even you, who were not exactly known for your sense of humor – must have posed this question while in a mischievous mood, or else as a red herring to distract the attention of those whom you dub “vulgär,” or perhaps even as some sort of joke to amuse the initiated.)

Please excuse the interruption ... To return to the matter at hand: according to Sein und Zeit,* the common understanding of time – which is closely correlate to the “durchschnittliche Alltäglichkeit” investigated elsewhere** in the work – conceives it as being like a river made up of a succession of instants or “nows,” each of which is thought of as a pure moment of presence, and with this conception of time most people rest satisfied, a result which then gets in the way of further inquiry and a better comprehension. In this common conception of time the present tense is accorded priority, and without disputing that this may often be justified (he did affirm that it could be: “Die vulgäre Zeitvorstellung hat ihr natürliches Recht”), Heidegger also called attention to a consequence of such a procedure, namely, a dilution of our sense of what this or that particular moment could betoken for us, in favor of the weaker desire to retain them all somehow as such – a desire which conversely would indicate that the specificity of those that actually had been important was being forgotten. And thus, if Heidegger was right, one’s very notion of what the moment might be, is flattened out when the present tense is prioritized in the common conception that the succession of nows that is time is passing by, horizontally as it were.

So, it begins to seem that Stockhausen’s call to dispose of the “horizontale Zeitvorstellung” in favor of the variable intensities of the moment, moments which music might uniquely be able to explore, would have had in view not Heidegger’s own “ekstatisch–horizontale Zeitlichkeit” but rather the common explanation of time whose limitations Sein und Zeit was keen to expound. Without of course meaning to imply that Stockhausen and Heidegger were thinking along the same lines, nor that they moved on anything like the same

* §81.          ** §9.
level, it does appear to me probable that some of Heidegger’s observations exerted an influence on Stockhausen, who might have been especially receptive insofar as he, as he said, was concerned with the variations amongst the potential musical intensities of the “now” and also, it seems, with the possibility that there might be something like a non–temporal state to which such “nows” – or better, the acoustic κένωσις of the mind that could be attained by concentrating on some in particular – might open a main avenue of access.

In “Impulsive Moments,” for his part Tramte also seems to take aim at something like a common conception of time – although here much will depend on what one thinks the title means, for it could of course refer to the structure of time itself as readily as it could to certain points in a life when some choice is made nearly all at once, seemingly spontaneously. And the composition itself, dark and aurally ominous as it is, could likewise have as its subject–matter time and its dispositions just as much as it could be about the constitution of experience.

But far more intensely than was conveyed by Stockhausen’s theoretical remarks, here one actually hears what a consciousness permeated by aural refuse and in fact acoustically immersed in the destructive element all around itself would sound like from within – and this, as I suggested earlier, could arouse “l’horreur du visqueux” to a high degree. At least this is the first overwhelming stage in my experience (which, to raise this point again, does not seem to me to have a specifically hermeneutical character, at least in the more usual senses of the term) of Tramte’s piece of music, and it doesn’t seem likely to me that all this could have been unintended by him: this is not only a very striking composition but also one that’s accomplishing what it was composed to do.

However, that is only the first phase in the experience (and because I don’t think that this could be just my own idiosyncratic one, I shall not phrase my observations in the first person). Once the initial quasi–instinctive movement of recoil has terminated, one begins to attend to how the different sounds are heaped up one over the other in aural layers that are not so easy to listen through, as it were, and which for this very reason start to create aurally something like a fully spatial environment with its three dimensions, its various dis-
stances and densities, the nearby and the farther away, foregrounds and back-
grounds, heights and depths, corners and obtrusions one can hear around if
one’s lucky, etc. And then, when one notices how the sounds are arriving from
all directions, one also becomes aware of something very curious: it’s as
though one’s time–consciousness has been suspended and one is no longer at-
ttentive to the movement of time, whether it’s by means of some mode of count-
ing, by watching something successive flow by, or in fact by any other percepti-
ble method of keeping track of it. One might go so far as to feel that in this
space that’s both unsettled and unsettling, there’s simply no place for time, or,
to put the point just a bit differently, that in this viscous zone in effect time
has already been snuffed out; and then one might conclude that the intention
of Tramte’s composition is to unveil a confused region where neither the signs
of time nor the inner time–sense would be of any use in helping one to dis-
cern a way through or, more likely, away from it – if they even remain avail-
able to consult at all.

At this point the horror in the face of “le visqueux” might well up again –
which could propel one to listen once more to Tramte’s composition, but now
without consenting to a suspension of one’s time–sense and in fact devoting as
much attention to its operations as one can. (Perhaps it could then be claimed
that here the listener’s experience becomes something like a specifically her-
meneutical one after all; but on the other hand, to use that term for this focus-
ing of one’s attentiveness would still stretch it quite a ways beyond its various
usual meanings.)

With the various sounds in it materializing suddenly somewhere and then
bouncing around, some impinging quite close, others remaining much
fainter, before other sonic waves, other acoustic ripples are set going and push
the preceding ones away and supplant them in our ears and elsewhere, with
the total effect replicating the spatiality of a crowded, very crowded three–
dimensional environment, we listeners are indeed afforded aural means of reg-
istering time’s movements, but not it seems as mere listeners, in the most obvi-
ous sense that we’d comprise an audience that’s stationary for the duration of
the performance: rather, while listening to “Impulsive Moments” it’s as
though we ourselves are either actually on the move or intent on moving,
poised to move – whether the movement is our own, strictly speaking, or of
the sorts in which we as passengers are encompassed, say as riders in the con-
fined room of an overfull subway car, or, most likely, some combination of all of these. Furthermore, in this sonic environment it’s as though what we hear, and also how we hear it, varies as a result of our movements and indeed in response to them; all our movements and not only those that are specifically purposive and locomotive, and Tramte’s composition might prompt us to wonder what parts these various types of movements do in fact play in lending a shape to our acoustic experience and in so doing stamping a form on time. One of the questions it raises, in other words, concerns quite a bit more than merely the way in which the path we are taking through some space affects and helps to determine our aural perception of it as a whole, even though that topic (recalling L’Être et le Néant once more, it could be investigated by an inquiry to which one might give the name “acoustical–temporal hodology”) is already intriguing in its own right.

So, insofar as “Impulsive Moments” was written to require a measure of improvisation from the performers, this characteristic of the piece is augmented in a very interesting manner; it feels as though in its performance we listeners too, or rather, to speak more precisely, our movements are being enfolded as virtual participants in its improvisational dimension; and from this we can infer that they and we would share the responsibility in some sense for the music that results.

Not only our actual movements in the present are involved in shaping this result, but also those we are anticipating, that is to say, both those we are poised to make and those we are in various ways expecting and awaiting – and all those that might come at us without much warning. The title of the composition already seems to point this out, and as in fact “Impulsive Moments” seems to sketch out musically the scene of a very crowded space, a single impulsive move could have any number of consequences... insofar as we listeners too are virtually present on the scene, what the results of such impulsive moments would be, is something that each of us could fill in according to our own various situations.

One remark to illustrate this should suffice. The brief bits of well and less well–known tunes that wash suddenly over us – the impact of some of these on us will depend on how much interest they’ve previously aroused and now again arouse in us as we hear them here so briefly in passing; but generally speaking they could well call back to mind old snatches of our lives and what
we were in those moments moved to do, as though we are once again in the vicinity of an open doorway through which – but it’s already too late: the train is about to leave the station – we hear something that sounds as though it were meant just for us, an exclusive invitation to enter or exit...

Leaving these more existential matters to one side, I’ll turn now (yes, it’s about time!) to the feeling that while listening to “Impulsive Moments” one attains a better sense of what the moment itself is. Here, in my view, Heidegger’s most concise and clearest statement of the underlying constitution of the kind of time he championed seems to furnish something like a hypothesis that squares with the evidence in this case, although even so the formulation may stand in need of some amendment; but be that as it may, it’s outlined in a few sentences* late in Sein und Zeit: “Die ekstatisch–horizontale Zeitlichkeit zeitigt sich primär aus der Zukunft. Das vulgäre Zeitverständnis hingegen sieht das Grundphänomen der Zeit im Jetzt und zwar dem in seiner vollen Struktur beschnittenen, puren Jetzt, das man ‚Gegenwart‘ nennt. [...] Das Jetzt geht nicht schwanger mit dem Noch–nicht–jetzt, sondern die Gegenwart entspringt der Zukunft in der ursprünglichen ekstatischen Einheit der Zeitigung der Zeitlichkeit.”

(To be sure, throughout that work one encounters a number of alternate formulations, and it’s not especially obvious how they all are supposed to supplement one another. Less relevant in this context, it seems to me, is the rather different and considerably more enigmatic passage** where Heidegger pondered the origination of the past or rather of that which is already gone and yet perhaps will again enter the present in the form of something like an essence (but it’s less than clear where it’s gone to, nor is it made quite obvious from which side or sides it would then come), in which one reads the following: “Dasein kann nur eigentlich gewesen sein, sofern es zukünftig ist. Die Gewesenheit entspringt in gewisser Weise der Zukunft.” And stranger still is the even more intricate account,*** where Heidegger’s concern seems to have been the question how “die Gegenwart in der Einheit der Zeitigung der Zeitlichkeit aus Zukunft und Gewesenheit entspringt.” So, rather than pursue the

* §81. ** §65. *** §69.
question of the “Wesen der Gewesenheit” or inquire how the “Gegenwart” might possibly be born of something like a conjugal union of “Zukunft und Gewesenheit,” here I’ll limit myself to his espousal of the futural and its primacy in and as time.)

Precisely because it’s so difficult, while listening – listening hard – to the performance of “Impulsive Moments,” and being transported into the three-dimensional space defined by all its sounds, to ascertain where exactly they are hailing from, one begins to apprehend that they are coming towards one from the future, and indeed that they are being emitted from that source and bursting forth from it into the present, in much the way that Heidegger suggested; if one cares to take the language (the verb, the cases, and the prepositions) in his definition literally, it would seem that there is something like a chasm between the future and the present which the moments of present time must successfully leap across if they are to be (regardless of which mode of temporality it is with which they are then received on our side of the chasm – a chasm which, come to think of it, could seem to us to be something like a horizon) for any tract of time at all.

Yet any uncertainty they face is of course entirely metaphorical and irreal; nearly the most disconcerting part of our condition, by contrast, is the possibility that they will land in the very worst way, at the worst place and time, on this side: and it’s to Heidegger’s credit (whatever else one might care to say about him) that in Sein und Zeit he attempted to explore and explicate how human life is affected by the manifold anticipations of this possibility that remains both incalculable and inescapable, no matter how much we’d generally prefer to overlook it.

As for Tramte’s composition, it’s one of its several virtues that the impulsive moments which it comprises are not resolved into a duration that would conclude of itself, but are simply terminated, in a manner that’s meant to be as deliberately disturbing as everything else in it is.

Postscript. Mea culpa. I should have liked to devote some attention to that other composition of Tramte’s entitled “Corse Mode,” but as I have long since exhausted the reader’s patience and my own, I shall save that subject for some other occasion, space and time permitting.
August is coming to an end and tonight a nearly tropical thunderstorm is sweeping over Amsterdam – and on the Internet I just came across a duo from Down Under called Garçon Garçon that’s embarking this weekend on a tour of Europe and North America, though without stopping here, so, to close out the month, just for a bit of fun and as a second–best I’ve put together a short playlist of their songs.

It’s a new band formed by two guys from Sydney, Nathan Mahon and Nick Tsirimokos, and they’re making some catchy synthesizer pop with a few rougher edges – one song features a rap by Cazwell (which might not be safe for work, be advised) – and bittersweet tinges. I’d wager that the total package is going to be a hit in the various cities they’ll be playing in: the schedule may be found on their Facebook page, and it’s set to culminate with an appearance at the Folsom Street Fair in San Francisco late in September.

September is shaping up to be a very busy month here (and towards the end of it I shall be going on vacation for several weeks), but I was so moved by a song I just came across while putting together a playlist featuring the work of the band Telefon Tel Aviv – an electronic duo from New Orleans and now based in Los Angeles whose future was thrown into doubt by the death of one of its members, Charles Cooper, in 2009, but which will continue due to Joshua Eustis’ dedication – that I simply could not resist sharing it in advance.
On Telefon Tel Aviv’s Soundcloud page there is a breathtaking cover of Bruce Springsteen’s “I’m on Fire.”

**Telefon Tel Aviv**  *(Part II)*

*(September 6, 2012)*

The playlist includes songs drawn from the several records released by Telefon Tel Aviv from 2001 through 2009; by way of introduction it begins with a performance during a concert in Minneapolis of the cover of “I’m on Fire,” followed by a remix of “Worst Thing in the World” by the well-known music producer Jon Gaiser that’s very distinctive (and even humorous) aurally: a special homage to so significant a band from one of its peers in the world of electronic music.

In a brief interview recorded on video by the band’s record label, the Berlin–based BPitch Control, Joshua Eustis, who has persevered alone since Charles Cooper passed away in 2009, offers some insight into the sources of his inspiration and his manner of working.

More recently, on the idmf interviews page on Soundcloud a longer one conducted by Ben Walthew has been uploaded.

And just a couple of weeks ago, on the band’s Facebook page this auspicious note was posted: “When you try for years to have a creative breakthrough and it seems like it will never happen and you get discouraged but wake up a bit too early one day because something woke you up and you go back to work on something and things come together in a way you couldn’t have imagined and you understand your creative trajectory in a blinding flash... the sense of purpose that affords is what makes records finally get finished...”

It sounds as though a very interesting album is heading our way.
In the course of compiling the second part of the text about Telefon Tel Aviv, three elements in the items I selected to include – namely, the song “I’m on Fire” in its particular significance, Joshua Eustis’ remarks about the role played in his work-process by his own dreams, and the elated announcement on the band’s Facebook page of a sudden artistic breakthrough – seemed to me as though they were closely bound up with one another, in a manner which prompted me to think about them and their interconnections; then in mulling it all over I began to envision another installment that would try to formulate some of them, tentatively yet without straying too far. And so – it’s all very tentative – I’ve essayed the following.

Apparently visual, a dream in the most literal sense of the word seems as if it were specifically addressed to the mind’s eye even though one is in the midst of sleep; yet, listening to Eustis’ account of the very active manner in which he consults his dreams – and, in particular, to his remark that he often strives to remain on the edge of sleep, as it were, so as to be able to interrupt them in a timely manner and then, sufficiently awake, to transcribe some concept he found there – one has reason to doubt whether it is always only so immediately visual an occurrence. For in this case the concepts do not seem only to be meant for the eye; it’s also to his ear that they appeal: his dreams, to take him at his word, are of interest to him artistically insofar as they are aural in nature, and one may infer from what he says that an important part of his artistic method is to record the visual aspect of the dreams for later use in the work of comprehending their aurality (rather than the reverse, the much more common procedure of deciphering what one sees by means of what one hears). All of this is feasible on account of the evident fact that the concepts he encounters in them, fuzzy and indistinct as their sound may be in that acoustic and oneiric realm, are already virtually melodic; as such they call out to be notated on paper, which he goes on to do in a form that suffices for their subsequent musical transposition and elaboration.
Eustis takes care to stress that he has to listen hard if he is to draw out the melodies that are virtually there in that sonic dimension but in a mode that’s less than distinct; and thus the skill this requires could be termed an ability to discern sounds within sound and to carry them back with him as he returns to the waking world.

His statement invites those who are so inclined to reflect on this interior domain of potential inspiration in its specificity as something like an acoustic space, and, as one thinks about it, to consider the various complications one might face in attempting to keep one’s ears pealed while in the midst of it, and also the numerous obstacles and pitfalls one might stumble on as one then moved to extricate oneself from it: and these are just for starters. Not the least of the problems posed is the common tendency (which as a habit has sunk so deep into the mind, on account of its having been repeated innumerable times, that it’s no simple task even to recognize and distinguish its effects as such) to identify some of the modes in which one pays attention or gives thought to something, with operations that are originally visual (such as – precisely – reflection and consideration). The effort required to circumvent this habit of mind and its effects, is an exertion which Eustis knows well, to judge from some of what he says in the interview (or in those excerpts of it that we’ve been given); and, though he swiftly passes over the topic, he also suggests that even when the mind’s ear has been exercised so that it may serve as the primary organ of oneiric perception, one will often find oneself back under the sway of the inveterate habit, relying on the mind’s eye instead, or perhaps – and this would be a more insidious difficulty – running into its perceptual interference, with the result that whatever it is that one ends up transcribing on paper, once one is awake again, somehow does not plausibly seem to correspond to nor express as it should what one had heard or thinks one heard back in the dream.

But even if the obstructions of this kind (the intrusions of the visual) are left to one side – even if one has successfully surmounted them – there remains the disconcerting realization that here the mind is operating on itself by means of transposition; it is transferring, carrying across something in itself that’s akin to or wants to become a sound from its own region or level into a different realm and transforming it into something that is perceptibly distinct and sonorous. The act of articulation this operation involves does not
seem to have any close parallel amongst those that are carried out when it is images, visual phenomena, that one seeks to draw forth from one’s dream, if only by reason of their very vividness, which presumably is what attracts one’s oneiric attention to them in the first place – but as an aural procedure it bears a strong likeness to those that occur while we are engaged in discursive thought and concerning whose operations we are alerted every so often, though without being enabled to fathom how they actually work (insofar as they do work); as such, as an analogon, it would tend to strengthen one’s sense that those operations do in fact actively exist somewhere within one’s mind (or perhaps not so much within it as at one of its limits). And conversely: those who have already devoted some thought to the inner operations of the discursive mind might well find it plausible that interior acoustic phenomena would be registered in a similar way.

Just as it can happen that while speaking a foreign language – and here I’m merely summarizing a rather famous thought–experiment* – it’s as though one were first translating from one’s own, or even perhaps from some third one, and then speaking, even though one is not aware of either doing or intending to do any such thing (and one might be startled by the clear linguistic evidence that it’s actually occurring), so too while we are thinking it may at times seem “als läge unserm Denken ein Denkschema zu Grunde; als übersetzten wir aus einer primitiveren Denkweise in die unsre.” It’s clear that Wittgenstein did not mean to assert that these two experiences are isomorphic in all or even in many respects; the analogy was intended to emphasize some features in each without suggesting that they are cognate in every instance; but as long as this proviso is borne in mind, the comparison – and the terms in which it was formulated – strikes quite a few incisive notes.

Here, to put emphasis on the fact that in bringing back from that more primitive and pre– or sublinguistic level of thinking some thought which one then formulates in words on one’s own, properly discursive plane, one has the sense of moving something from one locale to another, it would be better to translate Wittgenstein’s term “übersetzten” (as this is a thought–experiment the verb is put in the subjunctive mood) not as “translating” – tradurre è tradire – but rather in a more literal manner, as “transposing.” This verb has

the virtue of underscoring the dislocation, the distortion, and the disorder (all of which would seem to be unavoidable during – or: prior to, underneath – any discursive thinking) to which thoughts of this kind would be subject, if they are indeed supposed to be transposed from, drawn out of the underworld of one’s mind.

And yet, though just as much in accord with Wittgenstein’s thought-experiment, one surmises that this other level might in some sense be a domain where, as it were, thinking speaks its own language, and does so with far more energy and accuracy than it is able to muster once it is drawn forth into the vicinity of a conscious mind and becomes an individual’s thought. This other level, of whose very existence some linguistic peculiarities would constitute our most direct evidence, would be one, it can be inferred, in which that language would be spoken with great speed and even greater assurance, with an interpenetration of sound and sense that would astound and shock us all, were we somehow (per impossibile) to learn it fluently; and then that lower level must be, as one would hasten to acknowledge, a mysterious and rather awesome realm, if indeed it exists to any real degree at all. (In this connection I should mention that the use of the term “Denkschema” could be taken to indicate that Wittgenstein, for his part, might here have been concerned with what Kant* had termed the “Schematismus unseres Verstandes” and then called “eine verborgene Kunst in den Tiefen der menschlichen Seele,” the art namely whereby particular mental representations are subsumed under their appropriate concepts – a concealed art whose actual operations, he made sure to remark, we will always have great difficulty in discerning, as though to imply: how fortunate it is for all involved (der Natur sei Dank!) that this is and remains so.)

Now, if as a result of this thought-experiment (however it’s construed or unfolded) it begins to seem as though this other level undergirding discursive thinking were not all sweetness and light but rather an obscure forbidding zone with a language all its own, would it not also be plausible to go further and suggest that in the part of the mind in which melodies and the other constituent elements of music are first conceived and then emitted in one way or another into one’s consciousness – and it’s into this area that Eustis ventures

* Kritik der reinen Vernunft, A 141/B 180–81.
in his dreams, isn’t it – that in this lower part of the mind the occurrences could well be even more strange, further removed from, and less like all that goes on in the upper region which corresponds to them? And this all the more so, insofar as music is bound up even more tightly with one’s φύσις and as such can take possession of one far more thoroughly and entirely than a discursive thought, or even the very human inclination to discursive thinking as such, ever could?

So, with some suddenness, the idea presents itself: on account of the oneiric principle in its dreamy and disturbing conjunction of sounds, Telefon Tel Aviv’s work may be called Surrealist music. To be sure, it’s a Surrealism whose dreams are shot through with our present-day darkness; yet the term might help to open a few portals on it and perhaps on Surrealism too (Surrealism considered not only as le dernier cri of ninety years ago but also as a force still to be encountered today, if one knows where to look – and to listen).

 conducible formulations: The Surrealists’ predilection for consulting their own dreams is well-known, of course, and unfortunately the practice has become so popular and widespread amongst all manner of artists, writers, and others, to a great degree on account of the Surrealists’ own example, that the actual consultation often yields only the most insipid results – aggregates of kitsch – and even the idea of turning to one’s dreams for inspiration has nearly been reduced to a low formulaic technique and thus itself stands on the verge of kitschification (pardon the expression); but precisely this development, which represents yet another envelopment of our lives by kitsch (and how much further in this direction have we all gone since the time of the first Surrealists), furnishes a reason why artists may still have a point when they turn to their dreams as a source of images or ideas – or sounds. For what is it that cries out for elucidation even more now than it did back in the twenties, if not kitsch itself.

But it’s not merely any number of artistic practices, new and cutting-edge in years gone by, which now have been nearly engulfed in kitsch; no, just as susceptible to this fate as they are, is the very concept of kitsch, given the rampant overuse, academic vulgarization, and general loss of its specific meaning to which it’s been exposed.
So, what do I mean by the term *kitsch*? Fortunately, here I don’t need to invent anything; already in the first heyday of Surrealism, in a short text about it composed by an author very much in accord with many of its artistic tenets and philosophical intentions, one comes across a suitable definition – a succinct definition not so much of what kitsch might be in itself (after all, what would be the point of such a static definition, which would probably comprise little more than a compressed itemization of instances?), as of what it is in its intrinsic interconnections to the dream and dreaming on one side, to technology on the other. (The close connection between dreaming and technology is also intimated.) A triangular mode of definition: a very deft choice of approach in this connection, and the definitions offered (even though they are provisional or perhaps simply preliminary) seem to me to suffice, certainly for the time being, although along the way perhaps some slight adjustments to them may be required.

In his essay “Traumkitsch,” which begins with the old dream of “die blaue Blume” (even though the yearning for such a thing represented merely the most exoteric and least essential side of Romanticism and was probably regarded even then, circa 1800, as something of a joke) largely in order to dismiss that Romantic conception of dreams as having become outmoded, Walter Benjamin then provided an up-to-date definition: “Der Traum eröffnet nicht mehr eine blaue Ferne. Er ist grau geworden. Die graue Staubschicht auf den Dingen ist sein bestes Teil. Die Träume sind nun Richtweg ins Banale. Auf Nimmerwiedersehen kassiert die Technik das Außenbild der Dinge wie Banknoten, die ihre Gültigkeit verlieren sollen. Jetzt greift die Hand es noch einmal im Traum und tastet vertraute Konturen zum Abschied ab. Sie faßt die Gegenstände an der abgegriffensten Stelle. Das ist nicht immer die schicklichste: Kinder umfassen ein Glas nicht, sie greifen hinein. Und welche Seite kehrt das Ding den Träumen zu? Welches ist diese abgegriffenste Stelle? Es ist die Seite, welche von Gewöhnung abgescheuert und mit billigen Sinnsprüchen garniert ist. Die Seite, die das Ding dem Traume zukehrt, ist der Kitsch.”*

* The essay was published in *Die neue Rundschau*, vol. 38, no. 1 (January 1927), pp. 110ff.
This passage focuses on the point of intersection of a number of trains of thought in a quite clear manner but is also therefore very compact; and so I’ll stretch out some of them just a bit.

Leisure goods manufactured in the nascent industrial civilization of the nineteenth century on the one side, various elements of the architecture of the modern city on the other: these are the “things” that Benjamin mainly had in mind here, although his definitions were framed so that they could also subsume other species of things as well. These things were produced in large runs (the economic demand was great and ever-increasing) and they were made in such a way that their eventual expiration was anticipated from the beginning and as it were built-in; from the outset they were meant to live and die by fashion, their appeal and even their physical exterior was intended to be used up within a definite period of time. During that time, however, their function was twofold: to satisfy certain desires but in an unsatisfying manner, thus keeping them alive, while at the same time working upon the consumers so as to increase their susceptibility to such desire in general, priming them thus to an ever greater degree to make the next purchase – whereupon they themselves might well be discarded. In this more rapid rhythm of consumption, the desires of the consumers made their first acquaintance with the new economic realities of superfluity and obsolescence and then quickly grew accustomed to them; subsequently not only the desires of the consumers but the disposition of their habits generally and, in particular, of their sense of what they could take for granted or routinely expect, were permeated by those realities so thoroughly that in the end, under certain circumstances, many of these consumers would consent and accept their own obsolescence or superfluity as though that condition were nothing but just another fact of nature.

The realm of dreams was the part of the mind in which the things that had already become the victims of this development of the economy lived on, in the mode of an extended farewell. Or at least this was the main characteristic of the dreams by which the Surrealists were most fascinated and which they circled about in their works. In this short essay, Benjamin, for his part, took care to mention the gray layer of city dust deposited on everything in these dreams; all the objects there were decrepit, worn down, used up, and banal: and yet for just that reason they were familiar and dear to these urbanites, which is no doubt why they would be included in the dream at all. It was one’s
own hands that had grasped these objects innumerable times from childhood onwards and thus worn them away, though this result had been anticipated and planned for during the selection of the technology to be employed to manufacture them; these were the things to which one was closest back then and which played a great or even perhaps the greatest role in fostering and shaping one’s desires, inclinations, predilections, habits, rhythms, dexterity, skill, etc., etc., – in short, the various constituent elements of φύσις and character. Now, when in the dream these moments of childhood were met with again, associatively, by means of the things from those early years, in order to bid them a long goodbye, the scene might easily have been awash with sentimental pathos: but in the Surrealists’ case, on the contrary, it was a cool encounter, an investigative preliminary to an analysis in which the person would be turned inside out, in some sort of quasi–anatomical inquiry into the constitution and the constituents of one’s individuality.

It is worth noting the insistence with which Benjamin emphasized the tactility of the dream and downplayed its visual aspect. He went so far as to utilize a simile more tactile than visual, when he called attention to what is perhaps the paradigm of manufacturing according to a fixed date of obsolescence, namely, the banknotes that serve as legal tender for a certain period of time if only due to the fact that their printed surfaces will be effaced more and more the further they circulate, as a consequence of their contact with human hands. And that simile is not at all the most tactile element in his account; according to him, prior to bidding farewell to the things one re–encounters in the dream, one touches them for the last time, retraces their familiar outlines, and lays one’s hands on the spots that have been worn down the most by early use and overuse; and these objects present themselves in the dream as though they intend to be handled again in just this way. But in so doing they remind the dreamers of how banal the latter’s interest in them had been – and they do so precisely by a poor attempt to conceal that banality (as though this effort were meant to fail): for in the dream the most worn–down side of these things was decked out with “cheap adages” – Benjamin did not specify whether they were inscribed or if they perhaps were spoken – as though some justification for that use and overuse were required. And that very faulty precaution, Benjamin concluded, amounted to an acknowledgement that the objects encountered from such a side in the dream, were kitsch.
To be sure, this way of specifying what kitsch is – or, not what it is, but how despite itself it might come to be manifest as such – is rather different than any of the common definitions of it which one might come across.

But is this all of any relevance to dreams in which the aural dimension is the most important and the main focus of an inquiry? To me it seems that it might be, as follows. (Please note that the three following points comprise just a very general sketch; no individuals in particular are being addressed or referred to here.)

1. The characterization of leisure goods and of manufactured items more widely that I drew out of Benjamin’s text, is obviously applicable to those that are sonic (just think of the rapidity with which one generation of electronic musical equipment is supplanted by the next): obsolescence and superfluity are overarching considerations in the rationale of these objects’ production and consumption, just as they are in nearly every other economic sector. And it’s applicable not only to the equipment, but to the artifacts as well: the tapes, records, videos, CDs, etc., emitted in myriad editions large and small.

2. How can it be disputed that those aural artifacts have informed many childhoods and, in more than a few, played the very largest role in shaping them – most obviously these young people’s own rhythm and tempo (I mean both the physical disposition and the inner sense thereof), but in all probability the effect has also touched their desires, inclinations, and habits; and likewise the variegated artifacts in which music plays a role, such as all the productions of that “dream factory” otherwise known as the worldwide film industry, all the television programs, the video games, and so on either in infinitum or ad nauseam, as one prefers.

3. As for the music that is kitsch already right when it’s first composed, but also music that at some later point in time becomes kitsch (for instance, to take an especially strange sort of occurrence, a retroactive transformation that is accomplished when pieces of music created subsequently somehow bring about a change in the earlier ones) – doesn’t it seem plausible that a lot of it would have been deposited in some form in that region of the mind that dreams, perhaps as a function of the number of times one heard it earlier in life, and as such could be re–encountered there, audible from its most insipid side, so to speak, but yet perceptible if only one has got one’s inner ear tuned for it?
One of the numerous virtues of Benjamin’s text is the discernment with which he called attention to the literary use to which the Surrealists put some elements of the kitsch they encountered in their dreams: the “cheap adages” – words that once were wise and are now worn out – they found there reappear, perhaps in a modified form, from time to time in their verses, where they often succeed in startling the reader. Whereas Baudelaire* had wanted to “créer un poncif,” the Surrealists utilized the stock-phrases they came across in their dreams – and these are perhaps two only slightly different approaches towards a single goal. Now, without wanting to posit a similar analogy with this or that feature in Telefon Tel Aviv’s own songs, it does strike me that the band’s lyrics evidently encompass commonplace phrases, which have been positioned (as though in frames or within quotation marks) in relation to the music mainly it seems for the resulting musical effect, not on account of any specifically linguistic meaning they might add to the whole.

It is another of the strengths of Benjamin’s brief essay that it called attention to a couple of salient points in the Manifeste du surréalisme, and in pursuing the references back to those pages I was struck by a certain passage in what André Breton wrote, where the Surrealists’ use of language and their special notion of dialogue were touched on in particular; some of Breton’s ideas – they will be introduced quite selectively in what follows – seem to me to illuminate electronic music such as Telefon Tel Aviv makes, both the intention of the music itself, in its finished form, and also the character of the relationship that this music, as it were, seems to want to develop with those who listen to it: so, here too the term Surrealist music may prove to fit.

The passage began with an allusion to the rather prevalent conception that the very purpose of language is to deceive. “Le langage a été donné à l’homme pour qu’il en fasse un usage surréaliste,” Breton insisted, as though aiming by this parody of a declaration to call to mind the old maxims in which that conception has been most succinctly expressed – that is, either the sentence commonly attributed to Talleyrand, “Le langage a été donné à l’homme pour déguiser sa pensée,” or the remark assigned by Stendhal** to the Jesuit père Malagrida, “La parole a été donnée à l’homme pour cacher sa pensée.” Whether what’s at issue is language as such or the capacity of speech, the

* Fusées, XX. ** Le Rouge et le Noir, bk. I, chap. XXII.
point of these two statements is that one’s thoughts are often best kept to one-
self and that to achieve this some instrument is required: that was the idea to
which Breton was alluding and which he then proceeded to investigate.

(While pondering these two bons mots one might well be moved to mis-
chief and wonder who it is from whom “sa pensée” is being concealed linguis-
tically if not “l’homme” himself. And at that point it would not be such a leap
to recur once more to Kant’s “verborgene Kunst” operating mysteriously
deep within the human mind or soul.)

It is quite clear that Breton did not reject the idea; rather, he explicitly ac-
nowledged that there were many scenes of life where language would indeed
be required in order to deceive, or – to speak less pejoratively and more com-
prehensively – to shield either certain specific thoughts or perhaps something
like the inner élan vital of the mind, which but for this mode of protection
might come to naught or cease to flow altogether. He had a well–honed sense
of what actually transpires in these scenes; and the manner in which, in this
passage, he described one of them, that of an ordinary conversation (which he
invoked not in its own right but representatively), laying emphasis on its essen-
tial antagonism, may be taken as proof that he neither hoped nor feared that
this fundamental reality in human nature might somehow simply be abol-
ished. For, in such a conversation, wrote Breton, “deux pensées s’affrontent ;
pendant que l’une se livre, l’autre s’occupe d’elle, mais comment s’en occupe–
t–elle ? Supposer qu’elle se l’incorpore serait admettre qu’un temps il lui est
possible de vivre tout entière de cette autre pensée, ce qui est fort improbable.
Et de fait l’attention qu’elle lui donne est tout extérieure ; elle n’a que le loisir
d’approver ou de réprouver, généralement de réprouver, avec tous les égards
dont l’homme est capable. [...] Mon attention, en proie à une sollicitation
qu’elle ne peut décément repousser, traite la pensée adverse en ennemie ;
dans la conversation courante, elle la « reprend » presque toujours sur les
mots, les figures dont elle se sert ; elle me met en mesure d’en tirer parti dans
la réplique en les dénaturant.”

In the antagonistic mode of usage of language, as Breton sketched it out in
this passage, thought is indeed concealed – and in a number of ways. Yet,
insofar as it is one of thinking’s conditions of possibility that it be masked by
language, it would have neither the right nor a reason to object to its own con-
cealment; and Breton for his part did not do so. But be that all as it may, and
leaving the requirements of this activity of the mind aside for the moment: what would life itself be like without these various scenes of verbal sparring, from the most crude or comical to the most serious or sophisticated – what sort of a life would it remain after these variegated interactions were excluded – and what is such an interaction, if not the exchange of two dissimulations and the contact of two reticences?

However, it’s not only conversation and verbal encounters which are shaken and shaped by this linguistic antagonism; something related and just as remarkable takes place in interactions that are conducted in and through writing, and indeed within the most literary of these: the relationship between writers and readers – the better writers and the better readers – is also stirred up by it. To be sure, these writers proceed much more openly in committing their thoughts to paper, while these readers open their minds conscientiously to them; and nonetheless, noted Breton, precisely on this account it is “la grande faiblesse du livre que d’entrer sans cesse en conflit avec l’esprit de ses lecteurs les meilleurs,” that is, those who show themselves to be “les plus exigeants” in their reading. These readers probe further and further into the thoughts of the writers, who, for their own sake and that of their works, but also in order to have something with which they can still keep them interested in their writing, must then continually devise expedients – new linguistic means – for concealing them at the same time; but conversely, as these readers’ minds are filled more and more by these writers’ thoughts, how else will they guard and preserve their own than by erecting some walls – new linguistic barriers – around them within their own minds? Thus, on both sides of this fraught relationship, just as much as it is the case in verbal conversation, language often is and must be used to conceal thought; and once the antagonism has been recognized as existing here as well, but in an even more dynamic manner than elsewhere, what would seem to follow as a corollary is that this relationship between these writers and readers may be called a dialogue. (Yes, in the Manifeste du surréalisme the sense and the reference of this term were each augmented significantly.)

So, this mode of using language is often necessary and justified; but it has its drawbacks too, obviously, and of these Breton was very well aware, so aware and over–aware in fact that while he did put one of the most important of them into words, he included the statement in his text as an offhand
remark offered in passing, whereas he could certainly have featured it promi-
nently, even didactically, as standing on a threshold between one line of
thought and another: that is why I excised this sentence from the remark
quoted above, reserving its use until now.

“Ce mode de langage ne permet d’ailleurs pas d’aborder le fond d’un
sujet.”

Those who are caught up in this antagonistic mode of using language will
either fall short of “le fond d’un sujet” when they are engaged in ordinary con-
versation or the like, or pass far beyond it while absorbed in that peculiar
kind of dialogue called reading; but they will miss it in either case. But what is
this, “le fond d’un sujet” – this idea which evidently was of quite some impor-
tance to Breton?

(If, in a very literal frame of mind, one fixates solely on the term itself, in
its most common sense, one might well embrace the Wittgensteinian doubt
that there really ever can be any such thing as “le fond d’un sujet”; but in
Breton’s text it as a concept did not designate any sort of terminus or resting
place for the intellect and instead served as a mental stepping–stone along the
path from one set of ideas to another: therefore it would be pointless at best to
depart here on that other train of thought.)

Because the antagonistic mode of using language prevents those who are
accustomed to it from fully fathoming any topic, according to Breton, one
may expect that the alternative, the Surrealist mode whose usage he champi-
oned would have opened up an avenue in that direction.

It was not only the Surrealists’ consultation of dreams as a source of poten-
tial inspiration for their poetry and prose which helped in opening that ave-
nue, but their experimentation with the practice of the so–called automatic
writing as well. Here I shall not summarize what was involved in it (for, after
all, there are so many accounts of that topic already) but simply register a
doubt about its sheer physical feasibility as a practice, given what would seem
to be the inherent disparities between the great velocity of the mind and the
relatively slower speed of the vocal apparatus and the even less rapid rate of
movement of the hands – and also note that this doubt was already addressed
and bypassed by Breton himself. “Il m’avait paru, et il me paraît encore,” he
claimed, “que la vitesse de la pensée n’est pas supérieure à celle de la parole,
et qu’elle ne défie pas forcément la langue, ni même la plume qui court.”
The raison d’être of automatic writing, in Breton’s formulation, was indeed to get to “le fond d’un sujet” – though not entirely in the very same sense of that term. For the experiment with or on themselves that such a practice of writing was (and it was to allow such an experiment to be conducted that the Surrealists insisted on suspending their critical faculties for its duration), was intended to ascertain whether or how well the linguistic mechanisms and apparatus within their minds were still functioning, and to demonstrate what lucidity they could still bring forth into the world.

Breton’s own summary of its rationale was very concise and very clear: “Non seulement ce langage sans réserve que je cherche à rendre toujours valable, qui me paraît s’adapter à toutes les circonstances de la vie, non seulement ce langage ne me prive d’aucun de mes moyens, mais encore il me prête une extraordinaire lucidité et cela dans le domaine où de lui j’en attendais le moins. J’irai jusqu’à prétendre qu’il m’instruit et, en effet, il m’est arrivé d’employer surréellement des mots dont j’avais oublié le sens. J’ai pu vérifier après coup que l’usage que j’en avais fait répondait exactement à leur définition. Cela donnerait à croire qu’on n’apprend pas, qu’on ne fait jamais que réapprendre. Il est d’heureuses tournures qu’ainsi je me suis rendues familières.”

Bearing in mind the evident fact that the “fond” of this “sujet” could not possibly have been approached directly, but only fathomed by an indirect route, through the various effects deposited in the writing that was the result, one might well conclude that this Surrealist undertaking had been devised in order to put a complex of mental mechanisms to the test, including the one that Kant had called the “Schematismus unseres Verstandes” – and thus that it was intended to be a quite practical kind of thought-experiment.

The fortuitous discoveries the Surrealists made individually, as a consequence of this mode of seeking out the hidden reaches of their minds, were not the only bonus they obtained by employing procedures such as automatic writing; the unveiling of their linguistic capacities also took place in their dialogues amongst themselves, for as Breton put the matter, they came to find that it was “au dialogue que les formes du langage surréaliste s’adaptent le mieux” – and in this connection one might recall that the rapport between writers and readers was also taken to be a dialogue which, as such, would be
susceptible to description and analysis (or, at any rate, this is how I’ve understood his train of thought).

The adaptation of the forms of the Surrealist usage of language to the dialogue (and the special emphasis placed upon the concept “adaptation” in the Manifeste du surréalisme is worth thinking about) also aimed to make it possible to reach “le fond d’un sujet” in the quite specific sense that by this adaptation dialogue too was itself being adapted in its structure, reconfigured into a very open or free rapport between the interlocutors (rather than the antagonism in which they were most often entangled) such that some truths or realities, as fleeting as these would surely be, might manifest themselves enticingly to the one and/or the other, though in each instance differently as a consequence of their several vantage–points; thus renovated, dialogue could facilitate a much closer approach to some particular truth or reality, or, alternatively, a much more intense apprehension of the great significance of the latter in its specific situation, though of course in so doing it would at most make it more possible or probable that here some matter (“un sujet”) might be illuminated in its depths (“le fond”): those who here sought an assurance that such an experience would necessarily follow, were seeking it in vain.

Breton characterized the scene of the Surrealist dialogue quite well when, distinguishing carefully between it and the other sort, he asserted that it was the aim of their endeavor “à rétablir dans sa vérité absolue le dialogue, en dégageant les deux interlocuteurs des obligations de la politesse. Chacun d’eux poursuit simplement son soliloque, sans chercher à en tirer un plaisir dialectique particulier et à en imposer le moins du monde à son voisin.” The antagonistic sparring in most dialogues (with the “plaisir dialectique particulier” it might confer) was to be suspended in these ones, in favor of a rapport in which both interlocutors were thus freed to concentrate on truth – or better, on truthfulness – both in speaking and in listening; they could each devote themselves to the moments of truthfulness that might be bodied forth by the other’s discourse (both of them presumably speeding forward with a high degree of automaticity, analogously to the practice of automatic writing) or those that might emerge however suddenly and unexpectedly in the space this sort of dialogue had opened up between the participants.

As for the element which constituted it as a dialogue, rather than simply the concurrence of two soliloquies, the response, for it too a quite distinctive
character was sketched out; very emphatically Breton insisted that “elle est, en principe, totalement indifférente à l’amour–propre de celui qui a parlé.” Consideration for persons had made way for the espousal of things – for the Surrealists’ investigation of the old outmoded objects that lived again a last time in dreams, on the one side, and of the nearly mechanical automatisms and infrastructures within body and mind, on the other; it was these things and the effects by means of which they made their existence felt, to which the Surrealists were to listen and respond: and by touching on these things in their response, new energy and inspiration was to flow into and elate them. As Breton put the matter, “Les mots, les images ne s’offrent que comme tremplins à l’esprit de celui qui écoute.” In the Surrealist dialogue, the responses were meant to leap.

Granted, in that sentence the meaning of Breton’s own image (“tremplins”), for its part, was less than obvious; but Benjamin evidently discerned something significant in it, for it then – in its very ambiguity – served him as a jumping–off point for what was perhaps the most interesting moment of thought in his short text. It struck him forcefully that the Surrealists’ usage of language seemed positively to invite misunderstandings and that this was indeed one of their aims, as it was by virtue of these misunderstandings that their dialogues were filled with so much life and truth: and moreover it appeared as though the dialogues they conducted amongst themselves, but also – it may be inferred – those which their works when published entered into with their readers, were vouchsafed whatever durability they might enjoy precisely only under this condition. (Thus it is that they still have surprises to emit, even nearly a century later.)

Benjamin, I believe, got to the crux of the matter when he noted that these misunderstandings themselves, in their aggregate occurrence, followed one another in a rhythm, and that it was through this rhythm that an essential reality entered the dialogue (perhaps even overcoming some resistance as it did so): “Denn ›Mißverständnis‹ heißt die Rhythmik, mit welcher die allein wahre Wirklichkeit sich ins Gespräch drängt.” Now, if what the Surrealists were most concerned with, were the things previously mentioned, the manufactured objects that had affected them early in life so thoroughly as even to have shaped their very sense of time and space, their physical tempo and especially their inner feeling of rhythm, and this to the point that they attempted to as-
certain the effects of these early conditions through thought–experiments on themselves carried out mainly by literary means, then – one could conclude – what would this dialogue (insofar as in it language was given free Surrealist rein) comprise if not the encounter of two such experimentalists? But there could have been no guarantee, of course, that they necessarily would have been attuned to one another, that is, that the early influences in fact had had lasting effects which were really congruent or similar in both cases; accordingly it was nearly inevitable that relatively soon the basic circumstance of their different formations (or as Benjamin called it, with obfuscatory over-emphasis, “die allein wahre Wirklichkeit”) would have been heard from: if only, in the most auspicious case, in the rhythm of their misunderstandings of one another and their misunderstanding of one another’s rhythms ...

“Je wirklicher ein Mensch zu reden weiß, desto geglückter mißversteht man ihn.”

To extrapolate from Benjamin’s point (as I’ve understood and/or misunderstood it): what we commonly call “understanding” may be composed for the most part of moments of misunderstanding, while in “misunderstanding” many elements of understanding might actually be comprised; and thus misunderstanding and understanding would no longer necessarily be contrarities but could punctuate and interpenetrate one another in measures of spurts and bursts – a lively syncopation of comprehension.

Well, by now probably enough has been said about the Manifeste du surréalisme itself that some of the implications for music may be unfolded, in three compact theses.

1. Many pieces of music are not intended to convey but rather are meant to conceal the thought of those who wrote, played, or sang them; and this (leaving aside the justifications for it which might be proposed and adjudicated in particular cases) is often necessary and desirable, insofar as it’s by virtue of this concealment that the music will sustain its appeal to the ears of current and future listeners, and perhaps also for the reason that it may be required if the inner sources of musical creativity are to continue to flow.

2. Other pieces of music, however, might dispense with that work of concealment and aim instead to conduct a thought–experiment with musical
means; they themselves would be just such thought–experiments, as they are at once both the subject and the object of the experimentation, insofar as the experiment is intended to ascertain indirectly something of the state of the mechanisms within the music–maker’s mind that pertain to the sense of tempo, rhythm, melody, and the like – a procedure of indirect indication, from their effects, which here is by definition (just as in the parallel case of those infra–mental schemata which are it was suggested more specifically linguistic in nature) really the sole conceivable approach.

3. Still other modes of musical activity, for their part, may seek to establish a rapport with those who are listening wherein some moment of truth could become audibly perceptible, a rapport that is something like a dialogue in, by, and through music, insofar as during the musical performance all who are involved, and not solely the audience, listen as attentively and (in different senses of the term, depending on their diverse roles and situations) respond as actively and as immediately as they can to what they hear; as for the acoustic truth that might arise in these surroundings, it could just as well stem from the whole quasi–dialogue itself, relate specifically to one or more of the participants, or pertain to the condition of their various mutual attunements – here the possibilities are manifold indeed, for something truthful could also slip inadvertently from an object akin to those with which the Surrealists were most preoccupied.

If there is any such thing as Surrealist music, it might very well constitute just such a thought–experiment or just such a dialogue, or perhaps by virtue of some “rhythm of misunderstanding” it would instantiate the one and the other by turns – or it might even find some way to begin in disguise, as it were, as though it were a piece of the guarded music of the first kind, and then by a metamorphosis open up into something else, something unheard of, startling, and truthful.

On an audience’s side, in the experience of listening to Surrealist music one could well expect truths to raise their voices – acoustic truths that in some manner, even if only by indirection or through misunderstandings or via the frustrating or even the negating of an expectation (for instance, a gap of silence when one was awaiting an actual sound), would extrude something of the character and constitution of habits whose existence we usually don’t even notice as such, and in particular those which are difficult to attribute exclu-
sively either to the mind or to the body, such as the ones that bear on one’s
capacity to be still or to exercise patience (while listening to a very quiet or a
very long piece of music, for instance), or those that modulate one’s readiness
to dance (for instance, even when no one else has stepped onto the floor and
yet the music is moving one to start things off), to name just two species of
them. As regards habits like these – and it’s astonishing to realize how very
many of them there are! – a “Surrealist mode of usage of music” would per-
form a great service if it were to provoke one to think of both the moment
when and the way in which one first contracted them, so that, if need be, one
could let go of them.

In this connection, there’s a passing remark in Eustis’ interview in which
he alludes to what’s evidently a frequent occurrence when Telefon Tel Aviv
takes the stage while on tour: the people in the audience, still vibrating at
some early hour in the morning to the music of the previous band, are re-
quired by its dark dreamy songs to shift gears and to slow down – although in
their excitement they may not find it very easy to do – and when the matter is
put this way, it almost sounds, to my ears, as though they were being afforded
a chance to become aware of some of their habits as such.

Yet who exactly would find it easy to put aside a habit temporarily, let alone
once and for all? And who would be brazen enough to suggest that it is or
could be? Not so surprisingly, here one author does come to mind; in one of
his aphorisms Nietzsche penned an ode to short–lived habits, “Kurze Gewohn-
heiten,”* and there he sketched the amiable parting scene on some habit’s
last day. “Und eines Tages hat es” – the habit – “seine Zeit gehabt: die gute
Sache scheidet von mir, nicht als Etwas, das mir nun Ekel einflösst – sondern
friedlich und an mir gesättigt, wie ich an ihm, und wie als ob wir einander
dankbar sein müssten und uns so die Hände zum Abschied reichten.” Vale et
fave. ... Yet prose this sweet could incite one to respond mischievously; once
precipitated into this mood, what one will quickly begin to hear in his atti-
tude, is the tinny sound of hollow bravado, as Nietzsche himself surely must
have understood: and so one might conclude that his aphorism simply wasn’t
meant to be taken only at face value.

* Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, bk. IV, §295.
Furthermore, and precisely because this vision was so idyllic – though even here some “Ekel,” that intense feeling of disgust (and the word itself remains one of the German language’s very most palpable) which wells up before or after the fact or the deed, was alluded to as a possibility, and this prospective “Et in Arcadia ego” moment already furnishes something like a clue – one might suspect that it could have been as it were a photographic negative of another scene that Nietzsche had often reflected on: this antecedent scene would have comprised a dark picture indeed of human beings generally and their inveterate habits, on the one hand, and of the forms taken by their hopes to be released from them, on the other, at a moment when they were already subjected nearly unavoidably to those which the things and the technologies of industrial civilization were installing in them. (Not only the excerpt I’ve quoted but the entire aphorism can be re-read for the picture of which it was just such a photographic negative; the view of his and of our civilization which results from this correction* and which one then can impute to Nietzsche himself, is illuminating and prescient.)

In short: concealed by the language he used in this aphorism (though also in some manner revealed by it, if a reader consults it with care) may be a set of thoughts which circle around topics that the Surrealists, for their part, would first touch on forty or so years later.

Yet those thoughts have not been the exclusive concern of the various penseurs et poètes maudits. In fact, at times they’ve forced their way onto the pages of writers who were neither – and here it’s even possible that they would have deposited themselves in passages that are both considerably more explicit than those one generally meets with in the writings of the Surrealists and their friends, and also if anything even more disturbing in their very obvious implications.

A striking instance of such an occurrence may be found in one of the long works of Jean-Paul Sartre,** an author whom no one seriously accused of

* The idea of such a correction I’ve derived from the procedure that Benjamin, in the first part of his essay “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire,” introduced vis-à-vis Henri Bergson’s work.  
** Critique de la raison dialectique, vol. 1, bk. 1, C, 4.
harboring sympathy for Surrealism, published some four decades after that movement had exploded onto the scene; there, in the midst of a lengthy discourse rehearsing dutifully once again, and rather predictably, the investigation of the ways in which “un destin préfabriqué” is actually experienced and lived out within modern society (this overarching concern of Hegelian Marxism throughout the twentieth century), his attention alighted on a certain matter and all at once, to judge by the sudden change his style underwent, his interest was engaged. “Aux premiers temps des machines semi-automatiques, des enquêtes ont montré que les ouvrières spécialisées se laissaient aller, en travaillant, à une rêverie d’ordre sexuel,” wrote Sartre, and while caught in it “elles se rappelaient la chambre, le lit, la nuit” – or rather it was not they who did so, strictly speaking, as in truth “c’est la machine en elle[s] qui rêvait de caresses,” and this by virtue of circumstances he proceeded to itemize in a prose whose rhythm was for him, or at least for his theoretical writings, noticeably marcato or staccato: “le genre d’attention requis pour leur travail ne leur permettait, en effet, ni la distraction (penser à autre chose) ni l’application totale de l’esprit (la pensée retarde ici le mouvement); la machine exige et crée chez l’homme un semi-automatisme inversé qui la complète : un mélange explosif d’inconscience et de vigilance; l’esprit est absorbé sans être utilisé, il se résume dans un contrôle latéral, le corps fonctionne ‘machinalement’ et pourtant reste sous surveillance.” This vision of human beings subjected to the machines they were operating, remains as shocking as anything to be encountered in Surrealist literature. Both mind and body were taken possession of; in the former, a state of reverie was induced in which it was the machine itself which did the dreaming, presumably in league with and assisted by an array of extant infra-mental mechanisms, while in the latter, sets of habits were being formed by whose nearly automatic functioning the body would acquire more and more of a decidedly mechanical character; and, even apart from the mechanisms and habits it was working upon and even creating in the human beings while they were in that susceptible state, the machine was also inculcating new tempos and rhythms in their bodies and in their minds.

Various constituent elements in this sketch of how the human being was overpowered by the machine, when taken together, could lead one to conclude that what was occurring was not merely the subjection of the former to the latter, but also the reproduction of the latter in the former. These machines of
production were reproducing something of themselves in the human beings operating them – this nightmarish vision educible from the Critique de la raison dialectique is even more horrifying than that already quite dreadful condition which, in L’Être et le Néant, Sartre had called “le visqueux.” And with respect to the Surrealists, this vision shines a still darker light on the nature of the powers that once had inhered in those old outmoded things which they sought to encounter again in their dreams and their other enterprises, and, in so doing, it confirms that the route on which they set off to seek them, was not a wrong one.

It is certainly interesting that Sartre should have focused here mainly on female workers; just as noteworthy, though for different reasons, is what he went on to write about their male counterparts. According to him, “les hommes ont, en pareil cas, une moindre tendance aux rêveries érotiques; c’est qu’ils sont le ‹ premier sexe ›, le sexe actif; s’ils pensaient à prendre, le travail s’en ressentirait et, inversement, le travail, absorbant leur activité totale, leur rend indisponibles pour la sexualité” – and already after just a few summary statements one is deep in the grip of several clichés. But perhaps that was precisely where Sartre wanted to leave his readers (assuming, of course, that he had good reason not to initiate an actual inquiry into the question); insofar as it’s unlikely that the readers would be any more satisfied with those poncifs than he himself may be presumed to have been, they, accepting the virtual invitation to reflect further on the matter, might well draw the provisional conclusion that nearly the opposite had been the case: that the male workers too would have been transformed also as regards their sexual and erotic life through their subjection (this term is something of a euphemism) to these machines.

Thus – to come back to Surrealism – on several of its concerns a crosslight is thrown by this short passage in the midst of Sartre’s book. The influence exerted by machines of industrial production on the sexuality of those who operate them is as interesting a topic of investigation as the modes in which, in a dream state, kitsch might disclose both itself and some pieces of the dreamer’s own history or prehistory as well. Nor, obviously, had the Surrealists failed, years before Sartre had even been heard of, to register the centrality of this matter: and here, as one also knows, they did not limit themselves to
machines of production, but also took care not to ignore vehicles of transportation when the talk turned to sex.

Perhaps even more than machines of production or their various products, it is mechanical vehicles which have, from the first beginnings of industrial civilization early in the nineteenth century, installed new tempos and new rhythms into the human frame – in some manner reproducing themselves in the process – and thus in consequence altered both the speed and the strength with which inclinations, impulses, and desires would well up or burst into one’s consciousness and – very possibly, since what’s also at issue is the cumulative inculcation by industrial things of habits that are at once both mental and physical in character – transform it yet again into “un mélange explosif d’inconscience et de vigilance” (in Sartre’s felicitous phrase), with results that could easily be neither foreseen nor (as it’s the acoustic dimension which here interests me the most) foreheard.

☞ The foregoing, it seems to me, is a specifically Surrealist train of thought, and for its part it turns up in some surprising places, far afield from the literary or artistic scenes as we’ve known them and right in the midst of today’s popular music. In Bruce Springsteen’s song “I’m on Fire” it speaks –

At night I wake up with the sheets soaking wet
and a freight train running through the
middle of my head

– or rather, it shouts loudly through lyrics which have transposed and arranged the main ideas in that train of thought into a few marcato lines. The one single metaphor in the three I’ve just quoted rings so clear in its significance that it’s shocking: the implication is that the speed and the strength of desire as one experiences it in oneself may be traced back (not perhaps biographically but certainly historically) to the encounter with such a vehicle and, by extension, to the interaction with the things of industrial civilization in general, and may even have stemmed originally more or less directly from them. A more patently Surrealist ἀναγνώρισις is difficult to imagine.
(Please note that here I am talking solely about the mode – the velocity, the rhythm, and the force – by which desires arise into consciousness, and not of the origin of this or that desire in its specific content, a content which can be put into words as though it were a proposition to which one assents or not as one will. What I’m broaching is neither a forensic, nor an etiological, nor a diagnostic, nor a clinical inquiry into the origins of desire per se.)

At the same time, these lyrics are pervaded by an ambiguity which has provoked misunderstandings and even some controversy – a result which itself is a piece of applied Surrealism. For what would the desire “I’m on Fire” sings of, were it to be fulfilled, lead to? Either the molestation of a child, or a torrid affair. Everything hinges on what three words in the first line –

Hey little girl is your daddy home

– are taken to signify; those who believe that they were meant quite literally have at times denounced the song (as though it were then somehow espousing a pedophile desire), while those who aver that those few words were intended figuratively, in accord with what’s said to be their unexceptionable usage in a great many other lyrics, have from time to time denounced the former for imputing any such thing to the song (as though it were they who ought to be suspected of harboring that desire); but rather than get embroiled in this altercation (and both sides do have their justifications), one might instead step back and observe two things: first, the clash itself could be understood as being to some degree an instance of dialogue of the peculiar sort that moves to a rhythm of misunderstanding, as per the notion that Benjamin elicited from Breton, and second, Springsteen’s song for its part continues to fascinate and to live on due in no small measure to precisely this dispute, as per the idea I deduced from the Manifeste du surréalisme itself.

Nonetheless, because it seems to me that this song exemplifies one of the ways in which Surrealism may be alive in the present – and also recalling the Surrealists’ own literary investigations of illicit desire and the criminal acts of violation that can flow from it (and it was via this topic that Benjamin, in his subsequent essay “Der Sürrealismus,” illuminated its own lineage back to the dark works of Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, and Lautréamont, as though to suggest that in some strange manner Surrealism were precisely one of the things they
had been dreaming of) – I am rather inclined to take these lyrics literally. (Moreover, I also find myself wondering whether those who deny that any such meaning could possibly have been the one intended by “I’m on Fire,” are not engaged, for their part, their own good intentions notwithstanding, in some wishful thinking or in an attempted Verharmlosung of which the results themselves would not be entirely harmless.)

In truth, it seems to me that “I’m on Fire” may be about that inner pedophiliac inclination only and nothing further. For, after all, what does the fellow do or not do with his desire? The song doesn’t say.

If, in the most general of terms, it’s expected of literature, art, or music that it effect a catharsis, one will of course need to acknowledge the actual existence of whatever it is which the work is to rid one or another of.

An interest in catharsis was not foreign to Surrealism, one may surmise, and it might indeed have been one of its primary concerns; but, as one would expect, it was a catharsis bearing little resemblance to perhaps the most well-known definition of that procedure, which, as specified by Aristotle in the Poetics,* served to banish from the soul its stagnant inward states and any emotions that would likewise overwhelm it (evidently the variegated afflictions to which he referred were numerous – “τῶν τοιούτων παθηµάτων”). No, if there was anything baleful and deserving of banishment, it’s far more likely that Surrealism would have found it amongst the habits which, with their particular tempos and rhythms, industrial civilization had instilled into body and mind, and by which the machine was taking over the human being; or amongst the mechanical desires being created in a similar fashion at just the moment when the passions were being lulled to sleep. And even if the only result of Surrealist activity in this field had been to effect something like an exclusively conceptual catharsis, removing from the intellectual landscape some of the mental trash heaped up over the basic distinction between increasingly mechanical desires, on the one side, and on the other the passions that were somnolent but still spontaneous, that would already have constituted a great service all by itself.

*1449b27.
(In the Surrealist approach to this topic one hears a strong echo of Nietzsche’s espousal* of the passions as such and his distrust of the orderly society in which they continued to exist only in a state of slumber – “alle geordnete Gesellschaft schläft die Leidenschaften ein” – and here, once again prompted to make mischief, one might ask what exactly it was which the passions were dreaming of while asleep, and wonder what a society might be like which was something other than “well-ordered”: doing so even though, or perhaps precisely because one realizes that it is far from obvious how one might arrive at anything like plausible answers to these questions.)

But the moment of catharsis in Surrealist practice went beyond the purely intellectual; its locus was that region of habits and perhaps desires whose character was both mental and physical, and the Surrealists were aware of the dangers that any intervention there might expect to run into.

These habits and desires were what Breton seemed to refer to implicitly when he claimed that Surrealism had created new needs in the Surrealists, and in particular a certain need for Surrealism itself. “Le surréalisme ne permet pas à ceux qui s’y adonnent de le délaisser quand il leur plaît,” he insisted in the Manifeste, for the reason that “il agit sur l’esprit à la manière des stupéfiants ; comme eux il crée un certain état de besoin et peut pousser l’homme à de terribles révoltes.” Such needs – one can infer from the prospect of this “révolte” – could not co-exist alongside those habits and desires for any length of time in one and the same subject, and the resultant conflict would precipitate something like an explosion leading to the latter’s expulsion, as perilous as this event could prove to be: much more than the needs which were to be utilized medicinally in this manner, it was these habits and desires themselves which had become such a second nature that their removal might be effected only at the risk of causing something like a terrible withdrawal from an addiction.

For his part, Benjamin also seemed to envision applying a cathartic operation to some portion of the habits already deposited in the φύσις by industrial technology. (Following his thought either in his first very compact essay, or through the second’s several lengthier dithyrambic passages, presents challenge after challenge: and moreover it seems conceivable that in Benjamin’s

* Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, bk. 1, §4.
own case the actual writing of these essays may have brought about a catharsis of the very sort he was circumscribing in them: accordingly I’ve handled both with an especial degree of care and quite selectively.) Yet here the procedure was framed expressly in terms of the body’s power and the objective defined as the latter’s intensification and augmentation: if it were to be increased, something else would first need to be removed – it’s by bearing this conception in mind, whose elaboration Benjamin may earlier have come across in certain works of anthropology, that one will most readily find a way through these two texts which so often speak in a rush of implications, sudden silences, and images. To take but one complex of these: when he circled back to the topic of the role played by kitsch in the dream, doing so not in order to offer any further definition, but to suggest how one might make use of Traumkitsch (the thing itself, not his essay), he couched his idea in rather enigmatic imagery; there he wrote that kitsch “ist die letzte Maske des Banalen, mit der wir uns im Traum und im Gespräch bekleiden, um die Kraft der ausgestorbenen Dingwelt in uns zu nehmen” – and his point in having put the matter so fantastically, one may conclude, was that those who wanted to appropriate for their own activity the power and energy that remained within those things, would first need to change their own habits (as though these were – precisely! – suits of clothing) and specifically to strip away those habits of sentimentality both mental and physical which stand in the closest of relationships to kitsch itself (for they are derived almost automatically from kitsch, this pervasive by-product of industrial civilization, and it in turn spreads nearly undetectably by their leave).

Now – to leap back into the present – if it is indeed true that specifically electronic technology has a greater share than ever in the formation of habits, especially insofar as these comprise both tempos and rhythms, and that it accomplishes this to a greater degree than ever by aural avenues of influence, isn’t it plausible that music in general and electronic music in particular might be especially well equipped to effect some sort of catharsis and so to help to remove them from someone in whom they’ve been instilled (and who may indeed suffer from them), that is, to extrude them as such into consciousness so that some decision concerning them could be taken?

If that does in fact seem plausible, then in this regard too one has some idea of the way in which electronic music could be Surrealist.
Of course, as is the case with “I’m on Fire,” the question of whether some condition actually exists and then, if it’s admitted that it does, whether it would call for a catharsis, often is overlaid and will provoke controversy – and if, as in this instance (as it seems to me), it’s a Surrealist “dialogue” which is filled with such contention between the parties and moves to a rhythm of their mutual misunderstanding (as Benjamin put it), whenever some heated point of dispute happens to be resolved and cleared away and the misunderstanding makes way for an understanding, it will seem as though here too some catharsis has supervened.

All this, it seems to me, is exemplified in Telefon Tel Aviv’s live cover of the song as recorded in the video included in the playlist; there we see the musicians dancing on stage, evidently in an elated mood, and at first it just didn’t seem right that they would, on account of the lyrics as I tend to understand them; the scene made me think that they had misunderstood what the song was actually about: but then, and this is yet another instance of the strange rhythm inherent in a Surrealist “dialogue,” it occurred to me that they must know very well, and far better than I do, how effectively cathartic music in general and their own electronic music in particular can be, when need be – here, to avoid emphatically and as far as possible provoking any misunderstandings on this delicate point, please note that I am not suggesting that in this instance anything of the kind would have been required in their cases! – and thus that it was I who had misunderstood them. Mea culpa.

Putting the entire matter of musical catharsis now to one side, one last question remains to be posed with regards to the practice of consulting one’s own dreams for inspiration. When, in the video interview, he recounted how he first decided that electronica would be his life, Joshua Eustis took care to mention the circumstance that the music which had prompted the decision had encompassed a dystopian vision of the future (and he noted that it was a future wherein humans had been supplanted by robots); this could well lead one to wonder whether the dreams in which he often seeks inspiration for his own music, and then also the music itself, insofar as it too has a dreamy character, are attuned mainly to the past, or whether, on the other hand, they are open towards the future too.
Dreams as dreams of the future: it’s an ambiguous idea, and if the dreams should happen to include dystopian visions, a very disturbing one as well. Does the dream advance into some prospective future, or does some part of future time enter into the dream – or does some other mode of encounter between them take place? And is the dream simply a presentation of whatever one sees or hears within it, or is the dream in some sense a participant in a process whereby its contents may eventually come to be in reality?

Though he did not intend the notes for publication, one nineteenth-century historian did commit some observations on this topic to paper, and they – or rather, part of one of them has since become well-known, due largely to Benjamin’s citation of it; yet, as the entire remark is of interest, and in order to preserve its format, here I shall not quote it, but rather include a picture of it.

Avenir! Avenir!

4 avril 1839.

rêver = créer
velle videmur Chaque époque rêve la suivante, la crée en rêvant

avenir! avenir!


The precise mood of Michelet’s remarks – they were occasioned by the death of his wife (and the editor of the periodical notes that it was possible for Daniel Halévy to publish merely a few, and these it seems only the calmest
ones, in his biography of the historian) – is usually overlooked by those who cite the “Chaque époque rêve la suivante” portion so enthusiastically (but usually not it seems at first hand), as though it were an incantation.

It would appear that Michelet’s “velle videmur” referred to the passage* in the Aeneid wherein a significant comparison makes palpable Turnus’ state just before he is struck down:

Ac velut in somnis, oculos ubi languida pressit
nocte quies, nequiquam avidos extendere cursus
velle videmur et in mediis conatibus aegri
succidimus, non lingua valet, non corpore notae
sufficiunt vires, nec vox aut verba sequuntur

(Just as while sleeping, once our eyes are heavy and we enwrapped in night’s quiet, to strive onwards although in the midst of the attempt we’d wither and die, is what *we seem to want* to do – but yet we simply cannot: the tongue shirks, the body’s force we made note of suffices now no more, neither voice nor words will second us)

Situated in such a context, in the midst of his sorrow, the idea that “Chaque époque rêve la suivante” would itself most likely have been a semblance or apparition: the prospect was consoling and helped to reconcile him to the event, but he was aware that it was probably more illusory than real – that the acts whereby the next age would be given shape could not possibly have anything so specific in view and that they were, as Michelet went on to note, more pro-creative than articulate and creative, let alone correlate to dreams in any definition of the term.

And yet this strange equation “rêver = créer” remains very thought–provoking. Not in the dreams of anything so large as an entire age in the singular (if the dreams that may be attributed to an epoch are anything other than a metaphor), but in those of individuals something of the next age may be announcing itself in advance, and in being dreamed of may already have come to be, albeit only inconspicuously at first ...

* Bk. 12, ll. 968-12.
In the meanwhile, and in conclusion, in one of Nietzsche’s notebooks there’s an especially striking thought* which I’ll vary just a bit in order to end on a fitting note: Das Träumen ist ein mächtiges Stimulans. Nur muß man wach genug für das Stimulans sein.

Lady Gaga in Amsterdam

*(September 17, 2012)*

Today and tomorrow Lady Gaga is back in Amsterdam, this time on her Born This Way Ball; on the occasion I’ve put together a short playlist mainly comprised of some performances in which her voice – which is quite an instrument! – takes center stage (although the dance moves in some of the videos included are fun to watch too).

At the Lunchtime Concert at the Concertgebouw

The Brackman Trio

*(September 19, 2012)*

Today in the Concertgebouw’s series of lunchtime concerts, the Brackman Trio was performing – a young Amsterdam ensemble comprising the violinist Tim Brackman, the cellist Jonathan van IJzerlooij, and the pianist (and flutist) Anne Brackman; the program included the second and third parts of Leonard Bernstein’s early work “Trio” and Liszt’s “Tristia, Vallée d’Obermann,” and

* Under the heading “Sprüche eines Hyperboreers,” early 1888, numbered 15 (118) in Colli and Montinari’s edition of the *Nachgelassene Fragmente*. 
the ensemble played them very well indeed, with great concentration and feeling, in particular the Liszt, earning a standing ovation in the end.

They have already put out two CDs; the website has the details.

It will be interesting and a pleasure to see and hear what the Brackman Trio does next.

Matthew Shlomowitz

(September 20, 2012)

A young Australian composer who lives and works in London, and who’s already quite accomplished (with Joanna Bailie he leads the Plus Minus Ensemble, and he is also engaged as a teacher at a couple of academic institutions, to name only two of his other commitments), Matthew Shlomowitz’ works are themselves filled with activity – and they might actually be meant to show just how much energy both musical and physical may flow from or be generated by the systematic or variable application of compositional constraints.

It isn’t by chance that Shlomowitz has collaborated with Rees Archibald and Andrew Infanti on a video in three parts about the Oulipo group in literature and its methods of utilizing various constraints productively, which he has posted on his Youtube channel. One might conclude, as per this video’s suggestion, that his compositions themselves could be called “Oumupean works” or some other related variant of the original term.

Nor is the application of constraint in his composing simply intended to yield an instance of la musique pour la musique: the composition that results sounds as though it itself comes forward, approaches us as an analogon, a significant albeit enigmatic likeness of something else. ... But what exactly is it supposed to resemble such that in so doing it would attract the listener’s attention?

Closing one’s eyes and focusing on his music only acoustically, one might be struck by the thought that many of his compositions seek to reveal how the human body itself, in its natural energy and activity, would be manifest if, gen-
erally speaking, our main organs of sensory perception were not our eyes but our ears, and these were sharper and more circumauditory by orders of magnitude than the weak instruments they at present are or seem to us to be. Accordingly, in Shlomowitz’ compositions we’d be given an adumbration of the acoustic images which bodies would project, so to speak, whenever they were active, involuntarily or purposefully as the case might be – and when is a body ever really inactive? – or, not so much those images by themselves as also the mode in which our hyperacute ears, as though listening to a recording played in slow motion, would register each image and their transitions quite distinctly.

Would it be mistaken to say that this is a music of the φύσις both as it now is and as it might perhaps have become at some point in a possible future?

However, when one opens one’s eyes again and watches the actual performances of many of his pieces, one sees that they also stage a gestural dance in which the musicians will have other roles to fill than their accustomed ones (and to balance the new physical responsibilities with their usual, specifically musical ones will require of them a fresh, an acrobatic dexterity) – or rather, it’s not so much that many of the gestures are new, as it is that the mode in which they are to be performed is novel: it seems that Shlomowitz has taken certain physical actions of which musicians avail themselves in the interstices of their performances (such as wiping their brows) usually so quickly that no one even sees them, slowed them down and/or isolated certain moments of them only, and in this form incorporated them deliberately and also at times contrapuntally into the composition itself, reconfiguring its traditional character in the process and our common expectations as well.

This actual counterpoint consisting of gestural movements somehow underscores how far even the smallest gestures of the body – of whose acoustic images this music often seems to be made – are already in themselves gesticulations, and even sometimes entire melodramas in miniature.

There are more than a few moments of humor, more than a few jokes in Shlomowitz’ works; when from time to time the audience laughs, that is the response they call forth.

And he seems to have a special feeling for those inadvertently comical situations in which we all sometimes find ourselves: a peculiar kind of miscommunication where we don’t so much get our wires crossed, as the saying goes, as
get entangled in them; a mutual misunderstanding such as occurs when we move to step out of someone else’s path only to see that the other has done precisely the same and thus that we each still bar one another’s ways – yet when we try the maneuver once again exactly the same thing happens, and again and again it takes place until we’re both nearly exasperated. (This interaction is one possible instantiation of the “jeu de ficelles” that so fascinated Henri Bergson in *Le Rire.*). The peculiar rhythm of such a minor and nearly mechanical piece of slapstick can be heard in several passages in Shlomowitz’ compositions, wherein it serves as the matrix of their musical form; and while the results may well not lead us anywhere, they certainly are diverting as long as they last.

The Stedelijk is “Open”

(September 23, 2012)

Amsterdam’s largest museum of modern and contemporary art, the Stedelijk, opened its doors again today to the public after several years of renovation, and one of the artists participating in the first exhibition, “Beyond Imagination,” is Rory Pilgrim, an Englishman living in The Netherlands, who’s composed a musical work entitled “Open,” which was featured in the official festivities yesterday.

With the beginning of this new chapter, many will be keeping an eye on the museum as an arena of new work – and, on account of the prominence that’s been afforded to Pilgrim, an ear as well; it will be a welcome development indeed if the Stedelijk, much as have the Guggenheim and the Whitney in New York, becomes a patron of note in the commissioning of new music.
Jack Stanton

(September 25, 2012)

Another Soundcloud discovery is Jack Stanton, a musician and singer in Oxford, where (judging from the results of a quick Internet search) he’s a student at university; the demo tapes he’s uploaded are a sparkling reprise of the synthesizer pop of the eighties, a present–day homage that’s as dark as much of that music was then. Although the influence is evident in a number of ways, there’s no nostalgia here, but a sweet–sharp edge that makes one think of Depeche Mode in particular; and this similarity is actually quite striking, not only as regards the music but also the singing: in its range and timbre Stanton’s voice recalls Dave Gahan’s, though it perhaps tends a bit further down into the bass–baritone domain.

Thus far there aren’t so many numbers on his Soundcloud page, but I hope that others will soon be added; at present it’s hard to choose some of them to feature, as all of them are musically and vocally very pleasing.

The Shures

A New Member and a New Video

(October 26, 2012)

The “Internet band” The Shures has a new member, the Welsh singer Sophie, and is thus once again a trio; to kick things off, they’ve uploaded a cover of Nicki Minaj’s “Pound the Alarm” (which I’ve added to the playlist), and together these three are just bursting with energy: will they soon be adding live performances to their repertoire as well?
Another new Amsterdam band is Light Light, which is a project recently initiated by Alexandra Duvekot and Thijs Havens of the duo Saelors in conjunction with Björn Ottenheim and Daan Schinkel of the group zZz (with Ottenheim on vocals and drums, Schinkel on the organ); it’s still early days for this band of bands, and the marriage of musical styles could take a number of directions, but the sound and look of the undertaking, kicked off by an enigmatic video of their song “Airplay” directed by Duvekot and the film-maker Amos Mulder, suggests that this foursome will have a promising future ahead of it: both here and in the English-speaking countries, I should think, and elsewhere too, Light Light can expect to receive a good share of, well, play on the airwaves.

Heading into November, in these parts we’ve just switched over to daylight-savings time for the winter; but the band-members are currently a world away on other shores of light, or at least in a much warmer and brighter climate: so Californians will have a chance to make their acquaintance tomorrow, for they’ll be playing in a city called Murrieta (it’s located halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego).

For those who aren’t residents of that state, Light Light may be followed on the band’s Youtube channel and its Soundcloud page, and on Facebook.

Postscript. Alexandra Duvekot has sent word that the Dutch four-piece was not the band that performed in California, as I had suggested – much as they might have wished to go – on account of the advertisement posted on one of the band’s sites by the Songkick system (which presumably is electronically automated to a high degree and of which one can thus expect it to cross its wires occasionally). So, on opposite sides of the world, there are two musical enterprises sharing a name, and on the global musical stage being brought about by virtue of the Internet, it’s not the case that never the twain shall meet. (This – since the confusion is Californian – would be a scenario which,
in the hands of a competent scriptwriter, could make for an amusing comedy of errors.)

Maxwell Demon

(October 31, 2012)

Out on Long Island (where the storm is now over, and just in time for Halloween) there’s a young singer and musician by the name – whether it’s his own or a nom d’artiste isn’t quite clear – of Maxwell Demon whose rather light arrangements are weighted down by lyrics that veer into dark as well as at times macabre territories, delivered in a voice that’s not beautiful strictly speaking but which makes up for this, memorably, by disposing over a style of recitation that’s disturbing by its very softness; and one remains in suspense about the regions of day or night in which the songs, tugged in different directions by these various elements, are going to end up.

This last summer he released an album entitled Strange Being, and just a month ago or so uploaded a video for one of the songs, “Homewrecker,” on his Youtube channel; it gives a good idea of what he’s about musically.

On his Soundcloud page he’s posted several interesting audio tracks from his album as well: “June,” and “Kill//Love” (which may or may not be a song about vampires).

Le Chat de Tom

(November 5, 2012)

A tip by Luiz Henrique Yudo drew my attention to the page Le Chat de Tom on Soundcloud, where a Parisian electronic musician – where, on a first-
name basis only, Thomas introduced himself and his compositions around half a year ago and, encouraged by the response they’ve begun to elicit from his fellows, has continued to post new ones since then; and it’s a pleasure to make the acquaintance of these pieces, whose proper locale is hard to pin down: they could be spun on a dance floor quite readily, or it might be in the context of a chamber–concert of experimental electronica that they are meant to be performed – or even in some setting that, as it were, swings between those two extremes.

Or passages of these catchy tunes might simply be hummed on the street, and then, it could happen that within a short time they might make the rounds of les rues parisiennes as the songs on everyone’s lips – even without the lyrics which Thomas (as he says on his page) is inclined to add to these “Tests” at some point in the near future.

He has thoughtfully grouped them into a complete set, which is well worth listening to in its entirety.

Who knows, if word of them gets out, maybe some day soon as one’s humming this or that song of his while strolling down the street in one’s own city one might happen to hear from around a corner someone else whistling the very same one ... 

But for now, for those who have to hurry, some especially interesting ones are “Test 27,” “Test (–1),” “Test 40,” “Test 46,” and “Test 53.”

Forestears
A New Upload

(November 5, 2012)

The six–piece band from Brighton Forestears has placed a track, “Organ Song,” intended for but not released on the EP Against the Floor on its Soundcloud page as a separate upload, and it’s memorable, with its voluptuously sad vocals, bits in the arrangement that bring the score of the film Chinatown to
mind, and a somber coda that follows a significantly prolonged silence – could it be some sort of musical cenotaph?

Rory Smith: “Sadder Song”

(November 7, 2012)

The young English composer Rory Smith – who’s something of an athlete in music (he recently relocated from Midhurst to Leeds to pursue an advanced course of study) – has begun to upload new recordings on his Soundcloud page, including several that are shaping up to be a full–fledged song cycle. There’s much to be said about these pieces (and at present I’m drafting a text about them and their resonance); the most recent one, however, “Sadder Song,” is so lovely and timely that it just called out to be shared in advance.

Heinrich Heine’s “Ich hab’ im Traum geweinet” as Poem and Lied

(November 21, 2012)

Every so often it happens that the people, places, or times one dwells on – or circles about – in the recurrent privacy of thought, get overwritten by those which enter there unbidden on account of world events; the inner continuum of one’s imagination might be shaken up as a consequence of new associations of ideas that could emerge from the intrusion, with it being lent a feeling of greater weight or a stronger sense of depth in the process: and its recon-
figuration would then be at once thoroughly idiosyncratic and yet comprehensible in principle (assuming, that is, that one would care to elucidate it in words to other people at all).

For my part, to speak plainly, lately two different cities, Paris and Düsseldorf, were preoccupying my imagination – each for reasons which, though it’d be out of place to specify them here, had little to do with the others – when, prompted by a recent turn of events, I began to think again of that Dichter und Denker who was born in the one and led much of his life in the other, Heinrich Heine: a poet in whose lyrical works the light-hearted and the serious blend wonderfully together (this goes a way towards explaining why they have not dated) – into a mixture by virtue of which they have been eminently suited to interest several composers and, once set to music, to become full-fledged Lieder.

Now, it seems to me that in the eyes – and, even more, in the ears – of lyric poets, however dedicated to thinking they may also be, the ways of the imagination will manifest themselves in a manner other than the form in which they appear in the experience of those whose mode of thinking is devoted to θεωρία above all and which has thus been defined essentially by that end. (It may be mainly during that “theoretical” pursuit alone that the metaphysical postulate formulated in a brief aside by Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics, namely: all things are defined by their ends, “ὁρίζεται γὰρ ἕκαστον τῷ τέλει,”* acquires its great plausibility and even shines forth as a self-evident proposition.) And so it’s with particular reference to this latter mode of thinking that some of Hannah Arendt’s trenchant remarks may seem to be most valid, rather than that they would aptly characterize all thinking tout court: in the Life of the Mind she suggests** that the activity of thinking “inverts all ordinary relationships” such that while we are engaged in it “what is near and appears directly to our senses is now far away and what is distant is actually present” – which would mean, in other words, that as long as it lasts it “annihilates temporal as well as spatial distances,” and as a result, for the reason that “time and space in ordinary experience cannot even be thought of without a continuum that stretches from the nearby into the distant,” one could claim

“that not only distances but also time and space themselves are abolished in the thinking process.”

A transcendence of that kind might well appear to signal to a thinker immersed in θεωρία, but these propositions begin to sound implausiblible at best if what is at issue is a mode of thinking that attends first and foremost to the μέλος there is in words, in the mind, and in the world; such a mode of thinking while it endures could not possibly bring about either the annihilation or the abolition (if these terms are not for their part stripped entirely of their usual meanings) of distances or even of time and space altogether: for from out of the latter it would seek to elicit the music within them, and then, as Heine did, to transpose it into a poetic form – or in Heine’s practice a twofold transposition was often involved, whenever it happens that the distances of which on first hearing one believed he sang, soon begin to resonate as though for him they actually had stood in for others, of which he refrained from speaking directly but by which his heart was exercised even more through such reticence. (To designate reserve of this kind, the German language has a lovely word: Herzenstakt.)

Long before Heine treated the public to his “Hebräische Melodien,” those melodies and the distinctive cares which punctuated them could already be heard in his lyric verses, lending even them an immemorial intensity of yearning for something that always beckons from afar, being set in a perdurant “next year.”

On this point, too, the mode of thought of a poet, especially a lyric poet like Heine, would evidently diverge from the thinking that devotes itself to θεωρία. The “tonalities,” as Arendt elsewhere in her book* terms the states of the soul characteristic of the life of the mind, however moderato they may have been in Heine’s case, could not here be called “serene,” at least if by that term one means to designate a mood filled by “the mere enjoyment of an activity that never has to overcome the resistance of matter” (and accordingly serenity would be typical of the activity of “theoretical” thinking) – if only for the reason that were matter not there at some point to offer a coefficient of resistance, no acoustic reverberation could take place to begin with and there would simply be no sound at all in general. Hence – not to mention other sub-

stantive reasons one might well introduce – the lyric poet’s mode of thinking would be neither inclined nor even able to raise itself above matter, and in fact as long as the activity lasts it would remain closely attached and attuned to this very material condition of its possibility.

So, if not serenity in that particular definition of the term, what might have been the tonality of the soul in the case of this lyric poet, in some of his moods at least? To discern some melancholic disposition would not be so very difficult – Arendt suggests that insofar as the activity of thinking “is closely connected with remembrance, its mood inclines to melancholy” – but it seems to me that here something else was decisive; it would get closer to the heart of the matter to say (to speak telegraphically) that the nearness of the past effected by memory was in Heine’s thinking sustained by a somber expectation of the impending, and vice versa, and this reciprocal support was established in the context of an overarching awareness of a past and of a future extending in both directions and each encompassing similar episodes in a single story which “wir noch grade ertragen” (in the apt turn of phrase of a later poet), in such a way that neither his reminiscence nor his anticipation could be said to have simply preceded or originated the other: and then one tonality resulting from all this would likely have been not a philosophical tinge of melancholy but a quite considerable feeling of sorrow, however reticent he may have been in its poetic expression.

And yet it can be inferred at times that remembrance and expectation, having conferred in his thinking, had led his present moment of concern to be shed poetically as a stream of tears – this development very plausibly may even be what one of his most affecting poems, “Ich hab’ im Traum’ geweinet,”* is actually about.

Ich hab’ im Traum’ geweinet,
Mir träumte du lägest im Grab’.
Ich wachte auf und die Thräne
Floß noch von der Wange herab.

* It is included in the “Lyrisches Intermezzo” of the Buch der Lieder.
Ich hab’ im Traum’ geweinet,
Mir träumt’ du verließest mich.
Ich wachte auf, und ich weinte
Noch lange bitterlich.

Ich hab’ im Traum’ geweinet,
Mir träumte du wärst mir noch gut.
Ich wachte auf, und noch immer
Strömt meine Thränenflut.

The distance or distances of which this poem speaks, sound at first as though they are intimate only, but listening closely one might well think that, behind what would be a poetic personification, something other than a person was so plaintively being addressed. Thus, if the poem is read in this or a similar manner, it would seem to give expression to some variation of the Pathos der Distanz, an outlook correlate to his musical mode of thinking which might then be discerned at other points throughout Heine’s works as well.

This particular poem, of course, was set to music by Schumann in his Dichterliebe, and in this form it was interpreted much later, in the middle of the 1930s, by the tenor Richard Tauber, with great feeling and a very acute ear for what it may well actually have been about.

On Youtube I have come across two uploads featuring the original recording, the one very smooth but also rather soft, the second marked by some static grain but also fittingly louder.

In both one hears – and this I imagine would have brought a sad smile to the lips of the itinerant poet – the sound of solicitude and perhaps also even the crackling of the fire that consumes fire.
The Soft Moon
A New Video and a New Audio Upload

(November 24, 2012)

Having just released a new album, *Zeros*, and currently on a tour of several European cities (according to the schedule posted on its website, a concert in Utrecht is slated for November 30), the San Francisco band The Soft Moon has posted a video for the song “Machines,” which I’ve added to the playlist: edited by Ron Robinson, it is drawn from Ralph Steiner’s 1930 film, *Mechanical Principles* (which itself has been uploaded elsewhere on Youtube), and the montage of various kinds of gears and pistons in operation, now coupled with the aural pulsations, works to convey – in the strong sense of the word – a great surge of energy to those who are watching and listening to it.

In addition, the band’s record label, Captured Tracks, has uploaded the song “Insides” to its Soundcloud page.

A Musical Painter (or Two) at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

(November 25, 2012)

Currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco (where I happen to be at the moment) is a retrospective of the work of Jasper Johns called “Seeing with the Mind’s Eye” that merits a visit (it runs until the third of February); the title of the exhibition notwithstanding, one of its strengths – as if the sheer visual pleasure afforded by Johns’ paintings and wall–mounted
sculptures were not sufficient in its own right! – is to focus attention on the musicality that animates several of these works.

Although, as it seems to me, these works themselves already virtually invite the public to listen to them with their minds’ ears, the curators, dutifully and helpfully, have made sure to mention the two facts of the artist’s friendship with John Cage and his longstanding love of the poetry of Hart Crane – and each fact does help to underscore that open invitation and thus to bring the public to understand them a bit better.

In the case of paintings such as “Grey Alphabet” or “White Numbers,” much as with the mode of construction of many works of music, the meaning and the beauty emerge from the arrangement of the elements of a fixed system (whether they are letters or numbers is secondary) – and yet without the “skilled transmemberment” (to cite a noteworthy phrase from the third of Crane’s “Voyages”) of those elements, that is, their imprinting in or impression on a material substrate, with the attendant vagaries of outline, the works would not have been Johns’, but those of an artist like Stuart Davis who was fascinated artistically by the essentially graphic in its sheer two-dimensionality. With these paintings of Johns’, the elements of which they’re composed though still intelligible are forms in a phase of decay, and it seems to me that it’s this condition from which the great delight of these works derives – in something of the way in which every so often it’s during the descent into imprecision and echo of passages in a piece of music as they spread acoustically throughout and beyond their venue that one appreciates them the most: so this or some similar analogy between visual and auditory enjoyment is an idea that may well occur to the viewers of paintings like these ones, and it in turn could contribute to an illumination of their nature as quasi-musical compositions.

That’s all well and good, one could object, but it remains on the plane of formal conjecture and hypothesis. Most likely this is true; giving rise to a more substantive sense of yet another quasi-musical dimension to some of Johns’ works, however – by this I have in mind above all the considered impertinence characteristic of several of them, their readiness, so to speak, to whistle a cheeky tune back at the urban environment from which they’ve collected the castoffs – is the fact of the artist’s long familiarity or elective affinity with Hart Crane’s poetry.
(Perhaps the line of influence did not simply flow in one direction: it may be that a couple of decades had to pass if the subsequent developments of art, and in particular the emergence right at the end of the 1950s of pop art, were to catalyze into perceptibility some strata of atmosphere still too diffuse to identify in Crane’s lines when he put them together.)

Two stanzas from “Chaplinesque” sound as though they were a translation into poetry of one of the main moods of Johns’ art –

We will sidestep, and to the final smirk
Dally the doom of that inevitable thumb
That slowly chafes its puckered index toward us,
Facing the dull squint with what innocence
And what surprise!

[...]

The game enforces smirks; but we have seen
The moon in lonely alleys make
A grail of laughter of an empty ash can,
And through all sound of gaiety and quest
Have heard a kitten in the wilderness.

– by which I mean, in other words, a kind of light-heartedness concurrent with the frivolity of big-city dwellers who from time to time seek respites of pleasure in odd places. The sound of this attitude may be heard in both bodies of work: it’s marked in the measures of humor that enliven and modulate each of their poetic and pictorial singsongs.

And this likeness between them has a complement in another that comes into play when both the poet and the painter are in a more serious, a more expectant mood, which was nicely put into words in the last stanza of “A Name for All”:

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I dreamed that all men dropped their names, and sang
As only they can praise, who build their days
With fin and hoof, with wing and sweetened fang
Struck free and holy in one Name always.

It seems to me that, at bottom, the passion that speaks in these lines is also the one that saves the paintings Johns devoted to Crane and his fate – “Periscope” and “Land’s End” – from descending into an irremediable bleakness (which would in that case have engulfed many of his other paintings as well): whereas actually those two works in their painterly arrangements are scored to an especially buoyant music.

Postscript. One other piece in the museum – but not one of Johns’ – bears mentioning here, on account of its marked quasi–musicality as a composition. In the small exhibition “Field Conditions,” there is a very large yet also very detailed (and for this reason not readily reproducible) abstract drawing by the artist Marsha Cottrell entitled “A Black Powder Rains Down Gently on My Sleepless Night”*: it is a work suffused with visual music that’s as dark as it is delightful.

“The Ego” (Nicolas Jaar and Theatre Roosevelt)

(November 29, 2012)

A new track by Nicolas Jaar and an entity – not unexpectedly, given what one knows of Jaar, who or what this cipher of a collaborator is, is not easy to deter-

* The title is translated from a line in the fragments of “Feuillet 12” in Rimbaud’s Illuminations: “une poudre noire pleut doucement sur ma veillée.”
mine, although it does seem to be in possession of an actual human voice –
called Theatre Roosevelt, “The Ego,” was posted a few days ago on the Sound-
cloud page of his record label, Clown and Sunset; with its distinctive treat-
ment of that voice as though it were simply the first amongst equals in an arse-
nal of musical instruments, subjecting it electronically to various modifica-
tions in order to draw its sheer sonority into the foreground while sacrificing
whatever sense it may enunciate, this song – or is it an antisong? – could an-
nounce a different turn on Jaar’s part: which might account somewhat for the
great interest it’s aroused amongst his devotees in the short span of time since
it was sprung on the public without much warning at all.

This musical composition sounds very apposite at a moment when so often
it happens that people do not take the time to speak with one another but
rather in their talk stream or rush loudly past each other – as though it were
composed for a moment that would be manifest, in the ears of some disinter-
ested and slightly bemused auditor, as overflowing with snippets of speech
which attract attention, if they merit any at all, only on account of their sound
and not by their sense or lack thereof – apposite to a time when the mode in
which one listens to others resounds with a frustrating syncopation that fre-
quently pre–empts the very possibility of a mutual understanding (or even the
proverbial “agreement to disagree,” which is the latter’s most minimal reduc-
tion). Yes, with respect to this period, “The Ego” as a piece of music is timely
indeed.

There’s some equanimity here; but those who have been waiting to be
borne away on a lasting feeling of elation – and a quick glance around the
Internet to see how this track has been received, suggests that this is what
some have in fact been waiting for – will probably find their expectations
dashed, and have to seek that transport elsewhere: on a second or third listen-
ing, amidst the irony and even perhaps a certain cynicism which are increas-
ingly audible, one begins to hear more and more notes of disappointment or
something like despair throughout this mutation of a song. In an age when
public life is reigned by rubbish, one has heard it all before, and it may now
be more devoid of meaning than it ever has been. And, who knows, perhaps
after all this is something to be thankful for.
The Landon Gadoci Playlist
A New Video

(December 3, 2012)

After an absence of several months – though it’s evident that during that period much work on the music was being accomplished – the Austin singer and pianist Landon Gadoci has posted a cover on Youtube of Owl City and Carly Rae Jepsen’s “Call Me Maybe,” this one a duet with his friend and fellow singer in Italy, Nicole di Gioacchino; and the interaction between their two delightful voices, supplementing one another in harmony and counterpoint by turns, conjures forth from the original – which has tended to suffer from its rampant overexposure on the radio and elsewhere – something quite pointed and timely. (And of course I’ve added it to the playlist.)

If one listens closely to their version, both the vocal performance and the arrangements, it’s the particular joie de vivre of the generation that’s still in its twenties – those, in quite a few countries, for whom the tempo established by such inventions as iPhones, instantaneous e-mail messaging, and Twitter, has become a second nature, for better and for worse – that one comes to understand a bit better. Or at least, if one closes one’s eyes, one might hear the sound made by the gait, the particular pace and lightness of step, characteristic of this generation as it strides along the boulevard of its life; there’s a special bounce to this music from which one could glean, not, to be sure, where this generation is headed – the future, let’s hope, still holds unexpected destinations to deal out to us all – but perhaps how it’s getting there. And, speaking generally, beginning to comprehend this way of life adequately will increasingly become a matter of some importance, won’t it?

To be more specific, the lyrics of this song seem to be about the especial difficulties that – at a time when, to mention just one feature of the reign of the Internet and its subsidiary technologies, the act of giving out one’s telephone number to another has itself become a nearly antique mode of “hooking up” – have been placed in the way of that even older event, love at first sight. Here too Gadoci and di Gioacchino sound as though they’re well attuned to register
how the situation of the young–hearted today, surrounded by the many temptations, real, cyberspatial, or telephonographic ones, to encounters that often end superficially at best, will feel when those have been lived through from within. In their rendition one hears something of the manner in which, these days, in these amorous matters, a jittery self–confidence can in the blink of an eye be supplanted by an excruciating amalgam of uncertainty and certainty, whenever, that is, you grasp that you have most likely misread the signals radically (or even cut them into existence out of whole cloth by the scissors of your imagination), and what you took as encouraging indications that someone else was or could be “into you” were anything but that. Now, such an unstable succession of feelings, which must transpire quite frequently, has been well replicated by these two singers in the tremuli of this mercurial music; and this accomplishment may suffice to account for the distinct appeal of their version, especially when it’s compared to the original.

One particularly striking aspect about the fashion in which love is played out currently, when the Internet and the expectations inherent to it are busily remaking all sectors of our life, is the upheaval that frequently is introduced into the sequence by which it, whether great or small, once tended to unfold – a destruction of the definite order of states of amorous sentiment through which, with his sharp lucidity, Stendhal guided the reader in *De l’Amour*. In an early section* of that work he recounted the vicissitudes of what he felicitously termed “cristallisation” – “c’est l’opération de l’esprit, qui tire de tout ce qui se présente la découverte que l’objet aimé a de nouvelles perfections” – in its first emergence and its subsequent modifications. Here I shall not attempt to summarize his analysis, but simply quote from it three especially lapidary remarks, each pertaining to a different moment in this crystallizing process, while observing the sequence in which they were provided there:

1. “Un homme passionné voit toutes les perfections dans ce qu’il aime ; cependant l’attention peut encore être distraite, car l’âme se rassasie de tout ce qui est uniforme, même du bonheur parfait.”

2. “L’amant arrive à douter du bonheur qu’il se promettait, il devient sévère sur les raisons d’espérer qu’il a cru voir. Il veut se rabattre sur les autres

* Bk. I, chap. II.
plaisirs de la vie, il les trouve anéantis. La crainte d’un affreux malheur le saisit, et avec elle l’attention profonde.”

3. “Le moment le plus déchirant de l’amour jeune encore est celui où il s’aperçoit qu’il a fait un faux raisonnement et qu’il faut détruire tout un pan de cristallisation.”

Although it could well be doubted whether any of these three remarks would actually fittingly describe what commonly goes on now in amorous life, I tend to think that they all still do, taken individually; but it’s their definite sequence which no longer holds good in general, when love too is conquered by the haste and inattentiveness that’s triumphing everywhere: these days, the moments they describe often occur, in this or that case of love or love-sickness, virtually simultaneously or otherwise out of turn in some similar rhythm. Accordingly, one of the merits of Gadoci and di Gioacchino’s version of “Call Me Maybe,” to my mind, is that in it it’s these unruly rhythms which we’re given to hear.

Or it can happen, in our period when world enough and time are what few if any have any longer, that the entire development outlined by Stendhal is run in reverse; then what originates the entire amorous experience and sets the tone for it is the moment he called “le plus déchirant”: in such a case, even before one finds oneself falling in love, the crystallization around that person has already in some mode been completed in the inverse order at least once, having advanced back through its various stages and reached the one where irregularities are discerned in part of the crystal, if only so that the whole of this “amour jeune” may appeal even more strongly than if it remained simply uniformly flawless and perfect.

Now, although I realize that this train of thought could well seem strange, I also think that one might want to ponder what the most significant line in these lyrics, “Before you came into my life I missed you so bad” – and both Gadoci and di Gioacchino seem to have found this line to be quite thought-provoking – actually means, directly or, more likely, by way of implication. Then one might begin to wonder: what kind of joy – if it’s a question of joy at all – will be afforded by a love that commences by virtue of a tearing up (“déchirage”) and emerges out of negation (“l’anéantisation”) and which remains bound back as long as it lasts to the origin comprised of those acts? (Not to mention “l’affreux malheur” that could stubbornly continue to afflict
such a lover.) If one really listens to their version of this song, one might hear the elements of an answer.

For his part, this seems to be familiar territory to Gadoci, the locale he’s explored numerous times in the videos he’s uploaded on his Youtube channel, and this character has lent some unity of theme to the playlist I’ve put together of them as well.

♫ Musically speaking, he excels in drawing the point from out of love’s disappointment; he knows to fashion some very sweet songs – and don’t these perhaps also serve as vehicles for a species of practical wisdom? – from the distress the human heart often inflicts on itself, in its loves and, yes, in its friendships too. (It’s very possible that some distress, some amount of self-imposed friction, is needed if the heart’s powers are not to wither away and it is to remain capable of bestirring itself and instilling in itself the courage to take any significant action.)

Probably the strongest performance in this vein he’s yet given is his version of Jason Derülo’s “In My Head,” a rendition which in its expression of the loneliness of those who, for lack of time or skill or finesse, or simply by happenstance, build up entire scenarios in their own imaginations – whether they are fantasies of love or of friendship or even just of some fleeting contact is a secondary matter – is truly poignant.

Hayato Takeuchi

(December 4, 2012)

Judging from afar, by the composers and others who live there whom one comes across from time to time on systems like Youtube and Soundcloud, the musical scenes in Tokyo must be as diverse as they are inventive; one of them, Hayato Takeuchi (I recently heard of him via Luiz Henrique Yudo) has uploaded a number of tracks from which one can infer that his complete body of
work manifests both of these qualities at once, and as such his activity is thoroughly idiosyncratic, on the one hand, while it may yet be, on the other, in some fashion representative of what’s going on musically in his city in general.

The sheer variety of those few tracks conveys some idea of what Takeuchi’s “genreless music” could comprise: and this is a body of work that might prove to be as little limited by nationality as it is by genre – in its very oddness it could travel abroad with ease.

Particularly odd and especially appealing is “Tomorrow/Farewell Song,” which is something like a Cajun tune d’un amour perdu – sung in Japanese. (What the lyrics actually speak of, is not something I can establish, to be sure, but the gist of it, I believe, does spring over the linguistic divide.)

Some of his other pieces are “The World of a Know It All,” “The Fifth Area of Lunar Base,” and “My Trash Travels in Space (in His Head).”

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**At the Ventana 244 Gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn:**

**“Sweat Tests”**

(Date: December 5, 2012)

At the Ventana 244 gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn (right now I am on a visit in New York) the current show (until the fifteenth of the month) presents the video work “Sweat Tests,” in which the director and performance artist Brian Rogers has taken filmed moments from his piece “Hot Box” and rearranged them into a form suitable not for a theatre but for this intimate art space in particular – where they are projected on two separate surfaces and supplemented by a nonsynchronized sound loop.
Premiered in September of this year at the artists’ theatre The Chocolate Factory, where he serves as Artistic Director, “Hot Box” (it represents a collaboration between Rogers and Madeline Best) – which I have not seen – is comprised, according to various press materials – some of which I have consulted – of a very tumultuous and yet abstract performance in which physical states correlate to extreme bodily exertion and stress are mounted on the stage in order to furnish the material for a video sequence, shown simultaneously, that is measured in its tempo and calm and collected in its images. (Described in this way, “Hot Box” would seem to bear a family resemblance – although how close of one is a question – to the works of certain contemporary dance companies.)

The intended aim of this performance is perhaps to move its public to reflect on the general limits of the capacity of human endurance and their significance; but in the variant reduced form into which it’s been reconfigured in the art gallery, this piece could be taken as being about something that’s rather different and more specific: watching the succession of close-ups of Rogers and Best, their faces tensed and their heads bathed in sweat, with a soundtrack permeated by an audible anxiety murmuring throughout the room, one might well find the whole to be a twofold representation of what stage fright – both before but also during a theatrical or, alternately, a musical performance – actually feels like when lived through from within, on the one hand, and of the severe inner countermeasures that may be required such that no sign of it manifest itself outwardly, on the other.

What the gallery–going public, confronted by these “Sweat Tests,” might then see and hear is that the art of performance could well contain more than one paradox.
A New Discovery at the New Museum in New York

(December 7, 2012)

In the Rosemarie Trockel retrospective at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, a short film of thirteen minutes from 1912 is included, The Cameraman’s Revenge, by the animator and amateur entomologist Wladyslaw Starewicz, whom I had never heard of before. (He was born in Moscow in 1882, and, after the First World War, spent the second half of his life in France.) As there’s something both delicate and slapstick–like about the humor in it, while the musical score is amusing and lightly ironic, it struck me that it would not be out of place to mention it here.

(The exhibition itself, though it has nothing to do with music and as such exceeds the scope of my project, is well worth seeing; especially beautiful are Trockel’s ceramic works, such as “Grater 2.”)

Tona Scherchen

(December 14, 2012)

Every so often one chances upon an older composer who, without being entirely forgotten, does seem to stand far off on the sidelines of contemporary musical awareness – by some fluke, given the obvious quality of the works. Such a composer is Tona Scherchen, of whose compositions there are relatively few recordings, while still less is available on the Internet. The two I have been able to find on Youtube – “Shen (神)” and “Once Upon a Time” – I’ve assembled in a playlist, and should I happen to come across others, I will extend it as appropriate.
The daughter of a Swiss conductor and a Chinese composer, Scherchen
(from the information I have been able to gather, she resides in Paris) has
been composing since the 1960s, and both the Western avant–garde and the
culture of China have obviously contributed much to the music she makes.
But to set aside the musicology of influence and reference, one characteristic
that’s striking about a work such as “Shen (神)” is the sheer humor, whose
provenance would seem to stem more from the popular environs of the circus
– to name just one likely source – than from the middle–ranges of opera
(whether occidental or oriental), let alone from the precincts of the orchestral
music that prides itself on its high seriousness. This is a music that resonates
with the bustle and commotion of the common people in their cherished pleas-
ures and pastimes, from which it’s unlikely – thank goodness – that any in-
ducement or system will convince them to part.

On the page dedicated to the composer at Universal Edition there are a few
audio excerpts from other of her works; while on one at the INA website a re-
cording of her piece “Vague T’ao” has been uploaded.

Tona Scherchen is a composer of whom and of whose works I for one
should like to hear more, much more; perhaps at some point in the near
future she will be rediscovered by or otherwise come into vogue amongst the
music–loving public throughout the world.

Adam Cuthbért

(December 14, 2012)

In New York, operating in the realm between classical and experimental and
electronic music that’s so well–established in that city, there’s a young com-
poser whose music is – to resort for once to a much–misused word – ravishing
in its smooth sonic beauty, Adam Cuthbért: it’s a quality that is pronounced
in his piece “Rikai アダム・カスパートの「理解」,” included in the playlist, and even
more evident, perhaps by virtue of the omission of the visual accompaniment,
in the tracks he’s uploaded on his Soundcloud page.
Although, in my ears, his music speaks for itself and has no need of any elucidation by biography, it may nonetheless be of some help, in situating him and it, to mention the fact that he spent some time in Japan while at university and remains a student of Japanese, and also to note his especial love of some of the sound environments created for video games – these bits of data could supplement the profile of a composer whose affiliations, as one might have expected, are with American minimal music and with figures such as Brian Eno.

While not attending to his own work, Cuthbért oversees some of the concerts offered by the Bang on a Can festival, and also organizes – in conjunction with his friend Daniel Rhode (about whose work I hope to post something shortly) – a new small-scale festival and website called Sight/Sound, which, it seems to me, will be an enterprise worth following in the years to come. (It also has a Youtube channel of its own.)

Some pieces on Soundcloud are “夢世界 Dream World,” “S16 Luna Nera, Scene 1 and 2 (Miners Inferno & Sulfur Transportation),” “Improvi/Sed no. 2a,” and, with Daniel Rhode, “A Sense of Space Where There Once Was an Object.”

Alloapm

(December 15, 2012)

A duo of producers and DJs in Tokyo, Male Yacob and Amelie Mirror Adnis, has recently begun to make music of its own under the moniker Alloapm, and it’s exciting stuff; it, along with the reputation they’d previously acquired separately, earned them a recording contract from Sunlinxx Records in Los Angeles: some months ago their track “Gorilla Slightly” and a number of remixes of it were issued together as an EP.

Listening to the numbers that have been uploaded on their Soundcloud page, it sounds as though the arrangements of this synthesizer music would continue to reverberate around the dance-floor even after a song, or rather
its various constituent elements are heard from no more there (for, within the private nightclub in this listener’s head, at least, they’ve certainly echoed on even after the songs in which they were contained are done), while in the vocals, for their part, lines, texts, and words get shredded and in that raw form enter into the mix from all directions: the dancers will be bombarded by them not only from every side but from above and below as well – and they, under this barrage, might then just move their bodies a bit more quickly.

The Stephen Carmichael Playlist
A New Video

(December 15, 2012)

On his Youtube channel, Stephen Carmichael has posted a video of a new cover of Ke$ha’s “Die Young” that is also in part an homage to Cyndi Lauper, in part a mash–up featuring bits from her songs “Time After Time” and “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun”; and in it those three evergreens – that is, death, youth, and fun – go, look, and sound great together.
A Concert at the Muziekgebouw aan ’t IJ
Seth Josel, Raphael Vanoli, Ben Frost, and Their Friends

(December 20, 2012)

Last Friday evening at the Muziekgebouw aan ’t IJ here in Amsterdam, under the auspices of the Amsterdam Electric Guitar Heaven festival, and in co-operation with the Bimhuis and that very active impresario at Viral Radio and inhabitant of the “continuous partial everywhere” Juha van ’t Zelfde (who is himself a musician and DJ), an event was held that will I’d wager be remembered as one of the highlights of the season. At the center was a tripartite concert given by the guitarists Seth Josel (an American living in Berlin), Raphael Vanoli (a resident of Amsterdam with a Franco-German background), and the music producer and composer Ben Frost (an Australian who lives in Reykjavik), which was both preceded and followed by several other acts, including sets by the DJs H-SIK (Hervé Sika, from the Ivory Coast and living in Haarlem) and Gerri Jäger (from Austria and now living in Amsterdam), and live performances on keyboards by two musicians living in Berlin, the guitarist and synthesizer-player Claude Speeed and the DJ and producer Kuedo (a.k.a. Jamie Teasdale). Although top billing did go to Frost, all of the performers, in their various ways, excelled musically and also in some instances technically, while the evening fulfilled and even exceeded the expectation held by those who planned it, and also, I think, by those who attended, that it would form a whole.

However, lest the parts thereof – or at least some partial views of it – get overlooked, photographs of the event taken by van ’t Zelfde may be viewed at his Instagram page.

As for me, the following will comprise something between a full report and a sequence of separate remarks about the different piece of music that were played; even though, as it seems to me, there were many significant interrelationships amongst the latter – by virtue of the sum of which, after all, the sub-
stance of the evening would have been constituted as a whole – I simply won’t be able to venture into that wider field here.

So: in the first of the concert’s three parts, two different versions of Morton Feldman’s composition from 1966, of which the score was presumed lost for many years (a collateral victim of an automobile robbery), “The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar;” were performed by Seth Josel, who’s written it down again on the basis of a recording which recently surfaced out of an archive in Berkeley.

This new notation of the work Josel presented first seated on a cushion, his guitar laid flat on the stage, and the style in which he played corresponded to this posture; the notes were pristine, appearing and disappearing as rapidly as he plucked them into existence, without being prolonged by any reverberation: and the passages that elapsed between them were just as quiet as the sounds were definite.

Now a few words about Feldman’s composition are in order. It’s rather fitting for a work whose score was lost and much later found again, that it be a work about the musical score as such and its constitution; for what this piece gives us to hear is the remainder that’s left over after a full–fledged score on paper was subjected to a great erasure from which only a few small groups of notes were spared, for this or that or perhaps even no verifiable reason, all the others having been entirely effaced: when then the survivors of such a decimation pass so briefly in revue through the auditorium, each of them individually is nearly bereft of the complex of interrelations within which they once would have “made sense,” and each of them in the isolation of their fleeting brevity could represent an index of that antecedent action and might succeed in rendering it palpable to the audience. If they do so, this would be a work in which silence and sound abut each other uneasily and in a manner that may be called “antiholistic” – for, after all, if here the strange juxtaposition of sound and silence summons to mind some original destructive act without which this composition would never have been made to begin with, the musical result, in other words, will be something other than a whole – actually, this mournful sequence of parts that don’t add up to a whole is akin to a cenotaph, in fact.
Such an ante–musical act would itself resonate symbolically in the midst of a century replete with decimations.

Yet to leave this broadest context aside (as this is not the occasion even to begin to discuss it): that first act, as a preliminary moment in the process of composition, would seem to be able to engender meaning in inverse proportion to the number of musical means that remain – as long as the reduction halted within certain limits, of course. The rationale evidently was that the ground needed a clearing, if from the musical remainder new arrangements were to be composed.

How new layers of music can spring up from or cover over a field laid waste – and how quickly they can do so – it was one of the virtues of Josel’s second version of Feldman’s work to demonstrate. This time he performed in the usual guitarist’s posture, utilizing the usual technique, and with a standard amount of reverberation: in the result, with echo now gradually impinging on what in the previous version had been stretches of utter silence, it was as though the patches of the music that had survived the prior destruction were ramifying and the new growth was beginning to reclaim the barren spots, causing the silences to vanish little by little in the face of a piece of music that, while not yet one, was no longer quite nearly to the same degree not a whole, either.

Next in the line–up was Raphael Vanoli, who performed music of his own. It may have been improvised to some extent – Vanoli, who with Gerri Jäger founded the band Knalpot, must have considerable experience in improvising – or it may not have been, but the soundscape he elicited from his instrument was drawn con amore. Often bending over it protectively, and then also frequently tilting it up in front of his head, he at times interfered with the audience’s ability to observe his actual technique, a reticence on his part which had its reasons, as in it he brought a couple of unusual innovations to bear. Although, given the visual obstructions, I cannot say with certainty that this is what he was doing, it did seem as though he used not only his fingers to play, but at certain moments his nose – akin to a less–than–prehensile but still functional eleventh digit – as well, and even a number of times his lips – which were capable of educing from the strings several pizzicati at least.
The program guide had described Vanoli’s soundscapes as being “hypnotizing,” but this term was thus an apt one for the actual mode of his performance as well – both were in their different ways riveting. In fact, as regards the innovative character of the technique, this second concert represented the high point of the evening.

Frost’s piece “Music for 6 Guitars,” in its Dutch premiere, was the last played in the concert itself. On stage, on electric guitar, Josel and Vanoli were joined by Jeroen Kimman, Daniel Rejmer, Bram Stadhouders, and Patricio Wang as well, and this ensemble was complemented, to the side on the balcony and, most likely, at the rear of the auditorium, by a wind section comprising Adam Toth, Alejandro Luque Belmot, and Susanne Baai on the trombone, Caroline Bovee and Rolf Verbeek on the horn, and Roel van der Zande on the trumpet; while Frost himself, somewhere off stage, had his hands full with the electronics and with providing direction to each of the guitarists individually via headphones – for the sound of each of their six instruments was subject to variable amplification throughout the course of the piece, even at points in effect being turned off altogether, and overseeing these modulations and, presumably, guiding the musicians through them constituted one of Frost’s tasks during the performance itself.

Thus, with this work, Frost (who will return to the Muziekgebouw aan ’t IJ next year in April) explored the boundary-area between composing and conducting; far more than is customary, here the usual divisions in the performance of music between giving, transmitting, and executing the direct orders otherwise known as musical notations were thrown into doubt; while in the composition itself other boundary-areas were explored, such as the one where sound-sequences have nearly lost their definite shape and stretch out indefinitely as a drone, or the one in which the audience has nearly been precipitated entirely into a trance-like state – yet not quite. In both cases the music hovered on this side of the threshold, so that, in the first, one heard at most the beginnings of a drone, and in the second, it was only the first stillness of the trance that began to break over us; whether it separated sounds or states that were different in kind, it was the boundaries between them as such that Frost’s piece extruded and which impinged on the audience’s awareness.
Drones and trances: something of the sonic conditions of the dances or raves which, as seems likely, several of the evening’s participants must have attended in their youth, was thus replicated within Frost’s composition; and this recollection of sounds past – if it was not rather a mere echo of what goes on in today’s parties – was underscored by some of what one heard in the after-concert performances, each accomplished in its kind, by H-SIK, Jäger, Kuedo, and Speede.

Daniel Rhode

(December 23, 2012)

Adam Cuthbert’s close friend and collaborator on the Sight/Sound festival, Daniel Rhode, is likewise a composer, and though he currently lives in Michigan while in the last phase of his university studies, in his compositions it seems that he too has moved to New York and joined the hard-to-classify scene that thrives there in the interstices of contemporary classical and experimental music; and since where there is personal liking we go, it stands to reason that in the near future this virtual New Yorker will relocate there in actual fact.

(While compiling the text about Cuthbert, I failed to note that Sight/Sound has not only a Youtube channel but also a Bandcamp page of its own, on which further biographical information about the two composers is also provided.)

A VJ as well as a composer, Rhode has made a point of creating videos for several of his works, uploading them to his Youtube channel; I’ve assembled three of them into a playlist.

The most recent, “Vertigo” (directed by J. D. Forslin), perhaps precisely because it was filmed at night in a Grand Rapids that seems nearly deserted by its inhabitants, sounds and looks as though it already points towards a life in
New York; thus, to my mind, this is a work whose character is personal and anticipatory: and as the rearrangement of one’s life that goes with such a change of locale frequently comes with some inward upheaval, it may be presumed that the title was not chosen adventitiously but that it might actually express an impending state of feeling Rhode would already have encountered in himself and which he’d have transcribed from within, if for no other reason than the aim to surpass it or to assign a date to it.

In this composition, musically speaking, there’s a build–up of some tense expectation suggestive perhaps of the feeling someone has while striding along one of the avenues in Manhattan to an important interview (for instance, for a first full–time job after graduation) or some other kind of significant business meeting of a sort one’s never yet handled – of a mix of feelings, namely, in which jaunty self–assurance but also awareness that everything to come will depend on oneself and one’s own comportment, are both comprised, prolonged and punctuated, for some few instants that feel like forever, by the thump of one’s shoes on the sidewalk, the loud beating in one’s chest, the hum in one’s ears.

Meanwhile, as regards the visual dimension, in the video we see the bright lights of the city at night, which the camera as it were grasps for so avidly that they nearly become swatches of abstract intense color – when it is not engaged in panning rapidly back and forth, registering them then as even more abstract horizontal blurs, as they are likely to appear when one spins one’s head quickly around, seeking on all sides something to hold on to without finding it at all; a nearly delirious state in which concern in the face of a future that’s rushing straight at one threatens to overwhelm the present and one’s presence of mind altogether.

At a certain point something like a calm after this vertiginous tempest begins to shimmer through (it gains ascendancy, it seems to me, from approximately the 2:54 mark onwards) and the piece concludes musically on a note of composure, visually with a blurred registration of a pair of what could perhaps be traffic signals, which turn green just as the video ends.

☞ A quite different variety of feeling is sounded out by Rhode in “Resolution.” Here it is anger and actions correlate to it that we are given to see; in a
hard-edged black and white, as though it were an animated sequence of silk-screen stills (and the degree of visual abstraction increases in the course of the video), a couch is shown first, shot from various angles and at different distances, which a young man seats himself on briefly, who then proceeds, after a few tense seconds when he apparently is deciding what he wants to do, to strip it of its upholstery and to attack with a hammer the frame underneath, which in short order he thoroughly demolishes. The moments in which he is most at one both with his anger and his instrument are filmed in an especial close-up, as though to focus our attention not on him per se but on the force of will that’s welled up in him and by which he himself is moved: these sequences are lent an extra weight in the context of the whole montage, for the footage is repeated a couple of times and slowed down to some degree – and in part it’s even played in reverse.

This last aspect may offer a key to the work’s meaning, or to a portion of it. Here we’re shown something that succeeds above all else in infuriating the human will (which of the various powers of the mind is the one aroused the most whenever one encounters a significant recalcitrance), something that it would give just about anything to conquer if only it could, namely, whatever has already entered the realm of time past and now partakes of its essential fixity; it burns the will up that this, seemingly by virtue of its very definition, escapes its power to unfix, insofar as the will is a prospective, a forward-looking, a power of futurity: and thus its rage when it comes up against this, its own intrinsic direction and limitation, the rage that it cannot affect the past too, is bound to go far beyond the anger that may well accompany it in the exercise which is properly vouchsafed to it.

That idea constituted the crux of Nietzsche’s insight (which I’ve done no more than summarize here) into the nature of the human will, as he expressed it in the section entitled “Von der Erlösung” in the second part of Also sprach Zarathustra. There we are told: “Nicht zurück kann der Wille wollen; dass er die Zeit nicht brechen kann und der Zeit Begierde, – das ist des Willens einsamste Trübsal” – and from that destitute state, readers can infer, it may well seek to distract itself by means of arbitrary acts of violence.

The will cannot will backwards into the past; but it certainly knows how to lash out in fury on all sides, against all sides.
As regards “Resolution,” behind the man’s apparent anger, it is to this feature of the human condition and the fearsome rage it can engender, in the face of the evidently irrevocable direction of time and time’s desire – or time’s greed or even its covetousness (as the word “Begierde,” in Nietzsche’s hands at least, eludes any simple translation into English) – that the video wants to direct our attention.

Yet can it be said so definitively that all this in fact describes a fixed constituent condition of the nature of the human being? Nietzsche would not have been Nietzsche had he not, with his pregnant formulations, put his fingers on the exact spots from which potent counter-thoughts could well issue.

“Ohnmächtig gegen Das, was gethan ist – ist er” – the human will – “allem Vergangenen ein böser Zuschauer.”

In our age where it no longer seems quite so obvious as it once did that whatever has been done originated in an actual deed, nor that all that’s past is past with exactly the same kind of finality it used to possess in the past – and the devices whereby film or video footage may be mounted and played in reverse (as they also are in “Resolution”) constitute one small but symbolically significant part of the technologies without which this age would never have come into being at all – one may now perhaps find it more difficult to deny categorically that the human mind, prodded by its own inventions, could possibly stand on the verge of discovering within itself some new power such that, under particular definite circumstances, it would in fact be capable of willing backwards.

The common certainty that any such power is intrinsically impossible, may for its part rest to an uncomfortable extent on an unacknowledged assumption, which Nietzsche’s sentences have the virtue of putting into so many words: in its relation to the past the human will is essentially a spectator. (How benign or malignant is here of secondary importance.) And then the very vividness of the past as something seen would contribute not a little to solidify the sense that what’s past has become irrevocably final and thus eludes the reach of the human will, simply by virtue of its pastness.

However: vis-à-vis the past, could not the human will, with equal or greater plausibility, instead be called an auditor?
When, in “Resolution,” the rage is done and nothing remains, are we not told in effect that the spectator’s day is up? (For where is the spectator who has no need of a seat?)

Shouldn’t one then replay the video but this time attend far more attentively to the music (even to the point of closing one’s eyes entirely)?

So doing, elements in the arrangements of “Resolution,” such as the tape glitches and other similar audio effects or the off–kilter piano (to specify only two of them) begin to sound even more significant in the context of the whole; the latter in its totality then could give one an idea of the music that might fill from within a mind which has started to discern in itself (this being a discovery correlate to tomorrow’s technological changes generally) some ability to will back into the past – a peculiarly unsteady and unsure inner realm of sound: for nothing in the foregoing should be taken to suggest that an acquisition of a retroactive power by the will could ever come easy, nor that the exercise thereof could ever become routine or habitual. All of it (just as with this whole line of thought) would always be bound to remain tentative in the best case ...

To my ears, these thoughts are where “Resolution” actually intends to leave its listeners.

But be that as it may. Regardless, before closing I should not fail to mention that on Rhode’s Soundcloud page there is a piece entitled “Awash” which also deserves to be listened to. And a compilation of some parts of pieces premiered at Sight/Sound has also been uploaded there.

Brian Petuch

(December 25, 2012)

Another young composer in the circle of the Sight/Sound festival is Brian Petuch, who, like Adam Cuthbért, lives and works in New York, though in this
case the personal information available does not go much beyond specifying that locale; yet here too a collection of biographical data is not exactly needed, as his compositions tend to speak for themselves – and they do so in an idiom that, fairly unmistakably, is a musical New Yorkese.

It’s an ebullient urban music that Petuch composes, even in the more introspective interludes, and once it gets going, its tempo is rapid-fire; then it recalls what it’s like to stroll in the midst of the crowds through Manhattan at nearly any time of the day (whereas night in this city moves in another manner), when one’s struck not so much by the blows of many elbows, as by spark after spark of something like an electrical current: here the musical moods hasten by nearly as fast as do the people in the streets there, and in both the pace is quickened by virtue of an ambient charge.

In “Simple Objects,” even in the first movement, which commences more slowly and remains throughout calm like the dawn, one comes across several ὁμοιόσεις of the sound of the street, most clearly the sirens as one hears them with some regularity in the distance racing along the thoroughfares some blocks away, but also once – and this, after all, is an object that’s so simple that it could be quite difficult to devise a convincing musical likeness of it – something of the patter of an early-morning rain on the concrete sidewalks.

The impact of minimal music (a kind of contemporary classical in which, to be sure, there’s a considerable New Yorkness) upon Petuch’s compositions is patent in parts; but in these complex and fully orchestral wholes its effects are counterbalanced by another source of inspiration that is quite different, though even more obvious in its close connection to the city: namely, Leonard Bernstein’s score for West Side Story (a film which, earlier this year, for all intents and purposes, celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its worldwide release) – or, to be more specific, the special sense of rhythm and drama that’s so marked in that work of music. It’s something of this same sensibility which periodically bursts through “Three Pieces for Orchestra” from the beginning to the end.

Meanwhile, on Petuch’s Soundcloud page, in addition to what he’s uploaded on his Youtube channel, there is the third movement, a serenade, of his “Horn Quartet,” which makes one eager to hear the whole work.
“Bizarre Love Triangle” Again
A Second Playlist

(December 26, 2012)

Some months ago I compiled a Youtube playlist of a number of covers done of the song “Bizarre Love Triangle,” perhaps the most memorable – certainly one of the most moving – of the numbers recorded by the band New Order back in the nineteen–eighties, and to accompany it, on this site I posted a text about the song; it’s a perennial that has been frequently reprised since then, something of which I was again reminded yesterday as by chance on Soundcloud I came across a number of other remarkable versions, which – the call was nearly irresistible – moved me to assembly them into a second one to complement the first.

This audio playlist, longer than its predecessor, includes covers by Polar Moon, a band from Los Angeles, and Heaven, one from Williamsburg, Brooklyn; Colette Love, a singer from Córdoba, Argentina; Jonnie Allen, a singer and DJ from Salisbury, England; The Good Hurt, a band from Seattle, and Tan Biónica, one from Buenos Aires; the singer known as Theoretical Girl, from London; the band Happy Ending, from New York, and The Give ’em Hell Boys, from Edmonton, Canada.

Jonnie Allen

(December 26, 2012)

A new discovery on Soundcloud is the Englishman Jonnie Allen. Although not a great amount of biographical information is provided on his page there, nor
on his Myspace page, one does learn that he currently lives in Salisbury; but, turning to his music, there acoustic streams flowing from the electronic and techno scene, from the West Indies, and from the Subcontinent blend together in a very fresh manner that one probably wouldn’t encounter readily beyond the United Kingdom, or rather, even outside that country’s metropoles.

Fortunately for those of us across the Channel, or the Atlantic, let alone anyone further afield, the sun never sets on the good British musicians, singers and songwriters, and DJs such as Allen who are very well represented on sites throughout the Internet.

It seems Allen himself knows a thing or two about traveling, its pitfalls, perks, and lasting benefits; from the few words he devotes to his own past on his Myspace page, he knew the club scene in London’s warehouses at first hand and was intimately familiar with the life of an itinerant DJ passing through other large British cities (living through, in his words, perhaps with or perhaps without much exaggeration, “debauchery all around England”), and then took flight for half a year or so to India, where – with only the most essential equipment – he was able to devote himself to his music: and, if what he’s posted over the last two years or so on his pages offers any indication, it seems quite likely that such a period of relatively solitary concentration on the other side of the world stood him well.

Back in Great Britain, Allen has turned his attention to the writing of “an album’s worth of each major musical genre,” and in the sheer diversity of his tracks he appears already to have gone some of the distance towards that goal.

It should prove interesting to follow his progress and to see where his kind of music – and his singing voice, which is quite distinctive and very appealing, not to mention his witty sense of humor – will take him.

One of his songs, “Hindu Stan,” has been issued as a single by Oracle Releasing in Los Angeles.

Some of the tracks he’s uploaded on his Soundcloud page are “Ready to Run,” “Into the Machine,” “Life Is Pain, I Am a Vampire,” “Raggathon,” and “Dance Alia Dance,” while on Allen’s Myspace page there are some other tracks, including the more straightforward “Coming Up” and “Hindu Stan,” as well as “Fantastic Mister Fox” and “Crayon Cops,” in which he takes his sense of humor out for a spin.
The Give ’em Hell Boys

(December 28, 2012)

While compiling yesterday’s playlist, I came across a quite distinctive version of “Bizarre Love Triangle” – turned into a country tune! Naturally then I was curious to know more about the musicians who’d brought about that improbable transformation with a considerable panache, and so I made a first acquaintance with The Give ’em Hell Boys, a band hailing, as odd as this may sound, from Edmonton in Canada. Although it is represented on the usual Internet platforms, with pages on Bandcamp, Soundcloud, Myspace, and Facebook, a great deal of biographical background is not provided, and the bits that are – on the last of these, the names of the band members are given as being San Quentin, Charlie Scream, Doctor Proctor, Barn Jovi, and Bootsy Cline – are suggestive of a sense of humor that tends to uncover the inadvertently funny sides of many things and to deprecate much of the rest: an attitude that is met with rather often in the domain of country music, and without which its bleaker sense of the realities of life, love, and loss might be hard to take.

All the more is this so when the country music in question, as their website avers, “emerged from a slew of late night jams and backyard bbq’s as a unique brand of twang punk,” a variety of this music in which, in other words – for those who’re encountering the term twang punk for the very first time – there’s been a merging of “classic and outlaw country styles with breakneck bluegrass rhythms and punk rock attitude.” Well, these words too could sound a bit improbable, but after listening to their debut album, Barn Burner, one may find oneself agreeing that it’s not an idle description.

The Give ’em Hell Boys have begun to make modern-day ballads about people who raise hell in the streets, drink beer and get into trouble – and their blues can veer rather far into the dark: these are the dimmer regions which pervade numbers such as “North Saskatchewan Blues,” “Come Lately,” or “Forsaken,” while in their cover of Chris Isaak’s “Wicked Game” it’s a similar territory in which one finds oneself.
The year coming to an end conduces to thoughts about transience – and about the zones wherein whatever comes and goes might abide for awhile.

Pieces of music can provide the shelter, while music in general is perhaps one of the best possible symbols for shelter as such in its peculiar duality: in its durability the latter ought to outlast by far whatever is to be housed, yet its own inherent vulnerability, and the care it therefore requires if it is to survive, can greatly exceed the attention its erstwhile inhabitants may stand in need of; and so, insofar as music on its side evinces a similar twofold condition, grounds are given for apprehending a very close likeness between it and architecture, each considered as being not only a result but also as an activity. Perhaps it was above all this similarity that stood in the back of his mind when Schelling suggested that architecture could be called “eine concrete Musik” or, more pointedly, “die erstarrte Musik”* – translations of this term have raised some contention amongst the scholars (not to mention the scorn the term itself has met with), but here I’ll venture a paraphrase of my own: music at a standstill – which would seem to entail, conversely, that music is or can be a mobile architecture.

One body of work in contemporary architecture whose character as realized seems especially musical – and here the “music” does not remain “immobile” – is that of the English architect, Richard Paxton, who passed away some years ago; his buildings draw inspiration from the distinctive modernisms of Robert Mallet–Stevens and Pierre Chareau in equal measure while manifest-

* See his Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst, pt. II, sec. IV, §§107 and 116. (The latter paragraph has been erroneously numbered 117 in the fifth volume of the Sämmtliche Werke.)
ing a formal flair all their own, having fully incorporated into themselves to-
day’s and tomorrow’s technologies, as though they were imagined for Califor-
nia while yet being built under London skies: his *machines for living* sought to
bring the outside in, in the midst of surroundings both spatial and climatic
that were somewhat less than propitious – often in response they encompass
features such as retractible roofs and small indoor gardens and pools – in
order to maximize the play of moods they could foster throughout the course
of the day and night.

A necrological website is currently being constructed, and it will most
likely become a prime resource for his work.

The varieties of spatiotemporal experience elicited by Paxton’s buildings
come across nicely via the photographs provided on the pages dedicated to
them on the website of Arcaid Images, while the especial attention he devoted
to the interior light and sound conditions is well registered in two excerpts
about them from a short television feature which are available on Youtube. In
them one meets Paxton’s professional partner and widow, Heidi Locher, who
has since gone on to augment her architectural activity by an additional
career as a visual artist, and their children, of whom one, Frederick Paxton,
likewise inclined, is currently completing his studies at the School of Visual
Arts in New York and has already begun to profile himself as a film–maker.

In a recent exhibition entitled “Hotel Kalifornia” mounted by Locher at
the Londonecastle Project Space, art, architecture, film, and music all came
together in what must have been a subtle investigation of vulnerability and
transience – that is, if the eponymous film, a collaboration between Locher
and Frederick Paxton, is as representative of the whole as I imagine it to be.
(Although I did not see the exhibition, the film is featured on his website and
may be viewed there.)

And it was not only the human being’s vulnerability and transience which
*Hotel Kalifornia* inquired into with subtlety, but also the room’s – the room
in whose solitude he, or rather, she spends much of her life, and where often
the most intense, the most dramatic parts transpire unseen and unheard, to
an oddly timeless tempo engendered by a space that’s overwhelming in its
sheer strangeness: a dispensation of existential intensity which, in conjunction
with the distinctive pace of the montage, the exquisite sadness of the Latin
liturgical music – of all sorts of music the kind that perhaps best embodies eternity or rather the passion for it – very effectively underscored.

Both the title of the exhibition and of the film were taken from the well-known song by The Eagles, and this loan goes a ways towards establishing what the work is actually about: the hotel room in the particular way in which it, for a definite period, both houses human beings while also divesting them of a home, does itself indeed furnish an evocative metaphor for the span of time that’s been allotted to us. But as a guide to this work of art, to my mind, in Locher’s artist’s statement there are a few sentences which take one in a somewhat different direction, and a bit further.

“Hotels are like a musical instrument to me, they have a certain kind of rhythm. I can read them and the people in them and hear their inner workings. I feel I can pick up the vibrations, the intensity and the mood. Hotels have a heightened frequency where tensions lurk and rituals are acted out in an extreme atmosphere which is not really like everyday life.”

Not really like it – yet in its very exaggeration perhaps akin to it after all, insofar as what one now generally calls “everyday life” is comprehensible as being an impersonal kind of shelter which conduces its inhabitants to other rhythms, intensities, sensations – to other modes of music – as though they were away from home on a trip their whole lives long. Then one begins to wonder: these days, what have all our lives become if not so many hotel rooms, and as such the settings for variants of what we are given to observe in Locher and Paxton’s film?

But – to leave matters of this kind to one side, for the year is itself nearly gone, and there’s no more time now to touch on them even briefly – is there then nothing further that’s unsettling about the manner in which the film addresses itself to our eyes and ears?

Well, the architectural music in this film – the dramatic, which is to say, quasi-musical qualities not only of the set, but of the lighting, the camera work, and the montage as well – somehow suggests what the result might have been, had Baroque painters had at their disposal not brushes but movie cameras and sound equipment.
In the clair–obscur that the film offers to the eyes, the room is deepened in an enigmatic manner; here we witness the emergence of everything lit out of a fuscum subnigrum, the nearly black hinter–region in that era’s paintings from which colors – and perhaps even the visual altogether, or more broadly and better, visibility as such: that is, whatever is seen as well as the ability to see it – spring forward and into which they will again vanish when their measure of time is up. Then, of the artists’ capacity which set things up in such a way, would it be better to aver that it has constructed or that it has composed this evanescent mise en scène?

When the work in question is actually about transience, it may unsettle us to realize how akin to one another architecture and music often can be, their differences in mobility or solidity notwithstanding, if for no other reason than the very similar need of their compositions and their constructions for some shelter.

For an Evening Like This:
“Heavy Metal Lover”
(Lady Gaga)

(December 31, 2012)

Tonight bring all your friends because a group does it better ...

Yes, this evening it will be that time of the year once again.

Now, apart from the intrinsic interest of much of what she does, many of Lady Gaga’s songs lend themselves readily to covers and remixes, and “Heavy Metal Lover” is no exception, though it’s not so much the singers who have
risen to the challenge as the DJs around the world, who’ve elicited some very
different versions from the song, taking it as a framework for divergent varia-
tions on its themes – and in at least once instance, in a particularly sophisti-
cated move, even playing the vocals backwards.

To enliven this New Year’s Eve – and for future use in 2013 – I’ve put to-
together a playlist of fifteen impressive recreations, spotted through a simple
search of Soundcloud.

Along for the ride, on this night out, is an international group of DJs and
music-makers, some well-known, others less so, but in their treatments here
all in top form – where available I’ve listed their actual names, rather than
their Soundcloud handles: Alejandrodr 1903 (Caracas, Venezuela), Andrew
Beckstead (Canada), Boyalexboy (Brookline, Massachusetts (?)), Matt Brown
(Canada), José Manuel Cuellar (Málaga, Spain), Drew G. (West Hollywood,
California), Ramon Grajales (New Jersey), Honest Holy Eyes (China, United
States), Cameron Kleve (?), Joe Matthews (Belgium), Mugler (Carthage (?),
United States), Yoshimitsu Sama (Italy), Sanmart (Spain), Clinton Sparks (Bos-
ton, Massachusetts), and Roman Stone (Tennessee).

A chain of “Heavy Metal Lovers” may not be what everyone’s seeking on a
night like tonight, granted, even for the dance floor; and so those who’re in
the mood for a more varied but also a more concentrated dose of Gaga in-
stead, can turn to Zach Rickel, a DJ in Grand Rapids, Michigan who’s put to-
gether a megamix.

Postscript. Unfortunately, Drew G. has removed his remix from his Sound-
cloud page, so I’ve added one by Paws Up 96 (New York) instead.
Angélica Negrón, who some months ago was written about here, is not only a contemporary classical composer, but an avid participant in independent pop music in New York, more particularly in the scenes burgeoning in Brooklyn, where over the course of the last several years she – both as a singer and on the accordion, keyboards, omnichord, and violin – has devoted part of her time to the band Balún, a musical venture that she and José Olivares initiated while they were still residents of San Juan but which has since relocated, expanding along the way to comprise Andrés Fontanez, Noraliz Ruíz, Leonardo Velázquez, and Justin Wolf.

“Brought together by their love of simple melodies, 16mm films, classical and folk instruments, and experimental pop music,” as one reads on the band’s various Internet sites, with Fontanez on electric guitar, Olivares handling the synthesizers and programming, Ruiz on bass and tiple, Wolf on percussion – it seems that they all may in fact be multi-instrumentalists (though precise information about the part played by Velázquez in the ensemble is not provided, as far as I can ascertain), so depending on the occasion Balún might perhaps assume different configurations – the band makes popular music of a distinctly reflective kind: although it’s more sprightly than it is sad, it is also meant less for dancing than it is for dreaming.

Or at least that has mainly been its character thus far ...

Towards the end of December, the band issued a new album, *La Luna*, on its Bandcamp page, and alongside the title track the song “Distante” may prove indicative of what this year might bring.

(Just today on the band’s Facebook page, a link was posted to an interview on the blog of the music label Si no puedo bailar, no es mi revolución (which is broadly Latin American and based in São Paulo), where, in response to a question about how it intends to distinguish itself in the coming year, the band had this to say about the direction its music will be taking: “los arreglos son un poco más rebuscados, la mayoría de las canciones son vocales, los sonidos son más crudos y hay mucho énfasis en percusión enérgica,” and in its
songs fans may expect to hear “muchos más ritmos tropicales y cuerdas de en-
sueño.”

While from the earlier album *Memoria Textil*, “Las Abejas” is an instru-
mental number whose texture owes much to minimal and experimental music – though these also are changed somewhat as they enter the mix.

Meanwhile, on the band’s Soundcloud page, a range of tracks from its vari-
ous albums is provided, and a video of a memorable live performance of “Camila” has been uploaded on its Youtube channel.

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**Buke and Gase**

*(January 1, 2013)*

At a far remove musically from a band like Balún, but equally at home in Brooklyn (though they now spend at least part of their time in upstate New York, in the city of Hudson), is the duo Buke and Gase, though they too are decidedly experimental: for Arone Dyer and Aron Sanchez both play instru-
ments of their own devising, the former a “buke,” a six–string baritone ukulele that has been extensively remodeled, and the latter a “gase,” a hybrid creation that’s equal parts guitar and bass; and their manner of playing them eschews acoustic softness, so that, while the duo does explore musical texture – which is one of their aims, as they remark in the notes to their numbers on their Bandcamp page – they are at the same time wedded to sonic volume.

Their is a *loud* music, gloriing in its decibels, and it’s not so easy to tell which of the two instruments is intended to be played the more loudly, while the energy of the result is heightened even further by Dyer’s voice, which is similarly voluminous. In the venues where they have begun to perform frequently, their live act would I imagine fill the room with sound, any room, no matter the size.

To get some idea of what these two new–fashioned instruments sound like in natura, and also to see how they are played, a video of the duo performing in NPR’s “Tiny Desk Concerts” series may be recommended.
Three numbers from Buke and Gase’s debut album Riposte convey both the depth and the amplitude of their music in its finished studio version: “Revel in Contempt,” “Bundletuck,” and “Outt!”

A new album, General Dome, is scheduled for release later this month, and as a sort of foretaste an EP was put out last autumn, Function Falls; one of the band’s original numbers from it is called “Tending the Talk.”

There is also a memorable cover of New Order’s “Blue Monday.” Meanwhile, on the Soundcloud page of the band’s record label, Brassland, the title song of the forthcoming album has been posted as well.

Concerning the new album and its sources of inspiration, a notice on Pitchfork contains a piece of information about the jacket art that I’ll quote here, if only for the possibility that it will prove to pertain to more than the exterior: the duo “chose to unveil the record’s artwork with ‘General Dome’ – a piece inspired by a Sol LeWitt exhibition that Dyer caught at New York’s Dia Beacon gallery, in which the two have created a new graphical, coded alphabet with which to create cryptic messages [...] the band will post the key to uncode the messages on their website closer to the record’s release.”

This will be something to keep one’s eyes and ears open for.

Knalpot

(January 5, 2013)

Last month I wrote about a concert held in Amsterdam in which, inter alia, the guitarist Raphael Vanoli and the DJ and drummer Gerri Jäger performed in different capacities; but the two, along with Sandor Caron, who handles the sound equipment, also collaborate in the shape of the band Knalpot, which over the last five or so years has made a name for itself in Amsterdam and abroad with a music in which, in about equal proportions, rock and electronica flow together, sprinkled with some of the sound of avant-garde jazz: and in the band’s live performances – it is quite zealous about performing live – this sprinkling turns into a stream, as both musicians, each in his own way
(Jäger nearly overwhelming his instruments, Vanoli almost standing guard over his), give themselves over fully to the spirit of improvisation, with results that move musique improvisée in some quite new directions.

The playlist gives some idea of what Knalpot is like in concert.

Of especial note is Knalpot’s avoidance of the computer as a possible choice of musical equipment and its embrace of an older generation of technology instead, which, although quite sophisticated technically, must often seem antiquated in the face of all that is possible to attain acoustically by means of computers; by the decision to employ this other kind of sound equipment, the band’s music-making, whether live or in the studio, becomes an exercise in handwork and thus nearly an instance of acoustic artisanship.

On the band’s website is a concise and also thought-provoking justification of this choice: “The band that listens to almost any kind of computer music one can imagine, refuses to use one itself. Not for political reasons nor out of fear of the machine but for the challenge and the pleasure of figuring out another way to create this carefully sculpted engineering aesthetic of the studio, the computer and the software by using tangible instruments and objects.”

Now, all of this technology (no less than the computers which may perhaps soon supplant it entirely, at least for a time) can prove recalcitrant and pose obstacles in the way of achieving particular musical results with it; yet what Vanoli, Jäger, and Caron’s music seems to embody, whether it’s the live or the studio variant thereof, is the inventiveness that such challenges can call forth if they are to be surmounted at all: and thus, in the music itself, when or insofar as it’s improvisational in character, one might perhaps even hear an acoustic semblance of that process – namely, the process in which expectations are frustrated by the tools meant to realize them and then fulfilled after all by the application of others that had not obviously been intended for such a purpose but which at least had the virtue of being available.

These three musicians, in other words, are akin to bricoleurs – and this comes across also in the studio tracks that they’ve loaded on their Soundcloud and Bandcamp pages.
Adam Cuthbért: Two New Compositions – One an Internet Collaboration with Daniel Rhode

(With a Correction Concerning the Latter)

(January 12, 2013)

Towards the end of last year and at present, during the beginning of this one, Adam Cuthbért has been busy: in addition to his ongoing involvements with the Bang on a Can and the Sight/Sound festivals and now also another, called Prototype, which, its first edition premiering just this month, is dedicated to the newest wave of experimental operatic and musicotheatrical works, he has posted a number of tracks on his Soundcloud page, and these new compositions are as beautiful as their predecessors while being longer than they are – which may be a significant development – and also rather more dramatic in the expectations both raised and deferred by their crescendoes of tension – which could perhaps suggest that the kinds of music that are the mainstay of this third festival he’s now working on, might in turn be influencing his.

However, to avoid the question of influence and its uncertainties, and to remain with the music itself: the first of the two recent tracks, “No Hipster Hats,” is built upon the modulation of repetitions, the principle of structure that one knows from minimal music, which here forms a basis or indeed a stage on which a variety of sonic elements are introduced and pass by, notable amongst them several sharp and nearly industrial drones that at times sound like they came from an electric guitar to begin with, at others, from a trumpet; and by their cumulative effect the drama of this music intensifies more and more, with the last couple of minutes of Cuthbért’s piece constituting an
extended climactic scene in which every moment counts and carries its own weight – it sounds as though not a single one is wasted.

Even more recently, Cuthbért posted the result of a long-distance collaboration between himself and his friend Daniel Rhode, “Dropbox Bass Drop” – the title calls to mind the fact that in the absence of the Internet, this mode of musical exchange, proceeding with some speed through its several phases (which are outlined humorously in the remarks appended to the track), would scarcely be feasible; and while listening to the sombre texture of this track, which is composed as it were in a minor key, at least in comparison to “No Hipster Hats,” one might well encounter the thought that what the Internet has given, or has been given, could also be taken away. Then, if this is so, one perhaps ought to note that the mood here is not particularly elegiac but resonates instead like an epitaph.

(In the aforementioned remarks, the ultimate stage in Cuthbért and Rhode’s process of collaborative composition is said to be this: “Give the music back to the internet, because the internet enabled you to make the music” – a thought-provoking sentence which, if one stares at it for a while, may begin to radiate something of the attitude that, ethically or even metaphysically or ontologically, informs the life of the generations who know the technologies of the Internet like the back of their own hands.)

_N.B._ Contrary to what I stated in my text about Daniel Rhode, he has completed his university studies: currently Rhode is a resident of Grand Rapids, where, apart from concentrating on his own work, he earns a living as a music teacher.
Sometimes one comes across an image that is indeed more eloquent than any number of words (or even of notes?) could possibly be, and the convocation of beautiful people that just took place in Florence, in and around the fashion trade-fair at the Fortezza da Basso, is an occasion welcomed by those looking for just such a picture to overshadow all captions or commentary; but even so it’s not often that one meets with a photograph as striking and self-sufficient as the portrait that was published by the New York photographer Scott Schuman last Thursday on his website The Sartorialist, surely one of the very best he’s taken, insofar as it positively overflows with the innate poise and presence of its subject and incites in response the beholder’s curiosity: who is this man who looks like a cool, very cool jazz musician, and what has brought him there?

Fortunately, however, Schuman’s readers did not neglect to provide the basic data about him. It turns out he is in fact a tailor and clothing-maker, born in Ghana and living in Bergen, Norway, although the name he utilizes in his professional endeavors, T–Michael, seems more fitting for a musician than for a fashion designer; and so, alerted by this choice of moniker, it was not entirely surprising also to discover that the scope of his activities extends beyond the sartorial sphere alone, even crossing into this website’s major field of interest. (Something which, of course, justifies my devoting this text to him.)

For, perusing T–Michael’s website, his blog, or Facebook page, one discovers that he also has tried his hand at film-making, with a number of short works to his credit, including, just a few weeks ago, one entitled Coal, which may be viewed on his website or on the Vimeo channel of Dunderland Film, the Norwegian production company which issued it. This latest, a project of that international collective (which is based – where else? – in London) of fashion and film-making dandies known as Art Comes First (in which the musician Kalaf Ângelo, a member of the band Buraka Som Sistema, also participates), was written and directed by T–Michael and Finn–Erik Rognan, while
the filming took place over the course of a weekend in an abandoned insane asylum just outside Oslo.

This choice of setting was most likely no accident, as the film, whose enigmatic aspect is perhaps in part intended to suggest just this, seems to intuit that in and around dandyism as such – but whether today there still are or can be any dandies in the full meaning of the term, is a good question – something like an element of madness may swirl, a twofold power that dwells within the dandy while also haunting him from without; and, at bottom, what is it, or rather, what was it, being a dandy, if not the pursuit of an exquisite feeling for what’s fitting – of a sense of the precisely right time and place for a posture, a gesture, a turn of phrase, an article of clothing, or ... – finesse to which the dandies were devoted and which society, the society that claimed implicitly to have a monopoly on decorum, in fact disregarded, if it even would have known it at all whenever it did happen to see it – a sense which they, however, at the very same time, could not but betray continually and be pursued by in turn – a turnabout which for them must have been at the very least inwardly maddening?

(In Strindberg’s farewell letter* to Nietzsche – and they each bore more than an incidental resemblance to the dandy – it seems to me that something of this madness was fathomed. “Litteras tuas non sine perturbatione accepi et tibi gratias ago,” the dramatist replied to the philosopher’s previous, nearly delirious missive, and then, after citing an impossibly moderate piece of counsel, delivered to him instead a double-edged admonition: “Interdum juvat insanire!” ... Conversely, if there was a little bit of Nietzsche, and/or a little bit of Strindberg, in every dandy, what undertones of madness might then have sounded through the music in his mind, and resounded within the music in which dandyism itself were well expressed?)

Now, without delving further into the enigmas of the film, let me simply note that it is offered in two versions, each provided with its own soundtrack, and this lends the one a rather different atmosphere than the other.

In the shorter version of Coal, with a score by Tord Gustavsen, what perhaps we’re given to hear, is the slightly mad music running through a dandy’s mind, while for the longer of the two, the director’s cut, it is Marianne Sveen

* Dated December 31, 1888.
who has composed the music, and in this one it’s the genius loci itself – for this institution, one gathers, must have been frightful back in the heyday of its operation – that is more strongly audible and visible.

The two versions, taken together, supplement one another and add up to a complex subtle work, and it’s a pleasure, by the end of a circuitous stroll through the Internet, to have made its acquaintance – and to anticipate the shape and the sound of whatever it will be that T–Michael and his fellows undertake next.

René Baptist Huysmans’ EP: Dawn of the Anthropocene

(January 21, 2013)

With the new year there’s come a wave of releases of EPs, and amongst them a quite interesting one is René Baptist Huysmans’ Dawn of the Anthropocene, issued a few days ago by the small Greek label Etched Traumas, and available on its Bandcamp page or on his own Soundcloud page.

The point of departure of this record, as stated by its title, is the epoch whose threshold we have scarcely gone beyond, even now, where the impact of technological enterprises has been heightened to such a degree that it’s not implausible to believe that an entirely new geological age has begun, during which the planet itself will be covered by a stratum constituted largely by human activity – though how long this age might end up lasting, is not the least of the grave doubts the development raises, as Huysmans intimates in his notes to the EP.

In this connection, one might recall how prescient Günther Anders was, already sixty years ago, about the escape of scientific experimentation from the confines of any definite laboratory: in the ninth section in his essay on atomic weapons in the Antiquiertheit des Menschen, he insisted of the latter that their “Effekte sind so ungeheuer, daß im Moment des Experiments das
um‘ ko–extensiv mit dem Globus wird.” How, in fact, would “the Anthropocene” – here I mean the period itself, insofar as the term may usefully denote a definite span of geological time – ever have commenced to begin with, were it not comprised of any number of “Momente des Experiments” in just that sense?

(When – or if – the planet itself has in effect been remade into a single scientific laboratory, one might feel compelled to abandon or to forget the awareness that there is, or at least there was, a fundamental difference between truths and hypotheses; but I think one would be well advised to resist this temptation. As for the present essay, it advanced in – it’s advanced in a largely hypothetical and tentative mood.)

Probably it would be far–fetched to claim that it was actually the point of the experiments to ascertain this, but nonetheless their result may be tending to reshape the planet into an ever less hospitable home for human beings, into an environment to which human beings are poorly suited, as though what was being sought were a new delineation of the potentialities of the species’ evolutionary adaptability – or rather, not so much its adaptability, strictly speaking, as more precisely that of its specifically metabolic interactions with others and with nature itself, interactions which comprise in the aggregate a particular capacity of species that’s of great importance in the theory of evolution. (In lieu of any discussion of this point, which of course would be out of place here, I’ll just note that, in the third chapter of On the Origin of Species, Darwin’s exemplifications of the workings of what his book variously termed the “economy” or “polity” or “web of complex relations” of nature – had he been writing in German, he would no doubt have referred to nature’s own “Kreislauf” and “Wechselwirkung” – accorded a prominent role to alimentation, while in the fourth chapter, amongst the “Illustrations of the action of Natural Selection,” some metabolic exchanges that are not solely alimentary were addressed.)

For his part, if one extrapolates from what he says in his text, which states that the EP is about metabolism and its potentialities, it seems likely that Huysmans has traversed these matters numerous times in thought. “The three tracks of this release explore the human being as an extremophile organism,” he writes, “an organism testing the boundaries of what it is capable of digesting chemically, digitally and psychologically” – a species, in other words, that
is beginning to experiment on itself and on the adaptability of its metabolism in order to see how far they can be pushed: while it would be reassuring to add “before it would perish” to the foregoing, that guarantee is exactly what’s not provided, either explicitly or implicitly, by such experimentation conducted on a planetary scale. Nor – to survey this line of thought just a little – may we rest assured that through the course of this experiment, for however long it might last, the species conducting it will remain biologically singular: indeed, it’s as though the world is being primed for some sort of evolutionary splitting–off to occur.

Yet, lest these ideas lead me too far afield too soon, for the moment I’ll simply immerse myself in the music; while listening to it one is struck by an overwhelming feeling of hearing what the biological process of digestion, or, if one prefers, of assimilation, must sound like from within, had one the aural organs requisite to register all the noises it emits inwardly (and, from time to time, we all witness in ourselves that it does make quite a few): thus, right from the start, these compositions place the listener at the center of a metabolism in operation, which is nearly the very definition of a destructive environment or element, one wherein everything that enters leaves its own form behind and will become part of something else. So, in all three, though whether this applies to the third is not so evident, it’s the activity of this destruction, without which no biological species could possibly exist (for even the cryptoendoliths in their stony crevasses are involved in metabolic exchange with – including the ingestion of – their surroundings), that one is given to hear.

In Huysmans’ sentence which I quoted above, the word “explore” is aptly chosen; the aural inventiveness that allows him to create this sonic likeness which sounds exactly right, is preceded by an effort of mind whereby he transported himself into that destructive element: an initial act of imagination in which the power of memory could have nearly no share at all, and which thus is virtually an instance of what Henri Bergson called “l’acte originel et fondamental de la perception, cet acte, constitutif de la perception pure, par lequel nous nous plaçons d’emblée dans les choses”* – and it’s to just such an exer-

* *Matière et Mémoire*, chap. 1.
cise of “la perception pure” that these compositions first invite us, a mode of listening in which we are as far as possible unencumbered by our memories.

Which is to say – insofar as the power of memory is also an essential part of the human being – while engaged in listening to this eerie intrepid music, we could almost become something other than human.

Yes, this EP is an exploration. The mode of acoustic perception it calls forth, as it sets out, could lead the listeners towards a more elemental awareness of biological life as it exists in its rapport to matter and space, along the lines sketched out in Bergson’s book – at least to a certain extent, for the specific situation of Matière et Mémoire, or rather, of some of its ideas, those which are relevant in this context, was obviously very different. (These variances, which by the contrast may help to accentuate the profile of Huysmans’ music, should be readily apparent in what follows.)

That work is pertinent here not least because it too was concerned above all with a metabolic exchange – namely, the one that, in the shape of movement, appeared to Bergson to link the mind and matter. For the very last sentence in his book was meant to be understood quite literally: “L’esprit emprunte à la matière les perceptions d’où il tire sa nourriture, et les lui rend sous forme de mouvement, où il a imprimé sa liberté.”

Thus the multitude of our perceptions, according to Bergson, also plays a role in the metabolism whereby the human being sustains itself in its life; for life-forms of our kind, perception is not simply a receptive capacity (though of course this is how it mainly seems to function) but rather a participant in metabolic exchanges, insofar as without it we would not be provided with the power of free movement – we would be ill-equipped, in other words, for action, which, when carried out, represents a specifically human donation to the material world – and hence might then cease to live altogether.

(If the foregoing paragraph seems to be more arid than it is interesting, one might want to think of music, this universally human activity, both as constituting one part of our metabolism with nature and as comprising just such a donation of movement by us back to the world.)

Early in the book, Bergson proposed the idea “que mon système nerveux, interposé entre les objets qui ébranlent mon corps et ceux que je pourrais influencer, joue le rôle d’un simple conducteur, qui transmet, répartit ou inhibe du mouvement” – linked, of course, to the brain, whose function, even earlier,
he had compared to that of a “bureau téléphonique central” – and he continued: “Ce conducteur se compose d’une multitude énorme de fils tendus de la périphérie au centre et du centre à la périphérie. Autant il y a de fils allant de la périphérie vers le centre, autant il y a de points de l’espace capables de solliciter ma volonté et de poser, pour ainsi dire, une question élémentaire à mon activité motrice : chaque question posée est justement ce qu’on appelle une perception.”

Of especial note in what Bergson claimed here, is that these perceptions which come towards me as so many questions posed by this or that part of space to me and encouraging me to move, were implicitly accorded an aural character, more than an ocular one (whereas perceptions were most often described in *Matière et Mémoire* in such a way that they seem to be above all visual in nature); accordingly, though perhaps with some exaggeration, one might define music, at least all the kinds of music that actually or virtually invite one to movement, as a dynamic disclosure of space: and as for music that does not do so, it may instead appeal to one to revolve in one’s mind the question of how space has been constituted such that it could be disclosed in that way to begin with.

To my ears, Huysmans’ EP is an instance of the second kind of music, prompting as it does a train of thought in the listener (hopefully one which, for its part, is not all too immobile) concerning the dynamic constitution of space; but, concerning this point, his music, in its implicit content from which those thoughts take their bearings, seems to me to diverge widely from some of the presuppositions one may discern at work in certain parts of *Matière et Mémoire*: and so I shall attempt with some care to put these differences into words.

Later in the book one comes across a passage in which the idea that perceptions are the questions which this or that bit of space addresses to us, was restated, in a considerably fuller manner. “Nous avons montré en effet que les objets situés autour de nous représentent, à des degrés différents, une action que nous pouvons accomplir sur les choses ou que nous devrons subir d’elles. L’échéance de cette action possible est justement marquée par le plus ou moins grand éloignement de l’objet correspondant, de sorte que la distance

* Chap. 1.
dans l’espace mesure la proximité d’une menace ou d’une promesse dans le temps. L’espace nous fournit donc ainsi tout d’un coup le schème de notre avenir prochain ; et comme cet avenir doit s’écouler indéfiniment, l’espace qui le symbolise a pour propriété de demeurer, dans son immobilité, indéfiniment ouvert. De là vient que l’horizon immédiat donné à notre perception nous paraît nécessairement environné d’un cercle plus large, existant quoique inaperçu, ce cercle en impliquant lui-même un autre qui l’entoure, et ainsi de suite indéfiniment.”* Here Bergson offered a concise summary: inside this area, defined by a horizon, distances in space may be understood as measures of distances in time, both of them being comprehended as indices of how long it will take, either for something to traverse this space–time towards us, or for us to reach it. Thus our sense of this area assesses it primarily in terms of proximity and is practical and protective vis–à–vis such things as threats, promises, and the like, which is why it is circumscribed at all: for that boundary too may be taken as marking the extent of the scope of our precautionary power to scan this spatiotemporal environment; and evidently one has some degree of assurance that this arrangement will prove satisfactory.

Now, from what source did that assurance derive if not from the sense that this realm is the domain which, over very extended periods of biological and geological time, the human species has become adapted to, with the result that, situated within it, one feels, even as an individual, roughly secure in the twofold likelihood that one’s species will continue to be fit for this space, and vice versa? And similarly, did not the massive accumulation of probabilities through our long epoch of natural history suggest that near–nonexistence of the possibility that an utterly annihilating thing or force might be approaching as yet unperceived from some source beyond this realm’s spatiotemporal horizon?

This conception of Bergson’s, in short, was fortified in its presumptive plausibility by the theory of evolution, even to the point of depending on the latter; but in the new period breaking into the continuum of geological and biological history, as is averred by the notion of the nascent epoch from which Huysmans’ EP draws its title, many of those older near–certainties would wither away: so what one now might choose to think about above all – and

* Chap. III.
from his music one hears that Huysmans has devoted thought to the matter – is a novel disposition of our space–time in which one can no longer take it for granted that the latter, as it were, addresses leading questions to us through our perceptions, and, in so doing, implicitly affords each of us some rough assurance that we, the species at least, will in all probability survive.

If, however, what we now dimly begin to see and, even more disturbingly, to hear all around us, is the “dawn of the Anthropocene,” then the rapport of our perception to elemental reality will increasingly be afflicted by a systematic derangement – an incipient dérèglement de tous les sens in comparison to which Rimbaud’s will be proven to have been mere child’s play. From our surroundings henceforth, if that is the case, we can expect far less implicit practical guidance than ever before, and this at the very moment in which concerted human activity, with every tool and technology at its disposal, is beginning to operate on the face of the planet as a whole, infiltrating nature itself and transforming it more and more into an artificial construct.

Moreover: with this worldwide transition from the purely to the artificially natural, so to speak, the stage would seem to be set for any number of developments that were not anticipated – and these, one has good reason to fear, will prove to be anything but beneficial in general.

This too is a matter that Huysmans has thought about, to judge from the character of his music: for the EP does not only transport its auditors into the destructive element wherein alimentary processes occur, thus summoning us into the midst of a zone more or less entirely alien to our memories, and in so doing reprising what was in Bergson’s eyes “l’acte originel et fondamental de la perception” – no, at other moments his three compositions also manifest a musical dimension whose unfolding occurs in a more familiar, in a quasi–narrative way, but one which may at the same time be even more unsettling to hear than was the other, perhaps precisely because while listening to it our memories, far from being suspended, are actually called upon and in response to this appeal they intermix themselves in and amongst our acoustic perceptions. This is a mode of listening occasioned especially by “Cryptoendolith,” the longest of Huysmans’ tracks and the center of this triptych of an EP, and indeed more and more as its crescendo of tension mounts: and thus one of our main tasks in the effort of apperception will be to restrain our memories from overwhelming the perceptions as the latter present themselves to us.
Here I should note that the title of this track seems to me to be, well, cryptic, and perhaps even intended to serve as a kind of decoy – for what I hear in this composition is something like a kernel of a narrative about a subject rather different than the micro-organisms which slowly carve out their tiny niches in the interior of rocks. Instead it’s the scenario rendered in music of a new species appearing quite suddenly, by means of a successful mutation or as a result of some other kind of exceptional evolutionary event, natural or artificial, and setting out from its place of origin on its long irrevocable and most likely havoc-wrecking trek through the world – or, in other words, it is a composition that calls to mind the music of the many cinematic adaptations or permutations of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (the reference being nearly unavoidable in this context). Although, while it’s indisputable that this theme has proven to be inexhaustibly fascinating from the very moment she published her novel nearly two hundred years ago (and so this could conceivably represent an instance where my own memories are blocking the way of new immediate perceptions), on the other hand, in an age marked by an unprecedented efficacy of scientific experiment and technological action (whether one calls this period “the Anthropocene” or not), so many are the variations which may be explored once it is taken as the source of thematic inspiration, that all the influence it has already worked since 1818 may one day pale in comparison to the effects it is at present only but beginning to exert; and thus (and also to sidestep the by now scholastic debates about the role an author’s or artist’s own intention ought to play in any interpretation) it seems to me appropriate to situate this composition of Huysmans’ in that book’s lineage.

One illustration will I hope suffice to concretize that claim. At approximately the 7:21 mark, after tense minutes of ominous rumblings, a different sort of sound is heard; it juts out of that acoustic continuum, jolting forward as though it were the initial noise of something finally vitalized into existence and henceforth able to move by its own power: thus, listening hard to this scene of a strange birth, it’s difficult to avoid feeling that here some new life-form is raising itself from the table on which it was made, then taking its first unsteady steps around its natal chamber – the floorboards are creaking under its weight – before departing from the room, slamming the door shut forcefully behind itself.
Well, in this sonic passage listeners may or may not hear this or something similar, but the evident fact that these aural likenesses, as they pass by, constitute the successive elements of a story, can turn one’s train of thought in a rather different direction, leading it to attend again to the organs of perception themselves. Thus one might discern an opportunity to think about the difference in perceptive capacity between the eyes and the ears – to ponder the variances of their respective powers to register the meaningful signals emitted by our surroundings – and to consider both, each understood as an adaptation shaped into its present form during immense lengths of our evolutionary history, in their different potentialities for further adaptability to the new circumstances for which nearly nothing has prepared them or us.

This is the place, accordingly, to round off briefly the foregoing treatment of a few of Bergson’s ideas.

In the first chapter of Matière et Mémoire one encounters a concise statement of the results his philosophy, in its move to reach, uncover, and re-establish “le caractère véritable de la perception,” actually had in view to bring about: “montrons, dans la perception pure, un système d’actions naissantes qui plonge dans le réel par ses racines profondes : cette perception se distinguera radicalement du souvenir ; la réalité des choses ne sera plus construite ou reconstruite, mais touchée, pénétrée, vécue ; et le problème pendant entre le réalisme et l’idéalisme, au lieu de se perpétuer dans des discussions métaphysiques, devra être tranché par l’intuition.” Now, though these objectives were admirably concrete, one comes to a halt at this last notion, “l’intuition”; without delving into an exegesis of it, what ought to be noted is the share that ocular perception seems to have in this mode of apprehending reality, if only for the reason that the particular constitution of the sense of sight would, more than those of the other senses, most readily seem to permit one to distinguish between perceptions and memories: but then, vision’s special distinction notwithstanding, the difficult situation in which the senses find themselves, if they are faced with surroundings that cannot any longer be assumed as guiding their human inhabitants by means of the leading questions – or, if one prefers a different term, the clues – posed to the latter through
their perceptual apparatus, would envelop the power of intuition as well and confound it with an analogous uncertainty.

Reflecting a bit further on the privilege accorded to vision by Bergson – while leaving to the side his particular debt on this point to a venerable philosophical tradition – one might conclude that here too a close filiation with the theory of evolution is evident, insofar as the very existence of such a superlatively complex organ as the eye in its most developed forms, represented both a difficult challenge to the explanatory ambition of that theory and also a source of wonder to its propounder; that this organ exerted an especial fascination upon Darwin is clear from the pages he devoted to it in relation to his theory (under the heading “Organs of extreme perfection and complication” in the sixth chapter of his book): and the exceptional status it enjoyed in the context of evolutionary biology would then, some decades later, be matched by the central importance accorded to vision in Bergson’s ideas concerning the nature and function of “l’intuition.”

However, when nature itself – or whatever else it is that human action has begun to substitute for it – has ceased to co-operate, the pre-eminence of the eye would seem to come to naught, just as do the perceptive capacities of the other senses, insofar as their function generally is to transmit questions or clues from the human being’s surroundings to the mind, so that the latter may undertake free movement in response. And yet, could not the eye’s higher degree of fixity as an organ (insofar as the greater the “extreme of perfection and complication,” the more fixed and relatively final will be the form the organ has developed through the course of natural history) render it less potentially adaptable and hence also less serviceable, in the midst of just such an environment which furnishes little or no implicit guidance to us, than is its closest relative and rival amongst the human organs of perception, namely, the ear?

Given that the main concern in this context is the transmission of perceptions, one should not neglect also to consider the interval which was already traversed before the latter could even possibly arise at all, namely, the medium between the “things themselves” and the human organism, or in other words – when one is focused first and foremost on the eye, vision, light – the atmosphere; and, with such a focus in mind, it is not difficult to notice that the latter would seem to play, or to have played, a twofold role in the course of our evolu-
tion: for, on the one hand, it would be to the atmosphere of the planet, as a medium by which light itself as a great intensity is modulated and for the most part made safe to view, that the eye, the human eye in the form with which evolution stamped it, is correlate, constituting its native element, while, on the other, the atmosphere would also often serve to shield particular organisms from being observed too closely, and in so doing contribute something to their, to our survival, actual or potential, individually and as species. So, in neither respect should the Earth’s atmosphere be forgotten as a co-constitutive factor in having guided human beings implicitly by means of those suggestions which Bergson termed perceptions.

☞ *Matière et Mémoire* was published at the end of the nineteenth century; a couple of decades earlier, one meets with an awareness of the twofold condition of all environing atmosphere in an essay by a thinker whom one usually reckons as a sharp critic of the assumptions underlying the theory of evolution: in the second of the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, in the seventh section of “Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben,” Nietzsche went so far as to insist, albeit in words that were themselves geheimnisvoll and thus perhaps to be taken neither quite literally nor quite figuratively, that no life could live for long in the absence of a refractive layer around it. “Alles Lebendige braucht um sich eine Atmosphäre, einen geheimnissvollen Dunstkreis,” he wrote, and, in part on account of the pre-eminence that this thought seems to accord to the sense of sight (for here the question of survival is above all a matter of seeing and being seen), it appears likely that in this instance too (much as I said before à propos Bergson) Darwin was mitgedacht – an affiliation which shimmers through even more when Nietzsche stressed that this “Atmosphäre” represented one of the conditions for the flourishing but also for the propagation of anything that lives: “wenn man ihm diese Hüllle nimmt, wenn man eine Religion, eine Kunst, ein Genie verurtheilt, als Gestirn ohne Atmosphäre zu kreisen: so soll man sich über das schnelle Verdorren, Hart- und Unfruchtbarwerden nicht mehr wundern.”

*Desiccation, hardness, and sterility*: Nietzsche’s diagnosis would apply not only to the organisms or creatures who for want of such an “atmosphere” have begun to scrutinize and to be scrutinized beyond the limits prescribed
for them by their respective pre–histories (here I shall leave to one side his sense of the way in which this “atmosphere” itself evaporates under the ever more searching stare of scrutiny during the modern age), but also to the material environment, which would grow increasingly inhospitable in its absence.

All is not lost at this point, however, for the human ear, so obviously different in its mode of operation, that is, in its scope, acuity, and circumperceptivity, than its counterpart the eye, is likewise not so exclusively restricted to the atmosphere – however literally or figuratively one takes this term – as its sole possible medium: this is as evident, fortunately, as the fact that solid things too may transmit sound; but what’s of most interest to me here, is the chance that hearing could prove a better guide than sight in the midst of the incipient guidance–free zone which “the Anthropocene” has yet to fully unfold.

Listening to the third and last of the tracks on Huysmans’ EP, “Oligotroph,” I suspect that this possibility interests him likewise, for here we are jolted suddenly from a laboratory of Frankenstein to – to where, exactly? In this composition (as it registers in my ears) we’re given to hear sounds within a thin perimeter beyond which one has a sombre feeling that there’s nothing but a void traversed by bursts of radiation and the blinding flashes of light that appear suddenly, emitted over immense distances of time and space by stars without atmosphere; it seems plausible therefore to say that the scene has shifted to an enterprise of human exploration of outer space – a vastness which surely qualifies as an extreme environment, where the margin of error for ill–advised actions is almost nil, and in the midst of which, moreover, the explorers in their capsule are bereft of nearly all assurance that somehow, in some manner, the surroundings will encourage them in advance to desist if need be.

What the explorers do have to rely on, one imagines, are control–panels of electronics and computers and communication devices – a range of equipment bearing some likeness to what is currently available to the professionals in the sound studios around the planet; and so, towards the interstellar ending of Huysmans’ eerie EP, one comes to wonder whether music such as this, in opening our ears to what is perhaps now first announcing itself all around us, may be unfolding before anyone who cares to listen hard a sonic–schematic map of our near future? – a minimal one, surely, and no replacement for nature’s age–old guidance, but a map all the same.
Jennifer Left

(January 22, 2013)

A present–day blues singer and a songwriter across the Channel in Brighton who’s beginning to attract notice widely in the UK, is Jennifer Dalby, who goes by the nom d’artiste Jennifer Left. Following two EPs released last year, during this one a full–scale LP may be in the works, which would afford her an opportunity to showcase her voice’s full range, for it must encompass quite a spectrum of colors, moods, and keys, to judge from what’s been made available thus far on her Bandcamp page and Youtube channel, and also to pair its diversity with an even greater variety of arrangements – she’s shown herself quite willing to renew the blues so that it may speak to the generations raised on house music or on the sounds of the clubs more generally (producing in the process, in collaboration with the remixers in one or two instances, tracks which seem as though they might become the progenitors of new hybrid sub–genres). Through the course of the coming year, it will be interesting to see where this sultry and supple voice takes her, and where she takes it.

The videos in the playlist, inventively directed by Thom Undrell of Novi Films, also manifest Jennifer Left’s quirky and appealing sense of humor. – On her Soundcloud page, she’s uploaded the title song from her first EP, “Black Dog.” – In addition to her own original material, she’s recorded a lovely cover of New Order’s “Temptation.” Her rendition of the lines

Heaven, a gateway, a hope
Just like a feeling I need, it’s no joke

and

Tonight I think I’ll walk alone
I’ll find my soul as I go home

is startlingly right and especially exquisite.
Lastly, there is the “Alternative Diggory Pokery Version” of the title track of her second EP, although the “Banks Remix” of this song, by Alex Banks, ought not to be missed, either.

**KuuMA (空マ)**

*(January 23, 2013)*

Another of this young year’s releases is what is in effect an LP uploaded on the Soundcloud page of a composer (presumably it’s a single individual) residing in Nagaski who appears to move in the orbit of the Sight/Sound festival organized by Daniel Rhode in Michigan and Adam Cuthbért in New York – perhaps a corresponding member in Japan whom Cuthbért first befriended during his time there? – and whose moniker on that system is evidently an abbreviation and/or an anagram, KuuMA (or, written in the Japanese ideograms, for those who understand them, くんマ). Yet let’s leave the personal identity of this composer or composers to one side, for no doubt there are reasons for KuuMA’s enigmatic πρόσωπον, and focus instead solely on this virtual LP, entitled *Becoming the Moon*, for in this music itself there are already mysteries aplenty – and there’s world enough and time between us to permit me to delve briefly into one or two of them here.

In the LP’s second track, “What If You Were the Internet?,” it’s the sounds of that invention in operation that we’re first given to hear – but not exactly the actual sounds made as our fingers strike the keys and the keys the keyboard, for instance; rather, this is how the moving parts in the totality of the technology that is called “the Internet,” if any such still exist, might be registered by a listening device small enough to be inserted somehow amongst them.

Listening, it’s as though we’re transported into the inner recesses of the Internet, set down in medias res in a realm we have never before experienced
in such a way (and thus we are inclined to practice as far as we can what Henri Bergson, in *Matière et Mémoire*, termed “la perception pure”) – and then one shakes one’s head in momentary disbelief, for suddenly one notices that it’s not only the moving parts that are making the noise, but all the others as well! And what noises they all emit! The bottom line, we hear increasingly clearly as the track progresses and these cogs in the machine cease their mechanical operations and, as it were, begin to raise their voices: they are no more pleased with the tasks, the pace, and the hours demanded of them than are we human beings in all our various places of employment; and before we know it, we interlopers find ourselves right in the middle of a work stoppage, a general strike, or even an entire insurrection of technology ...

Moving on to the title track of this LP, which is rather more enigmatic and whose rhythms are considerably more dissonant, it seems to ask of us a rather different kind of auditory absorption – that is, if the implicit grammatical subject of the phrase “becoming the moon” is the listener.  

Well, whether or not listeners are invited to “become the moon” for the duration of the track, by virtue of concentrating in pure perception on the music itself, we certainly are given a taste of what its surface is like, so cold and unshielded as it has been left without any insulating atmosphere, so far removed from everything that makes our life possible that one is inclined to shake one’s head at the practice of calling that forlorn sphere “*der Mond*” and “*la lune*” or at all the ideas that ever have been entertained of visiting or of worshipping it. And yet ...

In closing – lest I leave the impression that KuuMA is a composer who tends to the dour side, which is far from being the case, I should also credit him, her, or them with having composed some works that clearly know how to have fun; the LP’s fifth track, “Luminous Squares of Orange and Green,” stands out in this respect, for in the hands of a contemporary choreographer it could easily accompany a short jeu d’esprit for one or two dancers.
In Homage to Depeche Mode’s “Strangelove” A Playlist

(January 23, 2013)

It’s late and time for something fun – in the shape of a playlist devoted to several covers, remixes, and mash–ups of Depeche Mode’s “Strangelove,” which is another of the songs from the nineteen–eighties that twenty–something years later haven’t been left exhausted and mere shadows of their former selves, but rather continue to expand in their appeal, as these various versions, each in its own way a homage (and one of them even represents a new birth from the spirit of “Strangelove,” so to speak), all attest.

In order, these thirteen tracks are the work of – I’ve listed the actual names of the individuals amongst them, whenever these were available to me – Vladimir (Beer Sheva, Israel), Kaiser Soze (Sterrebeek, Belgium), Friendly Fires (St. Albans, England), Bat for Lashes (Brighton, England), Sodium Bride (Denver, Colorado), The Assembly (Chicago, Illinois), Ainius Staneika (Vilnius, Lithuania), Jeremy Wall (Oxford, Mississippi), Rick Torres (New York City, New York), Electrometro (Valencia, Venezuela), Analog 80 (Brussels, Belgium), Ferenc Fehér (Kaposvár, Hungary), and Park Planet (Glasgow, Scotland).

Postscript. Since posting the above, I’ve learned that the cover I attributed to Ferenc Fehér alone was actually the work of one of the bands in which he participates, Tripes; my apologies for the oversight.
In putting together the “Strangelove” playlist, I made the acquaintance of some individuals and bands whose work it’s likely that I’ll be writing a bit about in the near future, and one of them is a duo in Denver, Colorado called Sodium Bride; though formed quite recently, it already has numerous original tracks to its credit, uploaded on its Soundcloud page (and a few live recordings on its Youtube channel), as well as several covers of a wider range of artists than one generally comes across, all interpreted in the spirit of the synthesizer pop of the 1980s, which, at present, may be encountering, well, a new wave of curious interest amongst those who weren’t around to enjoy it during that decade.

It’s still earlier than early days for Von Kater, the singer, and Koobs, the keyboardist and guitarist, and they will I’d imagine devote themselves more to their own songs in the time to come, but for the moment it is in their covers that the two really show the various directions in which they can go, by virtue of the combination of Kater’s dramatic phrasing and his distinctive baritone (there are more than a few echoes of Elvis in his delivery, interspersed now and again by a post–punk snarl) with Koobs’ jaunty arrangements. Most often these explore, as is noted on their Soundcloud page, the “darker side of love” – which, of course, is a very extensive, diverse, and inexhaustible region – and it deserves to be noted here that the band is capable of interpreting songs by men and by women with an equal insight.

How they would render some of the best numbers by The Velvet Underground and Nico, “All Tomorrow’s Parties” for instance, is something I for one would be quite interested to hear; I suspect they’d do a smashing job.
On a Chilly January Evening: A “Melancholic Winter Mix” by Von Rosenthal de la Vegaz

(January 25, 2013)

For a very cold Friday such as this, the Amsterdam DJ Von Rosenthal de la Vegaz, who, exceptionally but not so surprisingly for someone with his formal conservatory training, works nearly exclusively with classical music as his main material and eschews the pulsations which one hears almost everywhere, has assembled a lovely, meditative, melancholic mix and posted it on his Soundcloud page; in it there’s an undergirding of his trademark sonic humor, as a few patches of static or other kinds of radio noise (a counterpart to the rumbling of the trams outside which occasionally are heard during performances in the Concertgebouw here, adding a certain je ne sais quoi to the whole) bubble up from below at intervals, in order to intersperse a little levity throughout the minor–key mood.

Nostromo 7

(January 26, 2013)

Some days ago, a lead pursued from Ferenc Fehér’s page on Soundcloud – in the band Tripes, based in Kaposvár, Hungary, and now a duo, both he and Marcsingó András compose and play the music, while András sings – took me to another whose home base is some distance away, in Tatabánya, called Nostromo 7; the name, with its particular literary provenance, attracted my atten-
tion like a clue, but it was the duo’s music itself which held it, for the sound created by Péter Lipovics, a composer and sound designer, and Gábor Szabó, a singer and lyricist (and a director of film and video), can exert an ominous hypnotic power over the listener: or at least that is what I found in making the acquaintance of the album, Cinemind, which, sonically and thematically, runs from dark to darker and nearly engulfs the few lighter notes that flicker through here and there.

This is an experimental electronic music with a markedly goth verve, pervaded by more than a little of das Grauenhafte, and accordingly it’s not surprising to find one of the videos on the duo’s Youtube channel (which I’ve included in the playlist) reaching back to Murnau’s Nosferatu for its visual content; that film may be taken as an emblem of the innumerable works of horror – whether of art, of film, of music (to mention only some of the fields of the aesthetic in the most restricted sense of the term) – which have permeated all our minds from their beginnings, such that fright’s fascination is something few could readily escape (by now it may even have become one of the most imperious of human needs), even should they really, seriously want to.

However, at least we can become more aware of its sway over us; and it seems to me that this may in fact be one of the intentions behind Nostromo 7’s album (issued by Electro Arc in Frankfurt, in conjunction evidently with Shinto Records in Minneapolis), which delves into the “inner movies lost in space and time” (in the duo’s own phrase) perhaps precisely in order to extrude those “films” – the various scenarios of horror which might be the more powerful in their effects for having been “forgotten” – into – not into the light, for where is a strong light to be found anymore, but into the dimness all around us, wherein, even if our eyes cannot, our ears may just be able to perceive them.

Clear vision is probably the last thing one can expect given the pace and the pressure of our present-day society – when, in Conrad’s eponymous novel, now more than a century old, Nostromo avers “I never forget a place I have carefully looked at once,”* the claim is likely to elicit at most an ironic half-smile from today’s readers, for places which would be capable of sustain-

* Part II, chap. 8.
ing that careful regard are more and more conspicuous by their absence from our world.

Yet here our ears might prove to be the more acute organ of perception; if one listens closely to music such as theirs, one might discern something like the first rumblings of a thunder that’s as yet still far off but on the move towards us – and then one may want to ponder the line of Shakespeare’s which Conrad set as the epigraph to Nostromo: “So foul a sky clears not without a storm.”*

For the time being, though, some of the tracks from Cinemind uploaded on Nostromo 7’s Soundcloud page and on its Bandcamp page are “Melt Away,” with additional vocals by Erzsébet Vas, “Ocean Blue,” likewise with Vas’ participation, “Second Face,” with Anita Járóka on violin, and additional vocals by Josef Stapel, “Kozmo 2065,” and “Relief.” Lastly, there is also a “So Strange Mix” of “Longing.”

Postscript. Ferenc Fehér kindly sent word that in Tripes he is not the singer but composes and plays the arrangements instead; the vocals are handled by Maresingó András, while Krisztián Pravda has stepped back from active participation in the band: thus I have corrected the text above.

Suite: An EP by Giovanni Dettori

(January 27, 2013)

The Milanese composer Giovanni Dettori (well-known above all for his “Lady Gaga Fugue” and his efforts to bring back the art of counterpoint) has completed an EP, Suite, and uploaded a couple of the pieces included on it onto his

* King John, act IV, scene 2.
Youtube channel, one of which, “Storiaterza,” I’ve added to the playlist; it’s a composition delightfully full of happenings, abuzz with percolations of jazz and tango, and marked in its tempo – or tempi, as several come and go in the course of it – by one pizzicato after another: and it makes one curious about the whole album, which is available through the usual sites on the Internet, for instance on iTunes.

The sample provided there of another of his compositions, “Storialquarta,” is especially intriguing.

Dettori’s album came about when a sculpture exhibition, to accompany which he had originally written the pieces, failed to materialize, and rather than let these works languish on paper he was able to record them, with the help of musician friends; for my part, I certainly hope that the ensemble goes on to give the live performances of them which he’s expressed his interest in seeing take place.

Tripes

(January 27, 2013)

One of the covers I included in the “Strangelove” playlist is the work of the Hungarian band Tripes, which was once but is no longer (Ferenc Fehér has informed me) a trio, Krisztián Pravda, the lyricist and backup vocalist, having withdrawn from the group some time ago, and whose existence is thus as a duo, the musical arrangements now emerging from a collaboration between Fehér and Marcsingó András, with the latter handling the singing, while Gábor Sperla, though he is not actually a member of Tripes, contributes the lyrics.

What they may intend to do next, in the near future, two of the tracks in the Youtube playlist I’ve put together, “I Find Joy” and “Ruthless,” might be taken as disclosing; while the third, a stunning cover of “But Not Tonight” by Depeche Mode – a band which has inspired them like perhaps no other – is so beautiful that it hurts.
On their Myspace page there’s a lovely cover of Kraftwerk’s “Telephone Call.” – From the group’s first album, *Perfect Beam*, available on Tripes’ Bandcamp page, a number of tracks stand out, including two Hungarian tunes. (Recently the entire album was also uploaded on Fehér’s Soundcloud page.)

**Giovanni Dettori’s *Suite* EP**

**An Update**

*(February 1, 2013)*

All the pieces on the new EP *Suite* issued by Giovanni Dettori have been uploaded on another site on Youtube, and as I had thought, based on the brief excerpts to be heard on the album’s page at iTunes, the composition “Storiaquarta” is especially noteworthy, which, with its tense claustrophobic passages and interruptions of shattering glass, sounds like the considerably darker dénouement of the storia which preceded it (and like the former I’ve included it in the playlist).

The ensemble which performed Dettori’s music was comprised of Engjellushe Bace and Xhiliola Kraja on the violins, Adriana Tataru on the viola, Livia Rotondi on the cello, and Dettori himself on the synthesizers, sampler, and piano.
Jan Kerckhofs and Eva Blom Sing “The Boxer”

(February 8, 2013)

A lovely cover of “The Boxer” by Simon and Garfunkel has been uploaded on Jan Kerckhofs’ Youtube channel, a duet with Eva Blom, and I’ve added it to the playlist – an addition that has the minor virtue of some timeliness, for though the whores on Seventh Avenue belong to a bygone era, a heavy snowstorm now threatens to descend upon the city in which I’m traveling, and so I too am beginning to think of going home, where the New York City winters aren’t bleeding me.

“I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie Honey Bunch)” – Revisited by The Shures

(February 13, 2013)

A cover of “I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie Honey Bunch)” by The Four Tops has been uploaded on the Youtube channel of The Shures, and though the group’s newest member Sophie is absent from it, in this one video Gabriel Cabrera and Chris Kennedy, each clad in a different style of formal attire yet wonderfully harmonious vocally, go quite a ways towards re-inventing the performance élan of the bands of fifty years ago for 2013 and beyond. Bravo!
Maxwell Demon’s “Tears”

(February 14, 2013)

Around a month ago, the Bellport, New York singer–songwriter Maxwell Demon uploaded a track called “Tears” onto his Soundcloud page, and I intended to post something about it here in a timely fashion, but could not until now, due to my travels, some uncommon local weather, and life generally – anyhow, excuses aside, it is a song with the odd appeal of several of those he included on his album Strange Being a few months back.

The lyrics of his eerie tune might repel some listeners, comprising as they do a succession of lines that sound on first hearing like nothing other than sexual banalities, at best; but precisely because their content is so overbearing and obvious, one soon notices that these would–be erotic poncifs are not meant to be taken at face–value but were instead uttered in an expansive ironic spirit – if they have not simply been scornfully thrown back into a waste of shame – and then at a stroke the whole song is revealed as a bemused–bitter reflection on the suffusion of our imaginations by the masses of pornography everywhere, and on the soft or hard core of lust in action and inaction these strive to arouse into being in us, issued by a musician whose taste for pensive contemplation is pronounced.

And indeed, beginning late last year, Demon has been developing a new website, Indépendante Nautique, Rock Musique, as a forum for his thoughts, and several of the articles may be recommended for their music–historical and even theoretical interest – not to mention how resonant they might well be of the general mood of the young generation, which is to say, in other words, of our Zeitgeist altogether.

Postscript. His Twitter feed, it turns out, is also worth consulting for its pointers to artists new on the independent music scene.
Sweet Random

(February 14, 2013)

From Russia – the city of Saratov, on the Volga, to be exact – comes an EP, Love, by someone about whom one is given very little to know other than his first name and his age and the fact that under the moniker Sweet Random he has begun to create a distinctive body of industrial music; as the album is short and conveys an especial feeling of composing a unity, it should simply be consulted on his page in its entirety.

On Sweet Random’s Soundcloud page there are several remixes – rearrangements might be a better term for them – he’s done, of which the most recent is of “Only When I Lose Myself” by Depeche Mode.

Well, with a little luck we shall be hearing more of, and finding out more about, Sweet Random in the near future.

Industrial Wave Studio

(February 15, 2013)

Another of Ferenc Fehér’s projects is the electronic music duo Industrial Wave Studio, and in this one it is he who sings while Péter Renner creates the arrangements (as is the case with Tripes, the lyrics are written by their friend Gábor Sperla); the band is currently at work on an album, entitled Hit the Hit, and although a few tracks have been uploaded on its pages on Soundcloud and Myspace, the whole, or as much of it as one may now reasonably expect to be given in advance of its formal release, was made available around a week ago on Fehér’s own Soundcloud page: while it is too soon to speak sensibly about the album, one notes that this music is both more rapid and darker than much of what Tripes has done, abounding in tones which Fehér’s voice, which is every bit as appealing as Marcsingó András’, though somewhat deeper and
rather more smoky than is his (their accents each burnishing the vocal delivery with a certain extra charm), seems well-suited to accompany.

On the band’s website some additional audio tracks have been uploaded, including an instrumental number, “The Street,” and an interesting remix of Tripes’ “Once in the Lifetime.”

If one may judge from what Industrial Wave Studio has produced thus far, Hit the Hit, whenever and however it appears, will be an album that was worth waiting for.

Daft Beatles

(February 16, 2013)

We will. We will. Mash You.
– Daft Beatles

It stands to reason that from a city where many of today’s and tomorrow’s new genres in popular music are invented or hybridized into being, some of the most accomplished mash-ups – and the mash-up by now has nearly become a kind of genre in its own right – would hail; and here again and again London does not disappoint: a recent chance discovery on Soundcloud of one such musician, Jonas C., who goes by a humorous moniker he spliced together for himself from the names of the two bands he first operated on, Daft Beatles, confirms the point, with musical combinations of which the idea sounds so improbable until one actually listens to them – whereupon the distances, whether of sort or style, or of time and place, that had separated those whom he puts together, suddenly seem to be more illusory than real.

The increasing eminence of the mash-up as a form that conduces to surprising musical discoveries, should itself be thought-provoking; with each revelation of an unexpected affinity, as though the musics in question had been made for each other, one wonders a little more at the constitution of the
musical portions of our mind that are open to recognizing their mutual right-ness even when we ourselves were unwilling or unable to: perhaps it could be the case that there are deep planes of memory where the songs and music generally one heard long ago live on virtually, precisely by virtue of being preserved there in something analogous to the fused form to which the best mash-ups introduce – or rather, re-introduce – us. Or else, if one is disinclined to admit that they could possibly be present there already in that compact manner, would it then be more plausible to compare the behavior of the pieces of music in those regions of one’s memory to the comportment of people at crowded parties scanning the room for others whom they’d care to talk to or to ...?

Not to mention the mutual interpenetrations, contiguities, and simultaneities of the constituents of our musicality (such as our feeling for tempo and rhythm) at the even deeper depths of the mind wherein those elements might – it’s one hypothesis about their situation – be concealed and protected, in something of the way that, Kant surmised, the “Schematismus unseres Verstandes” would almost necessarily have to be “eine verborgene Kunst in den Tiefen der menschlichen Seele.”* Ah, if only the mind could be turned inside out for once, so that despite itself it would emit its strange inner music. ... Well, there is probably ample reason to want to leave it well enough alone, and yet finely-tuned mash-ups may at least bring one closer to overhearing the sound within it just a little, albeit indirectly, if one has some notion of what one is to listen for.

The more surprisingly right the mash-up – the more utterly improbable it seemed beforehand – the greater the likelihood that it might succeed in conveying just such percipience to the listener; and conversely, the taste for this genre (if it is not simply a mere fashion) might indicate that precisely that is what more and more people now hope to receive.

But be all this as it may. The following mash-ups, even in their more experimental or tentative moments, are strikingly surprising and right; and for sonic delight late on a Friday evening, what more is required?

* * Kritik der reinen Vernunft, A 141/B 180-81.
The Beatles, “Eleanor Rigby” vs. Daft Punk, “Around the World”
Madonna, “Papa Don’t Preach” vs. Nirvana, “Smells Like Teen Spirit”
Oasis, “Don’t Look Back in Anger” vs. Bob Marley, “No Woman No Cry”
Lana Del Rey, “Born to Die” vs. Johnny Cash, “Hurt”

And, last but not least – in fact, it was this most improbable one that I encountered first and which prompted me to listen further – there is an astonishing and beautiful blending of Blondie and Philip Glass.

Postscript. It’s come to my attention that Daft Beatles’ page on Soundcloud has been disappeared. This is a pity – for all those who have and who might have appreciated his music – and a shame, for Soundcloud itself. The action notwithstanding, a new home for his work ought soon to be found.

Ferenc Fehér

(February 17, 2013)

In addition to the Tripes and Industrial Wave Studio materials he’s recently uploaded to his own Soundcloud page, Ferenc Fehér has also provided in its entirety a solo project of his from 2000, a fifteen-track album of electronic music entitled Synopse; and while it is clearly an early work (though for this very reason it calls back to mind the new millennium’s techno sound), even after nearly fifteen years it does not feel as though it had dated – which, in our time, after all, is a considerable compliment. In fact, far from being dated, it points forward to his present-day work, for, though these instrumental compositions are not nearly as dark as Tripes’ songs, not to mention those of Industrial Wave Studio, which are still darker, here and there one does hear some sonic adumbrations of the two bands’ more recent music.
Not so much in order simply to stroll back into the past, then, but with the intention of presenting a better overview of this nexus of Hungarian sound-artists, three of Fehér’s tracks from *Synopse* may be recommended: “Levitatio,” “Fabula,” and “Umbra.”

**Sunday Evening Wrap-Up on Soundcloud: Nature’s Jokes, Floating Admiral, and Hess Is More**

*(February 17, 2013)*

Sunday evening is arrived, and so it’s time once more* for what may (or may not) become something of a regular feature on this site, namely, a round-up of some music I’ve encountered on Soundcloud; and as I seem lately to be returning over and over to Depeche Mode, is it any wonder that two of tonight’s three tracks should be covers of that band’s songs?

This time, however, it interested me most to see whether there were any covers of two of them in which Depeche Mode was at its most inimitable – two songs that had, it seems to me, been written exclusively for the band and no one else, tailored to its measure alone, in the performance of which it could excel so far that the idea of venturing to cover them might not readily arise at all, whereas several of the more well-known tunes have been covered repeatedly and in any number of styles, often quite strikingly. Here I’m speaking of “Shake the Disease” and “Policy of Truth,” and – to be honest – most of the renditions of them I listened to on Soundcloud simply didn’t measure up, and

* Two earlier brief notices each appearing on Sunday had offered a few tracks discovered on Soundcloud.
I was near to abandoning my little inquiry when I did chance upon a pair that—to my ears—merited attention and which thus could justifiably be posted here.

From England comes a bouncy version of “Shake the Disease” by Nature’s Jokes, the performance moniker of Chris Payne, a musician in Birmingham, while across the Channel, an even more experimental “Policy of Truth” has been set out by the Floating Admiral in Lille, otherwise known as Tony Wiek.

Yet once I’d settled on these two, somehow I felt as though some third track were missing from the mix, and in a flash it occurred to me to seek out an interesting cover of Blondie’s “Heart of Glass” (a song that’s likewise been much on my mind these last couple of days) – and then just as quickly I chanced upon a remarkable version on the Soundcloud page of Mikkel Hess, who collaborates in numerous musical projects in Copenhagen and New York under the name Hess Is More.

Bill Ryan

(Febuary 20, 2013)

Around a week ago in New York, thanks to a tip by Adam Cuthbért, I was able to devote at least a little time to music and could attend a concert at Le Poisson Rouge heralding the release of the new album, Towards Daybreak, of one of his professors during his years at Grand Valley State University, Bill Ryan. For the occasion the composer was present, along with the ensemble dedicated to performing his work, Billband – performing under this eponymous–euphonious moniker were Ashley Bathgate (cello), Vicky Chow (piano), David Cossin (percussion), Michael Lowenstern (bass clarinet), Pablo Mahave–Veglia (cello), Jonathan Nichol (saxophone), Doug Perkins (percussion), and Todd Reynolds (violin) – several of whom likewise travelled from elsewhere in the country to the city for the event. The group played I believe nearly all the tracks from the album with verve, devoting themselves to the performance with great concentration (Reynolds, Chow, and Nichol were each particularly
fascinating to watch), and deployed their talents, which are considerable, both as an ensemble and throughout the several passages or pieces where one or the other instrument took the lead or even went entirely solo.

The album, signed by every member of Billband, is available in limited quantities from the Bang on a Can Internet store.

Apart from his work as a composer, Ryan is known for his leadership of the Grand Valley State University New Music Ensemble, which has won prominence in the USA with a number of recordings and live performances of works by Steve Reich and Terry Riley; its work has been published by the Innova record label, by which his own albums have also been issued.

On Ryan’s Youtube channel a video recording of Bathgate’s performance of “Simple Lines” was uploaded a couple of days ago, and I have included it in a short playlist, along with a different arrangement of the same piece for a large cello ensemble, as well as a portion of a piece, not included on the album, entitled “Stream.”

The tracks on his first album, *Blurred*, have been loaded onto his Soundcloud page, including “Original Blend” and “Drive,” while on Innova’s page two tracks from *Towards Daybreak* have been made available, “Blurred” – in a version longer than is the one included on the first album – and “Sparkle.” Now, while the first of these is the last track on the album and the second the penultimate one, in the ideal sequence of this crepuscular music it seems to me as though it precedes the latter, heavily enwrapped as it evidently so much more nearly is within the state of sleep, and thus corresponding to a point situated earlier in the course of a night, whereas the other conveys that specific five A.M. feeling that comes after many hours awake when one is rubbing the grogginess from one’s eyes: so in placing oneself in the midst of Ryan’s music, it appears in the first case that the very blurriness of or in one’s mind is what has been rendered into articulate audibility, while in the second, although daybreak is not yet dawning, it’s as though one’s second wind has already started to blow – in sprightly sound.
The Musicians of Billband, Considered Individually

(February 24, 2013)

As a coda to the previous text about Bill Ryan’s new album, it occurred to me to roll out an omnibus post featuring one or two recordings from each of the musicians that performed on it, his group with the euphonious–harmonious name, Billband; for clearly they are all strong solo performers as well as being dexterous members of the band: and so a presentation in which their instruments could come into their own, either singly or in some smaller ensembles (and in some cases premiering their own works), seemed to be in order.

To begin with, Ashley Bathgate offers a spirited version of Andy Akiho’s “21” – not only on the cello, but operating a kick–drum and a looper concurrently.

The pianist Vicky Chow runs through Ryan Anthony Francis’ “Etudes for Piano” with verve, especially so in three of them, “La Fée Verte,” “Jacob’s Ladder,” and “Loop.”

Of the percussion–playing of David Cossin there does not seem to be much available either on Soundcloud or Youtube (and while he has a website of his own, it is at present less than functional), but in one video which I did come across, a recording of “Piano/Video Phase” by Steve Reich, his talent is displayed impressively.

On his solo album, Spin Cycle, released under the moniker Earspasm, the clarinetist Michael Lowenstern experiments with a number of other instruments as well, and in the track “My Mouth” the harmonica joins the clarinet in an uncommon sonic whole of a composition.

Unfortunately the cellist Pablo Mahave–Veglia has no page on Soundcloud, but on his website he’s uploaded an excerpt of a recording he made for his album Dualidad of “Der Mondbach I” by Andrés Alcalde.

A playlist of audio recordings has been uploaded on Jonathan Nichol’s Youtube channel, and towards the end of it the saxophonist goes solo in performances of Barry Cockcroft’s “Ku Ku” and William Bolcom’s “Concert
Suite IV.” (For the sake of convenience I have made a mini-playlist including just these two pieces.)

From his debut album Simple Songs, the percussionist Doug Perkins has made tracks available on his Soundcloud page, of which the first is “A Tale Begun.”

And last but not least, an original composition on his album Outerborough, “Icy Sleeves of Green,” has been uploaded on the Soundcloud page of the violinist Todd Reynolds.

The Sunday Evening Round-Up on Soundcloud

(February 24, 2013)

Sunday evening has rolled around again, and so it’s time once more for a Soundcloud round-up – though not, I hope, of any by now usual suspects.

An older project of the London singer, songwriter, composer, and producer Chris Garland (his current one is The Psychedelic Manifesto), the Diskowalküren – which comprised, alongside Ilona Bolz–Garland, a number of back-up vocalists, all singing to his and Ralf Kappmeier’s music – may be a thing of the past, but fairly recently on his Soundcloud page he’s uploaded a number of their hitherto unknown tracks, including the quite humorous–ironic “Alles Klar” (though, to be sure, the wit will be mostly lost on those whose German reicht nicht aus).

To many more “accessible” perhaps will be the version by Philip Vachon, a young musician and vocalist in New York, of that old standard of The Velvet Underground and Nico’s, “I’ll Be Your Mirror,” from his second album, </3, which he’s made available on his Soundcloud page – but it is every bit as lovely as the former is witty, with an accompaniment of handclaps that feel like a continuous round of applause and his vocal performance aching with a delicacy that sticks in one’s mind.
As a third piece of music in the mix, rather further afield, in Tokyo, Daisuke Tanabe has uploaded a new track, entitled “Paddle,” onto his Soundcloud page; it’s a composition that glides along to the sound of some pleasantly soft percussion.

Landon Gadoci: “Tie Me Up”

(February 27, 2013)

On the Austin singer’s Youtube channel, Landon Gadoci – having announced the release some weeks ago – has uploaded the audio of a single, “Tie Me Up,” one which, suggestive as it is of the opening of a new chapter in his musical career, was worth waiting for, and it’s been added to the playlist. (It is not quite clear whether an actual video will also be forthcoming; if and when one is offered, I shall substitute it.)

In collaboration with the Irish musician Des Mallon, who, amongst his other hats, is a producer at the English label Infrasonic, Gadoci has crafted a tune that, much like the duet with Nicole di Gioacchino which preceded it, vibrates with the particular mixture of assurance and uncertainty that one often encounters amongst the generation of those now in their twenties and which often seems to be nearly their second nature; and this attitude, here even more explicitly than in the previous one, seems to be what this song is actually about, due in part to the intelligent lyrics, which were written and are sung so as to pitch some surprises at those who listen more closely, and in part to the careful arrangements, which are polished with finishing touches of studied artlessness – their style thus comprising a sort of sonic sprezzatura – in order to keep such listeners just a little off-balance.

Or more than just a little, for in fact, in the course of the song, several syncopes are introduced: when for instance the number of syllables in the last lines before the refrain is unexpectedly truncated, or when entire words are accentuated not with regard to their meaning but as though in so doing the aim were to multiply and to echo vocally the underlying regularities of the bass.
Not to mention the utilization of vocal elements instrumentally in the higher registers (for the first time beginning at the 2:55 mark), a feature which contributes considerably to the tune’s overall appeal precisely because it is brought to bear suddenly, as though from out of nowhere, and yet then works so well in conjunction with the others.

This is a jaunty song that’s not so much meant to dance as it is to walk to – in a stroll that’s smooth and swaggering by turns, a promenade that speeds up, slows down, turns around, and retraces its steps, as though in response to whatever’s met with on the way, perhaps in something of the manner of the Italian passeggiate, though it moves at an altogether more rapid rate than theirs.

It is noteworthy that there’s no talk of love in “Tie Me Up,” but rather of lust: as though to imply that what used to go under the name of the first, has in our time been transformed into the second, that is, a physical, metabolic need of the human organism requiring swift satisfaction much like any other, in a period like the present that simply must hasten if it is to keep pace with its own technologies.

And the song’s nominal theme, the relinquishment of control, may provoke some thought as well – in acquiescing voluntarily to an inclination to which one would end up submitting anyhow, does one not at least preserve the modicum of dignity conferred by having willed it? (Ut desint vires, tamen est laudanda voluntas.)

The Sunday Round–Up on Soundcloud

(March 3, 2013)

This Sunday, for a change, the Soundcloud round–up is occurring early, very early in the morning; I have a lot on at the moment and may as well send it forth now.
First, thanks to a kind tip by Chris Garland (of The Psychedelic Manifesto), is a collaboration between the English DJ, producer, and songwriter Mikey Dee, currently residing in Singapore, who goes by the moniker Mobidextrous, and the Chinese singer known as Miss Melody, a song entitled “Ru Meng Ling.”

On her Youtube channel there is a video for their track, and the note underneath explains that the lyrics are drawn from a poem by Li Ching–Chao (or alternately: Ch’ing–Chao, Qingzhao), who flourished during the Song dynasty, around a thousand years ago. (She has been translated into English notably by Kenneth Rexroth.) In it, along with the lyrics themselves in English and Chinese, Miss Melody too is quoted by way of clarification: “Li Qingzhao wrote it in the morning when she woke up with a little hangover from a stormy night. She noticed there were less flowers in the garden whereas the maid, being somber all the time, failed to notice this happening. It is a discussion about truth. Is truth what is seen, or what is ignored? When tragedy happens to the unknown, who will see it as truth, and who will simply ignore it? Who is being somber? And who can see the change?”

Moving on now from poets to photographers, the second of today’s tracks, or actually, a short set of three, was kindly made available on the Soundcloud page of the website Portals; it is the work of the Canadian artist, born in Edmonton and now residing in New York, Landon Speers, who works not only in photography but also in music, under the moniker Headaches, with a number of albums available on his Bandcamp page.

(Headaches? Well, Speers’ page on Soundcloud is also worth a look for what he has on his head – namely, the very large and very red hat worn with aplomb in his profile photograph, which is presumably a self–portrait.)

The last of today’s pieces is not a set but a single track that’s the work of the large ensemble hailing from Cotonou in Benin, Le Tout–Puissant Orchestre Poly–Rythmo, founded nearly fifty years ago and still going strong – it tours numerous countries frequently; much of its music is available on disk and in the Internet, including on Soundcloud; and of this œuvre the blog Ana-
log Africa has uploaded onto its Soundcloud page an especially memorable song, “Écoute ma mélodie.”

This orchestra’s poly–rhythms and melodies are powerful, delightful, and very much worth listening to.

A Late Winter’s Night’s Tour
Around Soundcloud

(March 10, 2013)

After nearly a week in which it seemed the new season was at last arriving in these parts, the winter returned in force during the day and is striking back now in the form of a hailstorm – and coupled with a heavy workload at present, including the completion of a longer text which I hope to post here shortly, a certain ennui d’hiver has been pressing upon me; so on today’s trip through Soundcloud, the tempo will tend to the slower side, the mood more in a minor key.

☛ To begin with, there’s an intriguing electro–acoustic exercise by a music and vocal student at Western Michigan University, Laura Tribby, entitled “Lonely Lucifer.”

Second up is a lovely version, with an accompaniment laced by klezmer bittersweetness, of Georges Brassens’ arrangement of Louis Aragon’s poem, “Il n’y a pas d’amour heureux,” by the Berlin band Music Men (about which not much information is available other than the name of its frontman, Alex Sitnikov).

Thirdly, a few days ago, Jonnie Allen, the singer, songwriter, and musician based in Salisbury who’s been featured on this site before, raised a new structure around his special sense of humor, and he called it “Our House” – it’s this which is tonight’s final offering.
Eines Nachts in Berlin

(March 17, 2013)

Berlin, Berlin, hier lebt der Mensch gefährlich
und rutscht er aus, dann dreht sich keiner um.
Doch haut er hin – dann ist der Beifall ehrlich.
– Marlene Dietrich, “Berlin – Berlin”

Für RBH

Poised now as we are here on the verge of spring, I’ve been finding myself ready for a voyage – mainly a nocturnal one, though my hope is to conduct it without nostalgia – into the past and to Berlin, and what follows is just such a tour, though it re-enters the present by the end.

The fascination exerted by this city abroad has not dissipated during the present crisis, but instead continues to grow, bolstered by the fact that even today Berlin, regarded from the outside, is often still viewed through the nimbus of the Weimar Republic, the reputation it enjoys being couched, explicitly or implicitly, in terms of that chapter of its and the country’s history; this is a tendency which has not gone unnoticed by the culture industries at several levels, high, middle, and low, in various countries, industries which, in their different ways, have each known how to profit from the city’s continuing appeal, all the more so during our current global conjuncture, which now quite readily instills in those familiar with the history that disquieting “De te fabula narratur” feeling: and so, here we have a case where, for the time being, the object as well as the intellectual and the commercial interest in it, all sustain one another in what is – or, for us, at least it ought to amount to – an uneasy triple alliance.

And yet, all this notwithstanding, Berlin is a fascinating city and has been so ever since its rapid ascent to prominence in the last decades of the nine-
teenth century, the Gründerzeit during which its population and extent grew even more rapidly than power sought in imperial self-aggrandizement was amassed by the Wilhelmine Germany whose capital it had become. As such it was well posed to elicit reflection on the role played at all levels of modern life by a methodical organization and the inclination inherent in individuals to self-discipline – here I’m referring to a genre of reflection that either in effect or explicitly took its bearings from the inquiry in the second treatise of Nietzsche’s *Zur Genealogie der Moral* into the constitutive ante-history of the human being as a being that should be capable, by virtue of the will and the memory which have been drilled into it, of making and keeping promises, and, even more fundamentally, as a being that, insofar as it is, is itself a promise or even a promissory note to the future – a genre of intellectually explorative essay of which the first example may not have been German but French, namely, Paul Valéry’s early publication, initially entitled “La Conquête allemande.”*

Lest it appear I’m straying far from the field of music: surely it’s plausible (though of course it is merely a vast generality) to remark that in the absence of such antecedent, and also, actually, ongoing training, the inner metronome in each member of a musical ensemble would scarcely ever have been set to tick – and without strict maintenance of this interior feeling for time and timing, symphonies could neither be written nor performed.

To rehearse his essay here would have little point, as it has more lucidity, clarity, and distinctness in its articulation than summaries could ever hope to attain: suffice it to say that in it the typical cast of mind anatomized by Nietzsche’s second treatise was taken to be a fait accompli, and its consequences as inaugurated in the German national system were considered under the twin rubrics of methodical collective action and the discipline and self-discipline of persons; but when Valéry towards the end touches on the achievements of individual minds which exist apart from any such system on a large or national scale, while yet representing something like variations of it in microcosm, in this connection a few sentences may fittingly be quoted. “Tous les grands inventeurs d’idées ou de formes me semblent s’être servis de méthodes

particulières,” he rejoined to those who would raise the objection that new insights necessarily emerge only in as yet untrodden territory, or, in other words, from beyond the familiar paths of any extant method. “Je veux dire que leur force même et leur maîtrise est fondée sur l’usage de certaines habitudes, et de certaines conceptions qui disciplinent toutes leurs pensées. Chose étrange, c’est justement l’apparence de cette méthode interne que nous appelons leur personnalité! Il importe peu, du reste, que cette méthode soit ou ne soit pas consciente.”

To this encomium to the inner self–discipline of the mind that is nearly identical with the person’s character itself, for my part I should merely like to add that even more than in ideas or in forms, it may be in music that it can result – and in its contribution to wit and esprit it would show that, far from suffocating, it could even lend strength to a mind’s own spontaneity.

Accordingly, the best and most beautiful fruit of method and discipline, albeit an unintended byproduct thereof, might in fact be a precise musicality on the one hand, a sharp sense of humor on the other. Is it any wonder, then, that Berlin has long been known especially for both?

Within the realms where German was spoken, those who, around the year 1900, were most aware of Berlin’s peculiar twofold position, being at once the capital of Prussia and of a united Germany and yet also a cultural center whose intellectuality and sophistication manifested quite other qualities than mere obedience, method, and discipline, have left some quite acute insights into the nature of the modern metropolis as such; and of these observations there are none sharper than those contained in Georg Simmel’s essay about “Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben,”* which, if one thinks past the ex cathedra and universal manner in which he phrased his remarks, begins to seem as though it were written above all about Berlin – and as though its substance actually comprised real questions rather than bald statements.

His own city would then have served him as an experimental subject for ascertaining the degree of plausibility of his insights into what he liked to call

the “subjektive” and the “objektive Kultur” of the modern metropolis and its inhabitants.

Often only a single verb need be transferred to the beginning of his sentence, and with the change in intonation several open inquiries are released at once from the constative form inside which they were hidden.

“Die Beziehungen und Angelegenheiten des typischen Großstädters pflegen” – this is one of those verbs – “so mannigfaltige und komplizierte zu sein, vor allem: durch die Anhäufung so vieler Menschen mit so differenzierten Interessen greifen ihre Beziehungen und Bethätigungen zu einem so vielgliedrigen Organismus ineinander, daß ohne die genaueste Pünktlichkeit in Versprechungen und Leistungen das Ganze zu einem unentwirrbaren Chaos zusammenbrechen würde.”

The centrality, within this nexus of ideas, of the notions of Pünktlichkeit, Versprechungen, and Leistungen, may be taken as confirmation that Simmel’s essay belongs to the genre of reflection to which I referred before.

Now, if one wanted to typify Simmel’s thought in general, it would be tempting to call him a thinker of degrees, one whose sixth sense for the experiential, intellectual, mental, and perceptual thresholds where differences in quantity are transformed into differences in quality, and vice versa, is perhaps even today unmatched – and, accordingly, the question that actually preoccupied him in his reflections on the modern metropolis, was this (and here I’m putting the matter quite literally): how necessary is the self–discipline, or more precisely, the automatic and at the same time willing subordination or co–ordination of its residents to an impersonal arrangement of time, to a great existing schedule, in order that such a city continue to discharge its essential functions properly.

This question may easily be construed from two remarks in particular, in which his essay’s tendency to apodictic overstatement itself passes beyond a certain point and becomes nearly parodic – as though intentionally so:

“Wenn alle Uhren in Berlin plötzlich in verschiedener Richtung falschgehen würden, auch nur um den Spielraum einer Stunde, so wäre sein ganzes wirtschaftliches und sonstiges Verkehrsleben auf lange hinaus zerrüttet.”
“So ist die Technik des großstädtischen Lebens überhaupt nicht denkbar, ohne daß alle Thätigkeiten und Wechselbeziehungen auß pünktlichste in ein festes, übersubjektives Zeitschema eingeordnet würden.”

Given the speed with which it leapt into the first rank of cities late in the nineteenth century, but also on account of its large topographic size and its particular mode of apportionment in districts, Berlin might have seemed to be tailor–made to serve as the object for an inquiry into the role and the limits in modern life of punctuality, in the comprehensive sense – designating a condition both subjective and objective – that Simmel evidently lent the term.

If Berlin did in fact figure in his essay as the paradigm of the modern metropolis, would it then be so far–fetched to suggest that Simmel was also taking the measure of a twofold analogy – between the city and a symphony, on the one hand, the Berliners and the musicians of an orchestra, on the other – or even a tripartite one, supplemented with a comparison between the sum of the city’s timetables and a symphony’s authoritative score?

As with any worthwhile analogy, this one too ought to cut a swath in both directions. (After the ground’s been cleared, one will perhaps begin to hear more of the sounds of the largest cities while listening with care to this or that symphony, no matter the size, constitution, or degree of self–discipline of the orchestra performing it.)

*Die Symphonie der Großstadt.* – It’s more than probable that film–makers such as Ruttmann or Siodmak and Ulmer, who, a couple of decades later, were to record Berlin in just such terms, should all have known Simmel’s essay nearly by heart.

Behind all the disorder in Berlin during the nineteen–twenties, did its residents continue to live their lives as though they were members of some sort of orchestra, doing so (this is perhaps the most pertinent question) even in their free time, even when they were simply *Menschen am Sonntag*?

The disposition of urban spaces typical of Berlin, which, compared to Paris (not to mention the very different matter of the skyscraper cities), is so much more spread out and less dense, taking considerably longer to traverse – and this articulation of space and time is not the least of the features which lend plausibility to the comparison between cities and symphonies generally – makes room for some characteristics of the relationships amongst the city–
dwellers to become perceptible as such, whereas these do not perhaps extrude themselves so distinctly in urban environments that are organized more compactly; thus it was especially in Berlin that the constitutive role played by a certain soft *antipathy* in those relationships could be taken as a topic for reflection, and so it is not surprising to find Simmel recurring to it again and again in his essay: although his remarks in this connection are likewise marked by a degree of exaggeration, he wasn’t really wrong when he asserted that such antipathy “bewirkt die Distanzen und Abwendungen, ohne die diese Art Leben überhaupt nicht geführt werden könnte,” for otherwise the entirety of the urbanites’ surroundings in their very proximity would impinge upon them far too closely and far too often, in a manner that would be both “unnatürlich” and “unerträglich” in equal measure.

In accommodating themselves to the overarching “punctuality” of time and space without which the life of the metropolis would soon be extinguished (for, his exaggerations notwithstanding, Simmel’s claim remains rather plausible), the residents almost necessarily had need of some degree of antipathy in their mutual relations, if the latter were to be *relationships* at all and not to be compressed into something else of quite another kind, immediate contact abolishing both form and dignity – or into, to vary the terms in keeping with the symphonic analogy, sheer horrible noise; and thus Simmel had reason to suggest that this soft antipathy, or, speaking more precisely, “ihre Maße und ihre Mischungen, der Rhythmus ihres Auftauchens und Verschwindens, die Formen, in denen ihr genügt wird,” was not to be sundered, perhaps even analytically, from the “im engeren Sinne vereinheitlichenden Motiven,” for the “untrennbares Ganzes der großstädtischen Lebensgestaltung” – and at this point one may again infer that it was a whole which might well be likened to a symphony – could only have been constituted by the concurrence of both.

(To cite Simmel’s own more abstract terminology: this antipathy which “unmittelbar als Dissoziierung erscheint” when viewed right in the midst of the relationships comprised in the modern metropolitan form of life, was “in Wirklichkeit nur eine ihrer elementaren Sozialisierungsformen.” A proper vantage-point would be requisite if one were to grasp – I should like to suggest, *to hear* – that underlying reality.)

So, more readily than in some of the other great cities of the time, in Berlin’s large expanses an essential characteristic of the relationships amongst
the urbanites in the modern city could become manifest – though, to be sure, the antipathy to which Simmel’s attention was drawn, is not some sort of absolute quantity. It too would vary with the conjuncture, and this Simmel was well aware of, for he took care to identify it as being a harbinger, or indeed a “Vorstadium des praktischen Antagonismus,” potentially a preliminary to the outbreak of quite real conflict.

Around a quarter of a century after Simmel published his essay, another author, less abstractly theoretical but with a perhaps even more perspicuous and subtle sense for urban realities, set out to rediscover his native city after returning early from an extended visit with old friends in Paris, where he had lived for some years before the First World War and was now to find them changed, preoccupied with the demands of their careers and without much time or even the inclination any longer for the way of life they all shared then; the fading away of the possibility of truly being a flâneur in Paris (for flânerie was not the least of their pastimes in the lives they had led) prompted Franz Hessel to outline the thought which had guided the Parisian flâneurs in their purposefully aimless ventures through the city, a summation he provided in a few lines in his “Vorschule des Journalismus” – a text which already pointed forward to the next chapter in his own career, in Berlin as a sort of roving reporter: as though to imply that a formulation as concise and clear as his was, could only have been wrought while the very object of the inquiry already stood on the threshold of vanishing.

Or, in a speculative mood, could one espy in this end to Hessel’s visit a signal that towards the end of the nineteen–twenties the flâneur as a slightly outmoded metropolitan type was ready to relocate to another city, to be sure while also renovating its persona, language, manners, and predilections somewhat along the way?

Much more likely the latter, as the few quizzical lines penned by Hessel concerning the essence of the way of life of les flâneurs de Paris, do not read as though they were meant merely retrospectively, amounting to an epitaph and nothing more; on the contrary, from them one could infer that in his opinion it was in Berlin – as surprising as this idea must have sounded – that new
fields were opening up which the flâneur might suddenly re-emerge out of the past to explore.

Here is Hessel’s synopsis: “Was ist das für eine Sippe oder Abart, die nicht suchen will, sondern immer nur finden? Wir Fatalisten des Zufalls glauben geradezu: Suchet nicht, so werdet ihr finden. Nur was uns anschaut, sehen wir. Wir können nur – wofür wir nichts können.”

Himself a consummate flâneur, Hessel was particularly attentive to the so to speak environmental differences between the two cities, and above all to the possibility that in Berlin flâneurs could set out on the trail – in order to find them unsought – of a wider range of experiences than those to be met with in Paris, so more numerous were the opportunities there for “Fatalisten des Zufalls” than in the latter; whereas chances were that Paris, given the scale on which it’s been built, would have appealed above all to the eyes of the flâneurs, Hessel’s native city, with its vaster distances in space and time, might well have addressed them by sight and by sound in turn: and actually, its larger open areas and lesser urban density could then even have entailed that the basic rapport between it and the flâneur was acoustic in kind before it became visual.

Long exposure to this other environment in its characteristic specificity may even have heightened Hessel’s sensitivity to the particularly Parisian experiences comprised in the older flânerie, and thus helped him to summarize its principles as succinctly as he did. Thus, had he not already learned in Berlin to understand how a modern metropolis could call upon the city-dwellers, albeit softly and even from around solid corners, to lend an ear and to listen hard to its significant messages – had Hessel’s own ears not earlier been addressed by and/or become attuned to receive those messages, his insight into the peculiar intentionality lodged within urban things generally, which is frequently taken as a rubric today whenever talk turns to him and his works, “Nur was uns anschaut, sehen wir,” would most likely never have been formulated: perhaps it was reserved to a perspicuous Berliner to glimpse it as such and put it so plainly into words.

In his native city, according to the chapter “Der Verdächtige” in the book Hessel dedicated to it, Spazieren in Berlin, “muss man müssen, sonst darf man nicht” – but precisely for the reason that in the capital “geht man nicht wo, sondern wohin,” often doing so in a rush and amidst much noise, a sensitive flâneur, quite aware of the obstacles posed to his characteristic pursuits
there, could venture some acute observations not only concerning the purposefully non–purposive character of flânerie in general, but also about the various strange ways in which, though the city–dwellers were frequently uninterested in the things they passed by every day, the latter might well display an interest in them.

Accordingly, but a bit more specifically, and bearing in mind what interests me here most, music and the realm of aural phenomena, I find myself wondering: prior to the metropolitan sighting of any significant thing and indeed constituting the condition of possibility thereof, does there not in fact exist an antecedent dimension of *hinternoise* (to borrow a term coined by René Baptist Huysmans) whose role is deserving of an acoustically intellectual exploration in its own right? Would it then result from one’s having undertaken an excursion into this dimension that one could, in Hessel’s words, *do something for* whatever one happens to come across while strolling through the city, whereas those who’ve limited their peripatetic search or inquiry to that which may be *seen*, will subsequently most likely discover themselves able to do nothing more *for* or else *about* whatever they had wanted to *seek*?

(And to take this line of thought somewhat further: could certain abstract works of filmic art from those years, for instance Ruttmann’s *Lichtspiel*, be regarded as depicting something like the after–images that might pass spontaneously in revue before the closed eyelids of a tired flâneur worn out after many hours of exploration afoot in a city now awash in all kinds of artificial light, especially if in so doing the dimensions of experience other than the visual had been overlooked inattentively?)

Much more than in Paris, perhaps it was in – or: by virtue of – Berlin that such questions might beckon to be posed in the first place.

⏈ In 1929, the year of the Crash, Hessel published his essay on Paris in the collection fittingly entitled *Nachfeier.* That same year there appeared the account of flânerie in his home city, and it’s one of the several virtues of *Spazieren in Berlin** that it is attuned to the undertone of aversion or antipathy

* Berlin: Ernst Rowohlt Verlag.
** Leipzig and Vienna: Verlag Dr. Hans Epstein.
which had earlier been detected by Simmel in the relations amongst the city-dwellers – and to the antagonism whose outbreak could be easily sparked by even the seemingly slightest things. Or, by then, more than merely the usual antagonism: for, as is well-known, a spectre of conflict haunted Berlin at the end of the nineteen-twenties, and in his walks through the city, however non-purposive they, as reported by him, might appear to be at first, it often seems as though Hessel had meant to set out on its trail.

“Wo Altes verschwindet und Neues entsteht, siedelt sich in den Ruinen die Übergangswelt aus Zufall, Unrast und Not an,” he declares in Spazieren in Berlin (in the chapter “Nach Osten”), and while walking through the city Hessel would hear the conditions to come announcing themselves already from afar, or close at hand but still as yet out of sight, even before they entered his field of vision; here what was required of this solitary walker were neither rêveries nor aural delirium nor Rausch but rather a set of ears finely tuned to register the at first invisible approach of the new, as awful as it might then show itself to be. It was not least by virtue of his capacity to listen hard and in so doing to discern the intersection of sound and space in his urban environment that, as noted in his friend Walter Benjamin’s astute review of Hessel’s book, “Die Wiederkehr des Flaneurs,”* in the experience of this flâneur Berlin “eröffnet sich ihm als Landschaft, sie umschließt ihn als Stube” – a formulation which seemed to imply that the specific novelty of flânerie in Berlin would consist in the flâneur’s turning away from the city under its latter, more familiar sheltering aspect, in order to encounter it as it had seldom been seen or heard before, as a nearly unbounded landscape.

The metropolis as landscape: although one would be tempted to regard this simile merely as a belletristic bit of wit, in this instance it was meant to be taken seriously. When considered in terms of its acoustic properties, as Berlin’s own disposition of space, with its wide spectrum of urban densities – differing greatly in effect from the domain of sound in Paris – practically invited one to do, the city could indeed be compared plausibly to a landscape; while conversely, were it the comparison itself with which one began, one might then have found oneself moved to exercise one’s ears, to adapt and attune them more adequately to the vagaries of Berlin’s aural-urban reality.

Thus there was warrant for pointing out the similarity between a landscape and this capital city; and moreover, to direct attention to the likeness could also be of help in drawing another feature of a resurgent flânerie in Berlin into perceptibility, namely, that elements of the urban environment such as corners or thresholds or open spaces were the conduits through or around which sounds could reach the flâneur’s present not simply from the precincts of the near future: for this metropolitan landscape also included the city’s own past as one of its dimensions, and in particular places within it some past moments might still be resoundingly present, albeit virtually, if only one had the ears to hear their echoes or to heed their calls. In such locales, perhaps precisely to the degree that the experience was more essentially aural than visual, that past might once again be manifest, and in a mode different from that of bygone pastness; here in present audibility the past might again take shape, now in some other manner than as the sheer irrevocability or irretrievability as which it frequently appears from just beyond the reach of the human will (an Ohnmacht of the latter which represented its greatest torment, averred Nietzsche*): for, at such moments when something notable crossed the flâneur’s path, the encounter could well have served as the starting-point for a train of recollection leading virtually through (rather than into, in a surfeit of nostalgia) older regions in the space–time of the metropolis considered as a landscape.

Perhaps the most memorable instance of all this in Spazieren in Berlin was Hessel’s invocation (in the chapter “Rundfahrt”), occasioned by one of his own walks on and near the Unter den Linden, of an anecdote told by Jules Laforgue in the second chapter of his memoirs of the years he spent in the city, Berlin: La Cour et la Ville.** There, as the older author recounts, already several decades before, some winter morning early in the Wilhelmine era, at the crossing “de l’avenue des Tilleuls et de la rue Frédéric, le point le plus encombré de Berlin par une après–midi d’été, je m’arrête un instant et dans un

* Also sprach Zarathustra, pt. II, “Von der Erlösung.”
** Published posthumously, with a preface by G. Jean-Aubry. Paris: Éditions de la Sirène, 1922.
moment de torpeur involontaire, comme en rêve, seul le bruit dominant de la rue m’arrive” – and what else would this sound have been but the metallic clang of officers’ swords, “le bruit du sabre qui traîne”; this “moment de torpeur involontaire,” a lapse which seems enigmatically significant in its own right (did the noise itself induce it?), echoed so strongly in Hessel’s mind as to insert itself later into his literary composition at an opportune point: and when Hessel then dismissed this small memory with the remark that, “bis auf einige Reste,” the era in question was “ja nun vorüber,” it reads as though a question were being posed, as if for him it did remain quite conceivable that those sounds from the past might again return to dominate the Berlin streets, in a recurrent time breaking rapidly from an even darker future into his city’s troubled present.

Hessel’s quizzical undertone which unfolds a statement into a question, may be taken as an example of a sense of humor characteristic of Berlin; and humor (I suggested earlier, drawing on Valéry) may be on a par with musicality when considered as having resulted from the inner self-discipline applied both freely and consistently which is often regarded as being nearly identical to the personality – and not necessarily only the individual’s: wit, whether of a person or of something as large as a whole city, then might represent one of the fruits of long methodical training and thus be comprised in an indissociable unity (as Simmel would say) together with it.

Berlin’s feeling for humor has frequently been praised, and one brief encomium recommends itself especially here – Marlene Dietrich’s, between two of whose performances, in each of which it is variously exemplified, I have placed it in a short sequence.

The first of these is from Billy Wilder’s A Foreign Affair, the scene in the nightclub when Dietrich sings “Black Market,” composed as was much of her music by their fellow émigré, Friedrich Hollaender. Never did she deliver a performance as seductive as this; but, as it is also interspersed by something of the characteristic humor of the city, it’s from this latter angle that I’d now like to consider it briefly.

After an introductory round of applause, her performance begins in effect with a call to order, a reminder that a precise sense of timing was required of
the musicians, of the audience, and of the singer herself, if the number were to be pulled off successfully; then it moves to a rhythm of double entendres about what exactly was on offer to be exchanged in the illicit marketplace she was singing of – or rather it’s swept along on a current of cynical irony about “broken-down ideals” that one surmises owes some of its bite to an earlier trust in some belief which was subsequently shattered (the actual political color of the night-club singer’s cynical attitude is rather dubious); yet it isn’t her initial reference to discipline, nor the ironic tone adopted by the character per se, so much as it is Dietrich’s own sense of humor flashing through here and there, which imbues the scene with its seductive charm.

On at least one occasion, Dietrich’s daughter has confirmed a point which already seems rather evident: that the actress was quite aware how much the appeal of her persona was a product of the most precise application of numerous techniques of commercial publicity, her success thus in large measure a result of the wrapping devised by the latter and of her dextrous co-operation with it. She knew well that her career owed much to the marketing and could thus furnish a textbook illustration of its importance in the industry of culture, and the attitude with which a star might regard all of this staging by which images were sold – namely, a peculiar oscillation back and forth between cynicism and irony, which is deserving of reflection in its own right – was not alien to her. Nor was it to those who thought up A Foreign Affair, for the transaction by which an image is sold, is one of the things that the film is actually about, and this comes right to the fore in the “Black Market” scene itself, where the illicit dimension behind or underneath an exchange of goods is explicitly addressed (or should I say undressed?) along with the irony and the cynicism to which the prevalence of such exchanges can conduce; but what distinguishes this performance and lends it a bit of Berlin humor are the smiles elicited involuntarily which Dietrich could not suppress at a few moments – lasting less than seconds, notably at the 1:35 and 1:45 marks in the video, though the more closely one pours over it, the greater the number of micro-smiles one begins to observe flitting even more rapidly across her face – at the moments during the song when, with the verbal enticements utilized in those mercenary transactions passing in revue, the double entendres in the lyrics are especially sharp.
In this night-club number, such fugitive smiles do not distract or detract from her attitude, but rather bolster it with some additional appeal, indeed rescuing it from being nothing beyond cynicism and irony: presumably this is the reason why these extra-theatrical lapses on her part (if in fact that is what they were) were not consigned to the cutting-room floor. Yet the extra charm lent by such flashes of Dietrich’s amusement about all this commerce and her role in it, also works to heighten the desire for that which is on sale (and it was by no means only her image that this film was selling) – and moreover this last twist in the audience’s seduction contains a humor of its own, of which it’s nearly certain neither she nor Wilder was unaware and which sensitive listeners and viewers today should also be able to discern.

Yes, Berlin’s sense of humor, as she says in the encomium which follows this scene from A Foreign Affair in the sequence, is a marvelous one.

The third piece in the sequence is her song “Berlin – Berlin” (included on the album Marlene singt Berlin), and similarly it both reflects upon the city’s characteristic sense of humor while also exemplifying it. Here the self-deprecating humor of this city, “wie’s weint, und wie es lacht,” which has known to bring bitter and sweet, laughter and tears, together and to imbue each with something of the other, is praised in song by Dietrich with a restrained affection which is all the more moving as the lyrics in fact stem from a popular tune dating from the first decades of the century – and thus her performance strikes an unsentimental balance between the personal and the impersonal.

Dietrich’s rendition stands on its own (or at least it should for those who know enough of the language), beyond the point where commentary could usefully elucidate it; but there is one line in the lyrics which merits a few remarks, for (if, that is, it too formed a part of the original popular tune and was not added afterwards) it suggests that ordinary Berliners were often aware that the overarching time-schedule they all had to observe, individually and reciprocally, were the city to continue to function properly at all, imparted to their everyday lives a certain sort of theatricality, in the quite limited sense of a well-honed feeling for timing in the performance, keyed to the likely response of an audience of some kind, which had likewise to exercise a degree of self-discipline and feeling for good timing however it might choose to respond or not to respond to the performer (and indeed the lyrics do also speak
of “Beifall,” applause, as an occurrence in everyday life). One need only imagine overhearing this single line –

Berlin, Berlin, Du bist mein Publikum

– being whistled or hummed on the city’s streets long before Dietrich sang it, to grasp how well the Berliners understood that their modern metropolitan punctuality imposed roles upon them, which they simply had to discharge properly at the precisely right time and place, so that others could fulfill theirs in turn, and thus that they all might as well carry on with some measure of wit or esprit; their understanding of this necessity also translated into their free-time (amidst the “Symphonie der Großstadt” or as “Menschen am Sonntag”) and informed the roles they likewise played there, whether they were amongst the actors or in the audience. Of course, it’s probable that a certain sense of the humor of all of this would have developed whenever the punctuality and the interchangeable roles of everyday big-city life in its enduring organization were recognized as such and the implications fathomed; and it’s precisely this soft bemusement à la berlinoise which may be heard both in the original lyrics and in her delivery.

This is a discovery which may tempt one to listen more closely to other performances of Dietrich’s, in order perhaps to hear better what they actually are about – or, with that goal in mind, to listen to covers thereof by singers and musicians who have evidently paid very close attention to them; in the case of perhaps her most famous song of all, composed by Hollaender with lyrics by Robert Liebmann and featured in von Sternberg’s film Der blaue Engel, “Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß auf Liebe eingestellt,” a recent version by the German trio Turm der Liebe (it is a new experimental ensemble based in Cologne and Leipzig, comprising the vocalist Lisa–Gwendolin Eichberger, the pianist Laurenz Gemmer, and the drummer and synthesizer–player Johannes Klingebiel), fittingly and minimally entitled “Kopf bis Fuß” and now uploaded on the ensemble’s Soundcloud page, embodies this sensitivity to something in the original song that others might have sensed was there, though without having heard it quite clearly until now.
Once divested of its alluring surface sensuality – and in accomplishing this, the musical procedure adopted by Turm der Liebe may be compared to the diagnostic explorations of ultrasound technology – the amorous attitude expressed in the song sounds positively forlorn, as though it emerged as a desperate response to a life sunk in hopelessness; the pursuit of love then would amount to something of a last resort, and despite itself even, when acted upon habitually, to a species of addiction (and thus the song is revealed at a stroke as being a counterpart to the “Ballade von der sexuellen Hörigkeit” in Brecht and Weill’s *Dreigroschenoper*); yet even more interesting than these findings are in themselves, is the conclusion that an awareness thereof may plausibly be imputed in retrospect to the lyricist and to the singer of the original song – as though they both already had intended that one day it should be heard in just this way.

Here, as a practice of interpretation, a cover version of an old standard does not remain under the latter’s level but has raised itself to it, in order to uncover something in the original which one never had heard quite that way before – thus in some sense renovating it and our ears as well.

For a further elucidation, one might want to turn back, beyond Dietrich, Hollaender, and Liebmann’s song, or, alternately, behind the novel (Heinrich Mann’s *Professor Unrat*) on which the film was based, to a few perspicacious statements in “Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben” concerning the terrible loneliness to which life in the modern metropolis could lead; that the film was set in some smaller city is not particularly important in this connection, as the distinction between inhabitants of the lesser and of the largest cities was ever more a quantitative rather than a qualitative difference: and hence the individual’s feeling of being lost was an increasingly general one.

Simmel had contended in his essay that “die gegenseitige Reserve und Indifferenz” so prevalent in modern times “werden in ihrem Erfolg für die Unabhängigkeit des Individuums nie stärker gefühlt, als in dem dichtesten Gewühl der Großstadt, weil die körperliche Nähe und Enge die geistige Distanz erst recht anschaulich macht,” and as in the modern city “wie sonst ist es keineswegs notwendig, daß die Freiheit des Menschen sich in seinem Gefühlsleben als Wohlbefinden spiegele,” in the last analysis “es ist offenbar nur der
Revers dieser Freiheit, wenn man sich unter Umständen nirgends so einsam und verlassen fühlt, als eben in dem großstädtischen Gewühl” – thus their urban liberty appears to be an isolated freedom, one from which the city dwellers, though generally in vain, try to awake by various means, for example by falling in love over and over again.

Another kind of response to these conditions is also easy and near at hand, and yet perhaps even more vain than the former: the increasingly common blasé attitude, “die Blasiertheit,” which Simmel touched on several times in his essay and elsewhere. On account of its major role in modern life this attitude is full of interest, for in it “gipfelt sich gewissermaßen jener Erfolg der Zusammendrängung von Menschen und Dingen auf, die das Individuum zu seiner höchsten Nervenleistung reizt” – pushing the individual to an exhausting exertion, and then “durch die bloß quantitative Steigerung der gleichen Bedingungen schlägt dieser Erfolg in sein Gegenteil um, in diese eigentümliche Anpassungserscheinung der Blasiertheit, in der die Nerven ihre letzte Möglichkeit, sich mit den Inhalten und der Form des Großstadtlebens abzufinden, darin entdecken, daß sie sich der Reaktion auf sie versagen”: which means, in other words, that all this effort would tend to lead to a curiously self-defeating result, as “die Selbsterhaltung gewisser Naturen” could only come at “den Preis, die ganze objektive Welt zu entwerten, was dann am Ende die eigene Persönlichkeit unvermeidlich in ein Gefühl gleicher Entwertung hinabzieht.”

At bottom, what else does one hear recorded first in “Kopf bis Fuß” and retroactively then too in “Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß auf Liebe eingestellt,” if not these “Gefühle gleicher Entwertung” and some attempts to find a diversion from them?

☞ Under the Weimar Republic, Berlin certainly knew its share of diversions; but before I turn now to consider one of the most celebrated of them, I should like to suggest that the works of art and literature, and, more to the point here, of theatre and music created in those years which have endured, have done so despite having originated during that period, or that they outlasted it on account of having stood in a critical or an antithetical relation to the circumstances from out of which they emerged – in my opinion, such signifi-
cance as they may continue to exhibit today, confers no stature on the Weimar Republic itself, considered politically, but should rather render us even more wary of it, for those who lived through it and later castigated its mores, as regards its political life in general, were quite right to do so. However, as the present text could not possibly aim at being an exercise in either the history or the science of politics, this whole background will have to remain in the background here.

Much more pertinent are a few preliminary remarks ventured by Peter Sloterdijk in his investigation\* of the Weimar Republic as a “symptom,” in other words as comprising a peculiarly complicated form of self-consciousness that is now often found to be a harbinger and first version of the cynicism reigning today – thus it was the putative similarity of that era and Sloterdijk’s own which served him as the starting-point in this part of his “critique” (the term being used, albeit loosely, in the Kantian sense), though in the course of his research he also began to entertain doubts about that comparison and to raise questions concerning the limits of its validity. Above all it was a notion prevalent while he was composing his work a bit more than thirty years ago that he came to regard with increasing skepticism (and today this notion continues to circulate and perhaps even more widely than it did then), namely, the notion that the two eras were comparable periods of “crisis”: or rather, on occasion he himself turned into something of a cynic about the very concept of crisis and its overuse in much of cultural criticism. “Nach hundert Jahren Krise ist das Wort Krise so welk,” he went so far as to insist, “wie die Individuen, die es einst aufrütteln sollte” – although, on the other hand, especially now, three decades after the publication of his book, his own cynicism on this point may in fact embody a quite perspicuous realism about our current circumstances in general, and more specifically, about the intellectual predilection common in several countries for taking the Weimar Republic to constitute a paradigm of the present.

Worth reflecting on further, is not only Sloterdijk’s caution about too facile an application of the concept of crisis, but also his refusal to embrace the idea that the proverbial advantage of hindsight would lend to later histories of the Weimar period a higher perspicuity which it could not have attained about it-

self; and in fact, when he wondered whether hindsight confers much of an advantage, in response it’s hard to deny that frequently it offers none at all. “Beim Lesen der Dokumente stellt sich nämlich der Eindruck her, daß viele Texte von damals auf einem weit höheren Niveau von Reflexion, Einsicht und Ausdruck geschrieben sind als die späteren Kulturgeschichten ›über‹ sie,” he noted a few pages later – and here of course it’s easy to generalize his point from texts to works of music of various kinds. “Redet man einfach ›darüber‹, so ist man nur zu leicht schon darunter.” Yes, certainly with respect to the cultural history of the Weimar Republic in general, this is a pitfall of pride which one would do well to anticipate and avoid, and in particular as regards what’s perhaps its most famous single piece of musical theatre, the Dreigroschenoper.

Since its debut in 1928, the Dreigroschenoper has been reprised innumerable times, the most recent version being Robert Wilson’s upcoming staging at the Berliner Ensemble; here however what interests me most is one of its songs, the “Moritat von Mackie Messer,” and I shall try to handle it with some care – for were this Moritat not a tricky piece of work, it would not have been Brecht’s.

A memorable version has been recorded by Ute Lemper. Yet unfortunately the theatricality in her performance is too self-involved, thus overwhelming one’s attention and detracting from the strength of the song itself, which might – it’s conceivable – be better served by an exclusively aural rendition; and here two such versions offered fairly recently by singers from Berlin may be recommended, the first by André Schneider, the second by Mara Kim. Nonetheless these also are somewhat too self-preoccupied and still lack a certain sharpness; so how better to feel it than by turning to Brecht himself?

In his own, the most original version there’s a sound of something menacing, which is precisely what one ought to be listening for; as the song, frequently regarded as embodying a protest against the consignment of the powerless to oblivion by the powerful who would thereby reserve the historical record to themselves, nearly as their exclusive privilege –

Und man siehet die im Lichte
die im Dunkeln sieht man nicht
– was actually singing of something quite different, indeed nearly the opposite of this: on the contrary, there resounded the suspicion that it is the powers that be which seek out obscurity in order to operate more successfully under cover of darkness. In the wider arena of those years of economic crisis, above all but by no means solely in Germany, paranoiac belief of precisely this kind was gathering force and finding an enemy ready–made in that venerable bête noire, “das internationale Finanzkapital”; and – to speak plainly – it was this old idea which was represented in miniature, as it were, in the Moritat’s litany of misdeeds perpetrated by small skillful criminal bands: accordingly, covers which fail to sound out this arraignment, enclosed by Brecht in the lyrics, will uncover next to nothing of the real intention of the original.

Even before the Crash occurred the next year, and increasingly during the few years left to it afterwards, the Weimar Republic was tending to the extremes, as if in belated confirmation of the diagnosis in Simmel’s essay of the existence of “eine leise Aversion” in the relations amongst the city–dwellers in the modern metropolis, or rather, of “eine gegenseitige Fremdheit und Abstoßung” by then coursing through the country as a whole, which “in dem Augenblick einer irgendwie veranlaßten nahen Berührung sogleich in Haß und Kampf ausschlagen würde.” In their readiness to abet that rapid escalation, the political extremes, however little or much they might have touched one another in numerous respects (this topic being one of those questions in political science to investigate which the current essay is not the place), as though by tacit agreement proceeded to invoke – cynically, as Sloterdijk would say – this or that variation on a single still potent myth, the one which Brecht for his part also set out as the actual albeit concealed theme of this Moritat; and so, if one listens hard to the Dreigroschenoper in general and to this song in particular, one begins to realize that Brecht understood what the public wanted and had provided it, a fact which begins to account for the play’s great success both commercially and critically.

As Hessel notes (in the chapter “Friedrichstadt” in Spazieren in Berlin), already by 1929 the songs from the Dreigroschenoper were circulating through the city’s streets.

During his trip to Europe towards the end of 1932, Gershom Scholem attended a performance, and was quite dismayed by what he observed transpiring in the theatre. “Um mich, wie es wohl hier angemessen ist, berlinisch aus-
zudrücken: ich staunte Bauklötzer, als ich sah, daß hier ein Publikum von Bürgern, die jeden Sinn für ihre eigene Situation verloren hatten, einem Stück zujubelten, in dem sie bis aufs letzte verhöhnt und angespuckt wurden,” he wrote of the disconcerting spectacle he witnessed there.* “Es war, drei Monate vor Hitlers Machtantritt, ein wahrer Auftakt zum Kommenden für jeden, der ein solches Schauspiel aus der Distanz ansah. Ich konnte mir kaum Illusionen über das Faktum machen, daß ein Großteil dieser Zuschauer Juden waren.”

One might go so far as to wonder whether, above and beyond the Dreigroschenoper itself, it was this spectacle that Brecht, tricky Bert Brecht, had meant to stage, in order thus to exhibit (for posterity?) the decadence of his audience’s instincts in political matters – taking the latter as constituting a factor without which the whole course of events would not be properly understood.

Yet that is a exculpatory or charitable explanation. A sharper assessment of Brecht’s own role therein, lending voice to the myth of a dark yet efficacious conspiracy as he evidently had wanted to do, may be derived from what, when prodded by Heinrich Blücher, Walter Benjamin had to admit some years later in Paris** about his commentaries on some of the poems, and in particular on the third entry in the Lesebuch für Städtebewohner; there Brecht emerges, Benjamin acknowledged, as an advocate of expropriation not so much for any rational reason but rather insofar as it would provide an occasion for a species of revenge and indeed as offering to a newer and younger generation of would-be expropriators a chance to indulge in the pleasure of cruelty for its own sake – in other words, as reveling in the idea of a practice “in der die schlechtesten Elemente der KP mit den skrupellosesten des Nationalsozialismus kommunizierten”: and this decision on Brecht’s part and his earlier over-

* He recalls this in the chapter “Krisen und Wendungen” in his Walter Benjamin – Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft (first published in 1975).
** In an untitled “Notiz über Brecht,” from the end of 1938 or 1939, published in the sixth volume of his Gesammelte Schriften. The manuscript is preserved in the Fonds Walter Benjamin of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
sight regarding it Benjamin then resolutely repudiates, certain potential excuses notwithstanding.

“Jedenfalls ist der Kommentar, in der Gestalt, die ich ihm gegeben habe, eine fromme Fälschung” – a clean admission of Benjamin’s own error! – “eine Vertuschung der Mitschuld, die Brecht an der gedachten Entwicklung hatte.”

In the case of his “Moritat von Mackie Messer,” or indeed the Dreigroschenoper as a whole, Brecht may be charged with an analogous share of culpability, insofar as the myth with which his piece of theatre was suffused, did in fact embolden the extremes to meet, or, as Benjamin put it, to communicate with one another behind the scenes.

☛ And still, without having trained one’s ears by reading Brecht’s works, familiarizing oneself with his sly sense of humor and tricky feeling for the right time, could one have heard anything of this in them to begin with? Here the accusation itself owes a great deal to the accused – so what then?

From – though at the same time *against* – this Berliner amongst poets and playwrights there’s still much to be learned, even or especially now, and not least an acuity of ear which might help preserve one from things that would be seen only too late, as he once said outright, in two of the sharpest lines he ever penned:

Hörend die Reden, die aus deinem Hause dringen, lacht man.
Aber wer dich sieht, der greift nach dem Messer
The Soundcloud Round–Up: Givan Lötz, Mithatcan Öcal, The Sandman’s Orchestra

(March 17, 2013)

Tonight’s round–up begins with “Strutt,” a piece which an artist and composer in Johannesburg, Givan Lötz, has loaded on his Soundcloud page; and but for its last extra letter, the title would be rather a straight–forward description of the character of the composition: this is music on the go.

His album Easy Now is available from the Jaunted Haunts Press.

Returning to Amsterdam, the second track is a work of the young Istanbul composer Mithatcan Öcal, which was premiered by the Nieuw Ensemble last year at the Muziekgebouw aan ’t IJ, entitled “Üngüjin,” a Turkish word (his explanatory text informs us) designating some sort of desert–dwelling ogre or inimical being whom one would most probably dearly want to avoid encountering; fortunately, however, the same cannot be said of this music itself, whose acquaintance it’s a pleasure to make. As for Öcal’s career, it should prove interesting to follow – significantly, “Üngüjin” is dedicated by Öcal to the memory of Iannis Xenakis.

To finish things off, from the first album, Silver Linings, issued two years ago by The Sandman’s Orchestra, a duo in Lille featuring the singer, songwriter, and multi–instrumentalist Pierre Laplace and the singer Léonie Gabriel (they are uncle and niece), is the number “Hello Stranger,” uploaded on their Soundcloud page. – The release of their second album, Nocturne, is imminent.
Pop Noir

(March 18, 2013)

An up-and-coming band based in Huntington Beach, although this fraternal duo, the lead singer Luke and the lead guitarist and producer Joe McGarry, hails from Manchester, Pop Noir has accomplished much the last couple of years with its “we’ll do it ourselves” attitude and some fine hooks; it’s already popped up throughout the Internet in all the expected locales, on Youtube, Myspace, Vimeo, and Facebook, and has begun to perform live with some regularity in and around Los Angeles: at the same time the two, who both are also graphic designers and illustrators (under the moniker of Fantastic Heat Brothers), have paired some of their songs, most recently a very appealing cover of New Order’s “Temptation,” with nicely no-frills yet artful videos which one actually can watch.

I’ve included it in a short playlist along with the video for their first single, “DIY,” self-released on their own label, Fantastic Heat – these Californians by choice do like it hot, don’t they? – and chances are that I’ll be adding others as they become available in the near future – for, according to their Soundcloud page, new music is on the way.

As a foretaste they’ve uploaded a few as yet unmastered tracks onto that page, and it’s promising material; the New Order influence is there in Joe McGarry’s arrangements while his brother has a voice somewhat reminiscent of Lou Reed’s, although often the mother country is still heard in his intonation too.

One of the songs there, “Don’t Fool Yourself,” is quite worth listening to, as are “In Like a Lion” and “White Jazz.”
Pak0

(March 19, 2013)

Improbable though it might sound, some memorable dubstep and house music is being created in the very far north, in Russia’s port city of Arkhangelsk, by the artist known only as Pak0 – apart from this moniker, little is to be gleaned other than that he’s represented in the UK by the record company 2019, and that an EP, Dubcity, has been issued by the Subline label in his own country; on his Facebook page, where he is quite generously in providing links to tracks by other artists, he dispenses no further information about himself.

But how much does it matter if Pak0 is something of a cipher, after all; the music is what counts, and amidst the pieces he offers on his Soundcloud page there are several which do stand out by virtue of their spare mix of elements (and also their rather abrupt endings), in particular a collaboration – a “northern alliance” they call it, and actually the sounds tingle in one’s ears as they waft by, akin perhaps to an icy breeze – with his fellow artist Snoe in Murmansk, “Dotted.”

Closer to the mainstream of house music, but still somehow redolent acoustically of large open spaces and a certain thin cool air, is the solo work entitled “No More Light.”

Moreover, from the EP, I’d like to mention a couple of tunes; “Bristol” (here too, if one listens closely, one may hear gusts of wind and the brittle sound which things near to freezing might make when touched or tapped) and also (made available on Bandcamp by his record label) “Hustlaz.”
Spring is Here, Today

(March 20, 2013)

And it’s about time, too – this winter has dragged on and on. Well, on the occasion and to put some sprightliness into everyone’s step, here are three vivacious tracks found on Soundcloud.

The first, from the Soundcloud page of cellist Ashley Bathgate, is a performance of a recent composition, “Empty City,” by the Israeli composer Yoav Shemesh, in conjunction with a choir comprising Tamar Mayzlish, Noa Atar, Chen Levy, Erez Elfassy, Amir Solovitch, and Shemesh himself (this information is drawn from his website).

Next is a new piece just posted, with a nice sense of the timing, after an extended Internet sabbatical, by David Grellier’s electronica project College; it’s entitled “Révélation” – and it lives up to its name.

The third of today’s celebratory offerings is a buoyant composition with a humorous title – “Don’t Work the Hustle If You Ain’t Got the Muscle” – by the Englishman Liame Dethridge (he may reside either in Ipswich or in London or in both, according to a quick Internet search), who makes music under the moniker Blue Murder Jazz.

The Sunday Evening Round–Up on Soundcloud

(March 24, 2013)

For this evening’s round–up I’ve cast a larger net, and so have one track, one set, and one mixtape to offer.

To start with the mixtape, “1n+rødµk+lon +ø $¥§+(3)m§ øf §øµnd§”: it’s the at times disturbing work of an anonymous outfit in South Africa,
Åfr1kŧø rh1zømrå1k§, whose aim is to provide a platform for experimental and electronic music there, and includes pieces by nineteen different artists (further information about them, for those who are curious, is provided under each individual track in the mixtape on Åfr1kŧø rh1zømrå1k§’s Soundcloud page).

In addition to that first one, another somewhat more recent page has been set up by the same group, which also maintains a Facebook page.

The single track in tonight’s round-up is a fine example of the electronic music being made by Edouard Trolliet, a Frenchman from Tarnos, and is entitled “Never Look Back”: it too veers into disturbing territory musically speaking, evidently owing some part of its inspiration to a cinematic source, the genre of horror film.

Several albums are available on Trolliet’s Bandcamp page.

Traveling now across the Atlantic, two works by the name of “Traces” have been put together in a set by the “mysterious duo” (as they say on their Facebook page) of the Brooklyn sound artists who operate under the name Goitia Deitz, and their dreamy music is a nice find with which to conclude this voyage around Soundcloud.

**Early Bird**

*(March 27, 2013)*

Alongside the band Forestears, the producers Tom Peterson and Owen Crouch have recently launched a venture into the realm of experimental hip-hop, under the name Early Bird, and at the end of January they released a first album, *Dictators*, about evenly divided between instrumental and rap numbers, the latter featuring vocals by other artists whom they know; to judge by this initial offering, even if it’s still early days for them, these lads from Brighton should make a name for themselves with this project too.

The song “Dead Crimson” – a collaboration with a rapper called Bar Code – is a pæan to their own names, spinning out variations on them in an ex-
pense of boisterous virile bravado, which might suggest (the ominous sound of the title notwithstanding), if only one has ears for it, that life and its own special poetic vigor may yet burst forth from the English language in years to come, slogging through trite masses of cliché in the process.

It, and the other numbers on the album, have been loaded onto Early Bird’s Soundcloud page. (The band also has a Youtube channel, though as of now only audio recordings have been uploaded there.)

On the instrumental side (though often supplemented with vocal samplings) a prominent role has been accorded to the wind instruments, as one would expect from members and friends of Forestears; here a number entitled “Bloodshed” stands out, likewise another, called “Little Dots.”

Where Early Bird will eventually land, it’s of course too soon to tell; but the sight and sound of the duo’s flight will be fun to follow.

A Status Report

(March 27, 2013)

Tonight there will be no round-up on Soundcloud, as I’ve had my hands full with other matters, so in lieu thereof, a brief status report.

The last several days I’ve been working intensively on redesigning the Musicuratum LP site, in order, amongst other goals, to render it easier to navigate and to use; and not least to heighten its visual appeal, or to counteract the tendency to ocular monotony and tedium that is I’ve found one of the pitfalls in website design.

Some of what I’m learning in the process may be applied here at a later date, though in a quite different way (for why maintain two parallel sites if they do not after all diverge widely from one another in some respect at least?): time will tell.

With the end of that labor in sight, the advent of spring – and this winter has been a brutal one – should herald a burst of new articles, including a few longer ones which I’ve intended to complete for some months now.
In the meanwhile, may I recommend that delightful anthology of Morton Feldman’s writings (which I’ve been strolling through recently), *Give My Regards to Eighth Street* – it is wonderful and witty.

**Buke and Gase: General Dome**

*(April 2, 2013)*

A Brooklyn band I wrote about back on the first of the year, Buke and Gase, will be playing in Paradiso later this month (in fact, tickets for the concert went on sale today) – one of a few gigs in Europe in support of the album *General Dome*, released at the end of February and available in part for listening on the duo’s Bandcamp page, in which the music is fuller than, although as loud as, it was before and the vocals now at times dual, Aron Sanchez sharing the microphone with Arone Dyer; the concert in which this new album makes its debut, promises to be a memorable one.

It will be a sight to see how their trademark self-made instruments, the “buke” (a largely remodeled six-string baritone ukulele) and the “gase” (half guitar, half bass) – their names too were evidently spliced together, much like the things which they designate – are deployed in action.

I have had no further chance to decipher or even to study the graphic code that Dyer and Sanchez, taking their inspiration from a Sol LeWitt exhibition, employed to create the jacket artwork for *General Dome*, or even to ascertain if they were all that serious in propounding it – or being simply playful; but on paper or on screen it beckons mysteriously, which is all that may be required, here, in the end.

In any event: to whet one’s appetite or to open one’s ears for what most likely can be expected from the album as a whole, and from Buke and Gase live on stage, three energetic tracks are “In the Company of Fish,” “Meta-zoa,” and “Hiccup.”
April is the season for album releases, it seems; several have made their debut on Bandcamp (with parts or the entireties thereof being offered on Soundcloud by way of publicity), and one of them, a quadripartite EP that’s been well-assembled mainly from existing tracks, is Adam Cuthbert’s: united in this album, the separate pieces, polished for the occasion, seem as though they were made to be brought together in just this way, in precisely this thirty-minute, thirty-second-long aural succession.

It’s entitled *Dream World*, and if this music “does” anything at all, it can be said to explore the nature of the relations of which a number of dream states, some on the more lucid side, others more oneiric, are composed – the synapses that have been relaxed or unlatched such that impressions and ideas in accordance with the objective order without, no longer are transmitted into the mind nor, once there, circulate with all due speed. How the quasi-muscular exertions to which particular mental operations, usually so well coordinated with each other in the waking state (that is their common raison d’être in daily life, after all), each contribute in some measure, can be halted, extend along other axes, or even set out in a reverse direction, is one of the things these tracks are concerned to place before our ears. For, most often in dream states all coherence is *not* gone, that fabric of intra-mental relations hasn’t been torn apart entirely. What happens instead is that the linkages are stretched out: and if one’s inclined at all to accept that by this sounds might be emitted (whether within the dream, or in some other, but likewise virtual manner), then it would not be mistaken to observe that it’s these which populate Cuthbert’s compositions: so in several of the sequences which recur characteristically throughout the course of the EP, what one can hear are the *unclenchings* of the mind while it is dreaming.

And indeed, how calm this music remains from beginning to end; while the disturbances in dreams are not entirely absent from it – from time to time
one feels a certain sense of panic rearing up – the mind’s composure doesn’t once really falter: its inner coherence is loosened, not turned inside–out to expose things that never were meant to be seen or heard, and Cuthbért’s music in registering this relaxation does not turn away from beauty. Those who want a dream–music that’s out of joint, severely déréglé, “ver–rückt” (as Martin Heidegger or Prof. Dr. Baum in Fritz Lang’s Testament des Doktor Mabuse would say) and whose interest lies in its outbursts of strangeness, must seek it elsewhere.

Yet one might perhaps notice a peculiar inversion that’s brought about in the relation between a listener’s perception and memory. Much more than in most music (how much more is an interesting question), in the case of this EP the music can call to mind certain aural memories from which new perceptions fill one’s ears, whereas usually it’s with memories that the acoustic experience as a sequence of perceptions either ends or is terminated, as the case may be.

On an earlier occasion I spoke briefly about “夢界 Dream World” (and also, on another, about Cuthbért’s collaboration with Daniel Rhode, “Dropbox Bass Drop”) and I won’t reprise those remarks. Instead I should merely like to note that, listening to the former piece now again, at around the 2:17 and 2:27 marks there was something about the timbre of the trumpet – wielded by Cuthbért himself – which called a particular sonic memory to mind, namely the feeling elicited by the “Love Theme” in Jerry Goldsmith’s score for the film Chinatown, and specifically the manner in which Uan Rasey’s trumpet challenges the rest of that music; subsequently Cuthbért’s entire piece unfolded this time in a somewhat new way, the overture – which is what it now revealed itself as being, all at once akin to the opening of a piece of music for the cinema – began to resound with its labored breathing and something like an echo of soles striking the pavement, as though someone were running away, perhaps to evade something: as though in flight on foot from a pursuer and assessing the terrain at night in terms of the imperative need to take cover (which is an attitude vastly different than the deliberate or involuntary disorientation I mentioned before). In the ears of these and other perceptions born of an acoustic memory, a few other moments then stood out from the whole, while also at the same time underscoring its evident filiation to Goldsmith’s work, notably John Schuster–Craig’s impressive low piano
notes at 2:41 and soon thereafter the plaintive sequence of five notes on Cuthbért’s trumpet at 2:47, answered immediately at 2:51 by the pianist and developed into a very moving passage through 3:44, when it was resumed again by the trumpet for a bit more than ten seconds, and then carried by both of them together to a close, at around 4:27, with the striking of a single high note on the piano: thus these crucial moments brought back the unease in that “Love Theme” (which is of course well–known but perhaps deserves to be fathomed better than it has been) in the form of a permutation.

Now, to perceive the relation between the two pieces of music, ears that had been opened oneirically to the mind’s own musical memories were probably required.

All this well exemplifies a disposition of listening that’s become stronger by being loosened up as it moves from track to track, a disposition which then affords the listener a more acute sense of the arrangement of the album’s acoustic environment as space, or as a set of spaces – in the full four dimensions of the term: to be sure, time does not get passed over by this music. The anxious feeling raised to perceptibility by memory while listening to “Yumesekai (Taiga)” (as he’s now renamed “夢世界 Dream World”), isn’t so much espoused as it is counterbalanced or even in some degree neutralized by his music; and this instance is representative of much that transpires over the course of the EP.

The album as a whole, perhaps just because it is so well–measured, not being cut too short nor going beyond a due length, has time enough to dispense; and so, however long its four rooms may have been built to last, listeners can find some piece of shelter in the “dream world” of Cuthbért’s calm music.
Sunday Evening Round–Up on SoundCloud

(April 7, 2013)

It’s just before midnight on Sunday, and the vernal season is at last upon us, though I’m rushing to catch up – so tonight’s round–up will be brief with words, but longer on sound.

Ilpo Jauhiainen is an itinerant Finnish artist who’s as at ease in traveling as he is in exploring different types of art, visual and acoustic. Currently it seems he’s residing in Cotonou in Benin: tonight’s offering however is a sonic evocation of that old feature of the topography of Berlin, the Landwehrkanal.

About Jauhiainen I hope to write more in future; the albums available on his Bandcamp page seem promising indeed.

From Raphael Vanoli’s new band, so new that a website or other Internet representation is lacking – although it’s already been performing in well–known venues in Amsterdam and elsewhere – Stolpernova, comes a four–track compilation of some recent live sets, which he has loaded onto his Soundcloud page.

Stolpernova, I imagine, will be stirring up music in these parts for some time to come.

Finally, an electronic musician and producer in Brussels who’s been featured here previously, Analog 80, has posted a set of three pieces under the title “Return to the Moon,” and together and individually – especially the last of them, “Return to the Moon – the Dream Box (Спутник–1),” delivers some energetic music for midnight.

During the week to come, I hope to round off the renovation of the Musicuratum LP site, and to turn my attention back fully to the musical side of things.
A New Video from The Shures – “Halo”

(April 26, 2013)

Though I’m still in the midst of bringing this site up to grade, a video just crossed my path that’s remarkable, a rendition of Beyoncé’s “Halo” which, as Gabriel Cabrera and Chris Kennedy of The Shures say, is “epic” – or, in other words, it’s inspired in more than one sense of the term, and the duet just called out to be mentioned here, and to be the newest addition to their playlist.

(In their prefatory remarks, prior to the song itself, they let us know that Sophie will be joining them around once a month.)

The Work at Last is Done!

May 5, 2013

Another Sunday evening’s come, and after several long weeks of work on the websites, I’m happy to announce that both of them are back in order and ready for action again – each now I hope manifesting a visual presence that is distinctive and different, the one imbued with a darker atmosphere, the other an exercise in De Stijl, yet both enticing as conduits for music and what pertains to it, which, after all, remains the raison d’être of this whole enterprise.

I’ve pulled together three tracks from Soundcloud that seem to triangulate the event.

The first is a piano cover of New Order’s “True Faith” by Eric Daniel, a musician in San Diego.
Further afield still, from across the Pacific, comes a memorable remix of “Policy of Truth” by Depeche Mode, by the Auckland sound artist or artists known as West Coast Fruit Company.

The third of tonight’s tracks is a long live set of hard industrial music from an evening in April at the Rote Insel club in Berlin by the DJ No Name (other information is unavailable) – interesting even for those who generally eschew the genre.

The Sunday Soundcloud – Dash?

(May 12, 2013)

As regards the Musicuratum websites, the last week has largely been absorbed by the work after the work, which proved to be somewhat less protracted than the former but demanded an equal exertion, so much so that it’s something akin to a marathon which I feel I’ve just nearly completed. (Alas, some technical or systemic quirks do remain to be ironed out, but these I may well refer to the kind assistance of the professionals; my inclination to deal with them is likewise almost done.)

Thus tonight’s excursion will not circle leisurely around Soundcloud, but will instead travel through it at a brisk clip – some stamina will be required – for during these several weeks when my attention was mainly focused on the format, the material has accumulated, and so by now, beyond the usual three, there are quite a few more tracks calling out to be featured here.

Without further ado, then, let’s begin tonight’s long sonic sprint.

An alumnus of the Amsterdam conservatory, hailing from Ankara (by way of Uzbekistan), Emre Sihan Kaleli now works in this city as a freelance composer; his recent work, “[No. 9:2] Seventeen Thoughts on a Chamber Con-
certo,” was performed last month at the Muziekgebouw aan ’t IJ by the Nieuw Ensemble, with Ed Spanjaard conducting: and it’s a piece of dramatic music, interspersed with some lonely soliloquies, which will start things off nicely.

Next in the line-up is a new work by Rory Smith, whom I’ve written about before (and still some distance down on my agenda is another, longer text about his music and its significance), amusingly entitled “Plod,” which, as its ironic title already intimates it will, proves to be quite fleet on its feet. This composition turns his particular feeling for syncopated effects and slightly off-kilter piano in some unexpected directions: this is no mere accompaniment to a dance, but a piece of music which has incorporated it into itself – and dispenses it again as tap-dancing.

A pianist in California whose recordings on Soundcloud I just happened to chance upon, Kimdo Adear, offers some delightful performances of works by Beethoven, Debussy, and Chopin, but these unfortunately (perhaps in view of copyright or other restrictions) she’s marked as private, entailing that they cannot be embedded elsewhere: so by all means please listen to them on her page there! In lieu thereof, one of her piano variations upon some well-known pop-music songs, Tears for Fears’ “Shout,” recommends itself.

One work of classical music that lends itself especially readily to variation and adaptation is Erik Satie’s “Gymnopédie” sequence (it will figure more than once in tonight’s tour), and from the Brisbane composer Henry Collins, who is known on Soundcloud by the moniker Light Bulb Sound Design (I do appreciate light bulbs, evidently) and the pianist Michael Manikus comes a rearrangement of the first of them, which limns the procedures by which it was made in its very title, “Mnédie Gyop 1,” without by the transpositions destroying the oblique mood of the original.

A new work by a composer in New York whom I wrote about some months back, Brian Petuch, much as (to my ear at least) his earlier compositions do, imparts aural form to one Manhattan or even more specifically West Side street scene after another, though this time with a greater utilization of electronic means. Imbued with the exuberant sound of mid-morning, this one is called “Bleeper.”

From Nature’s Jokes, the musical moniker of Chris Payne in Birmingham, whom I featured here once before, there comes an “Orchestrion Version” of his new song “Who Are You?” – with an arrangement that’s more complex
than the other’s, yet without sacrificing anything of the rhythmic appeal of a
very catchy tune.

A singer, songwriter, multi–instrumentalist, and producer in Austin, Max
Frost, has become something of an Internet sensation over the course of the
last couple of weeks, on account of his new song “White Lies,” and, listening
to it, it is not hard to understand why, as the arrangements are equipped with
hooks in abundance, and then too there’s something about his phrasing,
which is somehow both ingratiating and ice–hard all at once, that simply
sticks in the mind. But it’s the companion tune that I’d like to feature here,
for it is darker (a video has been made for it – a disturbing piece of work): it’s
called “Nice and Slow.”

Another recent Internet sensation is the singer, composer, and producer
from Bogatá, Humberto Pernett, whose several albums have explored and
adapted various Caribbean and Columbian genres, some of which were
scarcely known elsewhere. One song in particular, “La Galáctica,” may be rec-
ommended as a starting–point for those who want to learn and to hear more.

Now – perhaps after a brief intermission for the reader – tonight’s effort
would not be complete without a cinematic score, and this is provided in the
shape of the music for Steve Holzer’s short film Machine Deva (which I have
not seen, though I attempted to locate a copy on the Internet) composed by
his son Derek, a sound–artist residing in Berlin who goes by the moniker
Macumbista. This set comprises five tracks of eerie electronica.

Turning again to Erik Satie and moving on to Paris, a trio there compris-
ing, alongside the guitarist and saxophonist Romain Fitoussi, the saxophonist
Olivier de Colombel, and the drummer Gregory Desgouttes, has uploaded a
recording of a jazz interpretation of the third “Gymnopédie,” and it is inven-
tive while yet preserving much of the form and the mood of the original work.

At this point, tonight’s trip will pause briefly to admire the “Mur sonique”
recently constructed by an electronic sound artist about whom little is known
other than his place of residence, Ottawa, and his profession by day as some
sort of bureaucrat, as indicated with a certain ironic distance by his nom
d’artiste, Beaucrat.

Venturing now southwards, to Salem, New Jersey, we encounter another
electronic sound artist who calls himself the Constant Zombie (he is otherwise
known as Jordan Livingstone), and his music, as one might expect, given the
moniker, is quite a bit darker, calling forth by sonic means the scenarios in all our heads of non-human incursions, civil-defense maneuvers, desperate states of emergency, ultimate containment measures ... all of which may be heard in his track “Stranger Than Fiction.” (One might also discern, towards the beginning, bits drawn from New Order songs, and so it is not surprising to find on his Soundcloud page that an instrumental cover of “Bizarre Love Triangle” was just uploaded.)

Another exploration of similarly dark regions is conducted by one number on last year’s album *A Bond with Sorrow*, “Traumspiel,” and the artist, the Berliner Christoph de Babalon, has not given it that title without cause: the apocalyptic scenarios in the manner in which they are outlined here, oneirically, most likely would never have become as well-established in our heads and at large as they indisputably are in general, were it not for the prevalence of such themes in the various modes of theatre and the sorts of games to which by now nearly everyone has been exposed.

Crossing now right around the world back to the antipodes, from the vicinity of Perth there comes yet another interesting Australian variation upon the first “Gymnopédie,” this one the work of Joshua Sweetman, who goes by the moniker of Yaqui Yeti. The hardest of the bunch, it unearths a metallic element in Satie’s composition of which one previously had perhaps at most some slight inkling.

A bleak ode to the element from which life came and which it could well be will swallow most of it up thalassically again, is delivered in a song, ominously replete with the sounds of submergence, which was recently uploaded by the Israeli singer and sound-artist Stella Gotshtein (she spends part of her time in New York), or as she’s also known, Stella Got; it’s entitled simply “Song to the Sea.”

Though it is instrumental only, “Vio,” a composition by Jan Hendrich in San Francisco, who’s active musically under the name Qepe, sounds as though it were conceived similarly, embodying an analogous effort to discern what a world (if the term itself would not then be hopelessly wrong) from which we all had been stricken out might sound like, if only somehow we were given a chance (per impossibile) to hear it.

In a somewhat similar way, in some contemporary musique improvisée one could hear glimmers of how a music that would – likewise hypothetically–
impossibly – exist in the absence of human beings, both as the performers and the audience, might sound; in musical experimentation of this kind, we are perhaps given some faint taste of what the synthesizing operations might comprise whereby the elements of such a music would be assembled into wholes (again, assuming that this term itself would then not be utterly inapt) – would they not differ radically from those with which we are more or less familiar? An instance of this inquiry may be discerned in the improvised music for which Joel Garten is becoming known; of these pieces his “Piano Improvisation on the Keys and with Gamelan Mallet” may be taken as representative – and apart from any inquiry his music may or may not comprise, in its own manner it is also beautiful.

To register the impressions emitted by the Chicago composer Nomi Epstein’s composition “Trio for Flute, Cello, Piano,” one will have to listen very intently, very hard, for low volume and softness as such are in part what her music seems to be about. This is a thought–provoking subject or set of topics, to be sure, and it deserves further reflection: other of her works may well furnish an occasion to engage in the latter, but for the moment there is much to appreciate and to enjoy in this one.

Courage! Just short of twenty entries, tonight’s tour is nearly finished – we’ll end with the French composer we’ve encountered a number of times already, now in the form of “Ein anderer Satie,” which is a lovely homage to him by Thoralf Dietrich, with just the right amount of oddness mixed into the honor bestowed, in a fashion that he would probably have appreciated – this is a piece composed “for two hands and a finger (or toe).” (About himself Dietrich provides nearly no information, and so, apart from his location in some German–speaking region, he too remains enigmatic.)
A New Composition by Giovanni Dettori: “Quartetto Doppio”

(May 16, 2013)

The composer in Milan whom I’ve written about before, Giovanni Dettori, has just published a recording of a new work, “Quartetto Doppio,” on his Youtube channel, and this ensemble piece, with Feyzi Brera playing the violin and viola, Patrick Graziosi the first guitar, Laura Rotondi the cello, and Alberto Roveroni the drums, while Dettori, completing the quartet (or quintet), handles the second guitar and the bass, is fascinating; in view thereof I have added the video – equipped with the score – to the playlist.

This composition begins by setting up a bifurcation: first the ensemble strikes off something like a theme, which then is not varied so much as it is sundered in two, both of the resulting parts, the one bristling with a loud guitar riff, the other holding its ground by an ostinato on the violin and viola, succeeding one another by turns whereby they defy one another audibly, the one nearly taunting the other and vice versa in each alternation – and in their very contrariety they together instantiate a musical contention that may well owe something of its parallelism to the art of counterpoint; thus, still at the outset of the piece, the popular and the classical modes are counterposed to one another, situated in opposite corners of this “double” sonic space, and here it is far from obvious whether ever the twain might meet, so definite does their mutual repugnance seem to be. However, largely on account of this same alternation, one can also fore... – forehear that they will soon be leaving those corners behind and advancing towards each other.

At this point listeners may well wonder where all this musical action may be supposed to be taking place. Of course, it could be a dramatic or diegetic scene or scenes, in the usual sense of that term, which these musical means are sketching out, with the alternation of the two musical modes in his composition then replicating the cross-cutting montage technique used in the
cinema to lend visual and narrative intensity to stretches of dialogue. Yet there also is another distinct possibility, namely, that all of this – the choice of musical modes, the distance virtually interposed between them, the rhythm of their alternation, etc. – would constitute an aural representation of the interactions between the several different kinds of music in the creative mind of a contemporary classical composer such as Dettori, who, as he himself has remarked, is concerned to circumvent in his work the narrowness of the old musical dichotomies; in that case, the setting of “Quartetto Doppio” would be in the interior of the composer’s mind itself, and the dramatis personæ would comprise the different kinds of music that circulate within it, while, for its part, what the audience would be given to hear, are the ways in which the latter comport themselves and behave towards one another in that inner region. And, in fact, doesn’t this latter possibility seem a more plausible delineation of what Dettori’s composition is actually about?

How “Quartetto Doppio” then proceeds to unfold might lend this supposition further plausibility, for now the two modes, where in the first it’s the guitars that lead, and in the second, the other strings, do indeed leave their respective corners and move towards each other – the alternation between them is itself succeeded by sequences wherein contact is made – though in the first few moments of this phase, is the action akin to the exchange of blows between boxers in the ring, or, on the other hand, to the holds by which the partners in certain genres of dance come to grips with one another on the floor? – it is hard to decide, for these moments of music move in a manner that’s simultaneously pugilistic, martial, and sensuous; and thus, cognizant of this very difficulty, listeners may feel as though they are overhearing an inner creative process wherein the protagonists are the different kinds of music themselves as they jut up against each other and spar with one another in some usually by–invitation–only realm (and then the composer too may seem to be first of all an observer and only subsequently a transcriber of their interactions and altercations). Yet, as the musical idiom then swings towards Buenos Aires, we listeners soon find ourselves witnessing something like a tango, and that initial question is swiftly dispatched.

In his compositions Dettori has made thought–provoking use of tango music before, and this time around he incorporates it in a particularly striking manner. Its usage here suggests, most obviously, that this particular genre
is especially suitable when the compositional aim is to flesh out, to lend body to an encounter between modes of music that mainly had wanted to avoid one another (then the guitars stand in for rock music in its entirety, in the manner of a synecdoche, and the strings likewise for classical) but which now are thrown together (the old dichotomy in which both were content to abide, is replaced by their close contact) – joined in this musical mise en scène in a tense dance whose brutal refinement the tango elements express quite well. Yes, as a genre both of dance and of music, tango seems to illustrate, generally speaking, how brutal the application of refinement itself can be, and how refined brutality’s (for in practice neither refinement nor brutality excludes the other); thus it is – so at least it seems to me – that the drama, the rhythm, and the tone of tango have been invoked in the “Quartetto Doppio,” as though to underscore that something so new in music may emerge perhaps only when, with considerable daring in the composition, the old opposites are forcibly, kinetically, or even violently joined together.

Sweet Random’s New EP: Untold

(May 17, 2013)

Around a week and a half ago, the Russian sound artist known as Sweet Random issued a new EP, Untold, which, following by a few months his first, Love, and constituting just as much of a unity as it did, does indeed (to respond to its title) deserve to be talked about.

On his Soundcloud page, Sweet Random has also uploaded the EP in its brief entirety (it is around fifteen minutes long).

The arrangements of this music bring some distinctively bleak and even novel complexes of sound to bear, and that alone would furnish a reason to listen to the album; but it’s something else which really elicits one’s attention – the feeling that here one is transfixed in some confined space and, moreover,
feels oneself to be nearly depleted, so that in the end there’s not much that could be done about it: so perhaps it’s this EP’s aim to describe a state of exhaustion that is more than a merely individual one.

That the musical referent is our present circumstances generally (note that here I am not speaking of conditions in any country in particular), seems especially likely when one listens to the last track on the EP, “Digital War”: for, if one concentrates on it, and then replays the other three as well, one might well register throughout something as definite as the sound of a wish or a hope, namely, that the decrepit impasse of today’s arrangements somehow be swept away by others that would at least possess the virtue of being new or younger – “qu’une sorte de flot irrésistible passera sur l’ancienne civilisation,”* to cite one especially cutting sentence of Georges Sorel’s which remains, much like his book as a whole, as current as it was when first published, already more than a century ago.

Postscript. The album has been removed from the Soundcloud page of the artist – now renamed Unhunt – but it is still available on his Bandcamp page, and I’ll embed it again from that source.

People Get Ready

(May 18, 2013)

Another recent EP release is Zelda Maria, put out earlier this month by the Brooklyn band People Get Ready (there is also evidently a band going by the very same name from The Netherlands, but I do not know much about it), and though – to be frank – the record seems to me to be a bit thin, musically speaking, with its appearance it’s now as good a time as any to lend an ear to the band’s first LP, which was issued late last year, especially as two of People

* Réflexions sur la violence, deuxième édition, chap. IV, pt. II.
Get Ready’s songs were already included in one of the Soundcloud playlists a few months ago, “Uncanny,” replete with some quite catchy arrangements, and “Windy Cindy,” a sort of homage to the artist Cindy Sherman.

The band, comprising the drummer Luke Fasano, the keyboardist Jen Goma, the singer and guitarist Steven Reker, and the bassist James Rickman, came together a few years ago in the interstices of music and dance for which a New York institution such as The Kitchen provides an arena; and in their live performances, judging from some of the information available about them on the Internet, they often aim to be not only a band but something like a dance troupe as well.

It is not so surprising, then, that for its part the music would be imbued with an especial degree of kinetic activity, the arrangements and even (albeit less noticeably) the vocals frequently bouncing martially–acrobatically; the leaps taken are particularly daring in two tracks from the band’s eponymous LP, “New June” and “Three Strangers” – and each time they land on their feet.

With the new EP released, where will this ensemble go next?

The Soundcloud Round–Up: Some Hours Earlier Than Usual

(May 19, 2013)

This time around, the Soundcloud round–up will be more of a brief and a belatedly weekend affair.

First off is a new instrumental track, “Saturday Morning Blues,” by a guitarist in New Jersey, Justin Valente, posted by him yesterday.
Late last month, the classical mixmaster here in Amsterdam, Von Rosenthal de la Vegaz, posted a new compilation, whose title alone already caught my eye; the mix itself then fulfilled that implicit promise, and so here is the bold set “Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?”

The last piece in today’s round-up is around a year old, though I just came across it; in this late-evening number, by the rough sensuous strokes of his phrasing, the Melbourne musician and singer Chet Faker (which is presumably only his stage name) lets it be known that “I’m Into You.”

Mobidextrous

(May 20, 2013)

A few months ago I featured in the Sunday evening round-up a collaboration of the English DJ Mobidextrous (earlier a resident of Beijing, he now lives in Singapore) and the Chinese singer known as Miss Melody, a song entitled “Ru Meng Ling” wherein some verses dating from the Song dynasty were set to appropriately reflective music; since then I’ve made the acquaintance of other tracks on his Soundcloud page (he also maintains pages on Myspace and Reverbnation), and there’s quite a lot to listen to, actually, including other collaborations between the two.

In fact, it turns out that he has posted multiple versions of “Ru Meng Ling,” and one of them, produced with a little help from their friends, namely “Jarome’s Song Dynasty Refix,” definitely adds some extra finish to the work.

Another of their collaborations, not quite as reflective or as slow as the other, is “Huan,” a song about the unsettling flux of life in the country’s largest cities today.

Similarly inventive musically, two other numbers, in which Mobidextrous goes solo, also ought to be mentioned: firstly, there is an instance of a genre he calls “folkstep,” “Gong Yan,” and then an uncategorized and softly menacing tune, “Three/Four Time Noodles.”
While looking over the websites, I noticed that one track in the “Strangelove” playlist I put together a few months ago had been removed by the band, the Scottish Park Planet – a pity, as it was more than a version thereof, but rather an homage in the shape of a new creation – and so I sought another with which to fill the slot; fortuitously so, as I then found what I needed on the Soundcloud page of a musician, singer, and producer in Seattle who goes by the moniker Wicked Gloves and whose other material also appealed strongly to my ears.

Now, for his part, Wicked Gloves specializes in a spooky variety of synthesizer music which he’s baptized with the name of “witch pop” (or at least I have not come across any such term before), I suspect more for the effect than out of any considered belief. Although by way of elucidating his background hardly any information at all has been provided, yet on his Bandcamp page he placed a first EP, *More Than I Can Take*, last September, of which the four tracks have also been uploaded on his Soundcloud page; and from the information which is available, it’s clear that he’s performed live on occasion, so it could well happen that Wicked Gloves will take this act on tour beyond Seattle at some point in the near future.

As a foretaste of what he might have in store for his audiences, two tracks from the EP may be recommended. – A sort of gloss evidently on the condition of love–sickness (or is it about a sad leave–taking after a preternatural night just before sunrise?) is the tune “Morning Sickness.” – Unfolding along somewhat similar lines, it seems, though slower in tempo and darker in mood, there is a track entitled “Troubled Mind”: which, no doubt intentionally, terminates quite abruptly.

Lastly, as a pièce d’occasion, this sonic sorcerer has brewed a mix of the sounds on the radio ("ADDJ Presents Claustrophilia the 3–Minute Mix"), and the result is both funny and potent.
The Sandman’s Orchestra

(May 25, 2013)

A couple of years ago, the singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist in Lille, Pierre Laplace, and his niece, the neophyte chanteuse and occasional guitarist Léonie Gabriel, joining forces as The Sandman’s Orchestra, began to compose and record a number of contemporary folksongs, soon compiling these into a self-produced first album entitled Silver Linings, available inter alia on their Bandcamp page, which attracted a considerable following (it wasn’t long before the two were honored as “Soundclouders of the day”); since then they’ve continued to develop their music (representing themselves in addition on Myspace, Reverbnation, and Youtube), and a second album, Nocturne, was likewise released around two months ago.

Just prior to its release, a song from the first album, “Hello Stranger,” was featured on this site one Sunday evening; another of those loaded on the duo’s Soundcloud page, “To the Moon,” with its arresting contra-arrangements of strings and drums, also calls out to be mentioned here.

Now, with its lunar, oneiric, and tenebrous predilections, and even more by virtue of its very name, The Sandman’s Orchestra summons to mind the fantastic paraphernalia of Hoffmannesque literature; yet this music does not aspire to remain a pendant to some antiquated romantic exercise in mere lyricism or in music that would be tone-painting and little more: rather, by its choice of means the two allow electronic instruments a noteworthy role in their sonic phantasmagoria – and the shadows these cast sharpen up their acoustic scenes as a whole, and in particular the lyrics, which often are intelligently pointed to begin with. Moreover, here one will not encounter the sounds of a free-floating Weltschmerz or world-weariness so much as those of an attitude that is more definite and precise in its correlation to today’s society; for it is the latter, and not the world per se in this or that definition of the term, which lives and thrives on our exhaustion and thus in turn renders us – Gesellschaftsmüde, in something of the way that conditions in the mid–
nineteenth century led many on this continent to become Europamüde, albeit without having ready at hand a similarly obvious remedy for the complaint: so it’s this twofold fatigue of today, rather than the simpler and less specific sort of yesteryear, which is manifested in the mobile clair–obscur of the duo’s variety of folk–music.

Patience that is itself nearly exhausted – perhaps this is what one hears conveyed through the special tempo of their music, if one has time enough and ear to hearken to it.

In these numbers, it isn’t that feelings, moods, or tones which have been forgotten are called back to a sort of eerie half–life, at once sepia–stained with age and yet now again outfitted with a potent presence, even though the band’s visual materials may leave the impression that their music might well be filled by so many sonorous analogues to the old obscure photographs of those long gone whose personalia have vanished with an even greater finality, such that the songs would be circumscribed in their choice of themes by the sentimentality which arises with a peculiar pathos from our industrial civilization as its requisite supplement. No, that does not seem to be the case here at all, and in fact, to the extent that folk–music generally has been entrammelled in just that subservient supplementary role, this entire situation itself could well be amongst the topics the two are exploring, in an undertone as is their wont.

All of these concerns and more come together in an occasional song (it is included on neither album) which appears nonetheless to afford insight into what The Sandman’s Orchestra is about at bottom, namely, a number in which that spectral poem, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The City in the Sea” (recited by Martin Lucas), has been set to music.

The mythical Atlantis of course stands as the matrix of the poem, though it is never named as such; the poet’s refusal to identify it, ensured that “The City in the Sea” did not enter the orbit of an artificial antiquity, for Poe evidently already intuited how far the elaboration thereof, in the midst of modern industrial society, would most likely become a mere sentimental pastime or a treacherously false refuge from the latter – hence it was a literary practice better avoided to begin with.
Poe, moreover, had quite another literary use in mind for the topos of “antiquity,” and so did not intend to squander it needlessly.

Which city does his poem actually speak of? The modern one – as it will one day be, and indeed as it itself means to be, one day. Much as Baudelaire would ascertain a couple of decades later, Poe divined the plan to become an antique ruin within the very constructive fury by which in his time the modern city was materializing, often so rapidly that it was as though sprung up out of thin air; a condition which once it had taken centuries to bring about, was now reckoned with as a fate not all that far off, one whose approach was actually accelerating; and this prospect was being built into the city’s form itself, both on the whole and in its constituent parts. Therefore, given this inner tendency, as though the modern city was arising in an emulation of Atlantis, what cause would the poet have had to utter its name at all?

The fate however which this city seemed to envision and desire for itself, this he did put into lines that spew more and more fire the closer one attends to them. (Again like Baudelaire, in the last of the Fusées, it often seems Poe too put pen to paper that he might “dater mon colère.” And the other poet’s sketch of himself there, was eminently suited to him as well: “Perdu dans ce vilain monde, couvoyé par les foules, je suis comme un homme lassé dont l’œil ne voit en arrière, dans les années profondes, que désabusement et amertume, et, devant lui, qu’un orage où rien de neuf n’est contenu, ni enseignement ni douleur.”)

This nameless city swallowed whole by the sea, would now, preserved under something like a pane of glass, exhibit its architectural daring to a view obliquely from above (it had always seemed to want above all to be regarded from that angle) –

So blend the turrets and shadows there
That all seem pendulous in air

– as though to underscore that the ulterior aim all along was to illustrate how far its higher stories (even before the advent of the elevator the height of modern buildings was on the rise) had attained a state of near or virtual independence from the solidity of the foundations, a marvel of human industry which even as ruins these constructions would continue to illustrate, not least by vir-
tue of the uncommon degree of exertion required of nature to reconquer them.

At the same time, Poe found it disturbing to perceive that the rationale or even the raison d’être for the modern city as the illustration par excellence of industrial civilization, was an ultimate state in which all its activity would have ceased, all its tumult been converted into the silence and stillness of something that thus showed itself to have been all along intended solely for the eyes of its posterity. O what a sight it would then present!

For no ripples curl, alas!
Along that wilderness of glass–
No swellings tell that winds may be
Upon some far–off happier sea–
No heavings hint that winds have been
On seas less hideously serene.

The very motionlessness of these remnants of a civilization in the sea, and of the waters encasing them, as though to say that its structures are thus set beyond time’s reach, suggests how during its nascence industrial civilization was content to justify itself in terms lacking the boldness which would have be-fitted the upheavals brought about by its unprecedented activity: for in this vital question, without originality and even timidly, in effect that civilization deferred to an opposing “way of life” as the ultimate arbiter, for whose sake all of it would have been done, a highest and last inheritor which would then be yet another iteration of the ancient βίος θεωρητικός with its specific preference for the time–less tranquility of θεωρία and its prejudgements vis–à–vis the city as such.

To judge by the fire in his poem, the prospect of this spectacle dismayed Poe greatly.

Furthermore, the lines just quoted also allude to one of the wishes this civilization has induced in its denizens from its beginnings, evidently inexorably, as an intrinsic by–product, namely, to find relief from the weariness it inflicts on them as the entry–price of their participation; this hope it is which is registered in the image of a sea without wind or waves. Though he recoils from the extra–temporal state thus envisioned – this was a desperate remedy for a des-
perate situation – as regards the weary sentiment from out of which it arose, one may notice that his anger is tempered, and conclude that Poe too must have known the feeling quite well.

All of this together should lend a special edge to this poème maudit in particular and shed a somber burning light on its creator’s motive. Of it he could have avowed, to cite a pertinent line from the *Aeneid*, “flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo.”*

Now – to come back to this musical interpretation of Poe’s piece – in keeping with the fiery spirit of the poem itself, Lucas moves to stir up its meaning by his emphatic manner of recitation.

Well, by means of this tour through the modern city taken as a topic of reflection, it seems to me that some further light is shone on present–day folk–music, or, more precisely, on the significance of the vogue for it. Even when, as is most often the case, this kind of music exists simply in order to feed and at the same time to stoke the hunger for easy sentiment aroused by our contemporary society, the deliberate cultivation of an anachronistic form, precisely because it is outdated, conveys despite itself some awareness of the ways in which this society’s products have been pre–formed from the beginning – shaped from the outset, in other words, by something like a yearning to hasten towards their own fate while remaining capable somehow of seeing themselves thus transfigured. (An acoustic medium is perhaps especially suited to register the existence of such a twofold wish and to plumb its depths.) Thus when, as with The Sandman’s Orchestra, the folk–music is more thoughtful, informed by a greater quantum of irony, and situated on a higher plane of reflection, that wish might be extruded audibly as such, so that, if we want, we could guard ourselves against the society’s sentimentality and its temptations – not the least of which is that horrible desire of falling precipitously into ruin.

* Bk. 7, l. 312.
Enough: it’s time to turn to The Sandman’s Orchestra’s recent album, and to hand the last word over to four of its tracks which, with their arresting titles taken as indications, should do more than a commentary can to render listeners wary of present–day society and its matrix, our own weariness. – The four songs, in order, are “The Last Night of the Old World,” “In Your Wake,” “On a Cloud,” and the eponymous final track, “Nocturne.”

**Sunday Evening’s Soundcloud Excursion**

*(May 26, 2013)*

For today’s excursion amongst the artists represented on Soundcloud, it’s a threesome of diverse urban music which will be offered.

To start things off, an eerie track called “Denouement,” made public around a year ago by a London duo by the name of Two Silhouettes, a collaboration between the multi–instrumentalist Sam Holloway and the vocalist Francesca Allen; their second album, *Twelve*, was released last month on their Bandcamp page.

Quite a bit more spritely is the “Afro–Indie Soul” (as it’s called on the band’s Facebook page) of Bells Atlas, hailing from Oakland, California, which is well exemplified in today’s second track, “Loving You Down”: this quartet, comprising the guitarist Derek Barber, the drummer and percussionist Geneva Harrison, the percussionist Sandra Lawson–Ndu, and the bassist Doug Stuart – evidently all four contribute to the vocals – also released an EP on their Bandcamp page last month.

Returning for tonight’s third track to London, it’s time to bring in “Baby,” a chastened tune (which includes a few patches of rough language) by a new trio, Benin City; this band, with Theo Buckingham handling the drums, Joshua Idehen the vocals, and Tom Leaper the tenor saxophone, is slated to release a first album sometime later this year.
This Sunday it isn’t the round-up of some tracks from Soundcloud that I’m rushing to complete, but another text which has proven to be a bit more complicated, and also – more to the point – more compelling than I at first anticipated, and lest I let the evening pass by without the usual excursion, I shall have to postpone its debut in favor of sending forth these three numbers on time.

Each offers a version of a song or songs by that very interesting personage, Lady Gaga.

Now, this is not the first time she’s been mentioned here. Tonight I’d merely like to suggest that it could be her classical training on the piano which stands behind the inclination she often evinces to mix pop music up with other kinds: a tendency which would in part explain her appeal to young composers and musicians who are at work on other kinds of music than hers, and yet who, though coming from the other side, share her reluctance simply to accept the old divisions of kind or quality – a tendency which also, as regards the wider audience of music-lovers, may help to clarify the great resonance of her music’s syncopations, surprising arrangements, deliberate false starts. For evidently these features of the music, as though they were first and foremost synecdoches, are often understood as standing in for the acoustic tumults of the present at large.

At a moment when the world generally seems like it’s been turned on its head, why should music not go gaga with a spectacularly representative success?

But let me not get ahead of myself. The starting-point of this Gaga trio was the need to fill a gap that had opened in the playlist I compiled for New Year’s Eve; another “Heavy Metal Lover” was required, and on Soundcloud I came across a very catchy version, the work of a sound artist in Dallas named Jeremy Henry who’s active under the moniker Haus of Glitch: this I included
in the playlist, but my attention was struck by the set of which it formed a part, “L’Opéra où la Musique Devient Gaga,” and this in its entirety proved simply too good to pass up. (In this “opera” there are several high points, of which I’ll commend just two in particular: “Death of the Telephone” and “The Ballet of the Government Hooker.”)

Having thus decided to offer a version of Gaga here, going from one to three was but a step.

The second of the three is a single song, a virtuoso version of “Government Hooker” on electric guitar by a musician in London (also evidently a singer and songwriter) who goes by the moniker Bealius Octavian (and whose own name may or may not be Lianamuel Veritas – it was not possible to ascertain this one way or the other). The aggressive potential of the instrument he deploys to good effect here, for it too in its very aggressiveness rings with the sound of something representative of the times more widely, and so doing it adds an extra bite to this already peculiarly challenging tune.

The last of tonight’s three tracks takes us on a “Bad Romance” back to North America and into the desert, in fact. It’s the work of Ben Sevier, a musician, singer, and songwriter living in Phoenix, Arizona, who works as a recording artist under the moniker Wyly: and here his vocals and piano arrangement are both understated and ominous. In these sounds what we’re given to hear is the cool, the quite calm and capable planning of a very determined stalker: it’s a sinister room of the mind in which this version deposits us, and though one really would like to leave again and there is no lack of doors, one shrinks from opening them.
Amidst the varieties of stories that may be told in the medium of music, the tale of horror can exert a special fascination over both the ear and the mind, where the sounds of fright will affect the former almost irresistibly, while from this episode, once the latter begins to recover itself from it, questions then issue with a startling rapidity.

One instance of this – as though, the mind frantic, the body fixed to the spot, before one a region never seen nor heard before and inexhaustible in its very strangeness, is unveiled – is afforded by the music which Edouard Trolliet has been creating over the last couple of years. Trolliet is a sound artist in the French city of Tarnos, whose track “Never Look Back” was featured here several weeks ago; and beyond the recent individual pieces on his Soundcloud page, there are a couple of albums into which he’s bundled many of them on his Bandcamp page, a move which is well–considered on his part, as these numbers are formed from within to constitute so many installments in a soundtrack–like succession, or even to comprise a sonic sequence that even without a projection of images is already virtually a film.

We have no need of actual images for the horror films in our heads to begin to roll; all that is requisite is some trigger, and these well–known scenarios commence by themselves.

In Trolliet’s case, the longer sequences – notably the album A Journey to Jupiter – take the listener on a voyage into outer space; the variety of horror into which we are precipitated is the science–fiction kind, which is to say, he’s avoided to a considerable degree admixing the elements of this experience amongst heterogeneous ones (as often happens, whenever the protagonists,
or, more to the point, the antagonists encountered in a horror story are other human beings): consequently, these elements manifest themselves rather clearly and distinctly here, and thus it seems, if one wants, that an analysis might at least be begun without too much trouble.

Trolliet does not hesitate to call himself a storyteller. “I will tell you stories... Don’t be afraid... Close your eyes, and welcome aboard... ”: this is his avis aux écouteurs. It’s a bold statement of intent; for how could an experience like an extra-planetary encounter, which would occur so far beyond our ken, possibly be recounted in the form of a story, this age-old mode of exchanging our experiences in order that a bit of sense or, with a bit of skill or luck, some wisdom might be gleaned from them? – this form of narration so closely tied to everything ordinary in human life, and sharing in the declining fortunes of the latter as it’s atrophied throughout the course of the last century – ebbing away so far that one of the age’s own great and hardly ever properly told tales would concern the travails of the twofold capacity to tell and to listen to a story – a human capacity overwhelmed by unprecedented events, traduced by new technologies and media, stifled by the increasing sensationalism and sentimentality of today’s society. And moreover, as this narrational capacity has evaporated, the fascination exerted by horror and even a need for the frightful as such, evinced most purely by the frequent anticipations of an ill-fated encounter with an other-planetary species, is rising – and its spectacular success may be taken as an inverse index of what’s happened to the other.

Stories still abound, of course, nominally, but most of what passes these days for one, is or aspires to be nothing but a novel in miniature, or else it is like a fleshed-out version of a shooting-script for the movies or television. When it’s not an instance of something abhorrent and thoroughly degraded, that is.

Strangely, then, of all things it’s a quasi-cinematic scenario of horror which is supposed to serve as the matrix of stories told in music ... ? Yet perhaps it is precisely from out of this horrific heart of darkness that some elucidation may come of what the story once was, if a new example of it in something like its pristine form can no longer be reasonably hoped for.

So: a story in the original sense – what have I in mind by this idea? Well, a few of the remarks I’ve already offered draw upon Walter Benjamin’s concise
essay “Der Erzähler,”* and one or two of the other points made there I shall also invoke in this connection.

In it he addresses a number of the factors contributing to the decline of storytelling, unfolding them as different facets of the shattered condition of experience, the experience one can communicate, above all in the wake of the recent horror of the battlefields, which seemed to go so far beyond what the human body could bear, so far in excess of what human speech was able to tell, as to interject a cæsura into the history of experience itself. This he outlines in two pithy sentences in the first section of the essay: “Es ist, als wenn ein Vermögen, das uns unveräußerlich schien, das Gesichertste unter dem Sicherer, von uns genommen würde. Namlich das Vermögen, Erfahrungen auszutauschen.” The cleft was revealed when those who returned from the front had at first nearly nothing to relay of what they’d witnessed, and this very incapacity entirely overturned the old certainties – or at least (to render the claim somewhat more definite) those certainties that are correlate to an implicit presupposition: above all it is visual phenomena which human speech is meant to articulate.

The capacity to exchange experiences through the medium of storytelling, which up to that point still seemed to be an inalienable human power, was shown up as quite alienable and indeed already alienated; after those of the war itself, this realization was the secondary shock which then precipitated an inquiry such as Benjamin’s analysis of some of the previously unremarked changes – in the constitution of experience on the one hand, in the mode of the story, on the other – which together had contributed to the event.

Both the constitution of experience and the form of the story had had something in common, and to this Benjamin returned several times during the course of his essay. Both of these were akin to handwork, that is, a whole process carried out by human hands, not merely the objects that were the results thereof, or at an early stage the two had even once been modeled upon it: that is to say, upon interactions such as the co-operation of eye and hand, or

the mutual adaptation of the materials and the tools, causes and effects, or the purposive activity of a number of people in collaboration lightened by songs, banter, stories ... In this handwork, these and other similar interactions were joined in a mode of activity differing greatly from those that commonly are involved either in simple menial labor, on one side, or in the creation of a work of art, on the other – a mode of activity whose rough perfection approached the condition of several of those by which the most conspicuous animal species variously distinguished themselves in human eyes, and the practice of which human beings may have derived to some degree from a selective emulation of the latter. Thus, in human handwork and its processes, there was a particular confluence of heterogeneous activities; and this continuously flowing stream, perhaps precisely because in its principle it was a recurrence without end within a channel slowly evolving in response, in turn had furnished something like an image, or even perhaps a model, both for human experience as it once was constituted and for the stories in which particular experiences were then given a pithy shape and by which they had been, in Benjamin’s word, exchanged.

This notion of the origin and first purpose of the story, is the one which I have in mind.

Now, for his part, Benjamin made sure to address the close connection between storytelling, as an open–ended activity in which one story could call forth another and so on indefinitely, and human wisdom, as something which might be gathered from the telling and then passed down by a further recounting, perhaps in the specific form of good counsel, thus possibly augmenting itself over the longer stretches of history (he goes so far as to speak, in the fourth section of the essay, of wisdom as being “die epische Seite der Wahrheit”). Most wrenchingly it was this nexus which began to unravel when the novel arose as the pre–eminent type of narrative, fraying further as journalism deluged everything under its gluts of so–called information while industrial technologies reshaped human life by means of the gigantic forces they had spawned, before it was finally ripped apart entirely in the World War – a planetary novum which overturned the very ground from which wisdom might earlier have sprung up.

Amidst the horrors of the battlefield, not the least of the victims was the old collaboration of the eyes and the hands, characteristic in particular of the
handwork to which storytelling had been so closely tied; so it’s one of Benjamin’s most well–considered maneuvers in his essay (likewise in the fourth section) to convey the special pathos of wisdom’s demise not by means of a visual image, but simply in tactile terms: though wisdom was in retreat, this very fact “zugleich eine neue Schönheit in dem Entschwindenden fühlt macht” – the emphasis is mine – whereas the word readers would most obviously have expected to encounter, was “sichtbar.”

With this unexpected choice of words, it is as though Benjamin wished, firstly, to alert to the risk that this pathos too might be swallowed up by a mere feeling of nostalgia – thus reduced to being a variety of the loud sentimentality produced by industrial civilization, here bemoaning hypocritically the absence of something with which it itself had dispensed and which it would hardly recognize if it did somehow happen to see it; but moreover, secondly, to hint that once the old order of the human senses had been destroyed, in the contact with powers of technology so utterly disproportionate to the human body in general and its organs of perception in particular, what beauty itself was – and also the ability to discern it – would be thrown into grave confusion. For what species of the beautiful is it which would be (to take Benjamin’s word quite literally) felt, if indeed this posthumous moment of beauty possessed any real existence at all and was not itself thoroughly illusory albeit seemingly real to the one afflicted by it, in the manner of an imaginary malady? Yet furthermore, Benjamin may well have had a third reason for choosing that odd term fühltbar, as it readily calls to mind one of the typical although at the same time thought–provoking characteristics of a feeling as such, namely, its brief duration – even before one knows it, it is gone; now, insofar as their very brevity is characteristic of feelings generally and especially of feelings of pleasure (which is the sort to which in this context Benjamin was referring), and insofar as this characteristic is exhibited most notably when the feeling in question pertains not to a positive pleasure but rather to the curiously euphoric and even more momentarily pleasing sense of relief that’s felt once something distasteful or painful to behold has passed, as a consequence, the exact nature of this feeling of observing “eine neue Schönheit in dem Entschwindenden” is itself cast into doubt. Accordingly, one begins to wonder: was it not so much a pleasure tinged with regret at the demise of storytelling in its old rapport with wisdom, as it was a pleasure of
relief that they were gone, or, on the other hand, a quite unstable mixture of these two pleasures, or perhaps yet another feeling of an entirely different kind?

Who could have said with any assurance what it was? Thus the questions multiply – indeed, all the more so as, now putting the matter of feeling aside, there was more than one new beauty to be found in the demolition of the old certainties.

In the Erlebnisse on the front during the First World War, amongst all of the horrors which exceeded by many orders of magnitude that which the individual human being could possibly sustain, beauty itself was not entirely absent, though there it manifested itself in ways utterly new and often horrific, frequently to the point that the horrible and the beautiful were nearly indistinguishable (and this was a condition which older definitions drawn from art and aesthetic theory, even those relating to the sublime, could hardly comprehend). Of course, all of this experience transpired on the edge of danger, and so those exposed to it were aware that by certain modes of beauty one could just as easily be obliterated as enraptured.

☛ To be sure, Benjamin was by no means the only or the first to have espied a proximity newly evident between horror and beauty. Perhaps their mutual nearness was already long since adumbrated in the hideous serenity in which Poe’s “city in the sea” had been extinguished; and one finds it described without varnish, some years before, in the frightful lines in the first of Rilke’s Duineser Elegien.

Denn das Schöne ist nichts
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen,
und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht,
uns zu zerstören.

A quite hopeless admiration, this, one should like to retort – at which point one might then ask oneself what more could there possibly be to say (if, that is, one still does not intend to join in the society’s reigning penchant for cheap talk).
However, lest the main motive behind this essay be forgotten just as its end is shimmering into view, I’ll hasten to counter that the topics which it is tentatively exploring – they are, in the form of a somewhat immodest list: horror and beauty, the story and storytelling, and the conditions of wisdom and serenity and perhaps also that elusive state which the German language calls Gelassenheit – all evidently assume a different shape if, in an experimental mood, one elevates the ear above the eye as the foremost organ of perception and thus also of intellectual interest. And that experiment represents something that Trolliet appears to have in common with the poets and writers who are passing in revue here: each of them, to various degrees and in their different ways, was inclined to undertake it.

The impasse at which storytelling seemed to have arrived, in Benjamin’s doleful account, may open up when music is attended to as a narrational medium, being placed alongside the other such that the two might (pardon the expression) shed some light on one another, reciprocally. With the eyes closed shut and the ears attuned, the capacity to tell a proper story might find itself anew in the medium of music – while the field from which it now draws its tales might be incomparably more vast than before, and the wisdom it could possibly offer, of quite another nature.

Considered from the present standpoint, it is as though the notion of music as a refuge for storytelling were already delineated in three significant sentences (or, in keeping with the actual flow of living speech, perhaps in fact these were the constituents of one single longer remark) uttered in an interview more than fifty years ago by Isak Dinesen – the nom de plume of Karen Blixen.* In it the author had this to relate: “One of my friends said about me that I think all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them, and perhaps this is not entirely untrue. To me, the explanation of life seems to be its melody, its pattern. And I feel in life such an infinite, truly inconceivable fantasy.” Now, after an initial parsing one might no-

* Alas, it was not possible to consult the transcript of the entire conversation, which was conducted by a Danish literary journalist: see Bent Mohn, “Talk with Isak Dinesen,” The New York Times Book Review (November 3, 1957), p. 49.
tice that this statement was not formulated without an ambiguity or a few, and
as this – this much one may assume – did not occur by chance, let’s turn to
identify them briefly; for they seem significant in this context not least by vir-
tue of one’s hesitation in deciding what precisely was meant: thus these were
the deliberate ambiguities of a storyteller.

An infinite, truly inconceivable fantasy. What the actual meaning of the
superlative is, is not quite obvious: if it is an approbation, did Dinesen intend
to underscore how inexhaustible a source of stories life can be, whenever, so
to speak, the productive imagination within it is solicited in the right way? Or,
if this phrase were introduced in order to convey a certain reservation held by
the author with respect to this very great power within life itself, would this
not suggest that stories can come to be only when a preservative distance
from life’s mighty force is maintained? Yet more likely than either of these
possibilities alone, was some mixture of both conceptions in the authorial atti-
tude she took towards it, so that she might overhear it better.

The explanation of life seems to be its melody, its pattern. Here the first am-
biguity resides in the actual sense of Dinesen’s circumlocution which appears
at first to be equivalent to a copula: exactly how is this explanation supposed
to relate to this pattern or melody, and vice versa? Ought the first aim be to ex-
plain – to unfold and to clarify – life’s perplexities and conundrums as they
come, eliciting some wisdom from them – deriving it from having solved
them – and subsequently moving to assemble the results into a pattern or
indeed a melody – life itself, then, revealing its pre-eminently aural nature for
the most part towards the end, as a conclusion? Or will one be better off by lis-
tening to life right from the start as an acoustic phenomenon, construing it
melodically to begin with, such that its very nature as melody would constitute
the condition of possibility of all explanations that one might offer, while life’s
phrases or notes, so to speak, would serve as the keys for any explanation in
particular? And, secondly, when the story is told in the medium of music,
what will the explanation add to life, if anything at all (does life in fact need an
explanation?), and how would it add it? To put the matter differently: what
might it say about life and life’s completeness if later we encounter the expla-
nation again – now in the shape of an actual melody – being whistled or
hummed as we are venturing along the streets of our lives?
All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them. When one reads this statement a second time, one may notice that Dinesen’s idea begins to sound facetious or mischievous, for in effect she likened the story to some sort of container – to a box, a vessel, or a cage in which to stow and with which to transport one’s sorrows, as though they were a kind of living cargo. So the aim in storytelling was to contain the sorrows as such, in both senses of the verb; while on their side, these sorrows were already ready to be contained in this way – their own share of significance, or else their own inner structure, predisposing them to be encompassed within a story, an arrangement which imbued the latter with both seriousness and longevity, while also rendering life a bit more bearable. Now, all this, it seems she implied, represented something like the common belief of storytellers generally, at least those working at the height of the craft, and it was thus something to which she too subscribed to some degree, ex officio; but by the same token, her notions of what she was accomplishing in her own storytelling activity, had diverged from that set of beliefs to an equal or even to a greater degree, and this, one may infer from what she said, completing the thought, to the extent that her works were alive with both music and horror.

Whether all horrors may be borne once they are set within a story, it is hard to say with any degree of assurance at all.

 Nonetheless, although those who enter the zone where storytelling, music, and horror vitalize each other, may or may not have to hand over all their hope on the way in, once they’ve arrived there they might come across something quite unexpected: namely, the attitude, at once alert, taut, and high-strung, while yet also evincing some equanimity in the face of what transpires – an attitude perhaps never better summed up than by these lines –

Und nicht ein Übel ist’s, wenn einiges
Verloren gehet und wenn der Rede
Verhallet der lebendige Laut,
Denn göttliches Werk auch gleichet dem unsern,
Nicht alles will der Höchste zumal.
– a passage in which, in the poem “Pathmos,” Hölderlin, the great horror of a
dying—out of human speech and perhaps also of other devastations ringing in
his ears, nonetheless chose to desist from overweening reproof. (Here he em-
ployed a theological idiom equivocally, and this in itself may be taken as a sign
that the poet thought of the very condition of Gelassenheit as that which
would then remain, after the loss.) Confronted as he was by such a frightful
fore–audition – please excuse the inelegant term – which somehow already
resonates with that horror of horrors delineated in the science fiction of
today, namely, extinction on a planetary scale, it’s as though these terse lines
were transcribed for distant years even more than for his own.

For a further interpretation of those five lines there’s neither occasion nor
cause now; it suffices for my purposes to suggest that in some measure this
same attitude will be felt by a listener when the sounds of Edouard Trolliet’s
musical tales of horror have ceased: and then, to embrace this attitude may be
the small sum of wisdom which is all, under present circumstances, the power
of storytelling can reasonably still hope to convey.

Well, by way of conclusion, it’s time to put this quite tentative essay to the
test – of the music itself, of course. To do so, a few selections from the body of
Trolliet’s work should be consulted: from the album Alterations, “Mutation”;
from 100000 Teratons, “The Awakening”; and from A Journey to Jupiter,
“The Deepest Sleep”; as well as, most recently, three individual numbers, as
yet unbundled in an album, “Tormentor,” “9MM,” and “EVOL.”
As a sort of coda to the inquiry into the topics of music, horror, etc., posted the day before yesterday, today’s round-up features three instrumental tracks encountered on Soundcloud whose character as narration is muted but still perceptible, while each delves, though with differing degrees of darkness, into realms with which all are familiar and where, it seems evident, all have known their share of fright.

The darkest or most down-tempo of the lot, is an instance of “primitive open chamber music” assembled by someone in Koblenz, Germany, operating under the moniker Oberlin; in this case the personalia are mainly lacking – on the Soundcloud page, in place of a description, one finds just two brief questions: “Moi? Qui?” But the compositions themselves are promising, and the track “This Is No Night for Sleepwalking” offers a good starting-point if one wants to become acquainted with them.

Somewhat less haunted by horror (it’s as though today’s trajectory describes a withdrawal from that realm, step by step) is a track just uploaded by the singer, songwriter, and producer in Los Angeles, Mimi Page, “Treading the Abyss,” which she included on an EP a couple of months ago; here some vocal elements are utilized instrumentally, and the result respires with an interesting equanimity – to allude to one of the themes broached in Friday’s inquiry.

The last exudes a feeling as if it has been rescued from some scene of horror: but actually recovering from the experience is something else again, and when one listens hard to “Sérail,” a piece of “ethno tec” by Jacques Joseph Roux in Givors, one may hear the sound of a convalescence that is nearing completion; this music – or, insofar as it is a story, the protagonist – is perhaps not quite ready to dance again, but already in restless anticipation of the day it has been stretching its limbs.
Some months ago while compiling the Sunday round–up I came across a memorable version of Blondie’s “Heart of Glass” by a multi–talented Dane, Mikkel Hess, who under the moniker Hess Is More – along with a variable line–up of bandmates – has been cutting a figure these past several years in his adopted city, New York, with several albums got out, a number of commissions for theatre and ballet coming in, and most recently a residency just completed at an important alternative gallery there. Intrigued or, to speak plainly, impressed both by the reversal in the arrangements of the usual sonic relationships, with the drums, reduced in volume, taking a place amongst the various other instruments (rather than obliterating them) including the quasi–instrument which is Hess’ occasional eerie whistling, and by the delicacy with which his vocals, often nearly whispered and nearly always characteristically mellifluous, dusted off the jagged lyrics, I resolved to devote an entire article to his other music at some point in the near future.

The time has arrived, and from his Youtube channel I’ve compiled a playlist of some of the videos made to supplement his songs. In this case, they do not add much by way of elucidating his musical practice itself, but are, rather, small works in their own right, less works of art however than instances of wit: in them it’s above all his sense of humor which is illustrated – its tone, lightly bemused, diverges widely from the dour heaviness under which some of his country’s contemporary cinema is known to weigh down its audiences, and is actually comparable to the whimsicality that’s frequently exhibited in the fashion shows of the Danish designer Henrik Vibskov, with whom in fact Hess Is More has collaborated more than once.

All the same, though, the result is not likely to be loud laughter, but rather, wry smiles and perhaps a chuckle or two at the crossing of plays on words with humorous notes ... This sense of humor is particularly fine in the two more recent songs, which were included two years ago on the album Creation Keeps the Devil Away?, an LP on which Hess was joined by several other quite capable musicians and vocalists (Bang Chau, Michael Hanf, Thor Madsen,
Matt Parker, Nomi Ruiz, and Mary Joe Stilp); but there’s no lack of it in the earlier ones, either.

Yet on occasion, the deliberate use of ambiguity in the lyrics (which the arrangements then echo) comes into its own better in the absence of a visual treatment which substitutes a simple definite scenario in the place of the double entendres: this is especially the case in the earlier number “Yes Boss” (a collaboration with Chau), and for this reason I haven’t included that video in the playlist. The audio track alone, uploaded by Hess on his Soundcloud page, unsheathes its hooks much more when actual images have not been attached to it.

Also available on that page is a track included three years ago on an EP, an instrumental piece that with its sonic ironies is no less witty in its vocal–less way than are the songs in theirs, “Igor Goes to Hollywood.”

**Headaches**

*(June 16, 2013)*

“Headaches,” one might think, would certainly rank low on a list of potential monikers for a musician, lest possible audiences be scared off – nomen est omen – but in New York there is someone who in fact records and performs under that rubric, a Canadian of several talents (he is also a photographer) from Edmonton by the name of Landon Speers, whom I featured in passing a while back. Although in his case the moniker was not the result of some mere idea but relates to an ailment he has said he’s suffered from chronically for a long time, fortunately the music itself is untroubled by it: there isn’t, in the electronica of this prolific sound–artist, anything that’s ear or head–splitting, and actually one of the functions of this music may itself be to still the pain, such that the activity involved serves as an analgesic or represents an answer to the search for some relief from, some remedy for a long–lived condition.

To judge by the reports on his website and blog, his dual professions – for in his work they do run in tandem – lend his life an itinerant character; most
recently, as a musician he’s been touring alongside the band Purity Ring, and taking snapshots of the band–members in his capacity of photographer: and in general both the photographs he has published there, and the tracks he’s uploaded on his Bandcamp and Soundcloud pages, the solo efforts on his part and the collaborations with other musicians alike, exhibit the provisional condition of those who are on the road or doing a piece of the road together. Whether visual or sonic, they are recordings of fugitive moments, and here one feels that nearly everything – images, sounds, moods, paths, and even this “way of life” altogether, insofar as it is one – is stamped by and signifies its own transience.

In his music as in his photography, Speers is prolific; when examining the results one may sense that they, though of course it’s for their sake that the activity on the whole was undertaken, are at bottom the by–products of a process that is for him essentially vital – in other words, he does not so much make as exhale them: the sheer abundance of Speers’ image–streams may be taken to suggest that his creativity or productivity manifests something of the metabolic character of a living exchange or circulation of substance, while on the musical side it’s noteworthy how well his collaborations with other musicians generally turn out. Of these several have been made available on his Bandcamp page; while recently on Soundcloud he has uploaded a mixtape of songs or numbers that made their debut in the live concerts on his tour: this he’s sent forth under the title “Share My Love.”

From amongst his other pieces, some other music stands out: firstly, a recent number, “No What?,” then, from the early compilation Dirty Hairy, four tracks, “Simmer Down,” “Missed Train,” “Should Have Worn Shoes,” and “Dizbizy 1”; more recently, from Doc. 1, put out under the alternative moniker Bad Dad, an inventive vocal track, “Bad Dad – 00100”; and finally, to round all this off, three tracks he posted two years ago, “I Wasn’t Born Yesterday,” “Poor Decisions,” and “Success.”
The Sunday Round–Up on Soundcloud

(June 16, 2013)

For today’s voyage around Soundcloud, the first track comes from a recently released debut album, *Disco to Die To*, put out by an evidently acronymically-inclined duo in Los Angeles, OOFJ, formed, their Facebook page informs us, out of a shared love for French synthesizer music and Russian themes, by the South African singer Katherine Mills Rymer and the first-name-only multi-instrumentalist and producer Jenno; and in “Pinstripe Suit” one can hear the sounds of those favorite things wafting through arrangements whose character is decidedly symphonic (Jenno’s musical background having been classical).

The second track comes courtesy of the very dedicated small record label Awesome Tapes from Africa, which, when it is not busy disseminating new material, exists in order to reissue older recordings by artists from that continent; one of these, scheduled for release later this month, *Hailu Mergia and His Classical Instrument*, makes available again after thirty years an album by this Ethiopian musician, and on the label’s Soundcloud page one of the tracks, “Shilela,” has been uploaded as a sample of the entire record.

One relatively recent number by the New York band Nihiti – whose own obscurity is matched by its music’s – is “Ghosts and Lovers,” which is today’s last track. In it the texture of industrial music is wrapped around a pattern which was perhaps drawn from minimal music, and the haunting whole which results might lend itself readily to accompany a short, slow, shadowy work of contemporary choreography, most likely for a trio of dancers.
Another instance of an artist and a musician in one is Ilpo Jauhiainen, a Finn who’s lived in a number of cities abroad, notably in London, Tokyo, and Berlin (weeks ago I featured his track “Landwehrkanal”), and who, these days, when not at work in and around Helsinki, remains a frequent traveller, most often to Africa. In his music (on which he currently seems to be concentrating much of his effort) one hears the influences of these various locales arranged in a kinetic collage or as though overlaid in patches, into compositions organized according to a pattern that’s as much visual and even tactile as it is auditory: the particularly graphic character of schematic maps or globes seems to have lent a shape to Jauhiainen’s ventures into the acoustic domain, especially the more recent ones.

If one bears in mind the varied provenance of the different sonic elements he deploys, one might even discern in these sequences the translation of the contiguities of his personal itinerary into the music’s overlapping sonic successions.

More specifically, a comparison may plausibly be drawn between Jauhiainen’s numbers and the abstract geometric paintings of Odili Donald Odita, with whose works, even before Jauhiainen became acquainted with them – though of course this is one of those analogies that only come to the fore in retrospect – his own already evinced an elective affinity in terms of their form; and as for the feeling they each convey, a similarly luminous–voluminous atmosphere envelops both.

On his Youtube channel he has uploaded several of them, with still images as a visual accompaniment. Although most of these are available on his pages on Soundcloud and Bandcamp, there is one which I should like to include here, “A Scent from Afar,” already several years old though uploaded only recently: it can serve as the kernel for a future playlist, when and if Jauhiainen turns his attention seriously to video as a medium in its own right.
A new album, he has announced on his Facebook page, will appear in the near future, and on his Soundcloud page he’s made available a sample of it as a foretaste, “Rain 2.”

Meanwhile, on his Bandcamp page, from the earlier album Sound Pearls, there is the track “Leaving Asmara.”

And from Shimmer and Bloom, the subsequent album – one however that really ought to be listened to integrally – three numbers may be recommended, “Diode to Tokyo” (with Tero Heikkinen on electric guitar), “This World,” and “Shine” (with words and vocals by Adam Ferns).

The Sunday Evening Round-Up on Soundcloud (June 23, 2013)

This evening I have relatively little time on my hands (an interesting text near to completion is still in need of some work) and so, without further ado, the round-up: three tracks that do not lay out soundscapes so much as, for want of a better term, moodscapes, with the moods in question ranging from the ethereal and eerie to the industrious and yet easily exhausted – although the three are all suffused with tones which sound like they were struck off stone or metal, and accompanied by the half-clear echoes of human words.

The first is in fact the premier track of a newly-formed musical duo in the USA, Cathedrals, which provides information about itself only sparingly but whose aspirations, as given in the duo’s statement of purpose, are striking, and even, one might say, true to its name. “Cathedrals’ aim is to contrast dark and light sounds, creating an ethereal soundscape that evokes imagery in the listener’s mind.” Well, to put this sentence to the test, “Hapchance” may be consulted.

From Reading in England comes tonight’s second track, “Nothing Dub,” an original number by an outfit that specializes mainly in distinctive remixes
and mash–ups, Version Big–Fi, in musical idioms which owe much to the ways in which the musics of the country’s former colonies in the West Indies have been received and adapted in the UK.

To a sound artist in Auckland operating under the name Reflex Condition is owed tonight’s last track, “No Limitations,” and since especially for this riveting workshop of a number a comment would add nearly nothing, I’d best simply let it speak for itself unreservedly.

Givan Lötz

(June 26, 2013)

In Johannesburg there is yet another dual citizen shuttling between the realms of music and the visual arts; his name is Givan Lötz, and his short piece “Strutt” was already featured one Sunday here a couple of months ago, not least on account of the brisk pace of the music (which its title, if one squints at it, may itself already suggest): his other work is no less noteworthy, and so to him it’s now time to devote some further consideration.

To begin with, on his Soundcloud page, Lötz offers a bold statement concerning the source and impetus of his work. “I am an artist because I am uncertain,” he writes there, and his “art–objects are, first and foremost, results of a philosophical inquiry” into the subject of “what it means to be human” – a description which, although it may sound portentous and overly broad at first, actually begins to seem to fit the evidence in his case, once one has pondered it. What’s being conducted here is an exercise in philosophical anthropology or the study of human nature, for what Lötz seems to pose through the media of music and art are questions about the content and the limits of the meaning which may plausibly be attributed to the human body’s various organs of sense, singly and in co-operation with one another. Of course, these questions (if that is the right word for them) are not stated as such, and the sole way to formulate them is by deciphering what Lötz calls the “results,” individually and in the aggregate – with what degree of accuracy the interpret-
ers themselves can only conjecture; nonetheless it’s in this vein that the following remarks are offered.

On his several sites, most recently on his Bandcamp page, Lötz has loaded a series of short compositions whose titles refer to a few of the most specific modes of activity of the organs of sense, in their perceptive and/or communicative capacity – the numbers “Gasp,” “Gush,” and “Glare,” for instance – while on his Vimeo channel he’s paired them with what he calls “motion canvases,” abstract kinetic screen-paintings whose color and composition owe something to the color-field painters on the one side, the mature Mark Rothko on the other; even though they are in movement, visually, these “canvases” tend to envelop the viewers, quite in the manner of those older painterly works, while the music has it seems been given the task of countervailing our absorption in them: this is a point which is well exemplified (or not, as the case may be) by “Gasp” and “Glare” in particular.

Thus in these works, Lötz counterposes the visual movement to the musical, in order that the audience be held in a state of tension as long as both last – which may have been one reason for keeping them short in duration. Evidently Lötz wants to maximize the alertness of those who are watching and listening, as though to lead us to become aware, firstly, that our inference of a camera panning quickly (generally from left to right) imbues our perception of the music itself with an even greater velocity, and secondly, conversely, that our registration of the already rapid tempo of what we hear sharpens our conclusion that actually it is the camera which is moving and not the fields of color passing by across the screen: whenever our own movement, actual or virtual (as the movement of the camera here stands in for our own), happens to affect our very sense of space, this modulation is brought about by a peculiar reciprocity between the eyes and the ears, as though they were then each engaged in interpreting the other’s signals while also and at the same time transmitting their own specific perceptions to us – a twofold process which both sets of organs can sustain effectively only for a quite limited span of time before, with fatigue supervening, our minds would be left to wander in obscurity.

This brief summary, I hope, goes some way towards elucidating one part of the “philosophical inquiry” from which these “results” have sprung. Yet in pulling it together, a further significant element in them came to light, one
which likewise beckons to be deciphered; for there is one of these works where the name of the musical composition does not match that of the “motion canvas” corresponding to it, and in this case the discrepancy itself elicits thought: whereas the video is called “Gaze,” the music was provided under the title “Unsee,” and in the face of so literal a contradiction as this, how could one not pause for thought?

Well, accordingly, and taking that initial title to represent a cue, please consult the musical composition alone, without the visual accompaniment.

☞ Now I’ll venture to guess what Lötz had in mind in underscoring the verb to unsee so prominently; by this he may have alluded to an inherent characteristic of visual perception itself as a process, namely, that insofar as the capacity of sight is being utilized purposefully, every further moment of vision will erase much of the aggregate of the visual perceptions that went before, in effect unseeing them, though for the most part their vanishing transpires below the threshold of awareness: given the rapid succession of the impressions rendered by this organ of sense, it can perhaps only operate properly – and this becomes the more probable, the more deliberately vision has been turned to use – when many of those that are delivered, are once arrived nearly as soon disregarded, such that it’s under this condition alone that anything in particular could be seen at all, for any tract of time, long or short as it may extend. So, in other words, seeing requires unseeing, or at least it does so in the more overtly focused modes of its activity; it is an organ of sense which, perhaps unlike the others, may be utilized largely by virtue of a concurrent negation of the perceptions it yields: and this odd reflexive feature of vision becomes perhaps nowhere else more obvious than in that peculiarly purposive mode, gazing.

(If for no other reason than that his “motion canvases” are visually both so abstract and so kinetic – and this characteristic will be heightened even more if one turns off the accompanying sound – while one looks at them, one may be made especially aware of how much one must unsee in order to continue to see anything of them at all.)

Although at this juncture the “inquiry” would already have covered quite a lot of ground, Lötz does not rest here, however. He seems, rather, to have set
the stage for a further excursion of thought, of which, lest I stray too far, I shall merely indicate the probable point of departure: it aims to consider whether and, if so, how closely this auto–negation within visual perception itself in turn might be related to the human mind’s capacity to forget – where the latter is understood similarly, as a very active and even purposive ability without which the mind would very soon be smothered under a surfeit of its own contents.

At times, however, an organ has first to malfunction or to cease to discharge its ordinary function within an interlocking whole which is meant by its nature for activity, if an impetus towards comprehending the inherent organization of the latter is to arise; here, in this concern with the part played by unseeing in sight (and possibly also, albeit tangentially, with forgetting’s role in mental operations generally), his intellectual interest itself may perhaps be accounted for in this way: something must already have gone awry in vision itself. Now, since the question concerns the eyes, which make up one part of the system that would otherwise comprehend but is now itself to be comprehended, the “inquiry” which preceded these “results” would have had to be conducted with a considerable intellectual adroitness; thus it was that Lötz had reason to draw attention to the role unseeing plays in visual perception by means of an exclusively aural work: for these other organs of perception, the ears, evidently do not operate under any similar necessity of voiding their previous perceptions if they are to continue to function properly – they seem to have no need of an analogous unhearing in order to hear at all – or at least, if they too are acknowledged as being under the sway of some such compulsion, they will be affected by it to a much lesser degree than are the eyes. Consequently, unhearing, in this sense of the term, is far less likely ever to become a topic for reflection, whereas auditory perception as such, with its specific constitution so different or essentially divergent from its visual counterpart, may in fact furnish the point of reference or tertium comparationis without which, concerning the sense of sight in its ordinary and its disordered states, one could neither think nor say anything intelligible in the first place.

It seems evident that Lötz has pondered this and related topics from numerous angles, to judge by the “result” that is the video he made for his song
“Easy Now,” and actually from this work just as from his “motion canvases” it may plausibly be conjectured that of the several senses it is auditory perception which is of primary importance for him, intellectually and artistically.

Right at the beginning the theme is provided: in as many words, the human “body is alive,” by which Lötz evidently means to suggest that it is teeming with life or that its various constituent parts tend strongly to lead lives of their own, apart from the orderly co–operation whereby it exists as a whole, such that the ensemble may be thrown out of joint with ease, the organism thus devolving into something akin in miniature to the old bellum omnium contra omnes or a scene of sound and fury, signifying nothing. This break–down is illustrated by the visuals, which comprise sequences where some human gestures are photographed in close–up and/or duplicated and stitched together repetitively, in either case extracting them from the wholes in participating in which they possessed a modicum of meaning and dignity, thus rendering them absurd and often even positively repellant and bizarre to the viewer; it is as though one were witnessing the antics of the inmates in an insane asylum, and they are far from easy to watch. So this is perhaps the most disturbing piece of work he has made, replete with the greatest number of parts that have supplanted their former wholes and now turn unhappily against one another, in so doing posing themselves as problems which in succession, one right after the other and none for very long, briefly solicit our attention, however resistant we may be to tender it – until, that is, one can no longer keep one’s eyes open and chooses as it were to unsee this spectacle, henceforth simply listening to it instead. Thus, somewhere in the middle of “Easy Now,” back to the acoustic sphere alone we are sent.

☞ By way of conclusion, there remain two other works I’d like to mention, as they also comprise the “results” of a sort of “philosophical inquiry,” this time into the nature of the human body as a whole; but it is a very different kind of whole than the common one, for in these performances the body’s physical and communicative nature is re–envisioned or indeed re–enacted according to precepts drawn from the stylized practices of Butoh drama, whose explicit aim is to undo the subordination of the body to the personality: this may be seen in the work “Undoing,” which Lötz helped conceive and to which he con-
tributed the music, and in “Black,” directed by Chloe Coetsee, whose sound-track he supplied likewise. (The latter he has not loaded on his own Youtube channel, but it is available elsewhere on that system.)

Beaucrat

(June 30, 2013)

Featured in passing several weeks ago, on an extended Sunday outing through Soundcloud, was a track by a half–anonymous sound artist in Ottawa who calls himself Beaucrat, a moniker which refers to his regular employment as some kind of bureaucrat and, by abbreviating the term, suggests the distance there is between the profession and his own preferred activity, while nonetheless holding open the possibility that the two might not be entirely unrelated, for all that, with the dissociation then representing simply another facet of an underlying connection. Accordingly, in this case it would be tempting to explore the influence exerted by bureaucracy, which encroaches more and more on everything today in our world, or corrodes it all from the inside, on present–day music specifically, an influence both direct and by way of the reaction against, the flight to islands of refuge from that insidious rule by Nobody. Since, however, there’s no time nor place right now to touch on matters of this sort, off to one side I shall set them silently, behind a provisional barrier or un mur sonique – to spin a variation upon the title of that previously–featured track.

The music itself is ferrous and replete with the sound of synthesizers, though simultaneously it conveys the minor comfort of listening to something which one may already have heard and known; what Beaucrat brings to bear while also updating and speeding it up a bit, is a musical idiom drawn from the darker synth–pop of the 1980s: and as for the vocals, both his own alone and his duets with the singer Margo Gontar (who, though living in Kiev, works frequently with musicians in other countries, evidently by means of the Internet), the names which spring to mind are Jim Morrison, Nico, Siouxsie –
all voices conspicuously deep in timbre, with some rough edges, and well-travelled through the lower reaches of frustration, doubt, and pain.

It was not for nothing that he covered New Order’s “Blue Monday” recently, and this strong rendition may be found on his Soundcloud page.

Three of his own recent songs in which this musical profile is shown with especial sharpness, are “Close Your Eyes,” “Pull to Black,” and “Falling Awake.”

Thus far he has I believe collaborated twice with Gontar, and the results leave one hoping for more, especially the one they call the “darkest” of the three different versions they offer of “All We Are Strangers.” And their initial collaboration, under the title “There Is No Pain (That Doesn’t Hurt),” is an ode which one is not likely to forget.

The Sunday Evening Round-Up on Soundcloud

(June 30, 2013)

It seems that tonight’s round-up has been captivated by the relative obscurity of the words of some languages I don’t know and by a semi-opaque collection of letters in the one I know best.

This compendium of three songs ventures, to begin with, into some new territory and returns with a first: courtesy of the local label Recordiau Llwyddgar, a lovely electronic track is available on Soundcloud, “Celwydd,” produced by the Welshman Ifan Dafydd, with vocals by him (I believe) as well as by Alys Williams – in Welsh. Although the meaning of the lyrics I can only guess at, the qualities of the music and the voices speak for themselves.

Second on the program is a recent track by a heavily electronic outfit in London to whom some attention was paid here around a year ago, a trio, perhaps Anglo-Danish-German in nationality, comprising the vocalist Dee Rüshe, the keyboardist Owen Pratt, and the drummer Jonas Ranssøn, called
Női Kabát (which is a Hungarian term for a kind of woman’s jacket). The name of this voluminous song is “Make Room! Make Room!”

Tonight’s list’s last track hails from New York or, more specifically, I’d wager – taking as a geographic clue the acronym or abbreviation, ASTR, by which the mysterious duo which made it is known – from the East Village, a tune called “Razor” with vocals that are Rihannaed in timbre, lyrics in which a heart rendered unsure by its own raw disorder speaks for and against itself, and arrangements whose jaunty energy replicates nothing so much as the surges of vitality one feels while walking through that neighborhood or any of the others like it.

Postscript. Rüsche has informed me that Női Kabát is entirely English and not, as I had surmised in view of the surnames, an Anglo–Danish–German troïka, although only Pratt and Ranssøn live in London: Rüsche resides in Budapest.

“Stay” x3

(July 1, 2013)

They escaped my attention at the time when first uploaded earlier this year, as I was preoccupied by the renovation of the websites, but by way of belated rectification here are three very moving versions of an already wrenching song, the duet by Rihanna and Mikky Ekko, “Stay,” performed by Tiago Braga, Ali Brustofski, and Jasmine Thompson, each of which I’ve added to their respective playlists.

Each of these three takes on both parts in the song, a conspicuous feature of their performances which multiplies the distress of the heart that “Stay” sings of, an inner turmoil intertwined so closely with this organ’s sheer feeling of still being alive as nearly to be inseparable from it; thus even more than between persons, it is within one’s heart itself that friction keeps passion
heated, and a love without this inward strife or, to use a plainer word, hurt, would amount to no love at all: accordingly, it’s one of the virtues of these three renditions that in them the staying power of human hearts is itself personified and addressed, as though, at least for the time being, it were a participant in some conversation deep within oneself of which one can perhaps overhear something if one knows how to listen closely.

(Here, in parting, a remark about the arrangements in “Stay” may perhaps be in order: the regular repetition of the same chord or chords both heightens the tension in this song, indeed pushing it so far that one might find it difficult to bear, and yet also, and at the very same time, precisely because these repetitions constitute a musical structure so fixed in measure, affords some relief from it to those who are listening.)

Lana Del Rey’s
“National Anthem”

(July 4, 2013)

Of the current batch of stars on the top shelf in pop music, standing apart from the others for several reasons, not least by dint of her rare and rather inimitable voice on the one hand, on the other the disillusionment and indeed the bitterness which may be discerned between the lines of the self-written lyrics, is Lana Del Rey: these features play a role in rendering her songs difficult to cover satisfactorily, and even the mere number of attempts to do so, to judge simply by the quantity of what’s available on Youtube, is small in comparison to the results of all the attention lavished by their fans on many of the others. Now, nowhere else is the nearly prohibitive difficulty more evident than in the case of her “National Anthem,” which with its uncommon style of delivery and the conspicuous irony in its lyrics might seem to be particularly unapproachable.
Yet on Soundcloud I have come across three covers that recreate it with success, all of them by men, as though to underscore, by the vocal recasting that was requisite, just how much of a challenge the task had posed. Each of these versions brings into greater prominence a few different facets which were, though not lacking, less than evident in the original, and in so doing they complement one another: thus, some minor flaws notwithstanding, they seemed to me to merit inclusion in a short playlist which, as a whole, would then serve as a counterpart or perhaps even as something like a key to Del Rey’s song. Especially on an occasion like today.

When the very thing (taking the largest view) one would like to celebrate, namely, all of our various res publicæ (those of us, that is, fortunate enough to have or ever to have had one), appear much of the time off in the distance to tantalize us like mirages – when, in other words, the public realm all too often is buried under layer upon layer of private matters conducted in the open, to the point where the very distinction between the two is nearly lost altogether – then some serious reflection is in order, and to this an impetus could be tendered by the cynicism and disenchantment that’s so patent in this “National Anthem.”

The first two of the covers are the work respectively of Davi Shane, a singer who goes by the moniker Davi, from Los Angeles, and the Parisian vocalist and guitarist Vincent Karaboulad, who’s active as a recording artist under the rubric of a band called Paris–by–Night; there follows, by way of an interlude, a striking revision of the original by the Irishman Gowan Royd, who achieves a surprisingly beautiful and dance–worthy result when he plays everything in it, lyrics and arrangements alike, in reverse: and the set concludes with a remarkable rendition harboring flashes of vocal and instrumental wit by a young talent in Longview, Texas, Zackary Hinson, from whom further interesting performances may well be forthcoming in the near future. (In fact, one would not realize how young Hinson actually is, were one to venture a guess based solely on his music itself.)

Finally, around a year ago, some enterprising individual uncovered the recording of her original demo of the song, in the form of a video, and posted it on Vimeo: so in order to furnish an additional point of comparison by which some facets in Del Rey’s final version may be brought out more fully, I’ll turn the last word over to its predecessor.
Midsummer Music by Maxwell Demon: Aurora

(July 5, 2013)

With a fine sense of the right time and place, Maxwell Demon, a singer and musician from Long Island featured here a couple of times before, has released a new album on his Soundcloud page, Aurora; at least in comparison to his first, the sound is brighter, the tempo more even–keeled, and so the season is clearly not passing him by: in these songs we’ve been provided with a sampler of some of the different moods of a midsummer music.

Three tracks may be cited as representative.

The album begins with a number which anthologizes several of the concerns harbored by the young and disaffected currently, “Cross” (perhaps it could just as well be entitled “Doublecross”), and which with some luck and more exposure could – this possibility is conceivable – serve as an anthem for those who still seek one; nor is it by chance that its conclusion comes quite suddenly.

Second on the album is the song “Laidback,” which does in fact live up to its name: it sounds as though it had been composed by, or else for, someone stretched out alone on a tiny raft resting motionless in the middle of a small lake, gazing up at the sky at some hour of the afternoon or early evening, and thus it embodies the halcyon feeling of high summer, however briefly it may happen to endure, at this or that latitude.

Ending even more abruptly than the first track did, and actually more noteworthy for its music than for the lyrics, is “Castles”: in fact the meaning of the lines, while evidently dark, is actually rather opaque, but by way of compensation for this obscurity, the arrangements are the most urban, the most quickly–paced, of all the songs on this album – this is not so much a Long Island as it is a New York City tune. (For, after all, even at the height of the summer, the locals do return to, or venture into, the city now and again.)
The Sunday Evening Round–Up on Soundcloud

(July 7, 2013)

Today’s round–up includes two energetic versions, one a cover, the other a remix, and a bravura original, the former the work of two established acts in Los Angeles and the latter by one in Manchester which, at least in its current form, evidently is just getting started.

 avalia The English band (if in fact that’s what it is) is called Black Tooth Songs, and around a month ago it released a debut EP on its Soundcloud page; the third track recalls something of the rhythm and blues of forty–five years ago, flavored with some punk notes from ten or so years later in the vocals and the arrangements – thus suggesting that in the right hands there might be life left in both these musical idioms, especially when conjoined with one another. It is entitled “100 Short.”

Of tonight’s two representatives of the diverse pop music life in Los Angeles, the first is the band Cage 9, for years now a feature on the hard–rock scene there and elsewhere; a point of entry into its music is offered by a quite loud and quite enjoyable version of that synth–pop anthem from the eighties, Depeche Mode’s “Enjoy the Silence,” which is refashioned above all for some virtuoso electric guitar.

A remix of “Roadhouse Blues” by The Doors, by the DJ duo The Crystal Method (that is, Ken Jordan and Scott Kirkland), completes tonight’s round–up. Here the musical genres which enter the mix are too many to list, but they are expertly put together, with attention to detail and evidently some skilled handwork at the consoles and turntables: it should serve them well during the tour through several American cities on which the two will soon be embarking.
Benin City

(July 12, 2013)

A couple of weeks ago, a new trio in London called Benin City released a debut album entitled *Fires in the Park*, and as one of the tracks included on it, a promising number, “Baby,” had previously been featured here, and the record as a whole moves on a comparable level, a further presentation now seems to be in order – especially on a calm Friday evening, as the band’s music in its various moods sounds as though it were made for the longer stretches of free time of the weekend.

Benin City, comprising the drummer Theo Buckingham, the vocalist Joshua Idehen, and the saxophonist Tom Leaper, is named after a provincial capital in Nigeria, and in its case this is no arbitrary gesture, as some elements of African music enter into its distinctive mix, lending an accent to the more common genres (in which, to be sure, the heritage of that continent is also patent), rhythm and blues, jazz, and rap most obviously, which the three musicians delight in combining in ways and proportions that vary from song to song yet which all sound as though they were at least relatively new. As such their arrangements are fine complements to the lyrics (or texts, whenever they are not so much sung as declaimed), which have been written with care and even at times a measure of poetic daring and self-assertion: for this is music that aims to leave a mark.

On the band’s Soundcloud page, *Fires in the Park* is offered to listeners in its entirety, while the album may also be purchased via the usual channels.

Three tracks afford some idea of where Benin City hails from, musically speaking, and where it might next be headed: “Faithless,” “Winning Streak,” and “D.A.M.”

Its further ventures, both in the studio and on stage (there are a number of concerts planned for the near future) will be ones to follow, either live or else virtually, through the visa-less realm of the Internet.
“Young Love” by Eli Lieb

(July 13, 2013)

The singer and songwriter Eli Lieb, formerly a denizen of the East Village and now relocated to his hometown in Iowa, has penned an original song and produced a video for it which he’s loaded onto his Youtube channel, “Young Love,” and the intelligent lyrics of the former and the smart montage of the latter have prompted me to add to the playlist this taut ballad for today of those who are undone but yet, precisely for this reason, still feel themselves to be alive.

Postscript. Eli Lieb, I’ve since learned from the dedicated team at his main fansite, currently resides in Los Angeles.

The Sunday Evening Round–Up on Soundcloud

(July 14, 2013)

Covers furnish the substance of this evening’s round-up, which wends its way northward after beginning on the other side of the world – in Buenos Aires.

There the band TangoCrisis has brought some of the sonic resources of tango to bear upon rock and pop music, and the fine example of the music that results may be listened to in a version of Depeche Mode’s “Policy of Truth” notable particularly for a smooth integration of the accordion into its ensemble of instruments.

Transporting ourselves now onto quite another scene – different hemispheres, cities, idioms – we encounter what sounds to be an all–electronic ren-
dition (perhaps including the occasional use of Auto–Tune for certain special vocal effects) by the Chicago DJ Devin Whitaker of Lana Del Rey’s “Carmen,” which represents something of a feat, for this song must surely be one of this rather inimitable singer’s most resistant to being covered at all well.

Previously active under the name New West but now performing under his own is the Philadelphia singer and songwriter Chris Zurich, whose version of “Where Have You Been” by Rihanna is tonight’s last track; it is distinguished by a voice seeking and beseeching in turns and by arrangements that boldly manage to be dreamy and mechanical–measured all at once.

**On the Lam**

*(July 21, 2013)*

Vincent van Gogh, “La Nuit étoilée” (1889), detail (The Museum of Modern Art)
This evening I had planned to be dutiful and compile one of the by now usual round-ups, but the temperature here has me in its grip instead, and to the degree that under its influence I can still think at all, it’s things such as radiance and brightness and swirling vortices of energy, etc., which are on my mind, and not music – so I’m going on the lam and the weekly compilation will simply have to wait another week to appear. In lieu thereof, a fitting detail from one of van Gogh’s late paintings.

A longer text about the human voice will with a bit of luck be posted sometime early in the coming week.

James Overton

(July 25, 2013)

Even in an age when, thanks to electronic technology, the human voice can be recorded and then utilized in music as though it were simply another kind of instrument, and thus is subject to all the manipulations of the musicians, nonetheless it remains sui generis to a considerable degree. Not least because of its physical constitution, which differs essentially from the various limitations imposed upon the others by their respective constructions, it may happen that the voice only reveals or (a better verb) emits some of its own significant potentialities – which would otherwise remain undisclosed – when it is operated at less than peak proficiency or with technique that’s deficient on certain points. Then the aim of remedying weaknesses such as these, although it is commendable and comprehensible in general, might need to be implemented with caution in the case of a voice (whereas as concerns all the other instruments, a musician’s relative lack of skill could be overcome without any compunction), lest the latter’s natural power be adulterated or else refined away entirely in the course of “improving” it.

This line of thought is occasioned by a young amateur singer in Sydney named James Overton. He excels in conveying in sound the rubbed–raw feeling which is the condition of minds and hearts aching under their own pas-
sions, and thus he best shows what his voice can do, when he sings the blues (or songs either similar in genre or mood, or to which the blues have leant an undertone): for, in the blues, the voice may be disposed in ways which elsewhere would be taken simply as signs of weakness or lack of expertise, such that, with every momentary vocal tremor, faltering or false note, lapse of wind, and crackling of roughness in the blues singer’s performance, to the organ’s physical nature in general, and in particular to the at times disconcerting influence exerted on it by the heart and the mind in their recollections of distress, listeners’ attention will be called – a result which, although it does not form the whole of the raison d’être for the blues as a kind of song, definitely comprises one major piece thereof. So, it seems, here the singer’s voice tends to rebel against its usual role as pure instrument, and puts its own organic existence on display instead, as though to proclaim that now it is one of the players in a real drama.

In Overton’s case, at least, this self-assertion of the voice is very notable, and its strengths – which are palpable – are intertwined with some faults in an especially intricate fashion, to the point where I rather strongly suspect that work on the latter, if pushed too far, might end in sapping the force which animates the former. Although, on the other hand, even during the very short period of time in which he has been uploading recordings to his Soundcloud page, the deficiencies no longer seem as patent in the most recent numbers as in the earlier ones, and so one could discern an upward trajectory by which he might be borne quite a ways as a singer. Perhaps, in the course of this process, he is acquiring, alongside a greater self-assurance, a better technique with which to modulate the passion he feels, as one hears it embodied in his voice, so that the performances would convey yet not themselves suffer from it.

Of his by now numerous passion-swayed songs, it is a cover of Rihanna’s “Where Have You Been” which manifests perhaps the highest quotient of passion of all – and here the performance is filled without being marred incidentally by it, although the song itself has been transfigured, in a manner which makes me want to linger a while over his version.

Most immediately obvious is the pace, which comes across as moving much more slowly than the original’s, and by virtue of this difference some part of
the meaning of the song which was at most implicit in the original, or even actively obscured by Rihanna’s rapidity, is brought to the fore. With this choice Overton has afforded the listener a sufficient span of time to register the sheer rawness in his voice and to replicate it virtually – which is to say, this quality invites one as a listener to think back to moments when in one’s own life one was aware of one’s voice being in a similar state, having been rendered raw but also and on that very account stronger, seemingly as a consequence of some large passion one felt rolling over oneself, and in effect to observe inwardly all that repeating itself once more: thus, after again ascertaining the evidently causal connection between the two occurrences, one then moves to infer from the powerful rawness in Overton’s voice that the singer too had known a like passion and in his performance really was affected by its influx. In short, as the feeling aroused by this version (whose actual genesis its slow pace may prompt a listener to explore) is *sympathy*, the sense of having had in common an experience that was roughly similar in its essence (which as such is opposed to that dubious species of condescension, *pity*), the kind of pleasure listeners might take in listening to this version, and to several of his other numbers, is or would be the one correlate to sympathy so construed.

*(An aside to the theoreticians. In the preceding I have drawn upon a few points in the fine analysis of communicable states of feeling which Adam Smith provided in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, while also electing to disregard outright any hypothesis of the type advanced by Nietzsche’s *Götzen–Dämmerung* in the section where the third of the “vier grossen Irrthümer” was anatomized, according to which the raw condition of the vocal chords might in fact ever so slightly precede in the order of time the distress of head and heart that would subsequently be attributed to it as its cause, an at best semi–fictional ascription obscuring the reality that between these two there could well exist some other sort of relation than a causal one – running in either direction – or perhaps no actual relation at all.)*

Lest a misunderstanding arise in this connection, I hasten to note that I am not suggesting that the slower pace of his version was also an involuntary effect of his inner state. On the contrary, this tempo seems to have stemmed from a deliberate choice on Overton’s part, the aim having been to stretch the song out so that there be enough of an interval within which the rawness in
his voice might manifest itself as a distinct phenomenon. (The softness of the accompanying music also has a share in holding open the interval.)

As a corollary to this, I’m inclined to remark that, on account of the speed with which she proceeded in the original song, Rihanna passed over this dimension of its possible meaning, and hence to a degree was unfaithful to it as it could have been or be.

Moreover, it is not only the tempo of the song which may be extended to memorable effect, but the voice’s articulations, the intra–vocal joints, as well – and that Overton does this represents another quite noticeable characteristic of his cover. Far more than did Rihanna’s original, in his version the vowels really begin to transmit meanings all by themselves; the distances separating them from the other kind, the consonantal sounds, have often been widened, for one thing, and for another, throughout the course of the song it sounds more and more as though he’s putting everything he’s got into belting them out and even then some: in the middle and towards the end especially, there is little to no holding–back in this rendition, and so the complete result anthologizes several of the signals that may be sent by means of these elements of speech, the vowels, when they are extricated from the lyric text and emitted individually.

What sort of signals are these, then? Well, they are variegated, but here I am interested mainly in those which display the character of a cry, and more specifically, in the context of “Where Have You Been,” those that are cries of pain – that give voice to the distress of the heart and head already mentioned – as well as what in effect are cries for help. Seldom are both kinds of signal admitted so directly into a song, and accorded such prominence there, as they have been in Overton’s version; in consequence, it is interesting to notice how closely the difference between these two sorts of cry seems to align with one major distinction amongst the various vowels as he sings them, namely, between those which are more rectilinear in their projection, on the one side, and the rounder or more spherical ones, on the other – the occasional es and is versus the abundant as, os, and us: and, upon further reflection, the division seems quite sensible, for considered as vocal elements which are able to bear and bare a signal, the former tend of themselves to be sharp and short,
while the latter can be extended quite a bit longer. In this case, however, the
difference neither indicates nor affects the intensity of the feeling one hears
in either instance, quanta which are roughly equal in both.

Although one might be tempted, and actually the idea would be rather plausi-
sible, to aver that in his performance Overton is taken out of himself – the
singer being displaced in an ἔκστασις, off somewhere or nowhere, as long as
the singing itself lasts – the prominent role played in it by these vocable sig-
nals seems to point us in a slightly different direction. For their very intensity
and audibility does not only serve to convey feeling to others and/or call forth
their sympathy, but it also, and, as Martin Heidegger’s Sein und Zeit would
say, more fundamentally, suggests that spaces are from moment to moment ar-
anged and re–arranged responsively to a kind of being which, as it is in every
respect essentially spatial, always finds itself already placed therein, regardless
of whether or not it cares to acknowledge this primary datum of even its most
solipsistic periods of existence. More than that, insofar as they are signals, in
fact these different kinds of vowels each pertain to specific kinds of spaces in
just that way, and in so doing they constitute indices of that fundamental spa-
tiality – even more patent as indices thereof than are the locative adverbs whose
character as such was stressed by Heidegger.* (“Das ›hier‹, ›dort‹ und ›da‹ sind
primär keine reinen Ortsbestimmungen des innerweltlichen an Raumstellen
vorhandenen Seienden, sondern Charaktere der ursprünglichen Räumlich
keit des Daseins.”) All of which is to say, these vowels as emitted do not simply
suggest that spaces intrinsically are correlate to beings capable of encountering
them in a great variety of ways, and furthermore, under particular condi-
tions, of becoming aware of them as such (and, so doing, thus they would aug-
ment the plausibility of a few of Heidegger’s dicta) – no, in addition, and
more importantly, they also render it rather more definite how this may hap-
pen, in the exemplifications offered by their own specific instances. Hence, by
considering this twofold indicative character of theirs, one may infer how it is
that such a “spatialization of space” (if such a quasi–Heideggerian turn of
phrase be permissible to utilize) can occur in general: note, however, that
space is thought and spoken of here only in the plural, and not at all as the ab-

* Sein und Zeit, siebzehnte Auflage, §26.
stract dimension within which every particular space would by definition be subsumed.

With both kinds of vowels, it sounds as though the singer’s body, and not solely the vocal apparatus, has been disposed in a distinctive way. That it is by no means a matter of the embouchement alone, a listener may ascertain by virtue of the sympathy already mentioned which Overton has elicited, a sympathy that for its part likewise attests to the underlying spatiality of our mode of existence, for, far from designating merely an immaterial state of mind, in this sympathy listeners are moved to dispose their bodies in a manner similar to the singer’s (this point might accord well with some of Smith’s analyses in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*), in order to sing along either in the fullest sense of the term, or else silently, with the enunciations but without the breathe behind them, or possibly merely in the deficient mode of a virtual anticipation of themselves joining in – but whatever be the manner in which they are disposed, the sympathy perhaps is at bottom nothing other than this like disposition of their bodies within a responsive, an attendant space. Accordingly, correlate to the two sorts of vowels in question here, Overton’s performance, roughly speaking, involves a pair of spatializations, each of a different shape, both of which, by the same token, listeners may subsequently also replicate and encounter for themselves.

On the one side, the *es* and *is* that ring with cries of pain, are sonic projections: to produce them, one imagines Overton raising himself to his full height, in order to maximize the range of the sound–signal, which would be shot forth even further perhaps if he were to launch it with something of a minor running start, as it were, an extra push by means of a sudden jolt of his head and torso forward just prior to the utterance. Meanwhile, the space which corresponds to the singer’s posture takes its shape under the sway of distress, that is, a state in which one’s foremost concern orientates one towards the zone stretching out some length in whichever direction it is one is facing, at the other end of which there would most likely be someone else or a few other people, whereas any other area around oneself is as good as ausgeblendet – and here, insofar as these sharp vowels amount to acts for which the verb *to beseech* is fitting, their ultimate aim is the reduction or elimination of the interval that exists within this zone and which separates whoever emits them from the other or the others. (In so doing, this intention or activity
could exemplify Heidegger’s peculiar re-definition of the term *entfernen* in the existential context: “Entfernen besagt ein Verschwindenmachen der Ferne, das heißt der Entferntheit von etwas, Näherung.”*) However, perversely, the consequence of the very effort to traverse the gap could well be to elongate it even further, as though the one or those at its other end were retreating into the distance at an equal or a more rapid rate – unhappily then the vocable signals seem to elicit only counter-displacements – and the avoidance too would constitute another dimension of the shape of this kind of space.

As regards the rounder vowels, the *as, os, us*, the singer’s posture is quite another. In this case, perhaps due in part to the relative openness of the mouth, in part to the large volume of breath, there needs be no additional emphatic locomotion; rather the body as a whole remains mainly immobile, poised at the center of a space into which these sounds emanate on all sides: a circumstance which may represent the most important reason why these vocables are thought of as being *round* to begin with (even though *spherical* might be a better description). What is being maximized in a space spatialized in this way, is the obviousness of the location where one is to be found, and the signals are meant to alert someone else to *seek* one out – they are cries for help or at least come across as comprising something of the sort. All the while one is scanning one’s surroundings (turning one’s head around in order to look behind as well, is about the extent of the motion incidental to this posture) in order to find those others whenever they would be approaching, and also, as far as one could, to encourage them to continue, perhaps as a consequence of some sympathy (but *not* pity) which one has occasioned in them, by virtue of some similarity of disposition or situation, antecedent, current, or anticipated. The guiding concern in this enterprise is to locate another who would be one’s equal and capable of tendering the right kind of assistance, in communication that would actually be helpful – even though this might present all the difficulties of picking someone out from the midst of an immense crowd.

* §23.
Although, in the foregoing, several parts of the meaning of the song were laid aside and only a few directly addressed, and these quite partially, Overton’s version, I should like to suggest, invites to such a willfully incomplete consideration by virtue of its pace and the manner in which his treatment of the lyrics stretches them out. Its force is exercised not least in bringing out the significance contained in the vowels, which, in their careworn roughness, are revealed as being avowals by someone who sounds like he has found how all-encompassing loneliness can feel, lived through from within. In his passionate rendition of the song the elements which elsewhere would have been mere sonic particles, now declaim *Here I am!* and *Find me!* by turns – yet here no reply is forthcoming.

Loneliness as an encompassing state is where the song in his version leaves us, and loneliness so understood is what should explain or justify the introduction here of a very few pieces of the analyses in *Sein und Zeit*; for, generally speaking, this state constitutes the main backdrop, usually so obvious there as not to require any mention as such, of the existential conditions Heidegger called “Befindlichkeiten” (although the term itself is met with generally in the singular, it seems patent that he had a number of them in mind), which always involve a corresponding disposition of space, of a space spatialized in a two-fold correlation to the specific condition, in that those enmeshed in those conditions are *placed* by them as long as they last in these spaces in two senses of the verb: *situated* such that others may locate them in a manner befitting the condition they then happen to find themselves in, they also *situate themselves* in such a manner as to enable themselves to move about while within it, however haltingly they must proceed as they do so. Here, in the various delineations of this dual *situation* and of the limited ways in which they mainly and for the most part can become aware of it, whereby *finding* and *seeking* would evidently exclude one another as real possibilities for them, a peculiar pathos may be detected in Heidegger’s text, a tone which testifies to their fundamentally lonely state, as if in the philosopher’s view the basic human locale were henceforth the largest cities – all others having become mere attenuations thereof – the basic human type, the isolated individual lost in the crowds.

Amongst his remarks concerning “Befindlichkeit” in general, there is one that seems especially mysterious at first but for which, it becomes clearer upon further reflection, that whole urban scene constitutes the implicit set-
ting. “Als Seiendes, das seinem Sein überantwortet ist, bleibt es” – i.e., in Heidegger’s terminology, Dasein – “auch dem überantwortet, daß es sich immer schon gefunden haben muß – gefunden in einem Finden, das nicht so sehr einem direkten Suchen, sondern einem Fliehen entspringt.”* According to Heidegger, therefore, the moment of escape from the sway of something, someone else, some other mood, is primary and perhaps also secondary in the order of time, if, that is, one takes his formulation (namely, the verb entspringen included in a dative construction) to mean that in most cases it’s only once the initial flight has come to an end or even itself then been fled from, that anything will subsequently be found instead; thus the eventual finding of it – which is to say, in the present context, the attainment of a fuller self-awareness of one’s own situation, fleeting as the latter in turn might prove to be – would represent a third step: for this very reason, however, insofar as in attaining this awareness the course had been set much more according to the indirection of negative avoidance than by a positive search for something definite, the provisional outcome to an appreciable degree would emerge out of chance and error – forth from the vicissitudes which proliferate most obviously in large cities.

* §29.

That this haphazard urban loneliness is the implicit setting of “Where Have You Been” in Overton’s version as well, will I hope by now have become a plausible statement of the case. Yet, in this performance, there is another dimension to the situation in which the singer found himself when he sought to bring out some of the meaning left untouched by the original, a situation into which one has likewise to venture or re-enter with one’s sympathy if one’s aim is to comprehend his work: and it’s to this, in concluding this overlong essay, that I should like to direct attention. This further dimension emerges when, after the original’s rapid search for its “you” is slowed down and then the singer steps back from that pursuit itself, the latter is offered as a subject for reflection – for how indeed could anyone or anything possibly persist for very long at this peak of desperate intensity? And how did things ever come to this pass to begin with? At which point, rather than squander his passion any


* §29.
longer on someone who’s conspicuously absent, the singer with all the force he can muster, fires off vocal questions at “all my life” instead, a span of personal history that now, evidently in answer to this mood of fierce self-assessment, crystallizes into a region from which he could withdraw if he should so choose, to find himself elsewhere anew.

Rosalie Burrell: “Paved with Gold”

(August 4, 2013)

Some time ago, at the height of the winter, one short orchestral work by a young composer in New York, Rosalie Burrell, was featured in a Sunday round-up, a promising piece entitled – rightly so, given its mysterious nature – “Secret Gardens”; now, a few months later, her career beginning to unfurl, Burrell has received an advanced degree from the Mannes School of Music as well as several honors for her compositions along the way, including two for another, more recent orchestral work, “Paved with Gold”: this she loaded on her Soundcloud page in the midst of the spring, which now seems like an act of significant anticipation, as it is not anything especially vernal so much as the golden ambiance of high summer which this music conjures up.

The composition sets out at a considerable speed to start with, perhaps allegretto for around the first minute and a half, a span measured out by the tolling of bells, before it settles into something like an adagio or andante, in order to convey the simmer of satisfaction that the season at its peak can bring: a feeling that everything is in repletion or arrived at the extreme point of its ripeness, and will abide there for a little while yet.

As one might expect in the case of a composer who clearly knows her Stravinsky, very soon it dawns that here some manner of story is being told (or illustrated) – and, generally speaking, Burrell herself has declared her musical interest in narratives and narration in a short interview posted on Youtube.
Now, what type of story is it which is recounted in “Paved with Gold”?

Well, in the aggregate, her orchestration unrolls the story in a virtually visual–pictorial manner, as though everything that is occurring musically has been placed at a definite distance from the listeners, beyond the reach of their hands: and then, one might observe that a reduction of spatial depth is involved in Burrell’s musical painting. For, instead of replicating, the music depicts the latter, and the events that seem to take place in this composition dance before the audience, much as do projections on a wall.

Because the allusive title suggests that what the composition is in some way about, is the United States, when this music, as it finishes, sounds as though it were rejoining its beginning, one could well reach the conclusion that while listening one finds oneself enclosed at the center of a sonic equivalent of an old trompe–l’œil panorama – and be prompted thus to wonder what, in our world of Behemoths, Leviathans, and Molochs, ever has become of the democratic vistas.

Better Late Than Never: The Sunday Round–Up

(August 4, 2013)

Tonight’s round–up – which comes late (at least in terms of the local time), but better that than never, no? – is an entirely North American affair, starting in California and ending in Canada.

First up is a passionate cover of Coldplay’s “Viva la Vida” by a quite capable musician and gravely–voiced singer in San Francisco, Alex Cornell, which welds the sense of beauty and the feeling of hurt so closely together that a listener might lose track of where either begins or ends.
Next in line is an original song, “Running Like Hell,” by a duo in Montréal which calls itself simply You and Me (otherwise known as Valerie Giroux and James Lemay): their music is the blues, with the complement of instruments one would expect, such as slide guitars and harmonicas, all of which they wield with aplomb, while the vocals are pleasingly suggestive.

The last of the three tracks was uploaded a few days ago by an Ottawa sound artist who’s been featured here before, Beaucrat, and it’s called “Don’t Want This”; here he seems to announce that musically he’ll be veering off into darker, even more Siouxsie–like territories than those he’s explored hitherto.

Michael Bonaventure

(August 8, 2013)

A third mainstay of a small and distinctive body of musical minimalists and electro–acoustic sound artists in Amsterdam, alongside René Baptist Huysmans and Luiz Henrique Yudo, hails from Scotland by way of London, the composer and organist Michael Bonaventure, who performs regularly in a variety of types of venue on both sides of the Channel, while his own works, with their mix of organ and other instruments, have been premiered by ensembles in several countries.

Generally speaking, they conduce listeners to reflection or dreamy trains of thought, and quite often lead to a meditative mood as well; where a listener will go or be taken while the music lasts, is likely to vary idiosyncratically, and so I shall not presume to draw up any maps thereof: but a few short remarks may nonetheless be ventured on one or two points.

Bonaventure does not hesitate to set the musical venue itself in the forefront of the work (a recollection of the formative acoustic and artistic role played by the cathedrals and churches themselves in the experience of the first organ music, is strong with him), such that the bulk of the building as well as the sum of air within it, are in effect both annexed to or encompassed within the instrument itself. In his hands the organ, pre–eminent amongst musical
instruments for the sheer mass of the volume over which it can dispose, is entrusted to compositions within which, their occasional invocations of eeriness notwithstanding, it is as if one were afforded some shelter for the duration – as though one had left a portion of one’s cares in the vestibule in order to enter the rest of this domicile – welcomed by the principle of repetition familiar from minimal music which he has also embraced in his own.

Often, too, the organ’s manifold voices are sounded in order to replicate something like conversation, or more specifically the pivotal moments in the latter: namely, the reciprocal interjections by which a talk is often sustained – not suspended – be they informal, amiable, or intransigent. Whenever the ironic comedy of such interruptions is thus uncovered, the works also evince a serene sense of humor on Bonaventure’s part, one which to be sure is neither raucous nor rorty but rather wry; and it is especially at these moments that the composer invites his audience to smile with him, together in the harmless enjoyment that these foibles into which we all at times fall, have now been re-rendered in lovely music.

Of the shorter pieces which Bonaventure has made available to the public, three recommend themselves here – “Aria,” “Rondeau,” and “Hob” – while from amongst his longer series, the five pieces issued under the title “Dragon” are particularly impressive.

Wyly: “Storytelling”

(August 9, 2013)

On one of the Sunday evening round-ups a while ago, a cover of Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance” by Ben Sevier was featured, a singer and musician in Phoenix who performs under the moniker Wyly – and just earlier this week an original song was loaded onto his Soundcloud page, “Storytelling,” which touches on the obsession called love from another angle and succeeds in leaving an if anything more indelible impression than the other.
In these lyrics there is restraint in the number of words, while the margin of mystery in their meaning is great, and thus the style of delivery – so smooth that the song’s nearly a lullaby – was chosen well by the singer. Here, as it is anything but clear who is addressing whom, perhaps what we are hearing or overhearing is the altercation transpiring somewhere in the heart of a single lover who finds himself torn – not so much in two as in three. Might it not in fact be the case that by turns this lover denounces himself on behalf of a distant beloved, returns to the defense of his own person, and advocates for the unrequited love as such – without at any point resolving this inward dispute at all? For indeed, if it were to be settled, what then would remain of storytelling?

Yet could love even be, or could anyone ever have fallen into it, had not a tale first been told? “Il y a des gens qui n’auront jamais esté amoureux, s’ils n’avoient jamais entendu parler de l’amour,” insisted La Rochefoucauld,* and who of us could credibly claim that in our desires we are unaffected by such a power of suggestion? All the less credibly, the more one has gotten entangled in the amorous fiction while alone with oneself, for, after having heard love talked about, we all each have had to talk ourselves into it, did we not – into that very inclination to fall in love to begin with. Thus, without this inner storytelling, love could conquer nothing at all, and even though notice is rarely taken of it, its serious confusions are sounded again in Sevier’s song.

The Sunday Round–Up on Soundcloud

(August 11, 2013)

In today’s edition of the weekly round–up there are three pieces by artists who have all been featured here before and for whom therefore introductions are

* Réflexions, ou Sentences et Maximes morales, no. 136 in the edition of 1678.
not really needed. (Happily so, it turns out, as I have less time on my hands now than I should like.)

Thus without further ado, in a Sunday sequence which is focused first in a retrospective–cum–reflective mood on the weeks past, and then turns around to prepare energetically for the next, a work by René Baptist Huysmans, “Glough,” with Michael Bonaventure on the organ, a song by Givan Lötz, “Test Me,” and an original, “Daily Composition 2013.8.5,” by Jeremy Henry, otherwise known as the Haus of Glitch.

Five Rounds of A.P.P.L.A.U.S.E.

(August 21, 2013)

A.P.P.L.A.U.S.E. – spelling out the word makes for a catchy hook, but Lady Gaga’s new song didn’t elicit much at all from me initially, when it hit the airwaves last week. To my mind, this emissary of ARTPOP seemed to be too much of a reprise of what she’s done before; moreover, the arrangements came across like a blunt instrument – and if I am going to applaud, generally I expect the music to entice, not to mug me.

The fanfare around the song I attributed simply to the relief of a Gaga-starved world that something, anything, no matter the quality, was now forthcoming from the singer.

Yet after playing it a couple of times, I had to acknowledge that the lyrics did put some clever lines and flashes of humor on display, registering a modicum of the quirky songwriting one knows from numbers such as “Heavy Metal Lover” even in that initial aural-only version. (Could I possibly have been the only one who thought at first that she was singing about “Kunst” rather than about Jeff Koons?) And when the video made its debut on Monday, I began to see what she’s really up to in “Applause” and was prompted to
revise my opinion accordingly. Thus the song had caught up with me, or I with it.

Then a singer and songwriter whom I’ve written about before, the Seattleite known as Wicked Gloves, loaded an appealing remix of the song on his Soundcloud page, and though I did not yet want to stop, collaborate, or – ah, I was listening, I did turn my eye to Youtube in search of a few good versions amongst the host of those which were so rapidly sprouting up there; immediately I came across an instrumental version by a virtuoso on electric guitar in London featured here once before, a musician operating under the moniker of Bealius Octavian (at some point after I wrote about him, unfortunately, his page on Soundcloud ceased to exist), and this stroke of luck decided the matter: I turned to compile a short playlist of covers of the song.

Before long I came across two others which did also elicit my applause and with which I rounded out the playlist. First was a version from a singer in Sydney named Craig Yopp which is full of charm albeit too short – though thus it leaves one wishing for more, much more, a teasing dissatisfaction which, of course, forms a type of hook in its own right; then there was another from London, this one the work of the singer Fynn Farrell, which in its vocal delivery blends rock and soul styles felicitously: so in conjunction with the other, these two triangulate some of the artfulness in the original and make it pop.

(As regards Farrell, some of the comments under his video raise objection to his use of Auto–Tune in the track on which he lays down the chorus. Here I do not intend to delve into the artifice of this technology and shall therefore merely say that in my opinion everything depends on how it is utilized. More important than this generality, however, is that in this particular instance I find there is simply nothing to carp about, and so these petty criticasters will have to live for someone else’s applause than mine.)

Postscript. Just as I was nearly ready to send this post out, it came to my attention that Wicked Gloves’ remix was removed by Soundcloud for alleged violation of copyright. Where would we all be – where would Lady Gaga be, for that matter – if these legal standards, assuming that is even what they are, which may be doubted, were enforced at all strictly and consistently? How
much would remain then? Well, I shall let the track stand, as an empty place-
holder and a mark of shame for Soundcloud. In this case the only thing that
system merits, is reproof. – Second postscript. Instead of four, there are now
five rounds of applause, as Ali Brustofski in New York has also come forward
with a worthy cover of the song; both the playlist and the title are now revised.

Craig Yopp

(August 27, 2013)

Last week, a couple of the covers of “Applause” which I featured were by sing-
ers whom I’d never chanced upon before, and their versions elicited not
merely approbation from me, but also an inclination to listen to what else
they’d done, and so doing I was not disappointed, deciding then to compile a
playlist for each of them.

The first of the two is a singer in Sydney, Australia, Craig Yopp, whose
covers have attracted considerable attention on Youtube – thus far these are
all he has offered there, though somehow I have the idea that a debut as a
songwriter is also on his agenda. But be that as it may, his videos are
stripped–down renditions of some of today’s most popular songs, photo-
graphed simply in black and white, and currently there are three which stand
out, for his delivery does draw forth something moving from “Come and Get
It” or “We Can’t Stop” and thus renders these tunes worth listening to after
all. (Rather more substantial to begin with, of course, is Rihanna and Mikky
Ekko’s “Stay,” a number on which Yopp bestows an equal sensitivity.) Each
has been shortened by him, a procedure which in his hands does not detract
from them at all, but instead brings out a depth of feeling that was more latent
than patent in the case of those two originals.

In some of his covers at least, Yopp shows why songs such as these, whose
lyrics are often so markedly thin – certainly when encountered on the page by
those of us who just like to read – tend nonetheless to be taken as anthems by
the young: here so much really does result from the tone of feeling adopted in
their recital or the expanse of spirit devoted to whistling or humming them,
and in singing them again something as minor yet also as sweet as a sigh or a
vocal tremor can make all the difference in the world.

The range of Yopp’s own voice is situated towards the upper reaches of the
register, and so when he descends on occasion for various choral effects, or
when he lets the rawness be heard, it conveys an especial pleasure.

In his versions the very shortness constitutes a hook in itself (this I men-
tioned already in the previous text), which leads one to hope for more, and
prompts one’s interest in what he’ll be doing and where he’ll be next – or a
year or two from now, for that matter.

Once one has listened to them a few times, what one might begin to hear
in this music is a hint of that slight awkwardness which is met with from time
to time in the demeanors or the personæ of those who exude self–assurance –
the two qualities may even go hand in hand, insofar as it could be precisely by
virtue of their forwardness that they don’t quite fit in to the world around
them, or at least not yet.

Fynn Farrell

(August 27, 2013)

The second of the two singers is a young Londoner who has begun to perform
material of his own as well as covers of other people’s, Fynn Farrell, whose
abundance of skilled passion, in both his singing and his songwriting, is quite
uncommon. It stands to reason that someone who puts so much of all that
he’s got into his work, is going to go far indeed, and as though to confirm this
in advance, in his city and elsewhere Farrell already has accrued a dedicated
squad of fans, or as they also call themselves, “fynnatics.”

His original song, “Cry,” is a memorable recollection of a love that went
unreturned, striking all the right notes for a number in this genre, and as
such it is quite on a par with the covers I’ve also included in the playlist – although those who wish to avoid burning their ears on some bad language, even when as here it’s uttered from the heart, should probably fast-forward over it.

The inclusion of a few rough words in his own songwriting aside, as a performer Farrell’s persona is a distinctive composite in which – alongside what comes across as a near-total absorption in the sense of the lyrics while he also simultaneously translates them into a language of gesture that’s mesmerizing to watch in its own right, composed of an expressive physicality well-punctuated every so often by a Sid Vicious-like snarl – various kinds of vocal style are mixed pleasingly together, rock, rhythm and blues, and soul most prominent amongst them.

Generally he prefers to slow down the songs he covers, and this affords Farrell (who also seems to be quite capable on the piano) more room to hit all the keys of his passion – that the procedure lends his music something of the quality he calls “retro” is a side benefit, though a welcome one. After all, this is a music which evidently means to last, and just about everything he sings already sounds very durable.

His version of “We Can’t Stop” is superlatively moving.

A New Composition
by Rory Smith

(August 28, 2013)

Right in the midst of the many post-publication* mini-after-activities, the mood here is still rather halcyon and elated – and just now, as though to exemplify an exquisite sense of timing, the English composer Rory Smith, whom I’ve written about before and shall write about again, has uploaded a new com-

* The initial publication of the present volume occurred just prior to this posting.
position on his Soundcloud page, which embodies the present state of my sentiment so well that I simply could not resist the temptation to share it. With his predilection for appealing but also obscure graphic symbols, he has entitled it “/\ /\ /\ ” – what they are intended to signify, I have not the slightest idea, though perhaps the whole is meant to be taken as some sort of picture – but his considerable musical inventiveness is well–displayed in this work.

Arising with an insistent crescendo of expectancy and its limbs jangling by the end, Smith’s latest piece leaves a listener feeling like one has finished warming up and is now ready for the main event, whatever it may be.

On a Somber September First ...

(September 1, 2013)

In view of the warclouds over all our heads, there will not be quite the usual round–up this Sunday so much as a pause to consider three pieces of sober opposite music.

From Two Silhouettes in London, a collaboration between Sam Holloway and Francesca Allen, comes an art–song featuring lyrics and vocals by Ollie Godwin, entitled “Look Up,” one imbued by a palpable desperation that can be rendered in words at best poorly, though a sense of the feeling of the piece may perhaps be given by simply recounting a few of the sonic elements to be heard throughout – or rather, through the thicknesses of so distraught an atmosphere.

Here birds crow in the beginning and again at the end, while between these two choruses, bursts of dissonant percussion are interjected, early on doubled by what sounds like a delayed echo or else the clangor of combat on the horizon, as though a scene of violence were advancing towards the audience, then arrived in the acoustic foreground and holding by their very insis-
tence the rest of the arrangements off kilter, finally returning back towards the distance whence they came: but not before something like a shriek – or another kind of furious or otherwise half–insane noise – is emitted. And so this is a song that, within the brief interval which is usually all one can bear to allot to attend to such a thing, addresses us imploringly, albeit without any great confidence that the call will be heeded.

Today’s second incursion of sonic darkness is a piece for piano from the Utrecht composer, musician, and ambient sound–artist Danny van Straten, who records under the moniker Gedrocht; not by chance has the composition been entitled “Alone Again,” as indeed it is back into the environs of solitude that each of us may separately be thrust by turns of events such as those one now is witnessing: and van Straten does not fail to meet the expectations awakened by the title, as his nimble piano work transpires as though it were being performed in a narrow cone of light on a podium in a theatre otherwise without illumination. In this hall, of an audience there is neither a sign nor even a need, as his piece in its isolate condition can introduce each listener individually to the ravishments of despair, and instruct them likewise in the art of dancing by oneself.

The last of the three is a composition in places so subtle that one must strain to hear the music – the middle portion of a work in three parts by a young composer and harpsichordist currently studying at the Oberlin conservatory by the name of Peter Kramer. To it, in an allusion to a memorable line in one of Hölderlin’s poems, he has given the title “Silence of the World of Shades (Five Baroque Flutes),” and this too represents a deliberate choice, as here the flutes in their very evanescence sound as though they were disembodied voices, uttering upon their arrival in some afterlife perhaps the last notes they will ever sing, just before a rumbling underfoot announces the entrance of that host of denizens who are to welcome these newcomers to the nether regions. (Or, in the absence of Kramer’s full work – it is to be hoped that the entire composition will be provided at some point – at least this is what I intuit its scenography as comprising.)

For his part, in the final verse of the tripartite strophe–staging taken from Pindar by Hölderlin in “An die Parzen,” the poem from which Kramer’s title is drawn, he seems to say that once perfection has been heard from in the completion of a poem, the rest will be immaterial.
The Sunday Round–Up on Soundcloud

(September 8, 2013)

This week, the choice of tracks from Soundcloud traverses what is by now a well–traveled triangle between London, New York, and San Francisco, though not perhaps along the most obvious of routes, while the wavelengths on which it moves will be dreamy and slightly downtempo.

Leading things off tonight is a song from Telepathic Love, the debut album of the New York band Heaven, comprising Matt Sumrow on guitar and vocals, Mikey Jones on drums, and Ryan Lee Dunlap on keyboards, which the group’s record label, the Williamsburg–based Goodnight Records, has loaded on its own Soundcloud page; the number is a dark pæan to their city itself which is impressive not least because it can be at once spectacular and sinister, a song replete with a droning delivery and anxious arrangements, one that, in a nod to New York’s origins (as though much of its present–day urban environment were already prefigured in microcosm in those beginnings) they’ve entitled “New Amsterdam.”

Second in line is a song called “Lost” from the album Garden of Dreams, released several weeks ago by The Psychedelic Manifesto in London; this track, with music by Chris Garland and Matthew Leigh Embleton, lyrics by Garland, and the vocals by Garland and Hong Guo, is tranquil in mood where the former’s was tense, and although its topic bears some resemblance to the
other’s, at least insofar as the two touch on the manner in which an environ can at one and the same time both encompass and flee from those who are placed in the middle of it and who seek to ascertain where they are, here the space in question does not seem to be anything so literal as the urban setting. Rather, the surroundings have evidently been made strange even until the point of estrangement on account of something that’s so much a matter of the mind as a belief, namely, the belief in reincarnation. And this peculiar change effected in perception which the lyrics recount, is well–accompanied by the ethereal arrangements.

Last in tonight’s line–up is a venture in a genre the San Francisco sound–artist and singer Bryce Albright, who records under the moniker Bosmink, terms “art pop” – though it is a music very different, to be sure, than that which one has been hearing lately in advance of the release of the eponymous album. This number is entitled “Hang My Hat” and, accordingly, it is a song about the place where one comes to rest, even if the latter idea by the end is turned inside out; in a few lines the lyrics go quite a distance towards accomplishing this, but not before the arrangements, which are both innovative and odd, already have led the way, taking the tune considerably further still. As a result, in spots the whole manages to be simultaneously atmospheric and edgy, rather of a piece with the city which he calls home, in fact.

A Note Concerning 
Tona Scherchen

(September 10, 2013)

The composer Tona Scherchen, whom I wrote an article about towards the end of last year, with the idea of encouraging perhaps some additional interest in her works which might lead, conceivably, to their actual performance, has apprised me in a personal communication that she has taken her leave of the musical life – “pour moi c’est devenu du passé.”
From my point of view, and, more pertinently, that of the potential audience for these works, this decision is, to be sure, a regrettable fact, but she, living for many years in France (now in the vicinity of Nice) and having been closely connected for a long time with the classical–music division at Radio France, has her reasons for leaving music behind her, some of which she has conveyed to me, authorizing their disclosure here.

It appears that the matter at issue is something other than mere neglect, for, as she summarizes the ill–treatment she has received, “la profession de la musique française m’a jeté à la poubelle comme on le ferait d’un chien ga-leux.” Though there exist numerous recordings of her works, of which many were produced under the auspices of Radio France, with few exceptions these the latter has chosen to consign directly to the archive, in effect preventing them from being transmitted at all, even by other stations, and thus, as a consequence of what sounds as though it were a concerted campaign undertaken against her, in the absence of the royalties that otherwise would have been paid, the composer has had to endure significant financial hardship.

As Scherchen herself puts the case, “bien qu’ayant une bonne cinquante d’œuvres déclarées et protégées SACEM” – i.e., they were duly registered with the Société des auteurs, compositeurs et éditeurs de musique – “dont une bonne partie fut à l’origine des productions de Radio France, en France on n’a plus jamais diffusé ne soit–ce qu’une seule de mes œuvres, je ne reçois plus un centime de droit d’auteur de la France depuis plusieurs années et voilà pourquoi à la fin ne me restait plus qu’à être dégoutée de la musique pour en avoir littéralement crevé de faim.”

All this is disquieting indeed.

While hers is a cautionary tale which gives food for thought about the great power that a single institution such as Radio France may exert on a country’s musical life, I do not mean to hammer on any moral to the story, but should like merely to commend her works – for which scores have been published by, inter alia, Universal Edition – to musicians in search of pieces to
practice and to perform. And then, who knows, perhaps I will be able to augment the playlist of her works, after all.

The Sunday Round-Up on Soundcloud

(September 15, 2013)

For this evening’s outing, offered is a collection of some pieces of experimental and improvised music for which the instruments are not simply the tools, instead to a large extent constituting what it is actually about.

Beginning with a collective from Brooklyn which furnishes next to no information about itself, Found Sound Nation, there is not a single track but a set of seven which are the results of an outdoors recording session conducted by these musicians when, in the context of a summer festival held at Lincoln Center in July, they set up a booth “to engage passersby and festival musicians in the spontaneous, collaborative production of original music.” Quite matter-of-factly they have entitled it “Lincoln Center Street Studio” and, the stationary setting of their improvisational exercise notwithstanding, the street is in fact its virtual element, for this is a sequence of tracks which, sonically at least, sets off afoot through the city, as one passer-by amidst the multitude.

There are few constants in this succession: during a span of not much more than ten minutes, the pace speeds up and slows down, while now and again the sounds that are heard advance or recede, as the strolling observers or else protagonists of this urban excursion continue on their ways, zig-zagging through the Manhattan grid, and with each turning of a corner they are precipitated into another mood, are entranced by another scene, or perhaps even briefly enter another and quite different world.
(Do we while wandering in the city find sounds such as these – or have they found us?)

An intriguing and eerie sonic collocation has been thought up by the pianist and composer in Arnhem Lennart Siebers, in what is tonight’s second track, the piece “Something Weird or Something Wuh?” In this work for a quartet, Siebers, who seems to have embraced the idea of improvisation as a compositional practice, presumably having sketched out the guidelines for the execution of the whole, himself performs on the piano, and is joined by the violinist Frank Brempel, the violist Anna–Sophie Becker, and the cellist Veit Steinmann.

In its entirety, or at least for the most part, Siebers’ improvisatory composition would work well as the accompaniment to a slower piece of contemporary dance, interspersed as it is with pizzicati and tango bits and the expectant anxiety of what sounds like the opening and closing of doors or shutters mounted on hinges that squeak.

An older work for guitar by the composer Georg Hajdu is the third and final track tonight. Premiered in 1999 in Tbilisi, it “is an imaginary trip through different musical landscapes,” he avers, and listening to the progression through a number of musical styles and manners of playing the instrument, one is inclined to assent to this description – to agree that what “Re: Guitar” is about, or what it renders into music, is indeed an itinerant inquiry into the variegated echoes of space in the sounds of the regions visited along the way.

However, the title of this piece might also be taken to suggest something else, namely, that here the guitar as an instrument is involved in a trial – made to testify on the stand (though one can only surmise on whose behalf) and then subjected to a few rounds of cross-examination, in which it has not exactly to confirm, but rather, by means of the composure it maintains in the face of this barrage, to convey its own veracity to the court, be it by an occasional high-pitched retort or a deep growl of displeasure, or even, when the professional wrangling is worst, by tapping out on the rostrum its impatience with the proceedings altogether.
Some Updates to the Youtube Playlists

(October 4, 2013)

Returning from a vacation is an opportune time for house–keeping, and the Youtube playlists do need some work.

Of these the first is the New York singer Ali Brustofski’s, who, although thus far she’s concentrated on covering today’s standards, has recently begun to record original material of her own. Such is the case with a new song entitled “Loveblind,” for which a video, set somewhere it appears in the outer reaches of Brooklyn, has been uploaded on the channel of a consortium of or else for Youtubers.

The second is the playlist of another New Yorker, the composer and musician, known especially for her skill on the accordion, Angélica Negrón: on the channel of one of the bands she plays in, Balún, there has been uploaded a recording of a live performance she gave of her own work “Volumen” earlier this year under the auspices of the New York Sound Circuit at the DiMenna Center for Classical Music.

On his own channel, Franck Christoph Yeznikian, a French composer living near Lyon, has made available one of his subtle compositions, “Transhumances,” a short work slated for inclusion in next year’s edition of the Liquid Room, an itinerant musical evening, devised by the Ictus Ensemble in Brussels, which, to judge from the description provided on the latter’s website, represents something like a cross between a performance of chamber music and a happening. (The new video comes second, for the whole playlist is prefaced by a short anecdote about Jackson Pollock told by Stan Brakhage.)

The last of the four, is devoted to the music of the singer, songwriter, and guitar virtuoso Alyn Mearns, born in Ireland but long since a resident of the United States, in Hickory, North Carolina, who performs currently under the moniker Yes the Raven; as he has set up a second channel and is shuffling
some videos from the one to the other, I have re-established the playlist anew, while also adding to it a new video, a number called “Wineglass Song” in which, though at the outset one might not have surmised this from the title, said glass furnishes more than the song’s theme alone.

The Sunday Round-Up on Soundcloud

(October 6, 2013)

Today’s round-up of tracks on Soundcloud is one part contemporary classical, one part experimental, and one part deep-house party.

We shall start with a new work by the Istanbul composer Mithatcan Öcal, the middle piece of a cycle he completed late last year, “Parachesis,” of which each portion was written for a single instrument. As the title itself suggests, all the pieces in this triadic work, in their different ways, explore what it may be possible musically to achieve with the various instruments through the compositional use of repetition, although decidedly not in the manner of minimal music, for, in his note to the piece, Öcal speaks of the second piece in his cycle as comprising something like a fugue. And so, bearing this remark in mind, to my ears it sounds as though what this piece gives one to hear, is a disconcerting description, in the most spatial sense of the term, of a few sectors of a city seemingly deserted, somewhat in the manner of a painting by Chirico, though bereft of even the shadows, which had afforded at least a bit of refuge.

The second piece in the “Parachesis” cycle is written for the piano, and in this recording it has been well played by Metin Ülkü.

The next of today’s tracks is a single from the upcoming album, Lanterns, by the New York composer, producer, and singer Son Lux, the moniker adopted by Ryan Lott; it is entitled “Easy” and as an experimental number,
situated somewhere in an interzone between contemporary classical music, jazz, and hiphop, it flickers with eerie sounds. In fact, as the album is slated to be released late in the month, and in view of its title, while listening to this advance release one might well wonder how far this will be an LP keyed to the season – namely, music whose implicit setting is an urban Halloween.

A recording of “Easy” has also been made available on Youtube, and this I have added to the video playlist as well. Meanwhile, those who are entranced by this music (with at times voluptuous saxophone by Steven Temme and guitar by Rafiq Bhatia) and wish to purchase Lanterns, may do so via the website of the record label Joyful Noise.

Last of today’s tracks is a remix by the German DJ Marius Hörsturz of Rihanna’s “Umbrella” or indeed a thorough recreation of it as a deep–house tune. With his talented remixes, mixtapes, and podcasts, Hörsturz (the name is too good not to be an invention) is beginning to attract notice on the club circuit internationally, and he does not disappoint in this number. In his version the tempo is slower than the original’s and for her voice another has been substituted – or is it hers, but modified beyond recognition by some piece of computer artistry, such that when, towards the end, her own is introduced, she is actually singing both parts in what would in that case be a strange duet? It is hard to say with any certainty: but then, amidst the dance–floor tumult, at least for all those standing, or swaying and sweating, under his umbrella, the questions on people’s minds would pertain to other matters than this, wouldn’t they?

**An LA Quartet**

**(October 13, 2013)**

A new discovery is the Angeleno Andy Lange, a pop musician who has single–handedly been assembling a body of work – assuming every role in the process, the writing, singing, playing (all the instruments), and not least, producing – over the last several years.
By way of summarizing the character of his songs: as he takes care to note on his own behalf, Lange’s background in a cappella music is heard from in their structure, with instrumentation that’s complex without distracting the listener by a surfeit of effects, and lyrics which his voice, assisted and not altered or obscured by the available technology, delivers in a mellifluously pleasing manner. If The Beach Boys were somehow to be reborn, this time as a solo act, and now updated for the present with the full range of the latter’s technical capabilities, but without slickness and plastic, Lange’s brand of Los Angeles pop is a bit what they might sound like.

Lange operates without the backing of any record label; his two albums are available through his Reverbnation page.

Beyond this body of music, Lange evidently also stands at the center of a nexus of other musicians in Los Angeles; most notable (these it was which first attracted my attention) are his collaborations with Andrew Garcia, Josh Golden, and Chester See, and of them I have collected a couple into a playlist along with some of his solo songs and, for good measure, a joint effort between two of the latter figures.

A few highlights in it are the parts sung by Golden and Garcia in the first number, a cover of Miley Cyrus’ “Wrecking Ball” – the former, hovering at the top of his register and then descending for some memorable emphasis, the latter with his raspy earnestness throughout; the sensitivity with which See handles the vocals in his and Lange’s version of Ed Sheeran’s “The A Team”; the beatboxing by Lange in his and See’s rendition, entirely a cappella apart from one guitar solo, of Muse’s “Madness”; and Lange’s vocals in his own song “Maybe You Will,” in which the Beach Boys vibrations may perhaps be heard most distinctly.

Yet it is this occasional quartet’s re-creation of Cyrus’ “We Can’t Stop” which packs the biggest punch – it’s a stunning piece of work – leaving one hoping that these four will fulfill their common promise by reconvening frequently from now on.

That it should be this song, over the last weeks often in the news, which thus far has afforded them the greatest opportunity to show what they can do, calls for a remark or two. As one knows, in recent months, Cyrus’ videos, her
performance alongside Robin Thicke at the MTV Video Music Awards, and her newfound persona generally, have prompted controversy – but also, though this is probably less well-known albeit of much greater interest, several sharp parodies on Youtube (of which the most cutting are probably Bart Baker’s), which puncture the calculated decline so patent in much of today’s commercial pop music, and even some of the pretentious excuses advanced for it as well. Now, the quartet’s video for its re-creation of “We Can’t Stop” also comprises several parodic elements, but these are included in the vein of good-natured fun, and in fact the main issue with Cyrus is skirted here by dint of a few strategic adjustments in the lyrics: gone are the lines in the original where drugs, their use, and their uses had been alluded to. The change does not represent an arbitrary act of suppression; on the contrary, it follows from the fact that in this quartet’s version one neither hears nor sees the desolation from which those who turn to a drug (seeking a substitute for something else that’s unavailable) so often try to flee and by which they later are overtaken. No evidence at all is to be found here of the feeling of being alone even while amidst a crowd of other people (this feeling whose significance generally is all too often overlooked), and hence those lines in the lyrics, had they remained, would have found themselves flagrantly out of place.

Whenever this song about a group of people (“our house”) is sung by one voice, the result will probably tend of itself to send out something of a plaintive or lonely sound, but when it’s a group which performs it, what we’re given is an actual illustration of its subject – the lively sense of camaraderie. Here, therefore, that desolate state is circumvented from the start, and a great part of the charm of the quartet’s version stems from this; for this too is what lends an especial point to its mixing together some of the harmonies of the barbershop quartets and the doo-wop of times past, with some of the style of the bands of the late nineteen-fifties and early sixties. Thus, even today, the decadence of the pop music industry notwithstanding, the energy of that older mode of singing-together might yet flourish.

In any event, their video shows how Lange, Garcia, Golden, and See take joy in one another’s company, sharing the pleasure of it unabashedly (this is a point underscored by the humorous coda to the video), and the result is invigorating. I for one hope they won’t stop.
Postscript. Mainly for lack of time to assemble one, the Sunday round-up will have to wait until next week. Meanwhile, I’ve found that Andy Lange also has a Soundcloud page, though it has not been updated recently.

Ilpo Jauhiainen’s New Album: Arrival City

(October 15, 2013)

The new album, announced some time ago on the Facebook page of the itinerant Finnish multi-talent Ilpo Jauhiainen, was released last week on his Bandcamp page, with some tracks also being uploaded on his Soundcloud page and Youtube channel: entitled Arrival City, it takes its bearings, conceptually, from the “global metropolises where people all over the world migrate in the search of a better life,” in the words of the artist’s own liner notes, as well as from the “more invisible geographies created by people collaborating and connecting globally.” (These are formations whose emergence virtual systems such as Youtube and Soundcloud, whatever be their faults, have substantially facilitated.) Musically speaking, the record attests to his high regard for and love of the sounds of contemporary Africa, where he has often resided over the last couple of years, and in particular, as he goes on to explain, those of Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo.

In my earlier article about Jauhiainen’s music, I included a foretaste of the album, the track “Rain 2,” and a few others may be mentioned to give a fuller idea of what he has been up to. Inspired by the abstract geometric paintings of Odili Donald Odita, with Veli-Matti Kimanen on electric guitar and a soundscape of Lagos contributed by Emeka Ogboh, Jauhiainen constructs an “Odili Scape,” while in “Wild at Dusk,” written in collaboration with Kimanen, Wanja Kimani, and Gabriel Teko, the former again wielding the electric guitar and the two latter handling the singing and speaking, it is indeed an urban environment at nightfall, evidently as seen from a young woman’s point
of view, of which the likeness is re-created in sound. – Moreover, the video playlist, initially so short, has been augmented with these two tracks and by another as well, “Lagos Space,” featuring the words and voice (the delivery is a kind of rap) of Diana Bada, which pays that city a tense rhythmic tribute.

Now that Arrival City has arrived, what will Jauhiainen’s next destination on his musical journeys be?

This Week’s Tracks from Soundcloud

(October 20, 2013)

In the midst of work on a long text which hopefully will be completed and posted here sometime soon, for this week’s round-up I shall limit myself to spare introductions, simply handing over the word to the three featured artists so they may speak for themselves through the textures of their respective pieces of music.

First in line is a recent track by Nicholas Yu in San Francisco, better known for the subtle electronica issued under the moniker National Park System, “Love Times Time.”

Next, from the Montréal singer and sound-artist Graciellita, is a new instrumental and vocal number, entitled “Lowhere.”

The third and last piece, which I came across thanks to a tip from René Baptist Huysmans, is called “XXX”: it is a short orchestral work dedicated to Amsterdam (on whose insignia those three letters are in fact prominent, which has no doubt occasioned more than a little amusement) by Francisco Castillo Trigueros, a composer who, though born in Mexico City and currently residing in Chicago, did live in the city for an extended period of time some years ago. (In this recording it is performed by the Holland Symfonia.)
Once again a Sunday evening finds me in haste, as I continue to be immersed in work on the long text I mentioned last weekend, still wrapped up in thinking it and its themes through, of which I’ll divulge this much, that masks and their function in music is one of the main topics, and now with even less time to spare for the usual round-up, as at the end of this coming week I shall be going on the road, hoping in consequence to complete and to post that text prior to my departure, thus also, and more to the point, doing my bit to mark the arrival of a masked holiday par excellence, Halloween. Given these constraints, therefore, tonight I am indeed in the mood to take a walk on the wild side.

It’s not by chance, accordingly, that New York, that quick adventurous city, should loom large in the present selection.

To begin with, on the Soundcloud page of the British record label Barely Breaking Even, a cover of Lou Reed’s famous tune by the new duo – so new that evidently the two have not yet established a website of their own – Hartley and Wolfe, has been uploaded. Not much biographical information about them has been made available, but as for this track, it is the first release from the upcoming album Bespoke Future, which, if their take on “Walk on the Wild Side” offers any indication, will be spoken of often once it is released early in December.

Next in the line-up is a recent “soundtrack,” as he fittingly calls it, from the Italian-born and Brooklyn-based Nicola Donà, who records under the moniker Horrible Present; it’s entitled “Manhattan Late Night” and, no surprise this, the urban environment as revealed here is deserted, nocturnal, and

* A sad piece of news. The present text was substantially finished before I heard of Lou Reed’s passing. He shall be missed.
more than a bit spooky: echoing with anxiety and the sound of things dripping, the city is as though ready–made to feature in some grimy film.

The third of this evening’s tracks is a lovely performance of John Cage’s “Music for Marcel Duchamp” by the young London pianist Eliza McCarthy, whose repertoire is already extensive and in part experimental, comprising some contemporary works, including a couple dedicated to and written for her by their composers.

Since Duchamp has played a role in this evening’s round–up, here I should like to append, as a bonus, an excerpt of his 1959 interview with Richard Hamilton, in which he, that New Yorker by choice, was at his mischievous best.

An Exhibition in New York

(November 3, 2013)

This week I’ve alighted in New York, and in lieu of a round–up – for how could I possibly hope to compete with the high–voltage Youtube spectacle shortly to be launched into the world from Pier 36? – I should simply like to commend to anyone in the vicinity a very worthwhile exhibition of works by that most musical of modern artists, Vassily Kandinsky, on view until February at the Neue Galerie. In it, alongside some of the “improvisations” and “compositions,” several of the sketches for his décors for theatre are included, to the strains of music by Schönberg, as well as replicas of the murals the artist created for the Juryfreie Kunstschau in 1922, and through this well–selected presentation of fifteen years in Kandinsky’s career, one is indeed given insight into the movement of his art from point and line to – not only to surface, but also to sound.
Something in Advance of ARTPOP

(November 10, 2013)

As tout le monde knows by now, tomorrow Lady Gaga’s ARTPOP will drop, and given how impassioned her performance of “Dope” at the Youtube Music Awards one week ago was – musically she flies the highest when accompanying herself at the piano – it seems fitting on this Sunday evening to anticipate the occasion by sharing a memorable cover thereof found on Soundcloud by a little monster calling himself Silverkenon, who I’d wager is paying the song tribute from England: but whatever be his locale, his version is suffused with exquisite blue notes, though he blows a bit of levity into it with a few vocal purple passages as well.

Personæ Musicæ: Cuthbért and KuuMA

(December 30, 2013)

Nearly the entirety of the past two months has found me on the road, and though the present text was begun already in Amsterdam, because I had no chance to complete it before leaving, it accompanied me there, developing during any hours I could snatch from my schedule while never consenting to be finished, and although the fugitive circumstances of its composition have provoked from me an at times over-insistent tone in response, as though only thus could the whole be held together, it’d be remiss of me not to state clearly that everything in the lengthy essay which follows has been set on paper in a tentative mood. Thus my one request to the readers who follow these winding trails, is to know that they would have crossed
one another at quite other spots, had the course of my travels been any different than it was. Whatever the musical and intellectual adventures this text may be found to contain – it does I think run numerous risks on both counts – as its arguments are unwound I hope readers won’t forget it’s all been mapped out quite adventitiously, nor that the winds which blow here frequently collide.

Several months ago, featured here were a few compositions by someone in Nagasaki active musically under the moniker KuuMA (or, written in Japanese, for those who know that language and for the search engines: 곱름), selected from a set on Soundcloud that constituted in effect a debut LP, one which was both delightful and instructive to listen to, not least on account of its promise of a significant career in music to come. At the time little biographical information could be found concerning their creator, other than that the pieces were the work of a figure who moved in the circle of the New York composer Adam Cuthbert and whom it seemed the latter had befriended during his time in Japan; but, given the obvious quality of the work, to me there seemed no warrant to pry further, and so, on the assumption that it had its reasons which others were meant to know nothing of, I remained content to leave the enigma be.

However, I cannot say it unduly surprised me when, some months later, Cuthbert revealed that he and KuuMA were in fact one and the same. While the bodies of music issued under their respective names diverged considerably each from the other, the first orienting itself largely in accord with the possibilities of live performance and the second often exploring realms of sound beyond notation, in listening again to various pieces side by side it was not difficult to hear just how complementary they were. But complementary often amounts merely to a vague compliment – so: how, or in what ways, did they complement each other? – this was the question posed most immediately by the disclosure of the identity behind them. Well, without at present wanting quite to claim that they, or more precisely, the two musics along with the experience of listening by turns to both of them, made up the parts of some one whole, no, nor that they somehow held one another in a balance of musical modes, it did strike me that between themselves they established a rapport by means of which each could call attention to some of the other’s characteristics
and thus amplify them in the ears of those who might be listening attentively to both: this was a result to achieve which, upon further reflection, I tended more and more to take as having been the very point that had guided this deployment of well-paired personæ.

At issue was not simply a single persona, therefore, an artistic alter ego invented simply as a foil for the composer’s own proper personality. Rather, there were now two of them, for along the way, Cuthbért’s own personal identity, or rather, that portion of it involved in his musical life, had in effect become another, a second persona counterposed to the KuuMA one, each of them augmenting the other reciprocally and itself as well, by virtue of this distinct relationship into which they thus were placed.

Especially once all or much of these musics was collated on Cuthbért’s Soundcloud page, their juxtaposition was startling in itself, and as such I found it to provoke some thought. At first the leading idea behind his experiment upon himself (for that is what it appeared to be) seemed to me to see how far, in the sphere of expression – but not self-expression – that is delimited by the work of musical composition, the self is able to become an other, somewhat as per the train of thought crystallized in Rimbaud’s aphorism,* “Je est un autre,” whereby, depending on which persona the composer had donned for the purpose, the music in question would as it were compose itself through him and his activity, the latter serving as a kind of medium or vehicle thereof. Soon, however, this avenue of interpretation, though in itself usually tempting to pursue, in this case no longer pointed in a direction which I thought especially fruitful to venture down.

Rather, it occurred to me that the adjacency in one space (virtual though it was) of the two bodies of music, might be taken literally or as providing a clue: thus they were being grouped together, arranged or positioned as something akin to the different singers or speakers that are comprised in a chorus and which complement one another in a quite specific activity, yet without in so doing constituting a whole (for a chorus operates most often as but one part of something else).

* In the letter of May 13, 1871, to Georges Izambard.
Although the term is tending to fall into disuse, the members of a musical chorus, when being identified individually, for instance on a printed concert program, are designated as “personæ musicæ,” evidently on the analogy of the lists of dramatis personæ one knows from the stage. Yet the usage of the concept of persona differs in the two instances: whereas the actors in today’s dramas generally represent persons more or less in the usual sense, the singers in a chorus become for the duration of the performance something akin to the personæ of the Roman theatre of antiquity, namely, the mask–like devices whereby the sound of those players’ voices was amplified and projected towards the public in the amphitheatre, so that, in the better–known case of a chorus singing in concert, the song’s meaning would resound through the interpreters themselves and be transmitted to their audience (assuming of course that the latter would have the ears attuned to receive it). Probably therefore it is these old devices, more than the relatively recent convenience of the literary dramatis personæ, which are actually referred to whenever choral singers are called the personæ musicæ.

For my part, the recollection of these original stage–instruments is what has led me to utilize the term à propos both KuuMA and, more surprisingly perhaps, Cuthbért himself; here, by means of each of the personæ, a different kind of music is rendered more audible and conveyed further than would otherwise have been possible, without the one interfering with the other or actively getting in the way of its effects, and vice versa: both bodies of music tend to harmonize mutually, for, precisely because they were launched as personæ musicæ, they can go together well while remaining distinct from one another.

At the same time, the theatrico–choral multiplication of Cuthbért’s own personæ seemed like a fitting occasion to reflect upon the persona as such and upon the significance of its uses in musical life – all the more so, as it began to look to me as though the inquiry might contribute not a little to a better understanding of what his musics themselves, and not simply the dramaturgy of their respective mises en scène, are about, thus supplementing what I’ve previously written on the topic, if not even in some respects perhaps supplanting the results of my earlier efforts.

In what follows, this inquiry is broached, though the further I’ve pursued it, the clearer it’s become to me that at most I could barely hope to scratch the
surface of this subject, especially as it’s led me to touch inter alia on some ethnological matters, which of themselves tend to be difficult to handle summarily, given how many layers of experience have been stratified in them. Still, it will be enough, it seems to me, to have bored at least the beginnings of a hole or two down through them, for the purposes of a sonic exploration, especially if in doing so the essay manages not to bore the reader, nor to lose sight of the bodies of music which occasioned it and to turn its attention back to them towards the end.

There is one older study in the field of comparative anthropology which I have found to be a helpful guide through the practices – they are, at first sight, obviously archaic and primitive – from out of which devices such as the persona of the Roman theatre or its counterpart in the Greek–speaking cities the πρόσωπον, were later to emerge. Although the specialists amongst today’s ethnologists no doubt hold the remarks in this older work concerning various peoples and their practices, to have been superseded by more recent research – the text in question is already more than a century old – here what interests me are the anthropologist’s comparative generalizations, and these do seem to have held up rather well: the points he draws forth from his materials continue to sound plausible. In what follows I shall be drawing liberally but also quite selectively on them.

The article I have found to be illuminating, was published in installments in the scientific weekly Globus in 1904 and 1905; authored by the anthropologist Konrad Theodor Preuß, the text was entitled “Der Ursprung der Religion und Kunst” and it does indeed offer an account of the origin, or, a more accurate word, the first wellspring of both religion and art – a task which Preuß, a noted specialist in the pre–Columbian civilizations, with long stretches of fieldwork in Mexico and Columbia to his credit, and later on in Berlin the director of the North and Central American department of the Museum für Völkerkunde (now the Ethnologisches Museum) with its remarkable Mexican collections, and also conversant more widely with a broad range of ethnographic literature, could carry out persuasively thanks to the varied source–material at his disposal.
What Preuß proposed was that nearly everything in human society, from the most institutional to the most intimate, could be traced back to an original confrontation between, on the one side, the powers which early human beings observed active and inimical everywhere around them in nature, and, on the other, those whose energies they felt coursing within themselves: at this stage, prior to the emergence of the animistic systems of belief according to which those powers were understood as souls, they were conceived simply as forces. Indeed, this conception will nearly inevitably strike us as exceedingly strange if only by reason of its very simplicity; thus some brief remarks about the character of both sorts of force, those without and those within the human being, may help to illuminate them a bit further.

Regarding the inimical nature which these early human beings discerned all around themselves, to their minds it was a realm pervaded by forces which enabled the various realities of greatest concern, that is, such things as rain, wind, fire, plant and animal life, etc., etc., to move and be efficacious, generally adverse forces which they believed themselves able to counteract by fashioning an imitation of some aspect thereof, in order to appropriate (as though the force in question were akin to an alimentary substance) something of their strength to themselves – for instance by employing devices of a visual or pictorial character or by utilizing procedures that were kinetic or sonic in kind. By means of such imitative artifacts or acts they thought to render themselves more capable vis–à–vis those hostile powers, though without imagining that anything would be subtracted from the latter in any absolute sense, as though they were each fixed quanta.

The human inclination to imitate these external forces as perceived under particular aspects – for instance, the sound of the rain, wind, or fire, the look of animals or plants – played and even now continues to play a main role in the biological history of the human species, averred Preuß. Whereas, as he summarized his overarching idea, an animal is “durch seinen Instinkt davor bewahrt, Dinge in seinen Gesichtskreis zu ziehen, die nicht unmittelbar für die Erhaltung der Gattung in Betracht kommen,” in the case of the human being, “die Hauptsache, die ihn in geistiger Beziehung vom Tier unterscheidet, ist die über den Instinkt hinausgehende Fürsorge für die Gattung.” Once this point in the evolution of our species had been reached, that is to say, “sobald der Instinkt aufhörte, allein das Lebewesen, den werdenden Mensch
zu leiten, mußte er eine unendliche Kette von Irrtümern begehen, die ihn nur
deshalb nicht im Daseinskampfe vernichteten, weil das Wesentliche, der In-
stillt und die Nachahmung des Bestehenden, blieb.”* The imitation of what
already existed, which by its prior persistence had demonstrated to some
degree its own fitness to survive – this, for human beings throughout these
eyearly chapters of their history, was what supplemented instinct (which, to be
sure, the evolution of the species could not possibly have extinguished) and af-
forded them, in the struggle for existence, at least some rough dual indication
both of what they could and of what they could not permit themselves to do
with impunity. This inclination to imitate which the early human beings took
to unprecedented heights, therefore, was closely connected to an incipient as-
sement of risk and the effort to triumph over it as far as they were able, for
they had to distinguish what was safe to imitate from what was not, and thus
the dangers they sought to avoid were encountered again, this time within imi-
tation itself. In this connection, the Nietzschean cadence in which the anthro-
pologist’s remarks were phrased, should probably be taken as being a clue to
what Preuß was thinking of: imitation or rather the mimetic inclination was
itself also twofold and therefore risky to enter into, for although the imitation
of what already existed could conduce to their own preservation or that of the
species, any imitation of other things – those which did not yet actually exist
or which did exist but only in some other mode – might very well prove to be
one of the “mistakes” or even, for the individual offender, the very last of the
links in that “unendliche Kette von Irrtümern.”

Accordingly, when they donned an imitative mask or executed a mimetic
dance, those early human beings were actively restraining themselves from
any act of imitation of the second kind. They had good reasons for believing
that an inadvertent blunder on their part would stand in need of something
like an expiation – or at least one could explain this belief by reference to the
realism which undergirded their aim of augmenting their own force by appro-
priating something else’s for themselves by means of a likeness thereof. Yes,
realism, for in effect, whether or not they put all this into words, they them-
selves were aware of the possibility that they would get carried away by these
associations of ideas and then find themselves in the dangerous condition of

* Globus, vol. LXXXVII, no. 24 (June 29, 1905), p. 419.
imitating mere irrealsities, to their own detriment, leaving themselves open and exposed to the inimical action of the forces they discerned all around them: so when they adopted strict countermeasures against such an eventual-ity (and also took steps to turn it to account whenever it did happen to occur), they showed themselves to be cool–headed realists. Thus, to level the epithet of magical thinking at the manner in which they conceived of the powers at work in their surroundings, in the sense in which the term is commonly inten-ded, would be quite besides the point.

Yet in a different usage of the term – here one ought to consult the etymol-ogy of the word magic itself – their mode of thought can indeed be called magical, where the term is understood as meaning something like efficacious or powerful. The idea guiding the use of imitative practices or devices was to increase the force either of the persons who employed them or of the perfor-mances in which they were employed or both at once, and it is in this sense only that Preuß wrote frequently of Zauber, Zauberkraft, Zauberkraft, Zauberwir-kung, or the like in his essay: nor evidently had he in mind the ideas of trick-ery and deception which today one often associates with the concept of magic.

The mask and its uses during these early stages of human history, afford an illustration of all this. (Masks and their significance, of course, are of great interest to me here, given the starting–point of this essay, namely, the persona and its predecessors.) According to Preuß, “alle maskenartigen Verhüllungen sind ursprünglich durchaus nicht als Unterscheidungsmerkmal für den Zuschauer bestimmt, sondern dienen nur dazu, die Zauberwirkung vollkomme-ner zu machen” – in other words, originally the masks were not meant as de-vices by which the performers themselves might be recognized and as such distinguiished from the roles they were playing. No, quite the opposite, as I sug-gested before: the aim in using them to begin with, in these pre–theatrical ceremo-nies, was to heighten the force of the performers or to increase the effi-cacy of the performance or both, and precisely the same goal was the objective of “die rigorosen Bestimmungen für die Exaktheit des Tanzes, die barbari-schen Strafen, wenn jemand aus der Rolle fällt, unter der Maske erkannt wird u. dgl. m.” Thus the imitation was intended to instill in themselves something of the power of whatever it was they were imitating: in no case was either the theatrical illusion in general, or the deception of an audience in particular, what the participants were after. And as for the purpose of those corrective
chastisements (whose significance is a matter to be touched on shortly), Preuß made it quite clear that it too was unrelated to trickery of any kind. “Daß solchen Bestimmungen lediglich aus der halbbetrügerischen Absicht der Veranstalter stammen, die Zuschauer und Weiber zu täuschen,” he insisted, “halte ich für ausgeschlossen, obwohl viele Berichterstatter” – who it seems had fallen victim to their own preconceptions concerning the purpose of what they had witnessed – “dieses mehr oder weniger andeuten.”

Deception, as a tactic to be utilized against an enemy or a possibly ill-disposed power, represents a refinement devised later, presumably quite some span of time after the use of the mask had first been established. That the two things are so readily associated together, however, should help to delineate the conditions in which human beings lived during these early stages of history. Hostility was everywhere to be found there, and many were the perils they faced – their surroundings these early human beings construed as a realm of inimical forces, amongst which not the least were those possessed by other groups of people or even other individuals. Their basic conundrum, therefore, to which the invention of the mask as an imitative device represented one amongst a variety of practical solutions, was how they were to augment their own force with that of something else, without themselves being affected adversely by its great potency.

Or, to approach the question from a slightly differently angle, given that force for them was always a means to the accomplishment of something, and not a power that could endure as a stable quantity, enclosed or self-contained as it were within its own steady potentiality: how were they to let the force within themselves out, as needed, without letting any other hostile force in? Thus the portals of the human body were a constant preoccupation of their thought. This topic Preuß’ study explored at length, and if the ethnographic reports are consulted, then, as he put the matter, “so entdeckt man unschwer an allen Körperöffnungen mannigfache Einrichtungen teils zum Schutze dieser wichtigen Eingangspforten des Leibes, damit kein Zauber eindringe, teils zur Erhöhung des herausströmenden Zaubers.”

** Vol. LXXXVII, no. 24 (June 29, 1905), p. 416.
it in general, as I am interested mainly in the most musical of these “gates,”
the human mouth – and it’s in relation to the latter, in line with Preuß’ remarks, that another of the mask’s first functions comes to the fore: it provided some modicum of security that while the force inherent in the body was being emitted in the form of breath, sound, chant, or speech, other forces would not impinge upon the human being from without, through the aperture of the very same organ. Accordingly, although Preuß himself does not seem to have touched on this aspect of it, one may infer that originally the mask also functioned as a kind of shield. Moreover, perhaps both of these aspects were interconnected in actu, in the sense that the protection the mask seemed to afford, in guarding the opening of the mouth, rather than dampen or mute the vocal sounds made by the person who had donned it, instead helped to focus them and enabled them to be projected farther than they otherwise would have been (much as the personæ and πρόσωπα would later be utilized to do), thereby increasing the force inherent in them, while, at the same time, the very forcefulness of this thus focused emission of sound in effect also supplied something like an additional layer of armor to the mask-wearer.

Perhaps by virtue of an analogy with the wind itself, or perhaps for other reasons as well, breath was conceived of during these early periods of human history as harboring a great energy, one so powerful that, in reading the various reports Preuß called upon, at times one might almost gather that individuals frequently imagined themselves to be its bellows, the vehicles whereby it would exhale itself into the world, as it were. It was due to the volume of breath emitted that sonic events such as cries could be efficacious in countering the inimical forces of nature or in throwing a human enemy back on the defensive, or at least this is the inference one may well be inclined to draw once one is acquainted with these anthropological source–materials – for his part Preuß himself stressed that “das Geschrei wirkt nicht nur als Ton, sondern weil es aus der Zauberöffnung des Mundes kommt und sich mit der Zauberwirkung des Hauches vereinigt.” Here the powerful effect stemmed not from the cry itself but from the exhalation on which the latter was borne and in the absence of which it would hardly have reached so far, nor made the impression it did. Thus the strength of breath underneath the sound, was what actually registered with all the recipients, and it was mainly this to which they responded, especially whenever an extended space had to be covered, while
the specific meaning of the cry was of a subsidiary importance in comparison
to the pre–eminent physical force – even though those who stood outside the
scene most often overlooked the latter factor when they attempted to explain
what was transpiring. But for the participants, and also for someone capable
of putting himself in their position, such as Preuß, these things were consider-
ably clearer. “Dem Schrei und dem starken Schall wird eine weit größere
Wirkung zugeschrieben, als ihrer psychischen Bedeutung entspricht,” he
wrote, with the difference presumably to be attributed to an effect overwel-
mingly physiological in kind. “Und es ist nur natürlich, daß der Eindruck auf
den Hörer einer besonderen Zauberkraft zugerechnet wird. Das geht beson-
ders aus der Entfernung hervor, in der noch ein Erfolg des Schreiens voraus-
gesetzt wird.”* Behind the strength of the cry per se and of greater weight,
therefore, was the volume of air expelled, a quantum of which the distance
traversed by the sound provided something like a rough indication or meas-
urement.

In at least one of its original functions, accordingly, the mask exhibits a
close resemblance to the earliest versions of the wind instruments – or rather,
the similarity will come to light if it’s plausible to assume that in ages long ago
each of these devices had a role to play in the strife with inimical forces,
powers, or people. All were implements meant in their various ways to bring
about the amplification of one’s own strength and to project it towards a tar-
get. Thus every one of them was also devised to serve as a sort of weapon, in
the midst of periods during which it was the common belief “daß der Hauch
sogar imstande ist zu töten,”** however strange be the sound of this claim to
modern ears.

Some evidence of just such a belief does spring to mind, however, when
one plumbs the records of antiquity, documents which by their greater famili-
arity could perhaps prevent one from dismissing it too quickly as merely ex-
otic or alien. In this connection, one might recall the siege and fall of Jericho
as recounted in the Bible,*** where, after a week of beleaguerment, once the

* Vol. LXXXVII, no. 22 (June 15, 1905), p. 384. An internal reference has been omitted
from the quotation. ** Vol. LXXXVI, no. 23 (December 15, 1904), p. 377.
*** The event is recounted most specifically in Joshua 6, 20, a passage to which
Preuß himself did not fail to refer.
ram’s horn had sounded, the trumpets blasted, and the people roared, the walls of the city then fell down – blown asunder by arms of noise, as it were. To discern the belief in breath’s deadly force here as well, one need only take the Biblical text at its word, quite literally, and refrain from attenuating it as though it involves a mere synecdoche such that, as a piece of literature, the noise the army made would stand in for the sum of its activity as a whole. That clamor, far from having been included in the text mainly for rhetorical effect, or to fashion a memorable scene for the narrative, is introduced instead as an index of the fatal power which a mighty volume of breath can exert: thus this episode attests to the general belief therein.

But why, more precisely, has breath been so widely thought of as being invested with that power? Preuß did not call a halt before this question, and the answer seems to be that like the other potent forces which early human beings felt coursing through themselves, breath too, as a main source of the body’s own vitality, should eo ipso be capable of inflicting grave injury and even death on others: nothing less was expected from so strong a force, which, they believed, could indeed take away what it itself had bestowed. And perhaps, to their way of thinking, intrinsic dualities like this one were a characteristic or even a prerogative of only the strongest of forces, and as such they therefore, it was agreed, needed to be handled with extreme care.

We today, of course, when we happen to read about forms of human association that operated under “dem Glauben an die fördernde und anderseits schädigende Kraft des aus der Nase und dem Munde dringenden Hauches,”* are in all likelihood inclined to regard them as being utterly archaic and for all intents and purposes as having long since vanished altogether. Yet a different story is told by some interactions in which we too are involved from time to time, whose guiding assumptions, as an impartial examination may suggest to us, do still seem to owe quite a lot to the belief in the great power of breath for better and for worse. Here those who are not entirely entangled in their own preconceptions may discern the actuality of that old idea, and indeed in a form not quite altered nearly beyond recognition by the Umwertungen and Verwandlungen which all of these original ideas and practices underwent later

* Globus, vol. LXXXVI, no. 23 (December 15, 1904), p. 376.
as civilizations developed from their beginnings – subsequent developments whose *derivative* character was stressed repeatedly by Preuß.

That in practice this belief has not been exhausted even now, is something which Leopardi, when he devoted an aphoristic inquiry to one variety of laughter, appears to have disclosed. To begin with, he was struck by what clever people might achieve for themselves when in their social intercourse with others they utilized laughter as a tactical device, a maneuver whose aim was to set up the encounter with themselves positioned advantageously at the center. “Due o più persone in un luogo pubblico o in un’adunanza qualsivoglia, che stieno ridendo tra loro in modo osservabile, nè sappiano gli altri di che,” the moralist noted, “generano in tutti i presenti tale apprensione, che ogni discorso tra questi divien serio, molti ammutoliscono, alcuni si partono, i più intrepidi si accostano a quelli che ridono, procurando di essere accettati a ridere in compagnia loro.” In order to achieve such a result, at least two people were required, the stratagem constituting in fact a small instance of action in concert – which should in itself be enough to underscore the degree to which the relationships amongst those present in the gathering had been antagonistic in character, prior to this intervention of laughter. Precisely because an overarching wariness of others was what they had to contend with and overcome, their laughter “concilia stima e rispetto anche dagl’ignoti, tira a se l’attenzione di tutti i circostanti, e dà fra questi una sorte di superiorità,” which is to say, by their maneuver the instigators showed themselves personally superior to the antagonism underlying those relationships, and indeed to the other antagonists as well, replacing the former with and inducting the latter into a mode, not of friendship, but of an incidental camaraderie lasting at least as long as the laughing itself went on.

Now, although such an occurrence is already very interesting in its own right, *why* it happened was what he was most concerned to account for, albeit sotto voce. If it was not their laughter itself which attracted the others to them – and his text took care to avoid any suggestion that this idea offered the best explanation – what else could have done so? That the moralist, underneath the initial laughter in this particular instance, discerned a declaration of the forcefulness of the instigators, ought by now to seem a plausible answer. By this
laughter they were demonstrating their own vital strength as being relatively the greatest of all those on the scene, as though the essential thing were to show how much breath one could deploy and move, a feat which, if it meant to rise above the current of antagonism in social life, would be most effectively brought about by a mode of action that was in the most literal sense of the word a conspiracy. Therefore, whenever we, for our part, involve ourselves in an action like this, do we not also proclaim in effect that the age–old belief in the power of exhalation still drives us?

Yet Leopardi (who, as he remarked elsewhere, hoped to write a history of laughter) did not limit himself solely to this one variety of it, but also ventured to characterize the nature of laughter in general – and evidently here too he had in mind its function of exhibiting the force believed to be inherent in human breath. His conclusion: “Grande tra gli uomini e di gran terrore è la potenza del riso: contro il quale nessuno nella sua coscienza trova se munito da ogni parte. Chi ha coraggio di ridere, è padrone del mondo, poco altremen- ti di chi è preparato a morire.”* And as a plausible corollary to this: rather than deplete this person’s force in exhibiting it, the act of its exhibition could well heighten it. Thus so sharp a thinker and writer as he did not fail to note that even when the laughter was that of one person alone, it can still be of great service in the masked warfare that is the world, by virtue of the courage it might exude, the terror it could inspire.

Bearing Leopardi’s insight in mind, even today quite a few pieces of human behavior to whose actual function and rationale little attention is usually paid, may be more adequately understood if this key notion, the force of breath, is invoked.

While engaged in laughter such as Leopardi wrote of, human faces themselves become personæ: they cease to be what we know as the most finely expressive part of the whole human being and are transformed for the duration into devices meant explicitly for the projection of sound, implicitly for the focused exhalation of vital force. In Preuß’ account of the origin of religion and art, too, at times the inquiry touches on practices in which the face was treated as though it were functionally also a kind of mask. Without of course attempting to imitate something else in order to appropriate its specific

* Pensieri, no. LXXVIII.
power, as was frequently done with the actual masks, in these instances the face was altered in such a way that the person’s force of breath could be let out to the required degree, and even be augmented in the process. What this most often entailed, as a consequence of an obvious association of ideas arising independently in numerous societies around the globe having nothing to do with one another, was either the filing-down or the extraction of some of the teeth, thus enlarging, they believed, the oral spaces for the exhalation to pass through efficaciously. Again a practice entirely foreign to today’s civilization and its antecedents, one might think at first, but Preuß did not hesitate to introduce a testimony from antiquity which, although the outlines of the original belief were probably already obscured by the time it was initially immortalized in writing, still seems to indicate that it played a role there as well. “Wir haben das klassische Zeugnis der Ilias” – here the anthropologist brought to his readers’ attention the passage* in the Iliad in which Odysseus reproaches Agamemnon that the barrier of his teeth (ἕρκος ὀδόντων) had been breached by words patently untrue – “dafür, daß die Zähne einst als ein Hindernis, als ein hindernder Zaun für die Rede galten, nicht, wie man nach unseren praktischen Erfahrungen erwarten sollte, als notwendig für deutliche Sprache.”** With this Homeric phrase, the teeth were identified as an obstacle to human speech, but underneath that odd idea, which furnishes an example of the resultant changes, the Umwertungen and the Verwandlungen as Preuß termed them, worked upon the original belief and its correlate practices throughout these early records of human history, one may plausibly hypothesize the existence during the archaic period in Greece of an operation of removing or reducing some of them, for a more purposive, focused, effective emission of breath. (It is certainly interesting that Odysseus should also dismiss Agamemnon’s remark as “ἀνεµόλα,”*** that is, mere hot air or overblown – these are good English expressions to use in this connection, for here they can be taken rather literally.) Thus the function of such modifications, if the hypothesis be plausible, would have amounted to a first draft of what the πρόσωπον and the persona were intended to help actors in the theatre achieve, several centuries later.

*** Bk. 4, l. 355.
Given some alterations, therefore, the human face was itself the first mask. And these procedures applied to it, were motivated by a belief related to the one on which I’ve focused thus far, this other pertaining not to the breath alone but to the body generally and to what it can do, when the various forces inherent in it are dealt with in the right manner. What is needed to activate or to intensify them, according to this belief, Preuß summarized quite concisely: “Durch gewaltsame Eingriffe in den Körper werden besondere Zauberquellen erschlossen oder die vorhandenen ergiebiger gemacht, wie wir das an dem Ausschlagen und dem Verstümmeln von Schneidezähnen schon kennen gelernt haben.”* So those operations on the teeth – as a custom whose existence in numerous societies was documented by the ethnological field–reports – represented one instance of a wide variety of practices, rites, and usages in which, in order to heighten a person’s powers, sited as they were believed to be throughout the body, some other part or parts thereof, though not always those of that same body, were excised or drastically modified, in an alteration effected by means which would almost necessarily have had to be violent. In this context, Preuß, with his special knowledge of the old Aztec civilization, was well–positioned to provide an unvarnished elucidation of these means and the implements that went with them, yet also able, as an erudite comparative anthropologist, to substantiate the insight that without those treatments of the body through long spans of history, horrendous, gruesome, and cruel as they were, the stage would never have been set for any great human achievement to flourish. Even now the realization may come as a shock, but the further one reflects impartially on the matter, the more might everything that people presently regard, and from which they hope to benefit, as the best that civilization can offer, be acknowledged as a much later iteration of the original human acts, a distant version thereof, transformed through the course of human history nearly beyond recognition except for one persistent tell–tale thing, the essential or genealogical likeness: at bottom all of it continues to embody the fearsome belief that to fortify the remainder, some part must first be removed. In other words, although it’s a point which it would perhaps ease one’s mind to overlook, that belief still implicitly informs each and every of civilization’s variegated offerings, not by any means only the great works of art and

* *Globus*, vol. LXXXVII, no. 23 (June 22, 1905), p. 398.
religion with which Preuß began, but also, as he did not neglect to suggest in
the last paragraph of his essay, the finely–organized arrangements of modern
everyday life, which represent considerable achievements in their own right.

Arrived at this juncture, were the present essay not the text it is, but some-
how a musical performance, the time would be ripe for an interlude or a full
intermission, that the audience might recover from the noise of a gun fired in
the middle of the concert (to vary one of Stendhal’s observations); but here,
though perhaps after a brief pause by the reader, I shall press on, turning my
attention now to a concept which is closely connected to the foregoing, one
which designates something whose gradual elaboration has constituted an-
other of the achievements of civilization: the concept of character.

The character which I have in mind, is first and foremost the personal one,
i.e., the intrinsic nature of individual human beings that is as unique to each
of them as their own bodies are, and which, for all the incidental changes it
undergoes over the course of their lifetimes, will nonetheless remain the same
one. Thus, insofar as the term denotes something relatively unchanging and
indelible in a human life, a person’s character is as constant as the body of
which it may be taken to be amongst the most evident attributes, and conse-
quently, by virtue of its existence, something of the continuous identity of the
body is conveyed to an individual’s personality, strengthening the underlying
consistency in the latter and rendering it more enduring. The vagaries of a
personality, to be sure, possess a charm of their own, but should untoward cir-
cumstances arise or adversity strike, it will be the concentrated strength of a
person’s character which is revealed through – literally through – them, as
though they then would function mainly as a more defuse medium. Along
similar lines, when a persona is donned, placed as a sort of mask in front of
one’s personality, character is not utterly obscured or concealed: rather, in the
act of concealment itself, something of it is actually revealed, under a very par-
ticular aspect, to be sure. Furthermore, it is more than doubtful whether indi-
viduals would feel themselves free enough to utilize personæ in the first place,
if it were not the case that the play with the latter, however light–hearted or se-
rious be the manner in which they carry it out, in effect is underwritten in the
last resort by their own characters, where they understand character as such
as being a force upon which they can rely when need be. Accordingly, the
degrees of strength of character are of prime importance to consider, and those
whose character is lacking, as one says, might well find it to be insufficiently
strong to permit themselves to wear a persona, striving consequently to cloak
– but at the same time, though inadvertently, disclosing – this very weakness
of theirs by the objections they raise to the use of personae in general, or,
more specifically, by their voluble disdain for those who employ them profes-
sionally, the tribe of actors tout court and, in particular, those whose stock in
trade is laughter, the comedians. If at bottom these detractors harbor the
“theatrical prejudice” precisely because they cannot trust themselves to don a
persona, their own characters being less than capable of supporting the act,
then it indeed can happen, as Santayana put the matter, that “irony pursues
these enemies of comedy, and for fear of wearing a mask for a moment they
are hypocrites their entire lives.”*

Of course, none of these qualities of individual character would be availed
the opportunity to manifest itself, were there no abiding arena, no supra–
personal realm wherein individuals could circulate, and this facility is what
civilization has built and painstakingly maintains, or it even is civilization it-
self. Whenever the overwhelming temper of the times is simply *poor, nasty,
brutish, and short*, no doubt numerous human characteristics are put on dis-
play, but by dint of their inherent fleetingness these will evince something
other than *character*.

That the concept of character, the thing itself being comprehended implic-
tly as a phenomenon for whose perceptibility the ongoing existence of a civili-
zation constitutes the sine qua non, is also informed by the belief formulated
earlier – namely, *to fortify the remainder, some part must first be removed* –
this may become more plausible if one considers how susceptible to change by
means of deliberate practice the characters of individuals can be, or even if
one merely reflects on the fact that they differ in the quanta of strength vari-
ously attributed to them. Furthermore, the concept also seems to owe some-
thing to the operations upon the human body which that belief has inspired, a
debt that is recorded in the etymology of the word itself, albeit such that the
initial definitions of the terms involved were themselves *Verwandlungen* (as

* Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies, chap. 33, “The Comic Mask.”*
Preuß would say) of those original practices. In the Greece of antiquity, a χαρακτήρ was an engraver or someone who minted coinage, but also an engraving tool (presumably a sharp or pointed implement), a die or stamp, and even a branding-iron, as well as a graven mark or an impress, while the verb from which the noun derives, χαράσσειν, meant to engrave or inscribe, most often on coins – and so in this instance too, much as with the masks and the faces that were the predecessors of the personæ and the πρόσωπα, incisions were frequent operations, removing some material and fashioning a likeness upon the remainder in order to produce an efficacious object. Suddenly, then, one can discern behind the χαρακτήρ, historically or genealogically speaking, the spectre of those violent practices whose major part in the origin of civilization was underscored by Preuß: thus one could hypothesize that the imitations and the excisions which were utilized in the earlier stages of civilization, in order to heighten the force available to a human subject, had as an ensemble furnished an initial model for later institutions, of which the minting of coins may be taken as a representative example, which have at first glance next to nothing to do with them and that are if anything distinguished by their seemingly innocuous – well, character.

When the threefold concept of χαρακτήρ is called to mind, where the term designated the agent or the tool just as readily as it did the result of an operation, the conception of individual character I’ve briefly delineated can be extended or even substantially modified. All the changes which may occur in it notwithstanding, an individual’s character remains singular and the same, much as does the body, hence the former may be taken to be one of the latter’s main attributes, as I suggested before, and yet, instead of defining it as an attribute, wouldn’t it be better and more precise to say that character is engraved on a human body, and indeed in such a way that it will not be something like a mere depiction on the body’s most outward surface? In some manner, then, a character would be cut into the body – or else, to vary the figure of speech, cut out of it – but which implements or instruments would be utilized to make these cuts, and who or what would do the cutting? Now, all these are questions which that master of sharp remarks Voltaire circled about in his article on this topic, doing so quite circuitously for he set out by recalling the term χαρακτήρ only in part, glossing its meaning solely as “impression, gravure,” yet then proceeding as though in
fact he had found the other two main meanings of the Greek word to be worthier of his attention. This unspoken choice of approach is remarkable in its own right, as upon further reflection – to which the essay, with the light touch, elegant style, and mischievous after-effects typical of Voltaire, invites the reader – one might realize that it’s these two other meanings which, when heeded, could actually guard the notion of character against becoming a moral cliché.

Something engraved our characters on us to begin with: what was it? La nature. As was to be expected. By what instrument has it done so? Notre corps. This answer is not nearly so obvious. Our body? Yes, as Voltaire evidently thought of it, the body does not only represent a sort of material upon or in which character is inscribed, in addition it provides the means by which the etching is done – thus it’s through the body that the mark is made. Or, for that matter, unmade. “Peut-on changer de caractère ? Oui, si on change de corps.” Insofar as the human body can act upon itself, raising itself to be at once the agent, the implement, and the object, then individuals could indeed alter their own characters – which would however remain identifiably theirs. In this context the given identity of each human body sets the limits of any possible change, though then one does wonder whether these limits have been put there to be recognized precisely so that they may be surpassed. For on the other hand, as if Voltaire were sketching out an antinomy, that is to say, a problem which preoccupied him and whose resolution he intuited would strengthen the powers of the minds of those who pondered it, he also insisted, a bit further on: “Nous perfectionnons, nous adoucissons, nous cachons ce que la nature a mis dans nous, mais nous n’y mettons rien.”* Accordingly, only to a quite limited extent could an individual’s character be changed: it can be refined, by reducing, concealing, excising bits and pieces of its original dispositions, in order to strengthen those one wanted to retain – pour encourager les autres – but never radically rebuilt. An inadequate conclusion, Voltaire’s readers might well conclude in their turn (his article itself implicitly encouraging them to do so), and one which he set in place precisely that they might refuse to accept it.

* Dictionnaire philosophique, s.v. “Caractère,” along with the revision of this entry which Voltaire included in his Questions sur l’Encyclopédie, par des amateurs,
At this point, considering how long this treatment of the topic of character has gotten, the reader may well feel like refusing to accept any further remarks on the subject; and moreover, I think that what’s been said so far suffices to outline the pertinence of the concept for a better understanding of the persona and its uses.

Now, very tentatively, I should like to suggest that a persona could itself be character, in at least one of the three senses united in the Greek term. Someone — let’s say a young composer, for instance — might adopt a persona not so much on its own account, as to become capable, while assuming the role of something like a χαρακτήρ, insofar as the work of composition could be likened to what engravers do, of utilizing that persona as a χαρακτήρ in the sense of an instrument with which — by means of the music that could perhaps be composed under these auspices alone — a χαρακτήρ or a lasting mark could be left on the body in order to affect or even significantly to alter its character as a result. Or, to simplify the foregoing in perhaps a slightly more plausible manner: a character is stamped on character by a character, that is, by a persona.

All well and good, but the immediate question then is whether this odd multiple usage of the term would transform it beyond recognition and even reduce it to absurdity — turning it into an incantation that has lost its power, a chant bereft of any sense — or else assist us to recollect the word’s potent yet neglected meaning and to breathe life into it again?

A persona can be character, that is to say, it could have the character of being one of the instruments useful when the aim is to imprint something that will endure on or in the body. Is this application of the term really so aberrant and implausible? I tend to think not.

Utilized to such an end, the persona would represent a variation of the masks of long ago. Through the persona he adopts, in a sense extending his own character in the process, the composer may literally concentrate some part of his creative force, so to speak exhaling it in the form of musical works which otherwise he could not have written or whose particular efficaciousness or impressiveness could have been devised in no other way. And after these are sent forth, the sum of his inspiration, far from being dispersed, might even rise higher than before.
In this connection, in addition to functioning as a kind of mask, a persona, as an implement, would also evince a likeness to certain musical instruments, especially to those in which the character of their first predecessors – whose original aim may well have been to impress a mark on an object – has been the most legibly conserved. I mean those wind instruments which generate a forceful projection of breath or air. And so here it’s apposite to cite Preuß’ contention* that both musical instruments and masks, in their first origins, were conceived as being akin to the cry or to any purposive exhalation in their efficacy, the result which was during those ages overwhelmingly the main consideration.

As Preuß has demonstrated,** the application of sounds borne on a wind of breath was one mode of action in the arsenal of the human beings who found themselves in the midst of inimical forces; yet he also took care to touch on the initial emergence of music, in the first instance the vocal music of song and chant, but also the music of the earliest instruments, especially the wind ones, within a considerably more irenic context as well. According to him, it originated when the recurring sounds or sound–patterns met with in the processes of human labor, were imitated and repeated by those human beings and from then on utilized regularly in order to increase the efficaciousness or force of their collaboration (the labor being primarily a joint effort) and to help it to reach a still more successful end. This sonic accompaniment to the sounds of labor, was nothing other than the first music and as such the matrix for the latter’s many subsequent developments and permutations. Even today, millennia later, much of the human need for music (music being amongst other things a need) is the necessity of just this augmentation and accompaniment: whenever it happens, as now it so often does, that the labor must be carried out by one person alone, then the music may fill the place of the others missing from the scene, thus lending a hand to make this sort too virtually an instance of well–disposed co–operation.

In contrast to the hazardous variety of the forces in inimical confrontation with those human beings during the early ages of civilization, the more peaceful regularities of human labor afforded them a modicum of relative security

* Globus, vol. LXXXVII, no. 23 (June 22, 1905), p. 395.
and stability in their existence, and therewith the chance for their characters (in the most common sense of the term) to solidify. Accordingly, individual characters would have been a by-product of human labor or indeed of co-operative activity more generally, and insofar as music were made to guide the latter, it probably also fostered the development of character, those of individuals, and perhaps also bestowed on character as such greater and greater importance as civilization moved to establish itself further.

Music’s role in this process exhibits it from its most beneficent side, as a power fomenting the mutual assistance which constituted one main element or moment in the collaborative undertaking that was human labor. Yet when labor has been transformed and henceforth exists as an isolated activity, or rather, when it would be were music not employed as a substitute for other people (an expedient frequently resorted to), then as seems obvious the laborers could readily become distracted by the music from their tasks, their attention captivated as they listen to it, quite possibly to their own detriment or that of the work they are carrying out. In that event, the virtual collaboration fostered by this particular use of music would cease to be collaboration or even labor at all, and instead the outcome is a work–stoppage.

When music is not an adjunct to the processes of labor but rather the very thing being worked on, by a composer who employs for the purpose a persona, that is, a χαρακτήρ, in donning it both concealing yet also revealing his own character, is it proper to call the activity in which he – or rather, they are engaged, a collaboration? To what extent is some manner of mutual assistance rendered while the work is ongoing? And might at some point the process not take a turn whereby everything would come to a standstill?

To me it seems evident that human beings, each simply as a single individual alone, cannot render assistance to themselves, strictly speaking, especially if what they each had in view to help along were the the inner workings of their own creativity – even though the opposite does not hold good, as, in these general terms, it’s just as clear that individuals are quite capable of harming themselves single–handedly. If real help is to be provided, as a minimum it’s another person who would have to offer it: in general it always comes from a distance that individuals unaided by any devices could not possibly assume with regard to themselves. However, when an individual is deliberately as it were extended by a persona (or even in effect withdraws in favor of
a pair or a number of personæ), things would look rather different, as the persona could comprise just enough of another person and open up sufficient room to make possible the giving and the receiving of assistance. And not necessarily in one direction only, as the persona might evince the independence vis-à-vis the person requisite to allow for the possibility of mutual aid being tendered back and forth between them, where these reciprocal interactions would take place under definite conditions and to particular ends, without this very limited self-multiplication of the person amounting to anything like an espousal of autarky as a principle.

In the instance of Cuthbért and KuuMA, the reciprocation of help was creative in kind, and so, in the collaboration between them, each conveyed inspiration to the other by turns, while the two acted in concert or, in the most literal meaning of the verb, conspired together.

Yet such a procedure entails some risk. The inward sources of creativity flow so delicately that to interpose oneself here at all, let alone in any massive fashion, could well end by damming them up or otherwise diverting them in ways neither foreseen nor wanted – and thus here too the result could impinge upon the work itself. This possible occurrence should not be discounted, given the unpredictability which even the most familiar and nearest of human relationships necessarily continue to harbor in themselves (thank goodness they do!) and by the eruption of which, in less fortunate cases, they might cease to be amiable and become patently antagonistic instead. In such an eventuality, the persona might turn against the person who devised it to begin with, provoking, deep within their shared creative heart, an intramural conflict whose existence, although imperceptible as such, could be inferred from the poor quality of the compositions it managed despite itself to deliver. So in anticipation of an outcome of this kind, many might want to think at least twice before undertaking to multiply themselves and the significance of their work by means of personæ, especially as cautionary tales do readily spring to mind of some who’ve recently diminished themselves and their music further and further with every new change of persona, each intended by them to be more breathtaking than the last.

Admittedly, it may overstate the case to locate the source of creativity, especially creativity in music, given the evident proximity of the musical and the mathematical, so specifically in the human heart, an organ of the whole
person quite distinct from the mind in general or the intellect in particular. Ought not the mind be acknowledged as having a large or a larger share in it, albeit in a manner of which the artist and, even more, the composer must be unaware? Perhaps. Yet one has reason to stress the role of the heart. Most pertinent is this: the heart, insofar as the term designates the seat of feeling, love, and passion, exists in a close affiliation with the body, upon which music, for its part, can have the greatest effect of all the arts, and thus it would not be so far-fetched to hold, would it, that the creative inspirations in music, first and foremost those of them who make it, but in addition, insofar as an audience’s musical imagination exerts itself as an active power, the listeners’ as well, have their primary locus there. And as a corollary to this: the lasting mark which, as I suggested before, the persona is utilized in order to imprint on the body, might just as well be impressed upon the heart, affecting or altering its character in an abiding manner, for after all, the human heart, if in itself it proves to be even less constant than the human body, might perhaps stand in greater need of this reinforcement.

Now, the needs of a heart which was felt to be shattered, discordant, or broken, seem to have been known from within by those theologians who first availed themselves of the conceptuality of the persona and the πρόσωπον, Tertullian in Latin to begin with and then, following his lead in Greek, Hippolytus, and it may even have been expressly in answer to destitution and its needs that they spoke about God as comprising three personæ or πρόσωπα in one: so conceived, God would make a fit respondent to individuals who found themselves out of balance or at odds with themselves or inwardly troubled, a source of solace to which they in their forlorn state might turn for relief. People who had begun to feel themselves despondent on account of some strife within their hearts, as though the heart were torn this way and that by its own forces, ranged against one another in interior conflict which they themselves could not possibly comprehend directly, given the peculiar distance between the heart and the other components of human personality, but of which they were made aware by the evident intractability and inescapability of its effects upon the tones of their souls – people finding themselves in this confusing state might indeed share their condition with a personal god such
as propounded by these theologians, for by His very constitution as triune it appeared in some unique manner to be shared. In other words, a deity of this description already knew that condition with a measure of intimate familiarity, and so the help they sought might be offered to those who felt themselves suffering from it.

Whether the assistance provided would have been of precisely the right kind, under the circumstances, is not a question that can be addressed here, obviously. As for the Tertullianic and Hippolytean theology, I have introduced it neither on its own account, although it does possess considerable intrinsic interest, nor to imply that there is any pronounced conversance with these writings on my part – in fact, for the preceding I’ve perused the second chapter in Clement Webb’s old and still useful inquiry, *God and Personality*, of which the third chapter is similarly informative. Nor, and least of all, have I referred to these theologemes in order to indicate anything in particular about what my own needs or beliefs may or may not be, caveat lector. Rather, I merely mean to suggest that the understanding of the persona and the πρόσωπον, which is to say, the comprehension of the results one may expect from their various usages as ideas, for better and for worse, runs deep in this corpus of writing, and so these two authors could be consulted with profit even by those whose inclination towards theology as such is nearly nil.

What has all of this to do with music? Well, the very notion of *discord* within the heart already could be taken to suggest that within the human heart there reside things akin to powers of music, incipiently dissonant or harmonious as they may be, and moreover, it might also imply, conversely, that works of music issue first and foremost not from the soul or the mind but from the hidden sources of the heart and thus also in some manner remain affiliated to it, where this ongoing relationship is outlined by virtue of the etymology of the musically significant term *discord* or its opposite *accord*, which quite literally are derived from the Latin noun *cor*, that is, the heart. But I shall leave this play with words aside, as the relevance is of a different order and actually substantial.

The discord inside the human heart which antedated and perhaps even engendered the elaborate theological doctrines of Tertullian and Hippolytus, the notion of a triune deity conveying both a moment of acknowledgement of this deeply felt condition and also a form of relief from it, continued to be heard.
from afterwards, and a couple of centuries later, in one exemplary work of personal writing wherein it was eloquently vented, the author also intimated the existence of a quite close bond between music and a disquieted heart. I am referring, of course, to the passage in Augustine’s main text in self-examination where he recounted that the factual data of his personal existence became a riddle to him when he regarded it all under the gaze of God – “in cuius oculis mihi quaestio factus sum”* – a revelation that all of it had been made not mainly for its own sake but in order that by its sheer transience it might engender dissatisfaction, disturbance, and disquiet in human hearts and then prompt them to turn back to their maker, bringing the individuals whose hearts they were along with them. Consequently, in addition to whatever meaning the facts of their lives might contain in themselves, they had also been posed as something like questions these persons were meant to guess the answers to, thus pointing beyond themselves and their own insufficiency and directing those who pondered the riddles to apply their energy to seeking the superabundant source of everything lasting, positive, and real in their existence and to find a shelter of repose there. According to Augustine, “inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te,”** and with this church–fatherly sentence he delineated both the sense of confusion radiating from some hearts as well as the hope harbored by the individuals to be saved from it once they would have come to rest in their God. However, in the same breath, he also stated how beguiling one’s factual existence is and remains, how difficult for an individual it could prove to let the attraction of the world go, generally speaking, and, more particularly, how readily he himself, as one amongst the dissatisfied, disturbed, and disquieted, had come to love in its own right the very thing instituted for this flock that it might better attend to its God: namely, music.

The challenge which he felt as being in some manner especially his own, therefore, was to distinguish between the orderly and the inordinate love of music – but at the same time, he could not quite avoid suspecting that precisely this sentiment might also constitute part of the riddle or question that was posed to him by himself or, more precisely, by his self. Once one began to regard one’s own personalia as amounting to the elements of a riddle, as

Augustine seems to have done, there would be no end to suspicion concerning their true purpose, and the resulting perplexities themselves became strange and worrisome in the aggregate, the faith in things unseen then at times shimmering before him as though it too were a fata morgana. What remained to this author subsequently as the thing on which he could count and rely most, relatively speaking, if not music? Thus, if Augustine’s text is stretched taught, and by the allusive manner in which it was written it seems to call for just such a treatment, the attentive reader might uncover the thought – many ages before Nietzsche’s signature statement – that the Christian held music in reserve lest he perish of the truth.

When, early in the work, the reader comes across the plea issued to his God by Augustine: “noli abscondere a me faciem tuam: moriar, ne moriar, ut eam uideam”* – a sentence which takes up and varies a passage in the Bible I shall touch on a bit later – it seems evident, does it not, that behind the utterance the author entertained substantial doubt or even a full-fledged mental reservation about the prospective beatitude of this intimate vis-à-vis, if only on account of everything else he would have to give up in order to attain it.

His request to die ought not to be taken at face value, therefore. Yet, prior to that anticipated ultimate moment when the promise would have to be made good, some of the main components of Augustine’s existential posture are full of interest even to those whom (as I remarked before) the discipline of theology as such never has captivated, all the more so when as now the overarching concern is to achieve a better understanding of the creativity of musical life at its most active, during the work of composing, especially in cases like Cuthbért’s where the works are created by means of a persona or personae.

To begin with, it ought to be noted, what Augustine called the “cor inquietum” is marked by several different kinds of care (thus care is its character!) and it oscillates uneasily amongst them. Without delving very far into these churning depths, some of the turmoil may be delineated as follows: although this heart cares for itself unduly or inordinately, that is, it both likes itself and tends to itself too much, thereby neglecting or turning away from its other cares, at the very same time it also concerns itself too much about those others, attending to them, and also, in some manner, preferring them, exces-

* Bk. 1, 5.
sively, leaving itself little opportunity to care about itself or to care for itself. In the most general terms, to Augustine’s way of thinking, all of this manifold care was foreordained both as a trial, a test of mettle meant to disclose who each individual person is, and also as one kind of inducement to them to turn to God, though without intending that in so doing anyone would in effect say to the world, *I no longer care about you.* More specifically, in Augustine’s own case, the considerable difficulties fomented by care – which with him was by no means exclusively cura sui – contributed much to the “quæstio” he took himself to be.

With Augustine himself, evidently it had been the upheaval and inquietude in the human heart which engendered the effort to fathom it as being an organ abyssal and mysterious in itself. That somehow it had ceased to function as it once had done, in its own earlier orderly or proper manner, this was the sentiment which prompted him to realize how he had become a riddle to himself, calling forth great creative eloquence from him in his effort to discern its meaning and to answer it rightly. Might one infer, in an analogous fashion, that when composers, concentrating most intently on their musical activity, encounter within their own creativity some acoustic difficulty, an inner challenge, obstacle, or problem, with respect to which the work as completed would eventually represent the solving, removing, or overcoming, and by reason of which the process of the work also may continue afterwards to provoke curiosity about itself, something within their hearts must previously have functioned in some unusual or unexpected manner? (Albeit fortuitously so.) And conclude, consequently, that the composers have then already become questions to themselves, drawing attention most obviously to this development whenever they happen to send their music forth under the name of a persona?

At this point, it may be helpful to cloak my rough working hypothesis, *the locus of musical creativity is in that part of the psyche one usually calls the heart,* in something like the form of a hypothetical syllogism. Thus: if the musical creativity deserving of the name necessarily comprises the surmounting of some inner sonorous difficulty, and if the human heart is constituted essentially as an organ that lives by virtue of the resounding strife inside itself, then the springs of this type of creative activity may plausibly be located
within the heart specifically, and most particularly a composer’s, on account of the higher complexity of the music.

The sounds of the turbulent human heart, both those which remain enclosed inside it, but also those it emits into the rest of the soul, play a central role in Augustine’s conception of selfhood. These were the constituent elements of the riddle he had become to himself, being especially well-suited to discharge such a role insofar as individual sounds can be at once both obscure in themselves and incipiently significant of something else, whenever, for instance, they serve to convey into someone’s conscious awareness the yearning deep within: for it seems they can cohere into meaningful wholes differently than other kinds of phenomena are capable of doing, and this difference is echoed as it were in the character of the attentiveness required if one aims to perceive them with discernment. In brief, to summarize the task of this discernment, it is to distinguish significant sounds within sound in general, and in Augustine’s case, the responsibility was discharged by a quiet listening to the facts of his life, or rather, to the rumblings these provoked within his “unquiet heart,” a type of listening – a sort of overhearing – that in its very stillness itself afforded him a foretaste of the rest he hoped for. At the same time, when Augustine listened to his own heart and indeed with his heart for the sounds or rather signals he might then discern which were to direct him onwards to the ordinate love of his God, this act was itself the rendering of tribute, as he himself remarked: “ecce aures cordis mei ante te, Domine,”* as though by this supplication to insist that when his heart co-operated in the project by applying its ears to itself, as it were, it would be rendered a more welcome donation in his Lord’s sight and affiliate Augustine’s personhood closer to His side. Thus this discernment was an operation Augustine had already performed upon himself, and by implication he conceived the quite active listening to one’s own heart that it required as being an important part of a hermeneutic activity largely formative of the self, that is, of the person who one wants to be and perhaps also of the place where one would most prefer to find oneself.

Now, obviously I have not invoked the dense nub of ideas which guided Augustine’s project of self-reformation for their own sake, but mainly in

* Bk. 1, 5.
order to suggest that the arena in which his efforts transpired had an essentially acoustic character. To the extent that self–knowledge was one of the desiderata in this process, knowing oneself meant hearing one’s own heart, albeit indirectly, in order to comprehend the sonic disclosure, however unintended, of what the “cor inquietum” wanted, on the one hand, and of what it needed, on the other – a mode of intent listening whereby many other aural phenomena would simply pass unheard by the ears altogether. To be more specific, in the present context, when it is less the self tout court which it would be the aim to disclose to oneself, as some part of the stream of someone’s inner musicality, Augustine’s conception of self–examination might be glossed pertinently as follows: the better one knows who one is and where one is, and thus at the same time recognizes the limits of one’s self, the more fully one can be this person, but also, in addition, the more readily one could set that self and its limitations aside provisionally in favor of a persona, with respect to which one might then proceed likewise, in so doing not detracting from but instead contributing further to understanding the inward personal sources of one’s own creativity in music, if one happened to be a composer, for instance. And, once having understood them, to acting upon and augmenting them, in the best case without devoting inordinate attention to this part of the whole undertaking and neglecting that for the sake of which it is all to be done, namely, the musical works themselves.

Those inner wellsprings, I’ve hypothesized, are located in the heart, unquiet as it may be, and so it seems plausible to add that the deliberate attempt to augment them from without, when for instance the self is multiplied by the creation of a persona or personæ, may well run the risk of affecting the noisy conflict within the heart in an adverse manner – exacerbating it perhaps or else somehow stifling it. The balance of forces within the heart is presumably so delicate and finely–tuned that one might later rue any alteration in it, especially whenever its given state at some moment is (this is another of my working assumptions) the matrix for the special sonic mood of a particular piece of music which could have been composed out of no other source. But if that is so, one will probably want to ponder a bit more the notion that the human heart is filled with the noise of its own forces clashing with one another and in fact could not endure long in the absence of this inward tumult. Is this vital
noise anything more than a metaphor mistaken for a truth? Or, if not, what more precisely is it?

To sketch out at least the beginning of an answer, it will be of use to turn once again to trinitarian theology (though also maintaining the same caveat as before), and in this vein I should like to recall an idea put forward by one of those theologians while sounding out the relations amongst the three πρόσωπα of God. In one of the texts of Gregory of Nazianzus, the Cappadocian raises (and then, to be sure, denies) the possibility that these three might indeed exist vis–à–vis one another not in a state of concord, nor even in something like discord sans phrase, but rather, more specifically and pointedly, in a quite voluble contention wherein they continually turn against each other, doing so singly or in ever–shifting combinations, thus yielding, all in all, an unstable succession of variegated dissension, tumult, and uproar (conditions which Gregory called to mind by his application of the verb στασιάζειν: “ἔστι γὰρ καὶ τὸ ἐν στασιάζον πρός ἑαυτὸ πολλὰ καθίστασθαι”*).

This scenario of vocal strife within God, if it was anything more than a mere figment of Gregory’s imagination, would seem to owe at least some of the plausibility it has evinced to his usage of the concept of the πρόσωπον itself, the term’s theatrical reference still eminent when he mentioned the possibility that an interminable conflict might be raging there, as though all three πρόσωπα were something like actors seeking to monopolize the amphitheatre, each attempting to speak more loudly than the others and project their own voices further, shouting past or drowning them out, the result quite conceivably being a cacophony in which nothing could be heard distinctly – in the end it would be nearly the opposite of a chorus.

Yet Gregory’s allusion to the possibility of an altercation so specific as to merit the verb στασιάζειν, is perhaps even more significant in the present context. For this was what the citizens and residents could expect to hear in the public spaces of their cities in the event of a civil uprising or insurrection, a στάσις – the affiliation of the two Greek words is evident – and so the action designated by this verb, amongst its other results, could also convey the sound

* Theological Orations, III, 2.
of a στάσις over a certain distance to the ears. Accordingly, the noise issuing from this civil unrest would not have been interminable in itself, arising instead only from time to time as opportunities seemed to warrant or as required by the circumstances – however suddenly or unexpectedly all of it might have happened – or rather, this would have been the case, were it not for the peculiar fact that the noun also denoted an enduring, stable, or unchanging condition or state (it’s in this sense that στάσις is frequently naturalized in transliteration in our languages), and indeed, one remarkable for its relative quiescence. What then is one to make of this amalgamation of two seemingly opposed meanings in a single word?

The inner logic which accounts for it, I think, emerges when one understands the implicit assumption: the parties or factions involved in the στάσις would be not two but three in number (for even if there were more than three, the strife amongst them could be comprehended by means of a triadic model). Were there only two, any conflict between them will tend of itself towards a definite end or termination, this being the complete victory of one and the vanquishment of the other, although as soon as one στάσις was finished another would likely soon commence amongst those who remained, and then it would indeed seem inexplicable how the word could also have signified a state notable for its steadiness over a considerable length of time; but if they are three, it is rather more likely that all will counteract one another in such a way that the strife could itself persist indefinitely in what is in effect a continual standstill, a rough balance of their forces in whose perpetuation each of them, any loud asseverations to the contrary notwithstanding, and the city itself in its entirety will retain a certain vested interest: then, between the two mutually opposing meanings juxtaposed so oddly at first glance in the word στάσις, there is implicit a third that relates them together in an eminently logical manner, an intermediate term which may be glossed plausibly as an ongoing stalemate.

This ongoing stalemate amongst the triad of civil parties or factions or powers, in short, is what ought to incite each to persist in their separate existences, and upholds the city as a whole in its.

Here, however, it is less the στάσις as such in any of the three intertwined meanings of the word, and more how each of the στάσεις would or would not sound, that interests me – for it’s the sound of στάσις which I take to be a fit-
ting metaphor for the unseen altercations within the human heart that keep it alive and which can constitute a living source of inspiration for composers who know how to listen within themselves to the vibrations they emit.

Στάσις in the sense of an internecine conflict is likely to strike the ears with an extreme loudness for a time and then fall silent once the civil hostilities are concluded as one side triumphs utterly over the other (or else scores some manner of Pyrrhic victory), with a similar great noise bursting out whenever the next gets underway.

A στάσις such as we still encounter it in the form of a stasis will probably be marked by a continuous dull murmuring or even give off hardly any sound at all: something like the stifled yawn typical of the permanently peaceful state which reigns in somnolent backwaters where nothing much ever changes or will change.

Finally, in the implicit (as it seems to me) intermediate meaning of an ongoing stalemate in the city, στάσεις comprise an aural ebb and flow, with some moments where the clash of contending forces produces much noise and fury whose significance is less than obvious, and others when, out of mutual exhaustion or else from cold calculation, the sheer volume is much less while the actual sense is conveyed sotto voce. Yet these multifarious diminuendos and crescendoes would all refer to each other, both backwards and forwards, for in this continuous altercation all sides are attempting to define or re–define the sense of what the others and they themselves said earlier, and at the same time each jockeys for position so that subsequently they will place the others at a disadvantage and thus enable themselves to speak to best effect. All, while they are talking or otherwise making noise, are preparing themselves to hold their fire, and while silent they ready themselves to speechify – alternation is the principle of such an altercation as long as the stalemate itself endures, and in general the contenders are willing to take turns even or especially when they most heatedly attack the others.

Now, neither the first nor the second of these possible στάσεις seems especially appropriate as a metaphor for the state of a composer’s heart, considered as the organ from which, if not the compositions themselves, at least a major part of the inspiration for them emerges. However, the third appears as though it could be cut out for the task, for the sound of this altercation as it unfolds, so long as it remains just such a stalemate and does not devolve into
one or another of the two other kinds of στάσις, may evince some similarity, in its inward–turned complexity, shifts in mood and tempo and volume, and variation of theme, to the intricate organization of a work of orchestral or symphonic music. If the clashes in the heart generate something like a music there, would not the latter be the most elaborate – finely wrought but also of a significant length – when those powers in contention check one another so that none can dominate? Accordingly, in the στάσις of the forces in the composer’s heart, if it be of this sort, one might locate the origin of or the aural impetus for a finished composition, or else in certain cases, given a quite high degree of discernment in the transcription of these virtual sounds within, even something like a very rough first draft thereof.

Of course, hypotheses like this may well come across as presumptuous in the extreme, laying things bare that never were meant to be disclosed. Didn’t I myself say that the human heart is shielded from attention for very good reason? And moreover, wouldn’t it be better to leave the inner workings of creativity alone as a mystery? All the more so if the interior stalemate, though ongoing, is also fragile and liable to fall apart whenever composers attempt to put pressure on it from without. Doesn’t the human heart then stand in need of a form of protection to insulate it from the rest of the person – not to mention the intrusive inquiries of others – and will it not then require something like a mask of its own?

To the early masks, I suggested before, drawing on Preuß’ insights, the function was attributed of insulating in some measure the mask–wearers from the inimical forces surrounding them: the human face and especially its openings simply had to be guarded. Considerably more subtle and a derivative refinement was the notion that masks would serve to protect others from the forces within oneself or even, still later and in a rather different sense, one’s own force: so utilized they would be implements donned out of care for the people around oneself, in relationships whose original inimical nature was effaced gradually, the more ethical in character they became – a shift which such a usage of the masks may have helped appreciably to effect.

Now, this notion of what a mask might be good for, though one could perhaps arrive at it by a long extrapolation from Preuß’ text, may be garnered
quite readily from the passage in the Bible to which Augustine, as I mentioned before, evidently referred. (In drawing upon this source here, the caveat upon which I earlier insisted, should once again be kept in mind.)

In this passage, in the words of the King James version, one is told of the encounter in the tabernacle when “the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.”* At first glance, the very intimacy of the tête–à–tête is startling, and one might wonder how literally the personifying expression “face to face” is to be taken, or quite possibly one might suspect that the English mistook the Hebrew in some significant fashion. Yet this phrase, it turns out upon consulting the Masoretic text, is a quite literal rendition of the locution “אֶל־פָּנִים פָּנִים” and the word “face” as it occurs throughout this chapter in the King James simply conveys the Hebrew “פָּנִים” (panim), while the accuracy of such a choice of translation is further confirmed by Luther’s German rendering, in which one reads of a meeting “von angesicht zu angesicht” between them. But then it quickly begins to seem that the Hebrew word is somehow equivocal in a manner of which the English “face” only provides the reader a slight inkling, for, just a few verses later, their conversation is recounted and one hears God telling Moses: “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live”** – it was this theme that so fascinated Augustine and upon which he sounded so significant a variation when he implored his God not to hide His face from him – and so the word פָּנִים apparently has two contrary meanings, at the very least. Therefore, according to the letter of this passage in the Bible, God’s “face” in one sense of the term is seen by Moses, while in another it could not be, given that He cares for him as he is and does not wish him to perish, a solicitude which is patent when by His hand Moses is spared that fate: he is only provided a small glimpse of Him from behind as He passes by, for, as we are told once more, His “face shall not be seen.”***

What is one to make of the divergent meanings of the word in such a momentous context as this? The face–to–face encounter in the earlier verse occurs as though between friends, and so one could infer that their countenances were marked by the mere minimum of reserve characteristic of a colloquy of well–disposed intimates, both masters of their own self–composure,

* Exodus 33, 11. ** 33, 20. *** 33, 22 et seq.
and yet, obviously, they can in no sense of the word be each other’s equals. In order that God might let Moses see Him, He had first in some manner to limit Himself or, speaking more precisely, His immensity of power or force – in der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister – and it was for precisely this purpose, the reader might tentatively conclude, that He made a פנים for Himself to begin with: with regard to human beings, the very transcendence of God’s omnipotence had posed a problem to Him that He solved by the expedient of the פנים, which transmuted it into something definite, a quantity or quiddity they might apprehend intelligibly. In the light of this conclusion, the divine “face” would appear to be like a form or an aspect God assumes that He may move on the same plane as human beings even though His own proper locus is elsewhere, and then it would not be a divine attribute but rather a device He dons as circumstances warrant, whose purpose is the defense of His creatures against too close, too direct a contact with Himself, for the human frame as presently constituted simply could not bear that. Hence a sort of distance must be interposed, and the “face” donned by God in effect both opened up this very necessary space between Him and Moses and also conveyed His speech across it: although they seem to have met informally, the encounter had to have been choreographed in advance with considerable finesse on God’s part, if it ever were to occur at all. Thus, in short, the locale in which their conversation took place displays a certain resemblance to an amphitheatre, and the פנים in this meaning of the term works in something of the manner of the πρόσωπον of the Greek or the persona of the Roman drama.

Here the “face” itself serves as a theatrical mask, a persona or πρόσωπον, which may shed a bit more light on the meaning of the Hebrew word, whose usage in this chapter of the Bible is so puzzling at first glance. If, in this particular context, and notwithstanding whatever else the term may actually signify, the פנים is a convenience God puts on out of respect for human beings, in order to uphold them in their independence from a fully immediate exposure to Himself, that is, His omnipotence, an experience which they could not possibly withstand as they are, why then should He not don more than one kind of mask, each correlate to the different and, depending on what’s required, the antithetical roles He takes on vis-à-vis them? Thus, the פנים shown to Moses is that of an intimate and accordingly was donned uniquely for the sake of a singular personal relationship, whereas another type of פנים, the one which it was
said human beings may not see and live, might well represent the formal demeanor adopted by God in an official capacity, most likely when His justice needed to be dispensed, impersonally. (This idea seems especially plausible, as the later verses say that God passed Moses by: perhaps because He was going forth in his role of judge to make the rounds, as there would have been much for Him to set right.) Now, why mortals could not possibly view this face of God without perishing, is prima facie a question susceptible of "infinite interpretation," but I shall veer away from that risky sea. Suffice it to note that a stern countenance involves a particular modulation of facial expression (at least when what is at issue is human expressivity, which, after all, is the sort we know best), an active mode of self-composure whereby much will be withheld from expression so that something in particular may be expressed more pointedly and to greater effect – but also in order to signalize, if only pro forma, a basic respect for the interlocutor as another person, however harsh the tone of the communication may be. Just as long as one exercises a modicum of modulation upon the features of one’s own face and renders it πρόσωπον– or persona–like to some degree, in the act of expressing and communicating anything significant to others, even at its harshest and most inimical, this respect is given – though it’s by no means assured whether they will recognize this – while the less obviously hostile the rapport becomes, the more likely it will comprise, above and beyond the signalizing of that basic acknowledgement, a greater fine-tuning of the expressiveness of the human countenance.

The human face’s role as a filter becomes more and more important, the greater the care that is felt for the others to whom it is turned, with its expressiveness itself embodying an attenuation or amelioration of the vehemences of the heart, for the sake of the others whom one does the good turn of restraining the outer expression of the raw force of one’s own passions. The expressiveness of the human face: by this I mean the physical aspect in its rapid mobility, the lively play of its features, the pursing of these lips, the raising of this eyebrow, the wrinkling of this forehead, the flaring of these nostrils, the peering out of this pair of eyes – all being movements which serve to hold back much of the forcefulness within the soul generally or the heart specifically, in order that something in particular be communicated efficaciously and also, just as importantly, that the others not find themselves overwhelmed in the
process. If somehow, per impossibile, human beings could convey their passions to others directly and simply did not stand in need of the face as an intermediary, they would stun anyone who happened to hear them, so potent are they in their enduring inward force, and then the passions really would be weapons: this effect would then explain why, if the passions are to be expressed at all, they require a certain degree of dampening or muting, which it is the task of the face’s expressive features to supply. (Incidentally, it may be thought–provoking to recognize, in this connection, that the human ears, that is, the set of corporeal appendages, rather than the inner sense of audition, are not mobile in any comparable way, and thus they have next to no share in the active expressive capacity of the face. Moreover, it’s already instructive, in the terms of this hypothetical–impossible thought–experiment, that to experience the passions directly would be a task for hearing, not for seeing.)

Sketched roughly though it is, this understanding of the character of the human face’s expressiveness, to my mind, may plausibly be derived from the passage in Exodus, which is the main reason why I’ve cited that text. More to my purpose, however, is to suggest that the human voice, in its sonorous physicality, above all, its characteristic tone or timber, but also the deliberate adjustment of the breath upon which it is based, usually filters the passions in a quite similar manner. Otherwise, the auditors would quickly find themselves submerged in the sound of one single sigh, stutter, or shout, and then nothing of any significance could be conveyed beyond the sheer undifferentiated outburst of a passion of this or that kind.

The care taken by individuals while expressing their passions to others, exercising control over the facial and/or vocal features through which they are being conveyed, renders communication of this sort a prototype or an early instance of the mutual assistance people provide one another when the circumstances are right. Interventions of this kind point tantalizingly in the direction of greater general beneficence, and although of course there is no guarantee that in any particular case an actual benefit will result, this common inclination towards beneficial interactions carries weight in its own right. In fact, some observers, at historical moments when things seemed like they were in a state of especially great disarray, have gone so far as to characterize the provision of mutual aid amongst human beings as an act that in itself is not merely human but even in some sense divine. For instance, taking aim at the disor-
derly mass of superstitions concerning the gods prevalent in his times, Pliny the Elder averred that “deus est mortali iuvare mortalem,”* and accordingly, in the present context, the careful self-control in the expression of the passions which individuals may show out of respect both for others and for their own persons, quite apart from whatever they each might happen to believe in or think, can be taken as a small-scale model of the reciprocity of good turns he apparently had in mind. In the midst of one’s fellows, to handle one’s own face as though it were also a mask or persona, could itself already represent a minor act of benefaction; and it is significant that benefaction amongst mortal human beings was what Pliny commended and counterposed to the putative activity of the inimical, maleficent, or vicious gods by whom the imaginations of a great number of his contemporaries were dominated, doing so all the more strongly as he abhorred the very idea of the actual existence of any such beings, and regarded the popular adherence to this quintessence of superstition as an indication that many people’s minds had succumbed to the spectacular appeal of multitudes of personæ with no substance behind them, as though it were not in a theology so much as in a theatre that nearly all the world was entrapped. In this contentious matter, Pliny’s stand was quite similar to the position Augustine would expound several centuries later against Roman paganism, and neither ought to be dismissed lightly, for the piece of superstition the two observant critics each denounced did lend its special sanction to the generally low state of the mores, as in justification or extenuation of themselves the Romans could simply point to the misbehavior of their own deities.

Our present quite different circumstances notwithstanding, however, today it remains very much a live question whether single individuals, by adopting a persona, could each act as their own benefactors and thus in some sense be like gods to themselves – or would this idea reveal itself in the end as being just another of superstition’s perennial disguises?

More than a millennium and a half after the elder Pliny, a quite similar notion of the potentially–virtually divine aspect of the human being was given voice in one of Spinoza’s scholia, and in the reasoning that buttressed the Dutch philosopher’s claim, too, the distrust of superstition is pronounced. Per-

* Naturalis historia, bk. II, chap. 5.
nicious belief played an even larger role in the middle of the seventeenth cen-
tury, setting citizens against each other in the countries then the most free, like The Netherlands and England, as though they all had nothing else to do than to be wolves to one another, leading at worst even to horrendous sav-
agery – “Ultimi barbarorum!” – and yet Spinoza, from the center of the
storm and indeed all the more credibly on this very account, could aver that
in a better–ordered polity, where, as he argued in his writings about political
life, restraints were to be placed upon both superstition and those who ma-
nipulate the superstitious to their own ends, human beings would be able
more readily to unite their efforts against “pericula, quæ ubique imminent”
and in good faith to embrace the old credo, “hominem homini Deum esse.”*
Encompassed by those dangers, on these islands of human beneficence a be-
neficent person might well seem to the beneficiaries like a provident god, and
consequently also one they ought to honor, above and beyond their subse-
quent reciprocation of the beneficial act itself, and so on in futurum. How-
ever, it would not be the unique individual as such on whom the honors were
bestowed and to whom the benefits were repaid, so much as it would be the
person, that is, an individuality utilized in a manner that could be helpful to
others, in the context of interrelationships amongst people for whom the sec-
tors of time of greatest concern were the present and the near future, and not,
as is too often the case with those fallen under the sway of a superstition, this
or that bit of the past. The superstitious, after all, do tend to grasp such
moments of past time as being uncanny harbingers of events that might yet oc-
cur, while every piece of superstition may well contain at least a tiny self–
fulfilling prophecy that is still waiting to happen.

Of course, at this juncture it is also likely that one will entertain some
doubts about the adequacy or else the higher impartiality of Spinoza’s own
conception of these matters. For where is the human belief which would not,
if examined minutely through the lenses of such a philosophy, reveal itself to
comprise superstitious elements? Who knows, perhaps one might even un-
cover a layer of superstition in this part of Spinoza’s thought itself. For, after
all, doesn’t his thinking confront the student of philosophy with yet another
significant eruption of the fierce rejection of political life as such, an antago-

* * Ethica, pt. IV, prop. XXXV, scholium.
nism stretching back throughout the course of philosophy’s history all the way to its beginnings (this insight was one of Hannah Arendt’s most important), when the βίος θεωρητικός was founded on a set of sentiments that might themselves have been less than entirely free of superstitious belief, superstition which, although hardly ever recognized as such, least of all by the philosophers themselves, was implanted ever more firmly with each further iteration? All the more obviously in his case, as Spinoza identified the freedom to philosophize as the ultimate raison d’être of political life generally, as being the one for the sake of which the latter should exist, and also inclined to the notion that the most adequate mode of comprehension of things was by regarding them sub specie æternitatis: in consequence of these two intellectual choices on his part, a satisfactory understanding of all the important res politicae, the characteristic durability of states no less than the evanescence of the most fleeting worldly events, would tend to become even more difficult than otherwise to attain.

At this point, whatever be the sources from which one derives the idea that a beneficent moment is inherent in the very act of donning a persona for other people or even for oneself as though one were another – or, in some strong sense of the phrase, being a person to them – quite apart from any purpose one would envision when doing so, concerning it too one may start to entertain a few doubts. Something that may have looked like beneficence might owe the semblance thereof largely to the vantage–point from which one perceived it intellectually and thus to some degree idealized it, whereas regarded in medias res, from within the forum of political life, it could actually reveal a very different aspect that one really ought not to overlook.

All the more so in view of the condition of the political realm today, where the personæ seem to crowd out the real people, while the dangers, as Spinoza termed them, are hard to locate with any precision. Currently we must contend with technologies of which he could not possibly have had the slightest idea. Although the impact of the Internet in particular upon public life, with the aggressive tone and attitude it evidently is fostering more and more in the latter, in part due to the sheer volume of “communication” it prompts everyone to conduct, has simplified some things, albeit in a rather crude manner,
others it has rendered very much more complicated, amongst them the answers to some questions which hardly ever seemed to arise in earlier times. What I suggested before concerning the implicit beneficence of arranging one’s face as though it were a mask, in order to spare others the exposure to the full force of one’s passions and to share some part thereof the more efficaciously, is, so it seems to me, one of these questions. For as the so-called virtual space of the Internet has emerged and taken hold, re-configuring to an increasing extent the actual spaces between individuals, that is, the distances between them across which they generally communicate with one another with some degree of tactfulness – or, to say the same thing somewhat less abstractly, the peculiar lack of inhibition which is often noted of the way in which people conduct themselves while in isolation behind their computer screens, tapping away at their tablets, chatting into their cellphones, etc., etc., has also begun to dominate their manner of interacting with one another in live face-to-face encounters – as this technological development advances, setting the tone for all parts of our lives, however much we may or may not want it to occur, can one still safely assume that in addition to whatever else the self-control exerted over the human face and its expressiveness may signal, it also suggests at least a modicum of regard for those who receive or could receive the message? This assumption accords less and less with the observable evidence everywhere, in view of the common disinhibition of demeanor that the popular media have evidently taken up as being their duty to propagate by any means they can (two of the main culprits in this being television and Twitter, although several other players have also joined the cause).

If only what all these technologies were bringing about, amounted to the mere heedlessness of others! Which is to say, at bottom, a simple disinterest in them. But their effects are insidious – the basic attitude spreads and conquers almost imperceptibly by the many small acts of imitation of which most often one hardly is aware, even to those who deem themselves most resistant to it – or else it leaves its mark on the very counter-measures one deploys in order to insulate oneself from it and those in whom it’s embodied. So, speaking generally or rather (this I admit) quite over-generally, the moment of beneficence one could once have identified in the very act of utilizing one’s face like a mask vis-à-vis other people, if only in the mode of a possibility or potentiality, has not been subtracted from it, thus making room for a thorough-going
neutrality of the human countenance, so much as it is shunted aside by a fundamentally inimical intent, whereby human faces, insofar as people continue to wear them like masks, are meant to serve not as personæ or πρόσωπα in anything like the old theatrical sense of the terms, but instead as disguises first and foremost. And the inculcation of this hostile inner disposition, so it seems to me, is the underlying purpose of the shameless displays one often sees on television and of the aggressive behavior to which the denizens of social media are routinely exposed there, none of which the administrators of such systems are especially set on discouraging, to say the least.

Now, what is it that faces–cum–masks of this sort are intended to disguise in detail, while perhaps at the very same time signaling that it is being disguised? It’s as though Vico addressed himself to just this question: “le malnate sottigliezze degli’ingegni maliziosi” – maliciousness “che gli avevano resi fiere più immani con la barbarie della riflessione, che non era stata la prima barbarie del senso.”* When crudity of expression itself becomes a disguise, it is a sign both of great subtlety and great malice of mind, another indication that the “barbarie della riflessione” has advanced quite far: this point is my main reason for invoking the Neapolitan’s sentence in this connection. Yet the fact that he saw the growth of such “sottigliezze” within civilizations as one major inner cause of their decline and disappearance throughout the course of human history, whenever such a cold ferocious cunning overwhelms them from within, ultimately doing away with itself as well, probably ought not to be disregarded here, either.

When the existence of the Internet and its variegated effects is considered in light of Vico’s notion of the two barbarisms, the one occurring right at the outset and the other towards the end of a civilization’s life–span, something strange and thought–provoking may become clear. Because the Internet as a virtual environment is pervaded by what seem to be immense forces, all thoroughly out of proportion to the individual – whether it’s this technology’s inherent power either to retrieve entire worlds of information, or to put its users into communication with tout le monde, or to spy upon everyone and anyone wherever they may be and to store so much of their minutiae – it surrounds us all as an inimical realm in something of the way that nature, to the

* The conclusion of the Scienza nuova.
minds of the archaic peoples studied by Preuß, seemed to encircle them. The problems, dilemmas, and conundrums in both cases bear some revealing likenesses to one another. (Here I shall refrain from fleshing out the comparisons needed in order even to begin to substantiate this claim, and instead simply note that these similarities represent a major part of the reason why I’ve turned to his essay at such length.) Accordingly, situated in the midst of the Internet as we are, the imminence of a new “barbarie del senso” looms over us from every side, announcing itself already in a tell–tale manner in the vicissitudes of our common notion of force, at the very same time that we are just beginning to fathom the other barbarism wherein crudity itself becomes a disguise for cunning. The one barbarism, in other words, is commencing again even before the other has ended.

Well, nobody can deny that the Internet speeds things up.

Whether or not one chooses to accept Vico’s dismal sketch of the fate of civilizations, something like the “sottigliezze degl’ingegni maliziosi” is met with everywhere these days, wherever one looks around and sees not persons but rather a crowd of disguises, and frequently quite sophisticatedly crude ones at that, all aiming to work upon the unwary and naive – or whenever one hears the sound of manipulation, for currently a number of spectacular examples of it are being thrust forward by certain parts of the music industry. If, that is, one’s ears have remained capable of registering such a thing at all.

Even when Vico’s prophetic anticipations are left out of consideration and one focuses on the nature of this incipient “barbarie del senso” alone, other more recent observers have delineated some of its components, which thus, as it turns out upon closer reflection, are not especially new at all. One of these is the power which superstition – to call it by its right name – has come to exert over political life, uncoupling the latter from the pursuit of beneficence or happiness, to a considerable extent due to the course taken by the profession of journalism from the later nineteenth century onwards. It was this development that Santayana assaulted head–on when he denounced the infiltration of politics by the techniques of advertising, effected largely through the press as
an arena for the methods of marketing. “Superstitions old and new thrive in this infected atmosphere,” he declared of the society whose universal religion is journalism, which continues to be our credulous contemporary society too, within which “they are now all treated with a curious respect, as if nobody could have anything to object to them. It is all a scramble of prejudices and rumours; whatever first catches the ear becomes a nucleus for all further presumptions and sympathies. Advertising is the modern substitute for argument, its function is to make the worse appear the better article. A confused competition of all propagandas – those insults to human nature – is carried on by the most expert psychological methods, which the art of advertising has discovered; for instance, by always repeating a lie, when it has been exposed, instead of retracting it.”*

Unscrupulousness, or, in other words, precision in the methods and confusion about the meaning of it all, is something we today still know a thing or two about. (As for what seems to be our prevalent skepticism, all too often it is merely the other side of the coin of the widespread readiness to assent to anything.) To extrapolate from Santayana’s remarks, which are already nearly a century old and yet hardly dated: the demise both of factual truth and of the ideal of impartiality, or, to speak cynically, their depreciation in value, represented an inverse index of the ascent of superstition as a social power, in its victory leading the credulous to pay an inordinate amount of attention to “whatever first catches the ear” – his phrase neatly identifies one of the things in which past, present, and future adherents of the “barbarie del senso” do tend most strongly to believe – and on this one point at least the Internet simply continues journalism’s work by other means, to an even greater effect.

For his part, Santayana clearly recoiled from the triumph of superstition in modern society, as he saw it, and today it’s not difficult to sympathize with this reaction, given everything we know of the technologies of communication, their uses, and their abuses. Still, given that for him as for Spinoza the highest freedom for whose sake political life ought properly to exist, was the libertas philosophandi, here too, one might likewise suspect, a modicum of philosophical–perspectival condescension and distortion had contributed to the appalling picture. On the other hand, although it would be a piece of

* Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies, chap. 43, “The Irony of Liberalism.”
chronological unfairness to hold this against him, in fact there is something important missing from his account, namely, an awareness of how desperate the inmates of this “infected atmosphere” may get, and of how far their desire to be delivered from it then may lead them, under certain circumstances and after some skillfully co-ordinated manipulation. What he could not yet have touched on, to put it another way, was the totalitarian temptation that subsequently arose in extremis from within twentieth-century societies themselves and which does not exactly represent only a piece of ancient history now in the twenty-first, either.

In this connection, the question concerning the Internet in particular is whether it may not inure those who use it habitually to just such a temptation, lending the latter the semblance of a mere innocuous belief, or whether it, by its constitution as a worldwide system of technology, would even actively foster the idea that for political or social problems which otherwise appear intractable, the sole solution would be a total one. Admittedly, this possibility amounts at most to a perilous inclination issuing forth at some point in the future from a technological network which, to be sure, has thus far been actually benefited the world in numerous respects.

A speculative line of thought such as this, or even the present essay altogether, would appear to have strayed very far away from music, the subject with which it began. Yet it’s by virtue of the long detour (as it might seem to be) that I can return to Cuthbért and KuuMA in order to conclude with a discussion of some of their compositions themselves, for if there is one single thing they all are about, or at least many of them, it seems to be the Internet.

One of the tracks on KuuMA’s album *Becoming the Moon*, which I wrote about last January, is entitled “What If You Were the Internet?,” and it delves into that technological system as though both imagination and empathy were needed to comprehend its workings from within. What the composition gives us to hear or to overhear, or so it sounds to my ears, are various constituent parts of the Internet discontented with their working conditions – we’re startled to recognize that we are the cause of their complaints, for, nominally at least, they work for us. These workers proceed to express their dissatisfaction as loudly as their various voices will permit, then pass from words to deeds.
equally variegated in their sound. Thus the composition sketches out a sce-
nario full of drama, and to enter onto this scene we simply must put on some-
thing like disguises – how could we possibly expect to show our faces there?
The experience itself feels like industrial espionage, and it is thrilling; but
what one retains from it afterwards is the sense that the Internet exists over
against human beings as a zone replete with forces that in all likelihood are in-
imical to us (how rightly or wrongly is not at issue) and which quite possibly
will show themselves vastly stronger than we are.

This idea of the Internet may serve as a key for finding one’s way through
the varieties of sound in other of his works as well.

For example, with regard to Cuthbért in propria persona, in April I wrote
about his album *Dream World*, focusing in particular on the track “Yumesekai
(Taiga)” (previously entitled “夢世界 Dream World”) which I’d also mentioned
in my first article about him, and in it there is one sequence that struck my
ears with the menace of a pursuit: it sounds as though someone is in flight
from someone else, moving with heavy step and even heavier breathing to
escape an assailant – yet who or what it is, is not exactly clear, as in dreams
generally anything at all could act as an enemy to the dreamer. But more than
the identity of this pursuer, what is of interest here is the skillful manner in
which a wind instrument, Cuthbért’s own trumpet, is deployed to evoke the
contours of an ominous–inimical environment in which there’s scarce cover
even though one has pressing need of a hiding-place. Somehow, perhaps due
to the physical effort required of the musician playing a wind instrument
which we listeners in hearing it limn virtually in our minds or even perhaps
by actually disposing our bodies as though we too were preparing ourselves to
exhale and inhale, instruments of this type are especially capable of conveying
the impression of some natural forces impinging upon us – most palpably the
difficulty of breath one might experience while in the midst of a fierce cold
wind – and so the idea arises that the locale itself could be the adversary we
the dreamers are moving to evade, lest it overwhelm us entirely. Then, if the
Internet was portrayed in the first composition as an alien realm whose deni-
zens are in a great uproar against us, would the converse not hold good as
well, so that, as one could infer, the inhospitable environment we are led
through in this composition, with the peculiar vivid intensity of a dream, in
fact represents nothing other than the ether that is the Internet?
 Hear d thus from its more hostile side, the Internet, this track sounds as though it says, is a nightmare from which careful listeners are trying to awake.

Listening well to one’s own heart is an exercise which, whatever else it might accomplish, can also enable one to listen better to music as it wants to be heard, while conversely, to focus one’s ears on music can render them keener in discerning that heartfelt inner noise, however static or sweet it happens to be. Yet, unfortunately for the state of our musical life today, the Internet tends to disrupt this focused aural activity at every point, on account of the vehemence, the volume, and the velocity of whatever it communicates to us so nearly uninterruptedly that for many it’s become an imperious need in its own right, rendering the music of the heart or the heart of the music even more faint to the ears than either may already have been.

 Nonetheless, a great obstacle can call forth a significant effort, and it’s in this sense that the Internet seems to be what a more recent composition by KuuMA is actually about. It is entitled, albeit parenthetically, as though in this instance a title were nearly redundant, “(Can’t Sleep Need Coffee),” for indeed, as the composer himself remarks, this music is caffeinated.

In this piece, an excited psycho–physical state is rendered relatively directly into sound, and thus it was released under KuuMA’s name, for what need has a such a music of notation or a score? The recording is all. A live performance would simply detract from what was achieved in the studio, as in all likelihood the rapid tremors, pulses, and jitters could not be re–created on stage with anything like the same sharp clarity of expression. Each sound is meant to jangle and push the ears to be as alert as they can, and so any acoustic dampening would tend to cancel out the overarching intent: thus this is patently a composition for the headphones. That this is also the standard mode for listening to music on, via, or from the Internet, surely was no accident, for this composition appears to want to convey a sense of what the isolation in which individuals find themselves from time to time, and especially often since the establishment of the Internet and its conventions, might feel like precisely when the brute fact of being absorbed by the technology registers in
one’s awareness with greater and greater intensity, on an ascending line of solitude.

KuuMA’s unique composition seems to refer back to the Internet in several respects, in fact, and might even clarify some aspects of the latter. The tempo, for instance, palpably fast from the start though without settling into a glide, embodies the speed of people who veer around that system, sometimes purposively, sometimes mainly in search of one distraction after another, but usually at a brisk clip; in so doing they themselves are displaced elsewhere, taken out of themselves, and thus disclosing to whomever might be there to see or hear it an interior part of themselves, although what is revealed at such moments would be neither the person strictly speaking, nor a persona, nor character: here it’s perhaps a computer–like facet of the human being which onlookers are shown, a sort of impatient auto–pilot that nonetheless is prone to run into glitches it cannot possibly surmount on its own. (How deeply rooted this part has been in them from the beginning, or whether it has been instilled as a consequence of their prolonged exposure to the Internet through many thousands of imperceptible imitations of which they hardly can have been aware even in their aggregation, will have to remain questions for another time.) Some other human power then must supervene to guide it all, and it is this assistance, provided at more or less regular intervals, which the musical repetitions in “(Can’t Sleep Need Coffee),” and most obviously the sequence of small blasts on the trumpet which continually recurs, now in the foreground, now further away or even barely audible, may be meant to call to mind: each of them, pulling the musical elements back from their propulsion outwards in all directions, acts to adjust slightly the course the music is taking.

Or at least that result is what might strike one’s ears to begin with. Subsequently, if the composition does shed sonic light on the Internet, as regards tempo and the feeling for time, it may also in so doing elucidate its own construction likewise.

At around the 2:03 mark, this trumpet sequence is heard very clearly, evidently quite near by, and similarly the next several times. The proximity to the listener brought about by virtue of this repetition may prompt listeners to pay closer attention to the rapport between the trumpet’s Leitmotiv and the rest of the music, and then one hears that the latter is not restrained by, so much as it actively responds to the wind instrument: the notes blown on it, in their coher-
ence as a phrase, manifest something of the character of an imperative word, though more in the manner of a guideline or a directive than a simple prohibition. And yet whatever be the assistance they may render a listener in finding a way through the dense environment in which one is immersed, their role vis-à-vis all the other sounds is even more significant. This phrase stands out over against those others as though it were their conductor, and accordingly, in its variations in tone, volume, emphasis, etc., as it is variously repeated throughout the course of the piece, it speaks in the manner of the gestural languages by which the conductors guide the orchestras, even though it be from behind. (“Il faut bien que je les suive, puisque je suis leur chef!”)

A few high silvery notes at approximately the 3:13 mark double the trumpet sequence, in an amplification which moves the music into a passage wherein the tension escalates noticeably, as though the atmospheric pressure has increased largely on account of the greater number of sounds. Henceforth that sequence can still be heard faintly every so often, although even so, simply by its sheer regularity earlier the listeners’ aural imaginations will probably continue to recall it even when it’s absent from their perception, in particular whenever the ensemble of sound is augmented – which happens with an increasing frequency here, to a point where listeners might find the experience to be overwhelming, especially from the 3:50 mark onwards. Yet by the demands the sonic profusion places upon the listeners’ attention, it also can call to mind the challenges, posed even to the technically proficient, of navigating through the Internet, and evoke the accompanying feeling of frustration, at the moments when the system is throwing the most information at its users, regardless of whether or not they’ve requested it, and at the very same time, even it may seem deliberately, actively hindering them from responding to its offerings effectively or at all rapidly – fortunately, however, the mode in which this music has been made available also enables the listener to replay it in whole or part ad libitum. (If only the occasional irritations of the Internet were as easily dealt with!)

By itself this analogy to the workings of the Internet might seem to be less than exact, but a couple of other facets of the music may perhaps shore up its plausibility and have theirs strengthened in turn.

Quite possibly on the very first hearing, yet even more likely after having been heard a few times, the synthetic sounds of “(Can’t Sleep Need Coffee)”
may strike the ear nearly as onomatopoeias. To be sure, it is not the noises of the first nature that is usually dignified with a capital letter which they re-create, but those of the artificial nature the Internet is creating all around us and supplanting or suffocating the other in the process: the whirring of power generators, the crackle of electrical connections, the hum from the portable computers, the buzz in the speakers or headphones, not to mention whatever aural phenomena one may attribute to the constituent parts of the global industrial infrastructure that makes all this possible and keeps it running in its chaotic order. But what is the function of an onomatopoeia? Or rather, what was its function, if we today generally listen to and comprehend these sonic likenesses only from their most innocuous side? Turning a final time to Preuß, it’s easy enough to infer how the first onomatopoeias originated and what they were intended to accomplish: to garner something of the force of the natural occurrences whose sound they imitated to the human beings who uttered them. (Onomatopoeias would then have been conceived as being akin, in their formidable efficacy, to words and especially to names, as one may readily conclude from the brief remarks concerning “Wortzauber” in his essay: “Das Wort ist kein vom Menschen allein ausgehender Zauber, sondern ist eine selbständig wirkende Substanz, eine Nachbildung des Objekts, das es bezeichnet. Wir können das am besten an den Namen von Personen erkennen, die bekanntlich ungern mitgeteilt werden, weil man fürchtet, daß damit ein Zauber auf die Person selbst ausgeübt werde.”*) A prime instance of the superstition fostered by that first “barbarie del senso,” surely – yet aren’t those whom the manifold immensity of the Internet confronts from every angle and throws back upon themselves and their own resources if they are to utilize it, rather than that it would utilize them, now beginning to face a comparable quandary?

Even if KuuMA’s/Cuthbért’s body of music as a bipartite whole is borne along on a current of fatalism about the Internet and the changes in our lives brought about by it – which may or may not be the case – one probably will come to agree that the question isn’t whether to attempt to appropriate some-

thing of the force inherent in this latest technology to ourselves, but instead how we all can best do so without being overcome by it, neither in our sense of time while it is adjusted to novel velocities, nor in the inner disposition of our quanta of energy or attentiveness as they are distributed and deployed afresh. To counteract the effects of the Internet we may have to make ourselves more Internet–like in some particular regards, or at the least put ourselves in its place with a degree of empathy or imagination, and so the first steps in a response to this very practical problem, KuuMA’s composition in particular suggests (while the other piece previously discussed also perhaps gestures by its very title in this direction), can be taken if we become acquainted with the sounds emitted by the technology itself, really or virtually, in order to enable ourselves to reproduce them onomatopoeically as the constituents of a music through which, when it is whistled or hummed again to oneself, vocally or silently, one might indeed increase one’s own strength, speed, or stamina of mind as needed, the better to contend with the challenges the Internet poses. And in offering itself as an illustration of how this improvement could at least be begun, “(Can’t Sleep Need Coffee)” does indeed provide some helpful guidance to the restless listener.

The notion that we could in effect imbibe – and by the ears at that! – and then assimilate some qualities of the Internet in order to guard against the multifarious perils of losing ourselves in it, most likely will come across at first as very strange, not to mention dubious. It is as if the sounds emitted by the technology in operation were thought of as potentially a prophylactic power or an inoculation! Moreover, the attitude of self–composure which is the desideratum here, has barely been delineated. Wouldn’t it be much more immediately a physical condition than a state of the mind? If so, how would the music help to instill it into the body, that some change in the individual’s character subsequently be brought about?

Well, in these pieces of music, the great importance of wind instruments – frequently it seems as though there are several different types of them in play, thanks to the electronic modifications of the sounds of Cuthbért’s trumpet – could give rise to the idea that breath might be the force to engage for the purpose. After all, the metabolism of human breathing with its inhalations and exhalations seems to be a major nexus between the body and the mind, and perhaps also the one that is disordered the most through prolonged periods of im-
mersion in the Internet, with grave consequences for our capacity to concentrate on or to pay attention to anything in particular: amidst the “infected atmosphere” bellowing forth from our contemporary prostration before the Internet together with its associated technologies, as an ensemble which represents the latest incarnation of the empire of journalism, very often we all act in effect as though we were beginning to hyperventilate, whether we mean to or not. At present, when all the places, the pieces, and even the people start to rush, start to rush by because nobody knows any longer really how to breath – breathlessness as a problem by now having become much more than something secondary or a consequence only – perhaps it’s right at the center of the whirlwind of this self-induced disorientation that we’d do best to look or rather to listen for an applicable remedy against the insidious tyranny of haste.

These are the vortices whose musical likenesses KuuMA has devised in “(Can’t Sleep Need Coffee)” in particular, while also counterposing them to some passages in which the trumpet holds its own against them and thus encourages a listener to emulate its cool composure, notably a sequence beginning around at the 4:10 mark and lasting about twenty-five seconds, with the instrument sounding rather like a saxophone towards the end, as well as a slightly softer one which starts six minutes in and continues for ten seconds. During these two passages the wind instrument seems to lead the other sounds, as I suggested before, playing the role of conductor to their orchestra, and hence also representing the higher-level power of one’s own mind that ought to intervene whenever some bit of behavior becomes too automatic and runs into an impasse it cannot escape by itself. However, just as noteworthy is what happens if one focuses mainly on this wind instrument alone, for then it seems instead to turn towards the audience and to engage us in a sort of conversation, as though it were actually an articulate voice instructing the listeners, not verbally but by the example of its own playing and the respiratory technique required of it, how we might best economize our inner resources, especially the breath which otherwise would be expended fruitlessly – in the shape of vocal outbursts, sighs, imprecations, or curses – on everything that the Internet, as though it were toying with us, so frequently does to exhaust our patience without leaving us the time we’d need to handle it all.
Indeed. By now, or more likely quite some time ago, the patience of readers who’ve gotten this far will have been sorely tried, and even if it isn’t, time is calling and I myself have to hasten this text to a close, so in taking my own masked leave, I should simply like to suggest to them to seek out the fine company of KuuMA’s and Cuthbért’s personæ musicæ.

This Week’s Tracks from Soundcloud

(January 5, 2014)

This first Sunday evening of the new year I’m just beginning to fire up the system again, and so today’s round-up will be something like a sound-check: quite summary, as these three mainly non-vocal pieces of music do speak for themselves.

Thanks to a tip by Adam Cuthbért, I came across the musical project Vajra, originated by the New York multi-instrumentalist and singer Annamaria Pinna during a period of time spent in India, whose most recent track, a tenebrous piece of work punctuated with eerie whispering, is entitled “Wavering.”

Next in the line-up is “#001,” a claustrophobic composition from last summer put forward under the name Yaporigami, a “beat-oriented” music project undertaken by the Japanese electronic sound-artist, DJ, and mixing and mastering engineer Yu Miyashita (he divides his time between Yamanashi, due west of Tokyo, and Brighton in England).

Cheerful in contrast is tonight’s last track, a recent composition put out by the Canadian sound-artist and photographer in New York, Landon Speers, under the moniker Headaches, and one whose sonic palette is bright but not garish, with some surprising juxtapositions of pitches and timbres. It’s entitled, perhaps as part of a private joke, “Snacks.”
Tona Scherchen: “Between”  
(January 9, 2014)

In the course of working on a further two–part project about the composer Tona Scherchen – more information about both will be provided at a later date – I’ve come across an audio recording of what may be her most recent work, which it seemed proper to share here.

Entitled “Between,” it’s the final incarnation of a piece with a long history. She first conceived and composed it during a sojourn in New York at the end of the nineteen–seventies, with the idea in mind of creating a “spectacle d’architectures, sons et lumières pour ensemble instrumental et bande magnétique,” having been inspired most likely by the performance art of the time: the result was premiered in the very center of the scene on March 13, 1981, at The Kitchen and featured Robert Dick on the flute, J. D. Parran on the clarinet and saxophone, George E. Lewis on the trombone, James Emery on the guitar, and Mark Helias on the bass, with Scherchen herself providing direction and operating the pre–recorded audio tape featuring the sounds of the sea. In this initial version the work lasted an hour and a half.

Several years later, during the Festival de Lille, on November 28, 1986, a considerably shorter version, around fifty–five minutes long, made its debut. This time she arranged the work for pre–recorded tape and trombone, performed by Yves Robert, but the son et lumière side was preserved.

More than two decades went by, and then in May 2009 a third and even shorter version, twenty–three minutes in length, was presented, in honor of the late composer, theoretician, and author Daniel Charles (a great partisan of John Cage in France) during a commemorative conference devoted to him convened at the Musée national Marc Chagall in Nice. By this point the work had become entirely sonic, the visual dimension having been shed like an extraneous sheath, and it was this version – “dédié à la vie” – which Scherchen also contributed to the webpages Charles’ son has set up to document his father’s life and work; for the sake of ease I’ll embed it as well.

Although Scherchen’s prefatory remarks as transcribed there are brief, she does suggest that hers is a work imbued with “des affinités et des liens pro–
“fonds” between the noise of the waves, on the one side, and, on the other, the vocal sound of human breath and the rhythmic beating of the heart.

In this last and definitive form the music now emits a subdued or sombre feeling of the human being alone.

In conclusion and in order not to neglect the eyes, I’ll include the older silent portrait study the cineaste Gérard Courant recently made available (one of the thousands he’s become famous for assembling) of the composer, Cinématon n° 699, recorded on February 9, 1986, in Paris. Perhaps by the very absence of sound the viewer may intuit something more of the artist as a personality.

Postscript. Madame Scherchen has sent word that Mark Helias was indisposed the evening of the premiere of “Between” in 1981, and hence the others performed the piece without him.

A World Premiere at the Concertgebouw

(January 11, 2014)

This afternoon at the Concertgebouw, the Ensemble intercontemporain, conducted by Pablo Heras–Casado, gave a lively concert featuring, amongst a number of works, the “Lied der Waldtaube” in Schönberg’s own later arrangement (1922) and Mahler’s “Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen” in the arrangement by Eberhard Kloke, both sung by Susan Graham, the latter with passion and volume; but what proved really striking and most distinguished the program, was the world premiere of a work commissioned by the Ensemble from the young French composer Yves Chauris.

Executed by twenty–four musicians and entitled “Un Minimum de monde visible,” it was a tense composition that, with the title being taken at its word,
eschewed sonic picture–making in order to introduce onomatopoeic likenesses of certain realities instead: in bursts throughout the course of it, quite convincingly, the audience was given to hear the paraphernalia of aerial warfare such as warning sirens, the strained whir of aircraft engines, the thunderous rat–a–tat–tat of tracer fire and further countermeasures – and these fiery storms did not only rain suddenly on the targets from above, but gave way to passages filled by the panicked aural chaos on the ground, which were in turn followed by the noise of the waves of bombardment as they may have sounded up on high and been registered in the ears of the pilots and the crews carrying them out, without the incidental compression of sounds which move at speeds not that much greater than those of the objects emitting them. Nor did this sequence occur once only. The whole scene, therefore, was heard and had been constructed from a number of angles, and it’s a sign of how artfully these embattled sensoria were stoked from beginning to end (although the middle part lasted perhaps slightly too long) that the attentive nervousness in the hall never flagged.

A brief excerpt, delineating something like an underground air–raid–shelter sub–sequence perhaps, is available on the Ensemble’s Soundcloud page.

There further elucidation is also provided in the form of a tripartite audio interview with the composer, while briefer remarks may be found in the printed program notes by Joep Christenhusz. One impetus behind the work was given by a set of old prints Chauris saw, during a residency some years ago in Japan, depicting the roads that once linked Tokyo and Kyoto, which, quite apart from the pathos of nostalgia informing the images, intrigued him on account of the entire topographic whole a few sequential views could extrapolate out of themselves, as it were. “Ik raakte gefascineerd door de sequensmatige ordening van die afbeeldingen,” the composer says, “door de manier waarop een aaneenschakeling van losse segmenten een overzicht van de gehele route geeft.” The lesson of this artistry was not lost on him: to judge from today’s first hearing, at least, his composition, constructed as it seems to have been from a small number of different acoustic angles, evinces a similar economy of architectonic means.

The title of the work, too, has a story behind it. Literally! In a short cautionary tale by Jorge Luis Borges whose theme is dreams and the perils of
dreaming, “Las Ruinas circulares” – a text which, even though it’s not one of his best works, is certainly noteworthy, not least because in effect it constitutes a variation on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* – the unnamed sorcerer sought to *dream* a man into existence, “quería soñarlo con integridad minuciosa e impo- nerlo a la realidad,” and then send him on his way into the world, an under- taking for which the best spot he could find was within the broken walls of a deserted temple, “porque era un mínimo de mundo visible.” Sheltered there he eventually realized his aim, or so he believed until the experiment with the force of dreams ended by engulfing the dreamer himself, and he forfeited not so much his life only as his very reality, he himself having been revealed in his own eyes as merely a figure in another dream. “Con alivio, con humillación, con terror, comprendió que él también era una apariencia, que otro estaba soñándolo.”

It is a thought-provoking conclusion in the age-old “la vida es sueño” vein, to say the least, yet the choice of a title for “Un Minimum de monde visi- ble” probably was owing to the unsettled mood which Borges defined in so few words. This explosive triad of sentiments (*alivio, humillación, terror*) rep- resents the most startling and the most modern moment of his story, after all, and of all the arts music might bring one to feel it to a much higher degree – disorientating a listener with all three at once especially when, as Chauris seems to want to do, we’re given to understand that such sounds as the work is made of may actually be *dreaming of us.*

**This Week’s Tracks from Soundcloud**

*January 12, 2014*

Tonight’s round-up on Soundcloud begins in the Caribbean, on the coast in the northeastern part of Columbia, on a ranch somewhere in the vicinity of Riohacha, where, with the assistance of the recording technician Gabriel
Bocanegra, the language of the Wayúu people was sung and an array of their instruments played by Guillermo Barliza, while the well-known producer, impresario, and founder of his own record label Humberto Pernett applied his skills – especially on the synthesizers – to fashion the material into a crepuscular piece that could well circulate anywhere in the electronic avant-garde music scene throughout the world. It is entitled, evocatively, “Ranchería.”

Next we fly northward to San Francisco, where the prolific sound-artist Bryce Albright is busy at work on an experimental pop music project by the name of Bosmink; his most recent number, released just today, is entitled “Hummingbird” and in fact it does hum with the sound of telephones being dialed, telegraph machines transmitting the signals, teletypes printing out the messages, etc., all apportioned in a techno-rhythm one could actually dance to – albeit slowly, very slowly, for this tune is subdued in its own dreaminess; it affords us ample time to follow its novel and at times daring juxtapositions of recorded and instrumental noises, while ensuring that its wistful lyrics not be overpowered by the music’s synthetic wizardry.

For tonight’s last track we’ll alight in London. There the lyricist and vocalist Francesca Allen and the sound-artist Sam Holloway, collaborating under the moniker Two Silhouettes, have made a measured tune with a moody undertone of bass guitar by Kev Cousins and slightly neurotic cello samples by Anna-Helena McLean, while Holloway adeptly handles the guitar and the tuning forks, and Allen, in a recitative that’s both soft and wise, delivers some striking turns of phrase – “but this is a chess game no one made with you” – in reproving someone else who evidently had converted an intimate relationship into a contest. It’s not surprising that these musicians would demur, as their various parts go well together, and so there’s “No Competition” here.
A Parisian Band: 
Loki Starfish 

(January 14, 2014)

In Paris an alternative pop music band has started to garner attention that is, to judge by the publicity materials issued about it, but also by the snapshots taken during its live performances, a counterpart to the musical projects which have emerged from the Rhode Island School of Design or from Central Saint Martins, for not only in anglophone countries do the erstwhile fine–art students frequently land in another although adjacent field and make a name for themselves there. Loki Starfish may be the latest analogue à la française to those unexpected byproducts of the art schools of England and the United States – and as though to underscore an Anglo–Franco–American commonality, the band’s lyricist and singer, Jérémie Lapeyre, even operates entirely in English!

The origin of the band’s name, which, after all, does sound rather odd at first, is elucidated by Lapeyre in a video (albeit one in French) available on its Youtube channel. As he explains the matter, they did indeed have the old Scandinavian mischief–maker in mind, intending presumably to make some of their own by juxtaposing in the music opposites such as north and south, masculine and feminine, hot and cold, malignant and benign, thereby fashioning something like a new mythology. Mythology? Well, leaving that idea aside, in the musical results themselves there are numerous juxtapositions which, at their best and most energetic, will get the listeners moving.

All the same, a few years were needed for Loki Starfish to gel, and whether the current line–up and direction are firm, remains to be seen. At present, alongside Lapeyre, who founded it, there are the drummer Jacques de Candé, the keyboardist Thomas Suire, the bass guitarist and keyboardist Louis Pontvianne, and the keyboardist Donatien Roustant – yes, the synthesizers do hold sway here! – while in the band’s latest number, “Broken Moth,” their friends Sophie Maurin and Florent Livet help out as additional vocalists. In any event, this tune represents a significant step beyond the band’s earlier and at times
quirky or inchoate efforts, with the music’s martial cast or marching–band disposition of tempo contrasting with the beginnings (or else the remnants) of poly–rhythmic arrangements that one hears repeatedly, the whole being lent additional complexity and charm by the call and response allocation of the vocal parts.

While “Broken Moth” may be heard on the band’s Soundcloud page, on its Youtube channel there is a video of an actual performance, recorded last summer at the Parisian venue Point Ephémère, that is far more lively and in which Loki Starfish in its present configuration gives every sign of coming into its own.

An entire album is evidently in the works, and so, with a little luck, at some later date the band will be giving concerts elsewhere than in Paris alone. For the moment, though, for those in its vicinity, it plays every so often at venues there – the next being scheduled in fact for tomorrow, at Les Trois Baudets.

Something Macabre is Going on Here ...

(January 15, 2014)

One of last year’s most interesting releases which I’m only now catching up with, was an album by Christopher Laufman, who creates and performs his music under the moniker Wise Blood. As if that name were not enough, the title of the record, written alternately ID or Id, in its very ambiguity – do these two letters refer to a document of identification or to that “thing” which many would like to detect underneath our conscious minds or to both? – should probably suffice to suggest that his work continues to veer around macabre terrain. For the topics of his earlier releases, and especially the videos made to accompany them, were more often than not beings which by all rights ought to be dead but that nonetheless are strangely potent and still in effect disconcertingly alive; these were conveyed in sound and on the screen not in the
manner of full–fledged horror, but as mysteriously supernatural, tending to stick in his audience’s memory by dint of just this choice of presentation: then, although one might be inclined to dismiss the macabre nimbus as mere posturing or pretension on Wise Blood’s part, a moment’s further thought might lead one to realize that not only the words but the music too shares in the macabre. What else, after all, ought it to be called when, as in the work of this skillful sampler of un–obsolete sounds, bits from bygone recordings return into the present with incomparably greater energy and effect now when joined to a host of others, than ever they had when each was an unremarkable organic whole?

All the more so, given Wise Blood’s evident talent in allying together some parts one never would have expected to encounter in the same place at the same time. Not to mention that many of them hail from not even all that long ago – the date of expiration advances upon them more and more rapidly, as a consequence of the pace of contemporary production in these sectors.

An undead horde of willfully de–decomposed pieces of music? It’s an unheimlich–eerie idea, but one which may describe rather precisely what’s actually afoot now.

In any event, on this album, his voice is appreciably more mellifluous, the music more melodious than it was, at least marginally – yet while the edges are less rough than before, the blade has been sharpened. Laufman’s record label, Dovecote, offers the LP on its Soundcloud page, yet since *Id* is worth listening to in its entirety, as there’s practically no filler here and the body of this music is fit and toned, here for the sake of convenience I’ll simply embed it whole.

In the course of *Id*, there are several high points, but the number “8 P.M. – 10 P.M.” is particularly striking.

Just a few days ago, on his own Soundcloud page Laufman loaded another album, composed evidently of disjecta membra left over from the batch of samples deployed in its predecessor, but operating on a similar level and which likewise does without the usual padding. This latest record is entitled *Get ’em*, and because it too is one of those listeners are most likely to “get” when they’re played straight through, all of it may properly be included here.
At points this successor album pushes the art of sampling quite a bit further than the previous had done. Laufman’s sense of humor, too, speaks up more. Repeated listening is therefore advisable.

Macabre in another manner is an original song posted by the young Texan singer and songwriter Zackary Hinson on his Soundcloud page, “Medusa.” Judging from this ironic excursion into mythology, in his lyrics and delivery he already knows to utilize camp or burlesque elements deliberately – inspired perhaps by some of the sophistication of The Rocky Horror Picture Show – rather than that they would take over the whole thing and run away with it, as so easily can happen.

The further endeavors of someone who can make horror and humor touch each other in one single song, as Hinson does in his, will be worth following.

**Jazz Underground, Afoot in New York – Too Many Zooz**

*(January 16, 2014)*

Towards the end of last year, during my stay in New York, in one of those encounters which can punctuate the intervals one spends on the streets of that city or in their extensions underground, the subways, and which render them often so exciting and even marvelous, in the Union Square station I chanced upon a trio of musicians whose brilliant sound had already entranced a considerable crowd, which was burgeoning by the minute – it was rush hour – and I too decided to linger awhile. With its energetic percussion and virtuoso saxophone and trumpet this small brass ensemble was pulling out all the stops, and though no doubt nearly everyone there had places to go and people to see, together with the band we were all consenting to conjure a concert or even a dance hall forth from that nexus of subterranean corridors.
Evidently the three were regular visitors to this spot. Business cards being dispensed listed their Facebook page and an e-mail address. The band’s name was quirky and easy to remember: Too Many Zooz.

Later that evening, pursuit of the lead on the Internet disclosed their names – Matt Muirhead, Dave Parks, and Leo Pellegrino – but not much else by way of information, apart from the times they had scheduled to play in that subway station, which the Facebook page provided well in advance. The band appeared there regularly, twice or three times a week.

A quick consultation of Youtube, however, did turn up two longer videos – stable and with good-quality sound – of Too Many Zooz in action. (In the first, the meaning of the band’s name is clarified.)

The Union Square station was well-chosen as a locale, given the sheer numbers of passengers passing through it, the major station between downtown and midtown Manhattan as well as the conduit for the very busy subway line to and from Williamsburg or similarly hip destinations further to the east. Yet not merely in this provisional locale, but also in their music itself, streams from various sources mix, cross, or blend together – tunes derived from klezmer on the saxophone, bursts of Cajun- or Caribbean-like percussion – in a jazz music with an experimental vibe and exuding potent joy in all directions.

Recently the Facebook page, in addition to providing the schedule of its subway performances, has announced the imminent release of a first album, entitled F Note – scheduled for this coming Sunday. It will be available during the Union Square gigs in the form of an actual CD, but in addition Too Many Zooz will offer it (for listening and digital downloading) via the Internet.

♫ If what’s been available up until this point is any indication, Too Many Zooz, it’s safe to say, is going to travel far.

Postscript. The EP has been posted in full on the band’s Soundcloud page.
This Week’s Tracks
from Soundcloud

(January 19, 2014)

Coming after a long Sunday afternoon at the Muziekgebouw aan ’t IJ for a program of Charles Ives’ work, performed as was to be expected with verve by the Ives Ensemble (especially well-played were the second Violin Sonata and also the second Piano Sonata), this evening’s round-up features a cityscape, an improvisation, and a registration of the uproar of technology.

An artist from Finland who has established the locus of his activity in the acoustic realm, Ilpo Jauhiainen, and whose itinerary takes him often to Africa on account of his love of the music of that continent, has been featured here before; currently he is at work on a sequence of new albums, of which the first is tentatively entitled Possible Cities, and if “Go-Slow,” the collaboration with Emeka Ogboh which has just been posted on his Soundcloud page is any indication, it may well comprise a succession of cityscapes, that is, the acoustic likenesses of a number of different cities rendered in their specificity, so that the album in its itinerary may foster the drawing of critical distinctions between them – traversing in reverse the order of discovery of the artist in his. An atlas-like album to be listened to forwards and backwards, in other words.

The second of tonight’s tracks is an “Improvisation” recorded a couple of days ago by the Toronto composer Joel Garten, one of a series of them in which the aim seems to be to explore how far the piano in particular might lend itself to being used in such a way, when considered as one in the family of string instruments in the broadest sense. And then actually it does seem as though it might distinguish itself from them, on account of the structure of its keyboard, which typesets the music in an alphabetic script, as it were, as distinct from the cursive handwriting as which the musics of the others usually flow along; in so doing the instrument would be shown as the one the more likely to sustain the listener’s interest in an improvisation.
How chillingly the sounds of technology in revolt against us would strike our ears, is conveyed by the last track, found on the Soundcloud page of an anonymous Parisian proponent of experiments in “Dadaist glitch” whose moniker is Da Fake Panda – one which does not have a title so much as a chaos of symbols whose formatting has gone haywire and of which the jumble obliterates the rules of typographical spacing one had thought were by now hard-wired into all the computers. So here, by some manner of wizardry the artist has performed upon them, in “[D₃₄D₇₂κΙΝK]██████,” we have an anticipation of what might happen were these systems somehow to embark upon vandalism or worse.

This Week’s Tracks from Soundcloud

(January 26, 2014)

This evening’s set of tracks from Soundcloud strolls up and down the road between folk and classical music – which is of course a thoroughfare very well-traveled in both directions.

To begin with, a recently-formed band in Ireland, The Gloaming, has just released an eponymous debut album, in the United States with the record label Brassland and elsewhere with Real World, and on its Soundcloud page the former has loaded one song from it, “The Sailor’s Bonnet.”

This five-piece, with Iarla Ó Lionaird as the vocalist, Caoimhín Ó Raghallaigh on the hardanger, a type of fiddle from Norway, Martin Hayes playing the violin and the fiddle, and Dennis Cahill wielding the guitar, while the New York musician Thomas Bartlett handles the piano, has embraced the forms of Irish folk music as a medium for modern moods, or as a stage fit for new-old musical practices such as improvisation either solo or concerted.
Much more formal, to be sure, yet punctuated by significant dissonances and strophified as it were by distinct traces of choreography, is a new work for piano by the New York composer Rosalie Burrell. Comprising eight movements, her piece is entitled “Entwined Disquiet,” and in the recording loaded on her Soundcloud page it is sensitively played by Javor Bračić.

Some of the passages in this work sound as though they are meant for a solo dancer, others for a ring–dance comprising an ensemble of several, and it is not difficult to imagine the whole accompanying a dance in which neither the formality of the music nor the feeling within it is accorded the last word.

From the Danish accordionist Andreas Borregaard’s Soundcloud page comes tonight’s last track, a recording from some years ago of a performance of “Le Grand Tango,” one of Astor Piazzolla’s most well–known works, by him together with the violist Asbjørn Nørgaard, the other half of the duo Inviolata.

As evident as is the role of Piazzolla’s work as a conduit between the common music of Buenos Aires and the higher reaches of the classical scene, it is always pleasant to come across a tribute to it in the shape of a spirited rendition, and Inviolata’s mediates between them with both passion and clarity.

**Futurist Music and Its Future Today:**
About Leo Ornstein

*(February 2, 2014)*

With this significant centenary year well under way, while, across the Atlantic, the comprehensive exhibition devoted to that milestone in the history of modern art in the United States, the 1913 Armory show, may still be seen until the end of the month at the New–York Historical Society – a visit highly to be recommended to anyone in the vicinity – this evening seems like an opportune
moment to devote some attention to the breakthroughs in the adjacent field of
music that took place at the same moment, and in particular to the work of
the eminent bad boy of those years, the pianist and composer Leo Ornstein.
(Accordingly, my usual Sunday round-up will be on hiatus this week.)

Although a degree of uncertainty persists as regards the precise dates of
several bits of his biographical data, it seems most likely that he was born in
December 1892, in the Ukrainian city of Kremenchuk. His family tended to-
wards music; his father, Abram Gornstein, was a cantor, while an uncle made
a living as a violinist. Early on he distinguished himself on the piano, and was
sent to the St. Petersburg Conservatory to study. In view of the pogroms set in
motion after the first Russian revolution, however, the family decided to leave
the Czarist empire behind and emigrated to the United States, arriving in New
York in 1906 (having surrendered the G of its former surname to the authori-
ties at Ellis Island), where Leo Ornstein continued his musical studies, making
his debut as a pianist in 1911 and his first recordings two years later. Soon he
had been recognized for his skill and was invited to perform in London as
well, at a series of concerts in March of 1914 in which he played works by
Busoni and Schönberg along with several pieces of his own, even more chal-
lenging in their newness: the presentation of “Futurist music,” as it was then
termed, was well-timed to attract the musical public’s attention. Marked by
the explosions of his experimental tone clusters and equipped with titles such
as “Suicide in an Airplane” and “Wild Men’s Dance (Danse sauvage),” these
works were slaps in the face of public taste, and it is not surprising that the
performances should nearly have engendered full riots in response.

Yet positive recognition also came quickly. During the very active career
upon which he embarked over the next several years, Ornstein was soon re-
garded as one of the premier pianists in the United States.

The circumstances of those years may have played a certain part in this
great success, for meanwhile, the World War had arrived and some of his inno-
vations in their sonic vehemence or violence – in compositions whose very
strangeness had it seems surprised the composer when he first heard them ges-
tating in his own mind – could be taken as somehow having heralded the
never before heard-of realities on the battlefields. Something of this newly
patent relationship might have been intuited, at the midpoint of the hostilities, when an early magazine critic insisted that by Ornstein’s works “theories of music as they were taught us ten or a dozen years ago are frankly smashed into smithereens.”*

For several more years, into the 1920s, Ornstein’s music was celebrated as the most avant–garde, esteemed as being quite on a level with Schönberg’s, but even in response to his own Violin Sonata of 1915 he had begun to consider the idea that he had reached (or even already crossed) an experimental limit beyond which it would be senseless for him to go. And so he began to withdraw from the public eye, first moving to Philadelphia and establishing a music school there (amongst whose alumni was John Coltrane), later retiring and relocating into a nearly complete anonymity. All the while, however, he continued to compose works of music, with the help of his wife Pauline, who would transcribe as he would play, having previously heard them already more or less fully–formed in his mind. To be sure, a few of these pieces were performed in public, especially during the earlier decades, but many were not. And Leo Ornstein at least was genuinely content with this state of things.

All the same, during the 1970s his works were rediscovered by the historian Vivian Perlis (the founder of the Oral History of American Music project at the Yale University Library), who subsequently helped to interest contemporary musicians in performing them. Recordings began to be made of pieces from every decade of his by then already long career. And still Ornstein continued to compose new work, even after his wife’s death in 1985. His two final Piano Sonatas date from the end of that decade, when he was already nearly a hundred years old. He passed away in 2002, not quite a supercentenarian.

Perlis has made available a long interview she conducted with Leo and Pauline Ornstein in 1977, appending to it some recollections of the man.

Their son, Severo Ornstein, in addition to publishing the scores himself – as he recounts elsewhere, he has had his troubles with other publishing firms – has also set up a website with a number of biographical statements as well as

a catalog of musical works and a set of recordings. (On Youtube, too, he has a channel where some recordings of his father’s music have been uploaded.)

Michael Broyles and Denise von Glahn’s biography of Ornstein was published a few years ago by Indiana University Press, while in a somewhat older issue of the Wisconsin Alliance for Composers Newsletter (June 1998), there is a useful short article about him, complete with lists of his works, by Gordon Rumson.

Late last year, Ornstein’s “Quintette for Piano and Strings” was performed in Philadelphia by Marc–André Hamelin, who has been a major force in the gradual revival of his works, along with the Pacifica Quartet, and the upcoming release of their recording of the 1927 work has been announced.

Drawing on the recordings provided on the website dedicated to him, I’ve put together an audio playlist of several works from different periods played by various musicians, amongst them Hamelin, Niek de Vente, and William Westney, to name a few. Although, as Severo Ornstein notes, the recording quality can vary, in all the performances – some by Severo himself, while one is even by Leo – the striking vivacity of this music speaks through.

This Week’s Tracks from Soundcloud

(February 9, 2014)

As I have a lot on at the moment, this evening’s round-up, as a sort of follow-through to last Sunday’s post about Leo Ornstein and his music, will be limited to two performances of older pieces and one new composition, while dispensing with the commentary. Namely, a rendition of George Antheil’s “Ballet mécanique” by the large Eindhoven ensemble Lunapark as well as one of Ornstein’s pieces, “Ballade for Saxophone and Piano” (written ca. 1955) by the
Quiet City Chamber Ensemble, a quartet based a bit north of New York, along with a new work by a classical pianist and conductor in London, Alisdair Kitchen, entitled simply “Poem (Homage to Leo Ornstein).”

Ein Vortrag zu
Tona Scherchen

(February 22, 2014)

An apology seems to be in order for the irregular schedule of posting on this website of late. Work on the bipartite project I mentioned previously concerning the composer and multimedia artist Tona Scherchen has laid claim to much of my available time, and over the last week and a half or so the first part thereof required an especially degree of attention: a lecture on her work which I was invited to deliver in Hamburg by the Hochschule für Musik und Theater, as one in a series of events devoted to the musical relationships between China and the West in general and Germany in particular. Yesterday the lecture was held, and so I can now anticipate being able to resume a more regular, fuller involvement here, but in the meantime, to my mind it’s warranted to share the text on this site as an entry in its own right, given that it is the longest and most elaborate piece I’ve yet written about Scherchen – one upon which I may expand in English at some point in the future, as time and space allow.

Meine sehr verehrten Damen und Herren, ich möchte zunächst meinen besonders Dank aussprechen für die Einladung von den Veranstaltern dieser Tagung, weil ich beruflich weder Musikwissenschaftler geschweige denn Musiker bin, und ich gehöre darum möglicherweise nicht ganz hierher; dennoch

Note. In this text, URL addresses are provided in the footnotes in order to mark the locations of the musical excerpts, which are embedded on the website. Here, however, at least in the document as a PDF file, they might be operable as hyperlinks.
hoffe ich Ihnen heute etwas sinnvolles oder einleuchtendes zur Komponistin Tona Scherchen und deren Musik mitteilen zu können.


Wie bei mehreren ihrer Werke, ist dieses Stück von einer schöpferischen Einbildungskraft geprägt, welche entweder auf eine theatralische oder auf eine bildhafte Weise Klang–Materialien abwechselnd umarbeitet, die Scherchen sowohl erfindet als auch findet. Erfunden hat sie Laute, die ab und an die Geräusche wiedergeben, welche gewisse menschliche Handlungen abstrahlen, die dann gleichsam onomatopöetisch über die Bühne dieser Komposition pas-


Im Bereich der visuellen Wahrnehmung wird ein solches Ausschließen öfter als Verdecken und Ausblenden des Ausgeschlossenen begriffen, und in diesem Sinne liegt es nahe, daß räumliche Wahrnehmungen solcher Art in der Phänomenologie „Abschattungen“ genannt worden sind. Dieser Begriff läßt sich leicht auch auf akustische Wahrnehmungen im allgemeinen übertragen und ist insbesondere auf diejenigen anzuwenden, die sich vor allem auf Raum beziehen.


Um die Spuren eines solchen Gewimmels in dem Stück „Shen“ zu verdeutlichen, möchte ich jetzt einige wenige Ausschnitte spielen. Ich hoffe nur, daß die Abschattungen, die ich nach jeden Ausschnitt hinzufügen werde, in der Tat die Musik erhellen werden. (In dieser Aufnahme wird das Werk von dem schon erwähnten Ensemble Les Percussions de Strasbourg gespielt.)

Während dieses Ausschnitts befindet man sich unter den Zuschauern in einem Zirkuszelt oder in einem ähnlich umrissenen Ort, eher stehend als sitzend, als die Steigerung der vom Schlagwerk bewirkten Spannung darauf aufmerksam macht, daß gleich etwas geschehen werde: möglicherweise da oben, auf dem Trapez, bereiten sich Akrobaten auf riskante Sprünge vor, dement sprechend erwidert das Publikum mit angehaltenem Atem, weil noch nicht ganz klar ist, was passieren wird. Man ist gespannt.*

* www.youtube.com/v/eqlWRWA1I8?version=3&rel=0&start=59&end=72

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In diesem Ausschnitt warten die Leute auf etwas, dessen Ankunft nur leise mit einem schallenden Gong aus einer beträchtlichen Entfernung angekündigt wird. Jeder ist ungeduldig geworden durch die Hoffnung, daß es doch ihnen allein lassen würde, ohne in ihre unmittelbare Nähe hineinudringen und damit ihren Volkszirkus zu unterbrechen – wer weiß, möglicherweise kündigt der Gong den Besuch eines Staatsvertreters an, der am Ende vielleicht doch anderswohin fahren würde als zu ihnen. Gemäß einer solchen Unsicherheit können sie es kaum abwarten, bis der Schatten, den sein Heranrückten aus der Ferne über ihnen schon vorauswirft, verschwinden werden würde und sie ungestört wieder anfangen dürfen.*

Hier führen die Akrobatiken oben in der Luft eine Nummer auf, die nicht ohne Gefahr zu sein scheint, da der eine dem anderen entgegenspringt und von ihm aufgefangen werden muß. Davor aber hängt alles von dem Springer selbst ab, er nimmt das eigene Schicksal in die Hand, und ein solches Risiko bietet der Komponistin den Anlaß, besondere musikalische Mittel einzuverbrin gen. Der gleichsam spiralförmige Klang, der während dieses Abschnitts in das Werk eingesetzt wird, könnte gewissermaßen onomatopöetisch vernommen werden, wie eine akustische Nachbildung eines visuell–kinetischen Vorgangs: in diesem Passus wurde die Musik so geschrieben, als ob mittels der Ohren ein beinahe optisches Nachbild hervorgerufen werden soll.**

Was man bemerkenswerterweise in diesem Abschnitt hört, ist ein höhnisches Lachen, daher wird man sich vielleicht fragen, worüber wird denn gelacht? Wie könnte es mit diesem Gelächter bestellt sein? Es entsteht, so liegt die Vermutung nahe, aus einer skeptisch–kritischen Haltung den offiziellen Behörden beziehungsweise den staatlichen Mächte gegenüber, da diese vielleicht doch selbst am Ort erschienen sind oder sie haben sich auf eine andere Weise vertreten lassen. Dabei hört man ein, daß Teile dieses Werkes wahrscheinlich die bedeutsamen wenn auch leisen Töne einer Ablehnung beinhalten.***

Ein Volksfestzug ist hier offensichtlich unterwegs, nicht aber wirklich irgendwohin; er ist nicht bestrebt, eine Botschaft zu liefern, sondern das

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* www.youtube.com/v/eqlWRWAnI8?version=3&rel=0&start=259&end=272
** www.youtube.com/v/eqlWRWAnI8?version=3&rel=0&start=317&end=330
*** www.youtube.com/v/eqlWRWAnI8?version=3&rel=0&start=505&end=516
Trommeln sorgt beim Publikum des Festzuges für eine gewisse Spannung, die darin besteht, daß die Anwesenden auf etwas wartend einander ermutigen. Worum es geht, ist eine Art des Mit- oder Zusammenseins im Rahmen ihrer gemeinsamen Tätigkeit, welche in einer Stimmung stattfindet, die eine bemerkenswerte Mischung aus Ernst und Leichtsinn darstellt. Ein spielerisches Element, das dieser selbstbestimmten Handlung des Volkes zu eigen ist, tritt dabei ans Licht beziehungsweise ins Ohr.*

Während dieses Ausschnitts von Scherchens Werk ist die Spannung unter Zelt am höchsten, weil die Akrobaten ihre größten, gefährlichsten Sprünge für das Finale behalten haben. Jetzt zeigt das Crescendo der Erregung unter dem Publikum an, wie ihre lebhaften Reaktionen zurück auf die Zirkusartisten selber wirken, sie zu einer gewagteren Vorstellung anfeuernd, derart, daß diese Vorstellung dann die Zuschauer wiederum zu einem höheren Aufmerksamkeitsgrad anlockt. Demgemäß wären Spieler und Publikum zwei Teilnehmer in einem reziproken Verhältnis, welches sich von jener konventionellen distanzierten Beziehung unterscheiden würde, die zwischen Musikern und Zuhörern in den Konzerthallen waltet. Vielleicht leuchte es mehr ein, eine solche wechselseitige Verbindung mit derjenigen eines formellen Tanzes zu vergleichen, worin die beiden Tänzer alternierend führen und folgen.**


* www.youtube.com/v/eqlWRWA1tI8?version=3&rel=0&start=540&end=552
** www.youtube.com/v/eqlWRWA1tI8?version=3&rel=0&start=572&end=583


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Bewegungen mit einbezog, dem bedeutsamen Inhalt des Hörbaren ein passend visuelles und kinetisches Geschehen gegenübersetzen können.


➔ Auf diesen Zusammenhang hat Heinrich Blücher die Aufmerksamkeit gelenkt in der neunten Vorlesung eines Kurses, den er im Frühjahr 1951 an der New Yorker New School for Social Research zu den „Fundamentals of a Philosophy of Art – On the Understanding of Artistic Experience“* hielt. „By space and time perceptions we space ourselves and time ourselves“, sagte er damals, sich auf den Zustand besinnend, daß diese basalen Wahrnehmungen für alle Menschen unentbehrlich seien, wenn wir überhaupt uns bewegen wollen innerhalb jener vier Dimensionen. Auffallend an seiner Äußerung ist nicht zumindest die Weise, eigenartig aber dennoch angebracht und selbst spielerisch, worin er das englische Substantiv „space“ als reflexives Verb verwendete: offensichtlich wies er damit unter anderen auf die Handlungen hin, mittels denen jeder sich in den Raum passe, innerhalb dessen oder vor dem er sich befindet. (Einige Zeilen später, auf eine noch auffallendere Weise, setzte er jenes Substantiv als ein intransitives Verb ein.) Angesichts des Raumes und der Zeit maßzuhalten, kommt glücklicherweise meist von selbst – „unconsciously we all do this“, bemerkte er –, wobei wir nicht absichtlich auf Zeit und Raum achten müssen. Während aber „moments of extreme danger, as in cases of dizziness in climbing or drowning, we must space ourselves consciously“, fügte er unmittelbar hinzu, eine Ergänzung, welche man unschwer auf die Tätigkeiten, die der Kampfsportler gleichwie der Zirkusartisten zu eigen sind, weiterhin verallgemeinern könnte. In solchen Fällen, so Blücher, müssen wir „actively assemble space phenomena around us in order to orient ourselves again.“

* A transcript of a portion of this lecture is offered on the Blücher Archive website.
Nun brachte er seine Überlegungen auf den Punkt, indem er beharrte, „we are not only in time and space but we also have time and space“, wobei ein solches Haben wörtlich gemeint war. Uns zu eigen sei das Potential, sowohl Zeit als auch Raum in die Hand zu nehmen, die beiden zu verwenden wie wir es wollen, selbstverständlich mit gewissen Einschränkungen. Aber abgesehen davon, auch mit dem Raum spielen zu können, und nicht nur mit der Zeit, dazu würden wir in der Lage sein, wenn wir nur unsere zeit- und raum-beschreibenden Wahrnehmungen bewußt sammeln und einsetzen würden. Inmitten einer solchen Handlung, kämen wir irgendwie, wenn nicht gerade außerhalb, dann doch auf die Grenze der Zeit und des Raumes zu verweilen. Daß Menschen dazu imstande seien, zeige die vollendete Kunst, denn in deren Erfahrung „this ability of ours becomes play“ – ins Spiel wird diese unsere Fähigkeit verwandelt genau solange, als wir noch in jener Erfahrung würden ausharren können, es versteht sich von selbst, weil sie unsere Kräfte sehr herausfordern werde. Bis dahin aber würden wir uns dem Raum gegenüber spielerisch verhalten können. In diesem Sinne gehöre es, nach Blücher, zu „the basic wonderments of art“, daß „when we see a painting we are suddenly made beholders of space entirely mastered by us“, eingeführt also in eine einzigartige Einstellung zum Raum, die wir nicht anders hätten einnehmen können. „We are the location itself and everything is related to us and our location. This space becomes alive to us, opens up only to us and takes us into it. We are not only masters of space but we understand for the first time space in its meaning and it becomes meaningful.“ Dementsprechend erscheine uns plötzlich der Raum so, als ob er vor allem da sei, um des Spiels willen, wodurch ihm ein Sinn wie zum ersten Mal verliehen werde.


Das Prinzip der musikalischen Reihenfolge im Scherchens Werk hält sich nicht streng an irgendeine Linie einer konsequenten Chronologie oder Erzählung. Es ist also minder zeitgebunden als eher räumlich geprägt, wobei das


Für ihre Komposition hatte Berberian komisches Material aus den mehrteiligen Karikaturen der Tageszeitungen, aus Reklame verschiedenens Ursprungs oder aus dem Fernsehen entlehnt und ins Akustische umgesetzt, wie zwei Ausschnitte aus dem Werk erläutern werden.*


* www.youtube.com/v/rmOwX1xTAak?version=3&rel=0&start=58&end=76 and www.youtube.com/v/rmOwX1xTAak?version=3&rel=0&start=90&end=107
kaum zuvor den Raum spüren mag. Und wenn wir dasjenige vernehmen, was während der Erfahrung dieses Werkes gerade geschieht, dann schärft es zusätzlicher uns die Ohren dafür, daß Verwandtes in Scherchens „Shen“ passiert, trotz aller offensichtlichen Verschiedenheiten zwischen ihnen. Wie es mit ihrem und unserem Raum bestellt sei und werden könnte, eben dies ist es, woraufhin diese zwei Musikwerke je hinweisen wollen – auf den Sinn für Raum.

Tona Scherchen at the premiere of “Wai,” with Cathy Berberian and the Quartetto della Società Cameristica Italiana, in Donaueschingen, October 19, 1968
(Photograph courtesy of the Cathy Berberian website)
“The More Things Change ... ”

(March 2, 2014)

On this March evening, recoiling from our worldly scene where the vortices and the vacuums of power currently sustain one another in tacit mutual complicity, and precipitated thus into a “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” mood – within which, presumably, I am not now the only one to find myself once again – it seems apposite to offer, in the place of music alone, instead a balance of it and some few fitting poems of the last century. These, in two cases, are each recited by their makers, as well as, in a third, by three present-day admirers of the poet.

This poetry I do hope is beyond the need of any introduction, and so without further preliminaries, here is, to begin with, Herbert Read’s recitation of his own “To a Conscript of 1940” – made available on the Soundcloud page entitled Poets Reading Poetry, which does its good work from London.

Next, prolonging the atmosphere of Read’s poem into the contiguous medium of music, is a new piece by Jonnie Allen, the Englishman whose work has previously been featured here on several occasions. In this one, which, not for nothing – its temper is decidedly minor-key – and indeed quite aptly, is entitled “End,” he takes care to unfold the repetition within a feeling into a form that subsequent listenings may well apprehend as increasingly subtle.

The third of tonight’s offerings is an inimitable delivery of “The More Loving One” by W. H. Auden, taken from the same Soundcloud page as was the other poem.

Now, finally, since, or rather, if the world–spectacle one stared at and now pulls away from, does emanate shimmering

    through the misty panes and thick green light,
    As under a green sea
– to invoke an acute poetic rendering of the phenomenon – I should like to add to the usual number of tracks another triad, these being each a recitation of Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est,” from which those words come, and all three spoken with a bardic–Burnsian cadence, as for this poem in particular the tongue should roll Scots or at least here and there with a trace thereof. Accordingly, the first, supplemented by a few spare sound–effects, is by the Liverpudlian Ken Corish, now resident in Plymouth, the second by a Scotsman from Dundee who’s made his home across the ocean in Orlando, Alasdair Nicoll, and the third by an anonymous woman somewhere in Spain who is known on Soundcloud under the moniker This Is Nymphetamine and in whose voice, somehow or other, a few elements of the accent of Scotland are pleasingly bolstered by some Spanish sounds.

This Week’s Tracks
from Soundcloud

(March 16, 2014)

Well, another Sunday evening has come, while the world at large looks to be in no better state than was the case two weeks ago – in the interval I was quite under the weather and had no chance to post anything, mea culpa – and in light of it all I’ve been pondering, amongst other things, how elusive it can be to maintain a certain measure even as one moves to hold one’s distance from the spectacle. So easy is it to go too far in withdrawing from the latter, or rather, from one’s own disgust in the face thereof, or, on the other hand, not nearly far enough. Where in the end is the spot on which one could hold one’s ground, and with just the right quantum of vehemence? ...

This quandary, along with some of its more and some of its less immediate ramifications, was never far from from my mind when I draw up tonight’s selection of three tracks.
To begin with, an original work by a young composer, conductor, and trombonist currently studying at Southern Illinois University, Michael David Krueger, entitled “For Patrick,” well performed by the Truman State University Wind Symphony.

Few bars in this piece have to pass before one hears that it draws systematically on that old standard by Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg, “Over the Rainbow,” sung on the screen by Judy Garland, arranging a number of the song’s tones, phrases, and moods anew into another register, and upon further reflection this feat calls for a remark or two. By these transpositions, Krueger evidently has unearthed something doleful and forlorn behind or underneath the sweet wistful surface of the original tune which one barely had ever noticed before, if at all, and yet in the absence of which it would never have elicited all the signs of recognition from so many hearts in the many decades since: an obscure source of its affecting undercurrent of loneliness, a source of which the work itself might have seemed to encourage the disclosure, one day. Around a year ago, I suggested, in the case of Friedrich Hollaender and Robert Liebmann’s standard as sung by Marlene Dietrich, “Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß auf Liebe eingestellt,” that it had been waiting the whole time for Interpreten who’d uncover the inner desolation within what was essentially all along an anthem of those whom the big city has fatally ensnared – now it appears to me that a comparable operation typifies Krueger’s instrumental citations of and variations upon “Over the Rainbow.” Not for nothing was *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, first published by L. Frank Baum at the very turn of the twentieth century in the aftermath of one war, revised for the cinema nearly forty years later during the approach of another; these world-events are *there* in his literary work, registering in the sonic shape of undertones that many may fail to notice, yet from which the moments of joy, camaraderie, and good cheer in the music of the cinematic version, though they turn this way and that, never separate themselves entirely: and indeed, their very attempt to extricate themselves from those conditions adds something further to the general desolation. This is the conundrum. With considerable finesse Krueger has faithfully delineated it again by musical means in his piece.
Of course, quite some time before Baum conjured up his cautionary tale, the whole problem had already been foreseen by Nietzsche, circumscribed in one compact line of the *Dionysos–Dithyramben*. “Die Wüste wächst: weh dem, der Wüsten birgt...” Whatever may beckon to the desperate as offering them a way out of the wasteland, might well only lead deeper into it or bring it to spread still further. (*Where is die Wüste, the desert? – once again, that probably is the question with which one ought to begin.*)

Yet he, to be sure, was not entirely alone in prophetic awareness of the circumstances to come, even then. Quite early – presumably without any knowledge of either the name Nietzsche or of his work – they were limned in the poems Stephen Crane presented to the public midway through the 1890s under the title *The Black Riders and Other Lines*, as well as in a subsequent collection issued towards the end of the decade, *War Is Kind and Other Lines*. (By the latter title one is already given a foretaste of the twentieth century’s special verbal cynicism.) Several of these correspond rather closely to some of the philosopher’s trains of thought and abound in the moods correlate to them. It is to the credit of another young composer, this time an alumnus of the California State University in Long Beach, Casey Martin, to have compiled a few of these poems into a song-cycle, which he has entitled simply “Songs of a Desert.”

As befits such a cycle of art-songs, the arrangements are spare throughout. These words have not been set there to be overwhelmed, no matter how beautiful the music might aspire to be. Accordingly, a lesson or two could well be generalized from the very restraint of this instrumentation.

For the last of tonight’s tracks, we’ll abruptly shift gears, locales, languages, and moods, and move around the world and into the present – to St. Petersburg. In that city, currently, a new pop band has begun to make a name for itself which, but for the language in which it sings (and also, of obvious importance these days, publicizes itself), would fit in well in one or another of the many scenes in London or New York. Not without some linguistic humor of its own, it calls itself Mayakovsky (Маяковский), and though I cannot know what the lyrics are actually about – I don’t even have a text to refer
to, dictionary dutifully in hand, to elicit some vague idea of their content – it
would not surprise me very much to learn that in their way they too unsettle
the conventional language. Inducing disorientation in idioms and styles could
well be a goal that a band like this aims at, and while such a thing has itself
become routine throughout the Anglophone world, one does wonder what the
increasing prominence of these musicians might signify in the Russian–
speaking realm.

Lacking the requisite linguistic skills, I can only proceed on the basis of
the music and of some apprehension of the few words I am able to make out.
For the time being, therefore – I suspect that I’ll have occasion to pay further
attention to this band in the future – there is a number called “Îµíè,” that is,
the lights or matches smokers have need of. (Whether or not it is relevant
here to mention that in the singular, огнё, this word also refers to flame and
fire, I cannot say, and so I may as well err on the side of a surplus rather than
a scarcity of facts.)

This Week’s Tracks
from Soundcloud

(March 23, 2014)

In the current crisis, many things despite themselves give off a hollow sound,
and not least the language pervading every public realm. This general hollow-
ness, too, is by no means a new condition, to be sure, yet when it becomes so
patent as now, one may well be prompted to call to mind moments from the
past in which comparable difficulties were met with. Such moments, when the
circumstances made it especially obvious that language, corroded already so
far from within, could for the time being no longer really fulfill satisfactorily
even its function of communicating meaning, are instructive not only with
respect to language’s art of arts, that is, to poetry, but illuminate as well nu-
merous works of that singular and sui generis art, music – as modern music,
too, has shared in these paralyses of meaning. This common condition stand behind tonight’s Soundcloud selections.

Whenever the meaning within was evaporating, leaving a mere hollow shell, what path then remained for the poets – and the composers – to tread? The messenger could turn against the medium, that this very altercation be now nearly the whole of the message itself.

Towards the close of the period in which he still wrote mainly in English, Samuel Beckett circumscribed both the problem as well as one quite plausible response to it, in doing so employing terms that were at once clear and yet allusive around the edges. In the course of his career thus far as a writer, he had begun to find himself confronted with the realization that “immer mehr wie ein Schleier kommt mir meine Sprache vor, den man zerreissen muss, um an die dahinterliegenden Dinge (oder das dahinterliegende Nichts) zu kommen,” and this need he felt prompted him to wait for the moment when “die Sprache da am besten gebraucht wird, wo sie am tüchtigsten missbraucht wird.” In accord with his programmatic espousal of linguistic mischief, for the moment the extant language was for him still something like a necessary evil, and however serviceable it proved itself to be, it would nonetheless have to be handled as such. So, with a notable access of declamation, he said this about its treatment, by way of a conclusion: “Da wir sie so mit einem Male nicht ausschalten können, wollen wir wenigstens nichts versäumen, was zu ihrem Ver- ruf beitragen mag. Ein Loch nach dem andern in ihr zu bohren, bis das Dahinterkauernde, sei es etwas oder nichts, durchzusickern anfängt – ich kann mir für den heutigen Schriftsteller kein höheres Ziel vorstellen.”* 

In one of the earliest enduring poems of T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” something like those holes were already being drilled into the usual language, and in the poet’s own reading of the work, if one listens well, one can hear the interior hollowness as it softly hisses out. Thanks to a Soundcloud page that is entitled Libraries and Archives, the recording is readily available, although in it Eliot omitted the epigraph he had taken from the Inferno, as though to underscore by the very omission its great impor-

* Quotations from his letter to Axel Kaun of July 9, 1937.
tance to understanding his intentions; for these are lines which seem to de-
clare how some poets may embrace frank speaking because they foresee not
being heard, let alone understood. A strange shade of forthright speech
(παρρησία)!

It may not stretch the terms too far to suggest that a comparable operation
is performed upon the material of music in the final work of Morton Feldman,
“For Samuel Beckett,” from 1987; at regular intervals the wind instruments
bore into the rest of the music, sometimes with an organ–like persistence,
reaching other sonic strata and releasing other sounds in the process: acoustic
disclosure of a sequence of crevices that were neither fully expected nor en-
tirely unforeseen, but whose existence was guessed at, having thus been some-
where in between. To uncover them as they deserve, a measure of finesse is re-
quired, and this the performance (now presented in part on Soundcloud) of
the work by the Ensemble intercontemporain last October, conducted by
Peter Rundel, nicely manifests.

In tonight’s final track, the recitation of another poem by the poet himself,
“Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town” by E. E. Cummings, the opening up of
the caverns where meaning once was, is accomplished by the utilization of
words as parts of speech other than those they commonly had been – here pro-
nouns become proper names, while verbs, adverbs, or adjectives get made
into nouns, and so on, and always wittily and with great feeling for the new
resonance, melodiousness, and rhythmicity issuing forth from it all. Here the
linguistic holes – and probably only the poet himself could know just where to
drill them – permit deposits of joy in the language to bubble up to the surface,
and thanks are owed to the Soundcloud page of Maria Popova’s “Brainpicker”
project for making his reading freely available to the public.

On the same Soundcloud page one can also come across a cheeky snippet
from an interview Gertrude Stein gave shortly after she arrived back in the
USA for her 1934 lecture tour, and as a bonus I’ll include it here. (Despite an
unfortunate amount of static in the recording, her speech can still be
followed.)

Quite mischievously indeed, in these brief remarks she propounds a novel
concept of comprehension. On the face of it, it is an unabashedly hedonic one
– with obvious repercussions for the perception of music as well as of poetry.
“Look here,” says Stein. “Being intelligible is not what it seems.” Apparently,
then, in her usage of them the meanings of words are made to shift, while nearly everything comes to depend on the tone and the timing of the tongue. “I mean by understanding, enjoyment. If you enjoy it, you understand it.” An oracular word whose clarity is itself obscure? More than likely. But what the very notion of enjoyment might be understood as signifying, will have to remain a question to pursue on other occasions.

This Week’s Tracks from Soundcloud

(March 30, 2014)

This evening I shall have to hold the commentary to a minimum, as I have a lot on at the moment (and similarly, as far as I can see, for the next couple of weeks). So, without further ado, this round of selections comprises a new track by Jonnie Allen, who’s been featured here several times before, entitled “Must... Sleep” – an evocative unclassifiable experiment; an unexpectedly successful attempt to translate a built structure, namely, the villa created ninety years ago in Garches, just to the west of Paris, by Le Corbusier for Michael Stein (the brother of Gertrude), with its grid–like spatial arrangements, into the regularities of musical sound, by a designer and composer in New York, Zachary Todd Barr; and thanks to a special project (one which is also represented by a Soundcloud page of its own) of another composer in that city, Susie Ibarra, called Electric Kulintang, finally, there is a full–fledged sonic ode in stereo to the plaza in Manhattan that is named in honor of the artist Louise Nevelson and where some large works especially commissioned from her are installed.
A High Summer Note

(July 1, 2014)

An apology is due for the unforeseen three–month–long hiatus of this website, but the interruption simply could not be helped. With high summer now arrived upon us, however, I anticipate being able gradually to resume a more regular schedule of posting, including a number of longer texts, in the months to come.

Whether I will continue to offer a Soundcloud round–up every week, every other week, or perhaps once a month, remains to be seen. (To some degree I do feel this feature is becoming, at least to my own taste, a little too routine.)

Towards the end of my period of absence, I did free enough time for myself to read through many of the entries on this website and in this Compendium, and I’ve made a few changes to quite a few of them, mainly by supplying full stops in the punctuation here and there. (Ah, the art of the periodic sentence – there always is room for improvement there.) Site maintenance was another task to which I found some time to devote: I have provided the website with a substantially fuller explanatory statement, which is accessible via the leftmost menu heading, while also removing the offprints I had produced earlier of the longer essays, as being now superfluous.

As before, comments from readers are welcome.

This Week’s Tracks
from Soundcloud

(July 6, 2014)

As I mentioned a couple of days ago, I shall have to see whether a Soundcloud round–up will continue to be offered with regularity every Sunday, as by do-
ing so it may become a bit too much of a routine; but for today I come with some pieces of contemporary classical music, variously experimental, minimal, and ethnic in their inspiration and execution.

To begin with, a young composer from Ankara currently residing in Boston after completing a course of advanced instruction in the United States, Utar Dündarartun, whose professional life is conducted under the simpler moniker Utar Artun, has shared on his Soundcloud page an exercise on an unusual instrument: the sixteen–tone piano invented by the Mexican composer Julián Carrillo in the middle of the last century and then realized, in the shape of an upright, in collaboration with the manufacturer Sauter. Although, to be sure, this model is relatively rare, rarer still is a grand piano built along the same lines, and of these one is found at the Hochschule der Künste in Bern, where Artun shared his microtonal expertise in a series of workshops and seminars dedicated to Carrillo’s invention two years ago. There, with an “Experimental Improvisation on Carrillo’s 1/16 Tone Grand Piano,” he demonstrated something of what this unusual instrument can do.

Today’s second track is a recent work of a South African composer currently pursuing an advanced degree at the University of Stellenbosch, Arthur Feder. This is a tripartite piece for violin, cello, and piano, called simply “Song, Prayer and Dance,” and in it jazzy syncopations, minimalist motifs, and even possibly the instrumental recreation of passages from a libretto, are all blended finely together. The composer notes that the work has been inspired by the traditional music of his own country, and of this influence a foreign listener may have a sense from time to time, most obviously perhaps in the measured pizzicati that help to confer a shape upon the middle of the first part.

The last of the regular three tracks is entitled “Un·fath·om·a·ble,” an electronic organ and piano work by Yezekiel Raz, a classically–trained pianist as well as a composer in Tel Aviv who has devoted himself to electronica for the past fifteen years, specializing in the Ableton Live system. This work too is tripartite, although each of the three parts is shorter in duration than the one which preceded it; it sounds as though the content is reprised twice, compressed into a narrower form with every iteration and being made accord-
ingly more taut: upon this composition whose first mood is akin to a dirge, there is thus impressed during its middle and, even more, towards its end an oppressive aural sensation of something that will soon be impending.

Appended to this evening’s line-up, included as a bonus, I’d also like to offer an older work by another Israeli pianist and devotee of electronic music, the Jerusalem composer Raviv Gazit. With a playful–evocative sense of humor that’s not merely titular but which also echoes again in the music itself, he’s called it, simply and self–referentially, “I Swallowed a Piano.”

Some Remarkable Releases

(July 14, 2014)

Halfway through the year is as fitting an occasion as any for compiling an assortment of several remarkable pieces of music offered to the public more or less recently, most of them having been released over the course of the last months, in the shape of albums, EPs, sets, or single tracks uploaded on Soundcloud. Today, with now nary a cloud to be seen in the sky, I should like to offer a medley of these sounds, which I’ve assembled into a summa æstatis in order to circle through the varieties of shade and sunlight there are in summertime – including its stillnesses and sadnesses. Thus the sounds of all that, to my ears at least, rustle vicariously throughout the music to be presented in the following survey, which is arranged for the reader or listener’s convenience into this one quite extensive playlist.

In this season, too, many are the semi–shelters music might build over our heads.

To begin with, an EP presented to the public a week ago, in its entirety. Thanks to the 1432 R label in Washington, D.C., an up–and–coming participant in the electronic music scene in Addis Ababa, Mikael Seifu, has been able to make his debut outside his own country, with four tracks issued under the
title *Yarada Lij*, presented on the label’s Soundcloud page. According to Chris Kelly in an article about Seifu on the *Wiyiyit* website, the Amharic phrase means something like *charlatan*, although it comes over into English only roughly – but the music is borne along by a genuine craft, and with the several subtleties of its composition and instrumentarium, especially in the evocative second track on the EP, “Drkness Iz,” it does leap across.

Next in the line–up is a new work by Michael David Krueger, who was featured here once before. This is a piece for brass, in writing for which the composer appears to be especially skilled, and in it he deploys the instruments over against one another – whether their musical counter–positioning bodies forth a prelude to a skirmish, or else an ἄγών, it is not so easy to decide. In any event, his piece bears an uncommon title: “Fanfare of Rage.”

In the remix of Beyoncé’s “Partition” just put together and published by the Haus of Glitch, the moniker of Jeremy Henry in Dallas, the third of today’s offerings, an elated motif from the music of the late baroque era introduces itself amongst the sonic expressions of her afterdark alter ego, “Yoncé.” She, the voice of a new ribald subgenre one could call either *dirty soul* or else an electronic development of R&B that keeps pace with our hypercynical present – which sees fit to recycle the surname *Lewinsky* as a colloquial verb – this Yoncé moves that motif so, that in this remix it speeds itself up into an allegrissimo in order to overtake her, casting away in the heat of the chase whatever compunctions it had going in, and perhaps even surprising itself in the process. Thus emboldened do these few bars of the older music, led on by that woman’s blues, undress! Although there is, fortunately for our eyes’ sake, *nothing to see here*, the sound of the scene, as we’re given to overhear it, is entertaining, at least, and in re–creating it for us Henry has outdone himself.

Chapeau! What after all can’t wit do with music!

Shifting gears now, on the Soundcloud page of Die Antwoord – which however is not the South African band’s but rather that of a musician residing somewhere in “Zefville” who’s mixed up a few of its numbers – there is a biting pastiche of a tune in which the surly charm of this spoken language is made palpable despite itself. Not so strangely, it is entitled “Broken.”

Alas, the next item in today’s compilation I am unable to embed, but at least it can be given a place in the playlist as a whole. It may be listened – or, much more likely, *danced* to there; it’s the work of the Ukrainian singer
Margo Gontar, whose work has been featured here once before, in collaboration with a producer located somewhere in Great Britain, DJ Saint Louis, and to this dark piece of techno they’ve given an instructive title, “Just Move (Forward).”

Not only does Mikael Seifu create music by himself, but in addition he also collaborates with other musicians in Ethiopia, and the fruit of one such recent collaboration, with the electronic musician Endeguena Mulu, under the moniker Gold & Wax (or, for the search engines, የጋልድ ሦሬክ, in the Amharic alphabet), is a self-titled set of two tracks recently uploaded on their Soundcloud page. While the set serves as a provisional announcement of this collaboration’s existence – the first of the pieces, identified outright as a “preview,” doesn’t appear to end but instead is evidently abruptly terminated – the effort, studded urbanely by jazz, techno, reggae sounds mixing it up upon a strong basis of the local musics, suggests that whatever the duo issues next will make the wait worthwhile.

The eponymous debut EP of a four-member rock band which moved from the Ukraine to Berlin two years ago, Four Phonica, is the next item in today’s line-up. These five tracks (whose various titles may imply that the musicians have devoted some thought to nihilism as a question, and also know their Nietzsche) show what the vocalist and percussionist Daria Chepel, the drummer Valery Derevyansky, the vocalist and guitarist Mark Gritsenko, and the bassist and synthmaster Alexander Petrovsky are capable of while in the studio, while on the band’s Youtube channel a number of their videos evince a substantial on-screen talent. It’s no wonder, then, that the four are already practiced at live performance, and understand how to occupy the room with an electric mood which can get as thick or as light as they need or want it to be.

This EP is offered on Four Phonica’s Bandcamp as well as its Soundcloud page.

Moving through a quite different sphere of sound, although at points brandishing a noticeable edge of its own, is the album recently released by the Danish ensemble MTQ, otherwise known as the Modern Tango Quintet, Yo nunca he estado en Buenos Aires. As may be gathered even by those who likewise have never visited that city, this record would not have come about at all in the absence of tango music and its charismatic fecundatory power, its
capacity to spur other musics on to new vigor and to sudden or even violent bursts of creativity; the contemporary classical genre in particular may surge again with greater strength and at the same time manifest a rather sharper feeling for delicacy, by engaging with this Argentine speciality: so do the eleven tracks on the quintet’s record comprise at least as many exemplifications of what the fertilization can deliver.

The album has been brought out on the Gateway label, and is also available for listening on the Soundcloud page of Andreas Borregaard, whom I featured here earlier this year, in connection with another, smaller ensemble, and whose skills on the accordion are well–paired in this one with those of his four fellow musicians, the contrabassist Jesper Egelund, the pianist Anne Holm–Nielsen, the violinist Clara Richter–Bæk, and the guitarist Mikkel Sørensen.

While he too is no stranger to collaboration, much more of a solo artist is the electronic musician Jan Hendrich in San Francisco (although perhaps from time to time this Englishman is to be found back in London), whose work was likewise presented here once before. Over the course of the last several years, alongside his work in the trio Ionophore, he’s been building up a body of music under the moniker Qepe, and it was in this capacity that he released a debut album some months ago on the very young Lone Pursuits label, one which he’s entitled Self Assembly. In this project, to be sure, he’s had some help from his bandmates, Leila Abdul–Rauf assisting with the vocal and trumpet parts, Ryan Honaker with violin and synthesizers, while the label’s founder Ashley Webb has tendered his finesse on the consoles in the studio. And yet, as the resulting music, as Hendrich says, was fully meant to gestate slowly, during all this it has remained identifiably his own quite personal work, and as a result Self Assembly continues to be inward–turned, imbuing itself from start to finish with the sounds of ideas and of thoughts: spare, cerebral, and full of mood.

Not easy to track down is a musical enterprise by the name of People–Eaters, which just released a debut album, Disincarnate, on the Aetheric label. This label is nearly as difficult to locate, although evidently it’s based in the United Kingdom, but as for the mysterious musician or musicians, home is said to be somewhere in Fiji, although there’s reason to wonder whether this in fact is so – even if the music itself is provided with titles in what seems like
a Polynesian language. Their reference to that part of the Pacific, however, may be meant to underscore the interest in cannibalism and cannibals which appears to animate the whole project (it represents, let us hope, only a matter of intellectual fascination): for throughout this anthropophagic album there constantly recur what strike the ear as the sonic transcriptions of those practices, while in one track the latter are spoken of explicitly in a gruesome voice–over, contributed by Joshua Levesque, and therewith are the listeners enveloped in – or rather, swallowed up by the darkness of its sound. Divested of a part of their inner sense of safety, too, at the very least.

“Although every care has been taken to remove bones, some may remain.” Hence the fastidious and squeamish may wish to abstain from this item in today’s line–up, but those of stronger constitution will be rewarded if they take a chance and brave the encounter with it, if only because, strangely enough, there’s something potentially instructive in this sonic art: it could acquaint the ear with the awe–full tones of the first threnodies as they probably must have sounded once, long ago, and may some day soon sound again. (Each of the tracks on Disincarnate, as the liner–notes state, originated as a threnody to their maker’s late father.)

The album as provided on the label’s Bandcamp page is complete, whereas the version offered on People–Eater’s own Soundcloud page has been modified: two of the tracks are presented there in the form of excerpts. Meanwhile, on its Youtube channel, there are a few videos made for these numbers, but they don’t really extend the experience very far, as this music itself has what it needs to stand alone, and then some.

Next in order is a short sequence of single tracks. The first of these is by the singer and specialist in Indian music Avital Raz. Born in Jerusalem and having made a name for herself both in Israel and in India, where at first she studied and then worked as a full–fledged participant in the independent music scene, Raz has since relocated to Manchester; in that city she is active as a teacher and as a performer. Most recently, on her Soundcloud page she’s uploaded a song entitled “Self Calming and Sorcery” – or better, a chant, suffused with the subtle sound of voices that mean to ensorcell and soothe, and do. Thus her track can sensitize the listener to the existence of one possible nexus of music and medicine.
The second of them is a new demo track on the Soundcloud page of the up-and-coming artist and aspirant musician Jack Stanton, whom I wrote a bit about a couple of years ago and who’s since moved on from Oxford to London. “Dreamboat” is its title, and his brand of synthesizer pop, clever lyrics, and a Depeche Mode-like style of delivery is as beguiling as ever.

Featured here once before is a noted composer and percussionist in New York, specializing in the kulintang, Susie Ibarra; the track recently uploaded on her Soundcloud page, “Of the Invisible,” is a rhythmical excursion through the zone situated between minimal, Filipino, and Cajun music, to name just those three kinds that are most immediately acoustically perceptible. All these streams flow together remarkably well, without however obviating the surprise of such a conjunction, nor our realization that Ibarra’s piece of music does not revolve upon itself endlessly but actually is fairly linear in its progressions. By the end it leaves us quite elsewhere than the spot from which we all had set out.

Now I shall feature two separate works by a young composer still pursuing his education at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, Antoni Schonken, who writes for several instruments individually and for full orchestration, and has a special interest in choral music. Something of the breadth of these interests may be heard already in the first, an early piece for piano and recorder, “Dreams and Dances” (the third movement is especially strong), while in the second, the recent “Six Short Dances for Flute, Cello and Piano,” it’s evident how much more choreographic his musical imagination has become in the interval, how much more attuned it’s gotten to space and its requirements. And also how much more pronounced is its wit!

(The technical level of these two recordings may well leave something to be desired, as Schonken himself admits, in particular as regards the volume, but this doesn’t matter so much now, as it’s early days yet for this promising young composer.)

A tripartite set of “Music for Dance” by Lennart Siebers, a composer and pianist in Arnhem whose work I featured here around a year ago, was posted on his Soundcloud page some months back. Here too the volume has been held low, while the dances which this music is written for would be noticeably spare, presumably, very much self-restricted in their palette of movement – kinetically achromatic, so to speak, but intently carried out – danza povera,
perhaps, emerging forth from a spirit of earnestness and willing to work with little.

Today’s penultimate piece is a work for violin by the Singaporean composer Chen Zhangyi, whom I’ve likewise written about before, under the title “Scherzo Nervoso,” and it is indeed tense or on edge. He has set its premier by Shi Xiaoxuan – it was the winner of a national competition in his homeland – onto his Soundcloud page.

Last but not least, I should like to end with an entire mixtape, far longer than anything else I’ve included. It is the most recent compilation by that unique Amsterdam DJ Von Rosenthal de la Vegaz, who draws his materials almost exclusively from the corpus of classical music, and he has entitled it “Till Death Do Us Pärt” – yes, he too is known for his wit. As presented on his Soundcloud page, American minimal music is well represented in it, but he makes room for Albinoni and Mahler as well, and of course Arvo Pärt, too, and doesn’t neglect to add some venturesome technical touches. It’s ravishing in all the right places. Bravo!

*Postscript.* Mikael Seifu writes to inform me that Chris Kelly’s article first appeared on the website of the magazine *Fact.*

**Tracks from Soundcloud on Sunday: Stillness Before the Storm**

*(July 20, 2014)*

In these parts a great summer heat has borne down, the last week or so, and so I remain *interested* in the various states of torridity, torpor, and the like that however unfortunately can accompany the current season – all of them in-
temperate conditions which, when they do arrive, come closer to us than our own skins, thus issuing everyone fair warning of the imminence of others very different in kind, as if it now were best to expect a sudden correction. Time’s odd dispensation that takes shape in the stillness before the storm, an occurrence spoken of often but fathomed seldom, is a temper or temporality that strikes the ear above all; hence of all the arts it should properly be music which might re-convey the brooding awareness of one’s placement right in the midst of the stasis, at the very same moment also holding out a refuge from that situation: in part it was this notion of sound’s special twofold capacity which encouraged me to assemble last week’s long playlist for summertime, and since then it’s continued to echo in the back of my mind.

Today’s offering of three tracks from Soundcloud, therefore, will be a bit of a coda to the earlier compilation: they’ve been drawn together along similar lines.

☞ From California comes the first of them, a new tune called “Double Down” by the singer and songwriter Joshua Stinson. An intimate relationship nearly arrived at the point of breaking up is the subject of this song, and the feeling of a crisis is emitted both by the lyrics and by the music, although each in a different way: the former are written according to the jangle of a meter suggestive of the pointed exchange of talk and counter-talk, or the back-and-forth of serious words and sass, while the latter with its insistent rhythm sounds like the pace of someone who’s had more than enough and is barely holding himself together, yet who understands that the best way out of his present difficulties would be by one steady step after another.

Next up is a new work by a composer in Rome, Daniele Corsi, for violin and cello, entitled “Tre Epigrammi.” It’s a hard title to measure up to, certainly, as with epigrams the greatest amount of sense or wit should be packed into as few words as possible, and yet this work meets the challenge with notable esprit; what Corsi has written for these two instruments (Édua Zádory on violin, Ana Topalovic on cello) can be heard as representing in succession not only three epigrams, but also the quite divergent kinds of effort required of a reader who aims to glean their meaning. For if there are three of them, here the triptych may recall to mind the fact that an ἐπίγραμμα could originally
have been an *inscription* or an *epitaph* as easily as it could be an *epigram* in the generic sense, that is, a few words even more compact and weighty, whose effect once incised or uttered could never be revoked or amended (but only obliterated), and for which therefore an even greater deliberation and forethought were essential. As a result, in Corsi’s music the concision of the one, the finality of the second, and the humor of the third sort are commingled, while each of this triad of qualities draws the outlines of the others into sharper relief.

The last track this evening is a mutant work of experimentation from a nameless denizen of Paris known only in an impenetrable acronym as LNL GCK. It has been equipped with no title, but designated only by the span of dates during which it presumably was pieced together, “15/10/12–01/03/13,” and throughout this work for double bass, flute, piano, piccolo, toy piano, viola, violin, and voices, it is the instruments themselves upon which the experiment is conducted. In this mad laboratory or workshop of studied artlessness, they are put to the test – and what a test it is! If any at all, what will be the sound they give off when subjected to these great stresses? In the process of finding out the answer, much of the character specific to each of them individually is stripped away, by the impact of a style of playing that can be likened to Francis Bacon’s disfiguring brushstrokes (who evidently is one of this composer’s favorite painters). Not much that was worthy of their name may remain to them by the end, but something interesting and even important has been learned, if one’s ears are tuned to hear it.

*Postscript.* I’ve been informed by Signor Corsi that “Tre Epigrammi” is actually an older work of his: it was composed in 2002.
About Marc Yeats  
(An Appreciation)  
(August 17, 2014)

The text that follows is the fruit of around three weeks of work, and one which developed a will of its own as it grew, filling itself out to a considerable length – for which I ask indulgence – and more than once protesting that it was simply not yet finished. Perhaps I could have pruned a hypothesis or two or even entire stretches from it, but having now reached the end, it seems to me that its arguments manage to govern themselves fairly well, after all. How satisfactorily this essay will hold up to a more impartial reading, that of course I cannot say. Please take it as the quite tentative inquiry it is.

aan Arthur Olof, in herinnering

Reserve when one encounters it in, or else (a better preposition) around an interesting work of music may call forth one’s reticence as a fitting response, signifying at once a tacit acceptance of the work’s right to maintain some distance between itself and those who listen to it, and the quiet insistence on upholding by virtue of this attitude one’s own prerogatives as a listener, an equal member of its ideal audience. A select audience it would be, a limited circle of listeners – such seems to be the case with the sonic œuvre of the composer Marc Yeats.

Yeats is an Englishman whose works are of the sort that forestall too overt a familiarity on the listener’s part, opting instead to reveal their personalities only bit by bit and quite slowly, in a lento of self-disclosure meant solely for those who have the readiness to replay them several times over, at the very least. “We none of us perform to strangers,” they might remark on their own behalf, much as Mr. Darcy once did. And so to them these pieces of music may well come across as though they were personages aloof and impenetrable. To the unready, strangers they are, strangers they shall remain.
Repeated listening to them is advisable, then, for actually they do repay the effort: there is much enjoyment in gradually getting to know them. Acquaintanceship here contains something of the longevity of a personal relationship of affinity, throughout the extended course of its various moments of development, out of the first inklings of awareness, to the subsequent reluctances, to growing interest and empathy, to ... – well, need I sketch out this, that, or the other trajectory which all should know from their own lives, experiences, and reading? Hence the enjoyment taken varies likewise, now oscillating, now amplifying itself along the way, for as a sentiment it is no less *not* immediate or invariant, but stretches out and ascends as the acoustic gates of understanding are unlocked and opened up. At some future point, to be sure, it too would tend to fall back, and yet, were I to attempt to quantify it and simplify its vicissitudes into a chart, the resulting line would probably describe a gently curving arc.

*Comprehension*, especially whenever (the etymology of our Latinate term notwithstanding) it is drawn out over a considerable tract of time and does not come about in a single moment as the sought–after flash of insight, seems to indicate that between it and the *enjoyment* felt by those who do comprehend, there persists some close connection or contiguity. And perhaps the interaction between the two is even closer than that: at bottom could they not be the very same inner process, registering in our awareness now under one, now under another aspect? This a modern poet, who certainly did know a thing or two or three about the “principles of psychology,” may have had in mind when, in a radio interview* conducted during a visit back to the United States, she shed some light – or was it a clair–obscur she threw? – on her ideas concerning the interpretation of her own works. Speaking with the broadcast journalist William Lundell, Gertrude Stein responded to the common charge that by experimenting upon language she had overturned both it and, worse still, its intelligibility. Against this accusation she held her ground – for she had *pleasure* to defend.

* Their conversation was broadcast on November 12, 1934, by the WJZ radio station in New York.
Towards the end of the broadcast, Stein had this to say: “Look here. Being intelligible is not what it seems.” Hers was a compact counter-statement in favor of her own practice of writing. She opted instead for *the appearances* as such – acoustic phenomena included, of course. (Perhaps, as Stein thought of it, the intelligible is precisely what it seems, then, after all. Or else, what it *seems*, it is, precisely! So the tone and timing of the tongue, as I wrote on that earlier occasion, has a much greater share in meaning than one usually acknowledges to be the case.) Even more striking was the follow-up: “I mean by understanding, *enjoyment*. If you enjoy it, you understand it.” Readers who had taken time to get to know her work, had eo ipso *enjoyed* it, and hence had also *understood* it. By contrast, those who had done neither, were wrong to concern themselves with something they had patently failed to comprehend at all. To them she replied: “If you did not enjoy it, why do you make a fuss about it?”

The poetic author regarded herself as an emissary from a realm of sense wherein *enjoying* and *understanding* were effectually identical. When approaching her work we in our turn will find them to be essentially concurrent activities. There they wax, there they wane together, always moving in unison, as it were.

With very few words – how many, in fact, were needed in order to proclaim an idea such as this? – Stein espoused an avowedly hedonic notion of comprehension. However, the “ἡδονή” in the back of her mind, it seems to me, should itself be understood/enjoyed in accordance with some fuller sense of what *pleasure*, as we call it, does or can do. (To what degree an awareness of pleasure’s complex of accomplishments may be uncovered in the original Greek term, remains a question for another time.) When, as per Stein’s suggestion, one *takes pleasure* in something, this seems *not* to indicate that one is participating alongside it in some activity, being placed for the duration thereof on a footing of equality with it: no, surely not, but *nor* does it signify that the delight is extracted from the object, which afterwards will be left depleted. Quite otherwise, this species of ἡδονή both nourishes the one who feels it, and at the very same time also returns something or, more likely, something else to the source whence the feeling came, thus sustaining and replenishing it also. So, in short, *enjoyment* such as we encounter it in art, when rightly understood – it appears she intimated to her audience – comprises a
set of interactions akin to the metabolic exchanges which the biologists have observed taking place in the processes of living nature.

Now, without undue qualms one could unleash this hedonic conception, which I’ve recounted here merely in brief outline, upon works of music such as Yeats’ as well. (They seem sufficiently robust to withstand – to sustain it!)

Yeats, for his part, has expressed his own sense of what is involved in his creative efforts (and in some parts of his daily life as well) in similar terms, towards the end of an interview conducted some years ago with Massimiliano Turci and posted on the latter’s Youtube channel.

Guiding him in his musical endeavors, to judge from what Yeats says, is obliteration.

Furthermore, during this segment, prominent in the shot is the painting behind him, and Yeats’ music is not likely to be understood at any point, and even less at an initial acquaintance, if the listener does not bear in mind the fact that this composer is first and foremost an artist who, even before he turned to music, was already a painter by profession – mainly an abstract one. His rapport to symphonic sound has remained, as he remarks elsewhere, coloristic, his method of building up a work, most often processual and experimentative in its embrace of trial and error. Yes, the orchestral works which result do indeed organize their space–times so as to appeal to the mind’s eyes as well as to its ears, sounding out as they go the nexus of those four dimensions, limning one particular location after another inside the latter, from each of which the surroundings will then configure themselves and be perceived variously, just as transpires with any deliberate change of place within a real–worldly environment, that one may better observe and overhear it.

Expectations entertained by those approaching Yeats’ compositions for the first time – and one ought to bear in mind the many ways in which a public’s initial expectations of a work or an œuvre will inform its eventual enjoyment thereof – will be more well–founded when it’s recognized how far, even after more than two decades of prolific productivity, he composes with all the zest of a man who had to teach himself nearly everything he knows in music. An autodidact’s character has expressed itself in these musical works, not least in the numerous hurdles his works pose to the orchestra in the pit, in their per-
formance, and to the audience in the hall as well, in their reception. These difficulties are impressive in their own right, while they perhaps also signify his deliberate handing on of the challenges he took upon himself, for others to overcome, understand, and enjoy, as the case may be. As though the composer means to say: it is largely by an onrush of new demands that orchestral music will continue to live, and not abandon itself to the uniformities of an epigonic or Alexandrian existence, succumbing to the temptations of a soft decadence beckoning towards it from every point, today. (Hence too, perhaps, the sheer gusto of Yeats’ work in the various collaborations with several ensembles which he has entered into, both at home and abroad.)

The process of getting to know these works, new listeners may find, feels at times like an initiation: they are gradually introduced to the expression in music of some English traits that are recalcitrant to translation – ones for which, although not unknown, there is less than a satisfactory understanding elsewhere, not to mention an appreciation.

Marking the beginning of Yeats’ musical career, in the middle of the nineteen–nineties, was a short orchestral work entitled “I See Blue.” A slightly later recording of a performance of it in 1996 by the BBC Philharmonic, with Sir Peter Maxwell Davies conducting, is offered on the composer’s Soundcloud page. (Because the recording originated on cassette tape, it may be marred slightly by a hiss in the background, he suggests in a note there.)

His previous activity as a painter would seem to have echoed on in the title of the work, and the music itself should call up one image after another to listeners’ minds. Yet, more than simple images, it seems to be specific locales which this work gives the audience to hear, in a quasi–pictorial manner. For the title might represent a bit of a joke or comprise a witty reference to the place where Yeats then made his home, the Isle of Skye, while right at the start the music hearkens quite further afield, to the urban settings in San Francisco or Phoenix where the action in Hitchcock’s Vertigo or Psycho was played out – for who amongst the audience will not hear the evocation of some passages from Bernard Herrmann’s scores for those films, transposed though they may be? Impressions were taken of them in order to augment the effect of a laden environment which crowds in upon the listener, by a claustrophobic mise en scène at once optical, mnemonic, and acoustic. Amongst this ominous orches-
tration, the room to maneuver is bounded very narrowly indeed; one takes but a step or two and directly a danger on one side, a barrier on another tower up: the music bristles with warnings of what not to do, where not to go. Whom then could one consult with? For counsel there is no one to turn to, here. Frequently, indeed, it sounds as though nobody else is to be found within the confined space–time of this composition – although others could be poised around its limits – inside it offers barely room enough for an audience of one alone.

Such a forbidding mise en scène notwithstanding, the composer saw to it that this piece of music is enjoyable as a whole. In the hands of a capable novelist, even or especially the harder passages of “I See Blue” could be stylized into lines of delightful description, which might function similarly within a work of literature – but I shall attempt nothing of the sort, restricting myself instead to a pair of illustrations in support of this finding.

Firstly, in this tripartite work or triptych (plus an epilogue) as it appears to be, during the middle section, which lasts from the 4:57 mark onwards to 8:09 and is by its modulation rather léger, quietly unlike the music preceding it, there comes a moment when, between 5:42 and 5:49, a voice–like phrase is heard from the wind section (from one of the trumpets?) that reads like an exhalation of relief, a sign the nervous tension so palpable throughout the previous third has subsided a bit: hence this instrumental solo conveys the particular kind of pleasure attendant upon the relaxation that comes once an effort, an exertion, or an ordeal is done. Now, it’s precisely just this dual reference, both backwards and forwards in the order of time, between a period of activity and the pause when it will have ceased, each essentially correlate to the other, which makes up the rhythm inherent to enjoyment in the fuller sense of the term I’ve been pursuing here. Hence it seems to be Yeats’ whole work of music which is enjoyed, rather than this or that separate part of it alone – and if some pleasure, strictly speaking, is not taken in each of its various parts, this abstention would, far from constituting a counter–argument, actually lend some further support to the idea. For pleasure, of whatever kind it be, does not constantly attend to enjoyment, however short or long the period of the latter. From time to time, indeed, pleasure is quite conspicuous by its absence. Therefore, could not moments of pleasure even be, strictly speaking, incidental to enjoyment throughout its entire duration?
To generalize a little: if there is such an enterprise as an art of enjoying – an art in which, oddly enough, a few perspicuous observers have awarded a first prize to the English – surely it consists in a gradual elaboration of that rhythm by its practitioner with patience and skill, in the awareness that an enjoyment worthy of the name does not arrive all at once, for it has its own discrete phases and is never solely determined by the end which we usually call pleasure, regardless of whether by this term one designates either the positive pleasure of some fulfillment or that more fleeting pleasurable feeling indicative of a cessation of pain.

A second illustration is this: at the conclusion of the third of this work’s “panels” (excepting the coda), there is, dare I say it, a climax which heightens the tension felt by the audience beyond the level it had reached earlier. The effect is created by taking up again some elements from the first two, such that in the passage from 11:32 onwards until 12:10 the piano is wielded nearly percussively, while the strings are deployed for a swarm of sound – but this time the locale set out by the music is not the very narrow zone where “I See Blue” began. At this juncture it has expanded considerably, and thus the audience finds itself placed in the midst of an open field which to be sure is storm- covered overhead and still wreathed in obscurity (it is always darkest just before the day dawneth) but where some blue flickers of light are already beginning to break through on the horizon. Hence the title of Yeats’ work is no mere addition or afterthought, for now one starts to realize how it anticipates – adumbrates – the place where the audience is left at the end, towards the culmination of the third part and onwards into the epilogue, although it’s only by those who’ve listened to the whole work that this can really be seen: that is, only these listeners are able to comprehend the work’s coda as being what it is, a dawn. In the delight taken when any such early-morning hour finally supervenes, those essentially different kinds of pleasure – satisfaction and relief – would be conjoined, and so, in the sounds of this ultimate part, more collected and calm than the previous three, both have been. Thus a musical image of oblectation is offered, and so the listener will understand that everything which came before was in fact composed for enjoyment of the work in its entirety.

Nearly twenty years of age, and “I See Blue” has become anything but dated! Actually it seems to be, it strikes the ears as though it were imbued with
the present moment, abounding in the concerns of today. Its palpable nervousness is what those who are now awake, regardless of where they reside, whether it’s in the capitals, the other cities and towns, or the countrysides, will most likely also have strongly felt, wary of the catastrophes smirking at them from every corner, eyeing in foreboding dread the tumults in the streets, the wreckage in the skies, and wondering what is nigh. In addition, as if to compound the disaster, re-emerging everywhere once more, much as nearly a century ago, is the suspicion uttered as though he had set it within quotation marks by the other Yeats:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold

– an idea or sentiment which, when thus cited or identified as such, as a bit of reported speech, may then be traced back to the suspiciousness of minds that themselves are more than simply observers to the event. For a suspicion like this one never merely accepted the dissolution as imminent, but did also, moreover, contribute something to hasten its onset, although of course disclaiming any share of responsibility in the aftermath. Exempting itself from its own consequences as far as it can, this notion tends, unfortunately for us all, to spread from mind to mind as though by contagion. And these days it’s been breaking out again, this time more voluble than it was before.

Listened to in the light of our present conditions, the sound-scheme in “I See Blue” may suggest how much the composer already had his ears peeled for the noise made by this particular sentiment or idea. Perhaps his work, as a result, was the record of a thought-experiment (conducted with appropriate precautions) performed upon it, to examine the sounds it would emit under certain circumstances, in order to expose some of its inner articulations, otherwise unperceived.

But I shall set this train of thought aside, in favor of another question which interests me rather more. That Yeats was able to write such an orchestral work even while he was living in the countryside and thus far away from any urban scene, when the city as such is the most obvious setting for minds led by their own suspicions – this is a datum I should like to understand.
Over that distance Yeats was well-situated first to adjust his sonic materials better to depict the realities of the city, and then to arrange them into a composition that expressed some of what transpires there. Perhaps from afar he was able to hear the sounds of the large-city uproar, actual or anticipated, better than he could have done had he found himself in medias res, amidst the urban crowds, or within metropolitan environments where the noises in the acoustic foreground might have gotten in the way of that which he actually wanted to listen for. Thus it could be by virtue of his having dwelt in rural surroundings that “I See Blue” can limn a few of the risks encountered in the city with considerable verisimilitude.

Relations between the countryside and the capital represent a main topic especially in the context of English history, and several of the sharpest observers and essayists have inquired into them. They have left behind a corpus of insight on the subject, and given the early growth of London into the world’s largest and most immense city around the beginning of the nineteenth century, an expansion due in part to the influx of great numbers from rural areas of the country, in the capital the writers of that period were frequently attentive to the traces of the countryside the new urbanites had brought along with themselves, in the shape of a few particular traits of character or habits of mind they bequeathed to their London-born children, in several professions and at certain levels of society at least. In these early stages of their urbanization, London could prove a sheerly disorienting locale for the newcomers, and their bewilderment at what they there experienced tended to persist for quite some time. Meanwhile, back in the countryside, those habits of mind and traits of character were being drawn into sharper relief, becoming more identifiable as such, by virtue of the greater contrast between the ways of town or rural life on the one side, those of the existence in the capital on the other. (In the English context especially, the way of life of the country’s other large cities forms a separate chapter in the story, which here I need not skim through.) Hence a twofold development was taking place in England, or rather, two divergent developments each tied to the other.

Amongst this group of publications, one essay stands out in particular for its perspicuity, William Hazlitt’s “On Londoners and Country People,” and for this reason I should like to cite a couple of his observations from it.
A portrait of that sort of native-born Londoner who rarely if ever at all ventured beyond his own corner of the city, and whose breadth of mind was really no wider – the Cockney: this was the likeness drawn at the beginning of the essay.* “Time and space are lost to him,” averred Hazlitt of this type of city-dweller. “He is confined to one spot, and to the present moment. He sees every thing near, superficial, little, in hasty succession. The world turns round, and his head with it, like a roundabout at a fair, till he becomes stunned and giddy with the motion. Figures glide by as in a camera obscura. There is a glare, a perpetual hubbub, a noise, a crowd around him; he sees and hears a vast number of things, and knows nothing.” He was nearly overwhelmed by all the movement around him, and although this type is specifically a London fixture, Hazlitt’s description it seems could have applied just as well to a newcomer from the countryside upon his first introduction to the capital: the impressions made upon these two by the city were similar in both cases. Thus something of the narrow horizons and even the mean-mindedness which Hazlitt attributed to country people when he turned his attention to them in order to sketch out their character, did also attach to this typical denizen of the metropolis, their descendant; and hence his essay was meant as an inquiry into some of the traces deposited by the provinces in the capital.

That a Cockney himself could become aware of any part of this and therewith of his own background, not biographically but historically speaking, Hazlitt evidently took to be an impossibility. For, finding himself from the very start in the midst of this unprecedented modern metropolis (for which London really has been the prototype), this sort of Londoner lived his life enthralled by the capital considered as a sheer spectacle. “His senses keep him alive; and he knows, inquires, and cares for nothing farther” – in their operations his organs of sense were far removed from being theoreticians – and indeed, given how much of the metropolis there was, why should this Cockney have felt any actual concern for its transience? “Every thing is vulgarised in his mind. Nothing dwells long enough on it to produce an interest; nothing is contemplated sufficiently at a distance to excite curiosity or wonder.” His absorption in the urban scene allowed him neither room nor inclination for any-

thing but the unending succession of its impressions. Because its overpowering appeal had captivated him, and indeed mainly via his eyes, “while his imagination is jaded and impaired by daily misuse,” the capital in effect did render him blind.

However, this portrait of an urban – but ignorant, non-urbane – existence was only Hazlitt’s starting-point. Shortly thereafter in his essay he went further, much further: he anticipated how the capital’s life would soon develop itself beyond its earlier limitations, as represented for instance by this typical London type. Even then the Cockney’s own special self-flattery as being a born Londoner, was already prompting him to shake off something of that first narrowness of mind, as though unwittingly to demonstrate how a public benefit might emerge forth from a private vice. “He is a citizen of London; and this abstraction leads his imagination the finest dance in the world. London is the first city on the habitable globe; and therefore he must be superior to every one who lives out of it. There are more people in London than any where else; and though a dwarf in stature, his person swells out and expands into ideal importance and borrowed magnitude.” Arrived at such a point, no longer would this capital–denizen remain quite the rudesby he was before.

To extrapolate along similar lines: from the Urerlebnis of the urbanite alone in the capital who never knew anything other than the massiveness of the modern city, this experience from which the essay set out, much else could develop. As an author whose active professional life could have been lived nowhere but in London, Hazlitt understood how this premier metropolis in its character as an immense spectacle – the very aspect which he said bewildered and overcame those encountering it all as though for the first time – was also the natural setting of an unprecedented liberality, in the classical sense of the term, nearly forgotten now. The greatest benefits of the civil state by then established and anchored in the capital, that is to say, modern commercial society, came in the shape of the expanded outlooks, higher views, and broader interests of the worldly public residing there, in the longer stretches of its history when it had attained its acme, lending to the metropolitan “tone of political feeling” some quality that must indeed have been very distinctive, once. Hazlitt himself was writing nearly at the midpoint of London’s extended heyday, and it’s to the credit of his perspicuity that he did not fail to refer, al-
beit only in the mode of an allusion, to the most far-sighted account of the conditions out of which the life of the capital had emerged step by step, already nearly two centuries before – for, that same early eyewitness had also warned, as clearly as he dared, the bellum omnium contra omnes of the seventeenth century would continue to trouble the modern society arising out of it, haunting it from within, persisting covertly in or underneath its manifold interactions and lending to them a faint hostile undertone, which might again become a thunderous outburst at some perilous later moment in its history, during a recrudescence or ricorso wherein the old strife would explode again, everywhere in the country but especially within the capital.

If, as Hazlitt announced a bit later on in the essay, in his times London’s worldly populace constituted “a visible body-politic, a type and image of that huge Leviathan the State,” then clearly he felt there was cause to keep Hobbes’ life and works at the back of his mind, in readiness. The hint to his readers probably sufficed, it was his “Et in arcadia ego” caption; while for us today there is a prescience to Hazlitt’s text which will be discerned better if it is read through at least twice, the second time epitaphically.

For much the same reasons, so it seems to me, these days one has far greater cause to re-read Hobbes with care. Here, however, I shall mention just a single salient point: the philosopher’s uncompromising avowal that it is fear which compels people to associate together, was balanced by his intellectual honesty in admitting that under certain circumstance this same fear could just as readily lead to the dissolution of an established society.

What sort of fear was Hobbes concerned with? (In the present connection, what’s at issue is only the fear itself, as a feeling or a passion, and not that which happens to arouse it in any particular instance.) Well, writing just prior to the start of the English civil war, he rejected the common and as it were foreshortened idea that “nihil aliud esse metuere, præterquam perterreri.” Instead, as Hobbes thought of it, fear, the great although usually unspoken fear between those whom he termed citizens, was bolstered by several varieties other than simple fright, and actually inseparable from them. “Ego ea voce futuri mali prospectum quemlibet comprehendo,” he averred. “Neque solam fugam, sed etiam diffidere, suspicari, cavere, ne metuant providere, metuentium esse judico.” Although, he said, this complex of fears may be effectively banished from human minds for a short period of time whenever one or a few
men established their personal *dominion* over others, it would soon assert it-
self again, once those relations were on the verge of disappearing; and regard-
less of how benevolently or not people’s private lives might be managed under
this or that regime, the enduring system of all the variegated commercial in-
teractions that together were the *society* or the *civil state*, as Hobbes called the
association of those *citizens*, whose nexus was the capital, could not possibly
be maintained without it. “*Quamquam autem commoda hujus vitæ augeri
mutuâ ope possunt, cum tamen id fieri multo magis dominio possit quàm so-
cietate aliorum, nemini dubium esse debet, quin avidius ferentur homines na-
tura sua, si metus abesset, ad dominationem, quàm ad societatem. Statuen-
dum igitur est, originem magnarum & diuturnarum societatum non à mutua
hominum benevolentia, sed à mutuo metu extitisse.*”* Thus, insisted Hobbes,
it was nothing like a reciprocal exchange of assistance but rather their
“mutuus metus” or “mutual fear” – in which all those various kinds of fear
were concurrent – which had joined or even forced the citizens together into
association with one another in the first place; and he repeated the claim in
much the same terms a decade later, just as the civil war was ending, while
also underscoring fear’s great role in upholding at least that degree of order
without which the society could not subsequently seem to endure. “Of all
Passions, that which enclineth men least to break the Lawes, is Fear,” he
wrote in his major work. “Nay, (excepting some generous natures,) it is the
onely thing, (when there is apparance of profit, or pleasure by breaking the
Lawes,) that makes men keep them.” While this idea of the state and its func-
tion is fairly obvious, there then followed an honest acknowledgement on his
part, which, it seems, Hobbes’ own philosophical conscience compelled him
not to omit. “And yet in many cases a Crime may be committed through
Feare.”** With this sentence he conceded that whenever the society’s fear of
the state’s force, quite often effectual as a deterrent, did abate under a certain
minimum point, the older and never extinguished *mutual fear* could blow hot
again, in such a way that a citizen’s life would evidently hinge on his having
struck first. At this point, the notion of a single crime stands for an entire con-
currence of offenses – whether actual, imaginary, or hypothetical, future, pre-

* *Elementa philosophica de cive*, chap. I, sec. 2.
** *Leviathan*, pt. II, chap. XXVII.
sent, or past. Multiply such a fear–prone individual’s calculations or his infrac-
tion by a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, millions, etc., as might indeed
occur under modern conditions, especially in a metropolis, and that old
bellum omnium contra omnes would quickly flare up anew and consume once
more the civil state in which Hobbes had hoped it could be endurably con-
tained. Moreover, generally speaking, for such an explosion the conditions in
the society would be primed even further during any period when lawlessness
seemingly is triumphing everywhere (perhaps not least by dint of the state’s
own hypertrophy) and begins to appear almost as a fate, for then in effect fear
will conspire everywhere to tear the structure down, mainly from within. In
short, what the mutual fear made, it can also level; and Hobbes certainly
never forgot just how precarious its construct was and would ever remain.

Hazlitt, an astute essayist, offers the reader some marvelous lines of de-
scription and well–observed images of life in the capital and the countryside,
and so doing seems to have had an especially visual talent. Hence, on a first
reading, all the fears with which Hobbes concerned himself do not appear in
“On Londoners and Country People,” for in fact the wealth of optical attrac-
tions in London did succeed in blunting the sense for them, the acuity of per-
ception by which they otherwise would have been taken account of. The un-
wary were lulled by their eyes – this may actually have been the first point
Hazlitt made in the essay. Accordingly, if those fears or rather their acoustic
reverberations are to be registered on a second, more wary reading, then the
careful reader would want to attend to something else: namely, to Hazlitt’s feel-
ing for acoustic phenomena and sense of everything which sounds can convey,
whether the actually audible sounds of a living life or the silent sounds of
printed placards and pages, an aptitude less pronounced than his other gift
but by no means inconsiderable. For even though by the early nineteenth cen-
tury Hobbes’ fears could no longer really be seen, they could still be heard, by
anyone with an ear for them, right in the midst of the period during which
London reached its height of prosperity, liberality, and (as Hobbes would have
said) precellence, being the first amongst modern cities. Nor is their sound
any fainter today; and it’s the awareness of this circumstance which, after a
slightly over–prolonged tour through literature, brings me briefly back to
Yeats’ “I See Blue.”
Of course, today the contrast between the capital and the countryside still signifies, although with the electronic means of communication currently available, the distance between them is neither so great nor so much a chasm as it once was; and so, despite, or perhaps to some degree due to, the different demands to which each of these two environments subjects the individual human sensorium, the countryside might be a fitting locale for a composer to assemble some of the fears which reverberate throughout and haunt the capital into an orchestral shape: these urban echoes could be heard so much more precisely by someone whose senses were not distracted perpetually by all the city’s other stimuli, the visual ones above all. In other words, both the discipline exerted by the ear against the human being’s other organs of perception, which would seem to imply that audition has reason to keep itself a bit aloof from its counterparts, as well as the self-discipline taken upon itself by the sense of hearing, may perhaps be practiced more readily by a composer who’s removed himself out of the sonic maelstrom which Hazlitt termed the London hubbub – when that distance would permit a better understanding, and at the same time an enjoyment, of the fear still discernible on, behind, or underneath the aural surface of the capital, while the main goal of the composer’s own effort of comprehension was not to end there, but rather to enable himself to embody that feeling in a piece of music.

Accordingly, I shall now consider one or two short passages of the orchestral work sub specie terroris, in order to show that what is represented in them does indeed answer to the name of fear.

Around halfway into the first part of “I See Blue,” after the orchestra has set up a virtually cinematic scene – where the hour is long past midnight yet just as long before dawn, and someone is hurrying by himself down some lurid uninviting street looking for heaven knows what while dodging packs of people and things anyone would do well to avoid as far as they can – there then comes the drama, in the shape of the threatening back and forth of an altercation that could easily pass over to acts. For now, beginning at the 2:45 mark and lasting a tense length of time until 3:11, a figure is struck compulsively on the piano, as though to depict the nervous drumming of the fingers of someone’s hand, the tic of a person who’s trying to conceal the panic welling up without quite succeeding at it. Is the figure a musical picture of an involuntary lapse which, with the great distrust presiding over this interaction
where everyone is warily scrutinizing everything as though it contained a signal of intent, could itself be misread and then serve as the spark to set it all alight? Or else, on the other hand, a sonic likeness of a miniature act that both provides an outlet for the excessive nervous energy someone would feel at such a moment, and also helps him to mark the time until it’s over? Perhaps this musical figure stands for the two gestures at once – who really can say conclusively what it represents? – but its usage in this sequence suggests how the inveterate mutual fear could re-erupt between the city-dwellers and overtake everything again.

Later, nearly at the end of the work, at the start of the last portion of the work which I’ve called a coda, another figure is utilized, this one three short high notes from a flute, the third of them quite soft, as though together they were a single word. What might this word be? “Finally” – falling with a cadence at once of lightening and of anticipation. Several times during the half-minute onwards from the 12:15 mark it’s uttered, and all along the instrument attracts most of the listener’s attention to itself. Little is left over for what is rumbling concurrently in a lower register, namely, a parallel figure from the piano, an accompaniment which, if one decides nonetheless to concentrate on it more than on the flute, may suddenly call back to mind the earlier triad of notes encountered in the first part of “I See Blue.” Soon, indeed, this recollection is hard to miss, when beginning from 12:40 until 12:50 this other sequence on the keys enters into the sonic foreground, as though to suggest to the audience that even now, during the dawning of whatever it is which the orchestration in this final part might be thought to point forward to, the earlier sounds of fear will not let themselves be forgotten. For even if we are less interested in them at present, they remain very interested in us.

Not quite as palpably cinematic or dramatic in its staging as “I See Blue,” but perhaps even more sinister in mood by virtue of its tonalities and its implications, is another of Yeats’ early works, this one a bipartite composition, of which each piece can also stand alone, entitled “Pagan.” Of the second of them, completed in 1996, he’s shared a recording of a later performance by, once again, the BBC Philharmonic, conducted by Davies.

Much as in Yeats’ first orchestral composition, throughout this one too the sounds of fear may be discerned – albeit not really of the same sort which
stalks the metropolis. The scene is another; nor, as he himself states, does this piece strive “to be a desolate pronouncement on our future” and hence a specifically prophetic or vatic statement: instead it aims to provide “a glimpse of the unthinkable” (the emphasis is mine), and here the optical term may be taken quite literally, as he wants to show us something from a secure distance, briefly, for a short period of time, and not to situate us amidst the action itself. These happenings comprise a “huge arcane and barbaric ceremony” which itself is far from a pleasure to witness, and all the less so the closer the proximity to it, as there the celebrants are “brutalised through music which is violent, both rhythmically and harmonically” – by their own consent, for the music is theirs. This time too, therefore, Yeats’ is a representational work, yet in this one most of its acoustic shots were framed somewhat more panoramically and few if any close-ups seem to have been included. While the ceremony takes place, it is also observed by some outsiders: thus it’s this entire scene which Yeats’ composition in its turn represents to the ears of its listeners, and so it contains a representation of another music within its own musical mise en scène. Hence he’s made, not a music of violence, but rather, music about violence. Now, just because this prepositional distinction between about and of tends to evaporate in practice, given how contagious violence itself can prove to be (closely allied as it is, in this as in other respects, to fear generally, and especially to mutual fear), and also how easily the precautions taken against it are circumvented (whereby the interposing of a sturdy pane of glass or a protective distance, for the sake of the viewers’ safety, may fail to contain the violence, especially if, as does seem to occur from time to time, it is also transmitted by sight and bursts out by a nearly involuntary imitation), to compose music–within–music like this is evidently a risky proposition. But for that same reason, on the other hand, perhaps it is an acoustic medium which would best lend itself to be the most sterile of possible laboratories, if one wants to ascertain experimentally the extent to which representation (or figuration) and containment may coincide in the work of art, both as process and as result. Could it not then be the case that the translation of things either seen or imagined into an appropriate musical form will also require a prior act of neutralization or disinfection, as one of the basic hygienic measures?

These are questions provoked by this half of “Pagan” as a whole, and they are posed most sharply during two passages in the work, each lasting around
fifteen seconds, beginning at the 4:33 and 10:10 marks, where the insistent high–pitched tone, akin to a whistle and indicative that the ceremony is nearing an auto–hypnotic apex, threatens to entrance the onlookers even across the distance they’ve wisely put between themselves and the proceedings they are witnessing, robbing some of them of their wits entirely – and as a consequence perhaps of much else besides, for who knows what offerings or victims those pagan rites will have need of?

For the audience, therefore, those who are in a position to overhear – from an acoustic shelter that is relatively secure – these witnesses to archaic rites and the risks they are running simply by being in the vicinity, this orchestral work may come across as something of a warning or cautionary tale about sight, sound, distance, and danger.

The composer himself, however, as it seems right I should admit, may well dissent from this term *representational* as applied to his orchestral works, even in the somewhat unusual sense in which I’ve utilized the term, and would, especially in view of his concurrent activity (for he’s kept it up) as a painter, prefer instead to call them abstract. But perhaps the difference here is less significant than it may seem at first.

➤ Permit me to turn now to two of Yeats’ very recent pieces, which don’t seem to organize their respective mises en scène quite as cinematically–narratively as those I’ve already touched on, and for which therefore the term *abstract* could be a better fit. How much of one – well, this we shall see!

A work for a smaller group of thirteen, premiered and recorded a couple of years ago by the ensemble LSTwo, a project of the students of the music department at Leeds University, is again a piece of music whose habitat seems to be the metropolis or the capital. Its title, “Crowded Rooms,” already offers a key to this music, while from the first bars onwards listeners find themselves installed directly within these rooms, and then in quick succession it’s evident where, what, and who they all are.

Not for the first time the locale seems to be somewhere in London. Now the hour is before or after dinner; the setting, a salon; the occasion, an urbane soirée or party. The currency of the evening? Conversation. Of what sort? (*Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”*) By turns it’s about the arts, literature,
politics, or scandal ... – but, once flowing, usually in an interminable evanescent stream. No venue like this could survive for long without these irrigations, and yet, at least a century ago if not already quite some time before, Hazlitt’s even earlier esteem for the breadth of outlook in the capital notwithstanding, a palpable fatigue was setting in amongst the more percipient of the attendees, who could not but help notice how many of the others would come and go

Talking of Michelangelo

and who in dismay then began to ask themselves, How much longer? These were the environs of London ennui in which that older liberality gradually was extinguished, whose regulars were accustoming themselves to mere repetition and where the discourse was ever more predictable, the verbal controversies whenever they occurred not much more than rounds of mild exercise after hors–d’œuvres were served – is it any wonder, then, if these gatherings, replete with the eternal return of the same crowd, began to look more than a little infernal?

Some such impression, I believe, is what Yeats had in mind in composing this work. As this music strikes my ear, in it the sounds of small talk, discourse, chatter – words at once largely empty and puffed up – and the sighs of great boredom emitted inwardly by those whom the loquacious hold captive, are adjoined in musical sequences whose visual character is as pronounced as those of Yeats’ first orchestral works but which have less need for the narrational organization of their mises en scène. If conversations are what his “Crowded Rooms” is representing to its audience by musical means, an extrinsic scene–setting or narration would not be required, as these verbal exchanges are able to speak on their own behalf and keep the story afoot by themselves, as it were.

Hence, too, the sound–scheme in this work may come across as being more abstract: for there are simply fewer actions or events to create musical moving images for. Actually, of these episodes the main one comes right at the outset (starting ten seconds in and continuing for around half a minute), when the guests presumably are arriving, hearing the noise inside for the first time as they enter, hanging up their coats, greeting the hosts, having a drink,
pulling themselves together, etc., and then plunging into the fray. From this point onwards, the music has been written in a more abstract manner, but the words, the boredom, and the exasperations circulating through this suite of rooms are well–rendered in distinctive sonic shapes, bombastic, dissonant, or high–pitched as each may be, and as such all of them do sufficiently disclose themselves to us in the audience.

Yet, while moving along with Yeats’ music through the rooms, the listener may also witness a few of the guests discreetly contemplating their hands, or someone else’s shoes, or ... – nearly anything, really, so long as it draws their minds away from the mainly one–sided conversations in which they’re caught and enables them to relieve the boredom they feel, at least provisionally. With this encounter, a minor mystery seems to announce itself to the observant audience: namely, how do they abstract their thoughts away from the crowd in the room, without seeming obviously abstracted and thereby openly offending the vanity of the person or persons speaking to them, and (this no less interesting a question) where during the interval are they abstracting themselves to?

Well, every so often the best thoughts come to those who’re absconding with their minds during the boring interludes at parties. – Speaking a bit more seriously, however, this peculiar urbane boredom encountered frequently in the metropolis or the capital (and on occasion elsewhere) has contributed not a little to the development of a certain facility in contemplation, as a practice by which the bored could make their inconspicuous escape, temporary though it might be. To be sure, contemplation of this kind diverges a bit from what is usually understood by the term, while it has very little in common with the θεωρία to which minds may fly when they effectively have disencumbered themselves of their bodies. Rather, it retains a close connection to the body and especially to the body’s faculties of sensation and perception. Contemplation like this, as long as it lasts, tends to absorb the mind in that which is contemplated, evidently by any one organ of sense alone or by several of them in co–operation, and thus disengages minds to some degree from the other modes of their own activity. Often enough this can be done inconspicuously (otherwise it simply could not be practiced decently in social settings), and hence those stretches of boredom were not set unavoidably there simply to be endured, but could instead have been regarded as laboratories or gymnasia wherein one tried out or trained one’s various powers of contempla-
tion in order to find out what they might accomplish, both separately and collective.

Sympathetic outsiders have occasionally written of the contemplative penchant that seems to be an English speciality, delineating itself most clearly perhaps in the works of a few philosophers and novelists. How else could this aptitude have been born than from the boredoms of London, subsequently showing its adaptability in other locales and to other ends, not only urban ones? As such it helped establish the finesse with which those inquirers have sought to comprehend the natures of habit and of enjoyment, those elusive propensities of the human being.

Years ago already, two Frenchmen, great admirers of the experimentative-ness of these empiricists and novelists across the Channel generally, co-authored an éloge to the especially English sort of contemplation, taking care to underscore its close proximity as an active power to the senses and their capacities. In a rhapsodietta of prose and a daydream of theory – the style which one had come to expect of them – towards the end of the last book Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari wrote together,* the duo went so far as to suggest that sensation itself is or can be contemplation, as strange as their claim may sound at first. “La sensation est contemplation pure, car c’est par contemplation qu’on contracte, se contemplant soi-même à mesure qu’on contemple les éléments dont on procède. Contempler, c’est créer, mystère de la création passive, sensation. La sensation remplit le plan de composition, et se remplit de soi-même en se remplissant de ce qu’elle contemple : elle est ‘enjoyment’, et ‘self–enjoyment’.” In the paradigmatic mode of contemplation, therefore, while thus engaged one contracts – contracts not so much into as with the materials of which one is made, entering into an informal agreement with them, a contract which then entitles one to contemplate oneself as a whole, and also, although this of course will take place within certain limits, to re-create oneself and the very organs of sense by which the contemplating occurs. (The precise meaning of the authors’ technical term “plan de composition” is unimportant in the present context.) What are these limits? That’s hard to say, but

* Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?, Conclusion, “Du Chaos au cerveau.”
in these lines Deleuze and Guattari put the verb “remplir” to interesting use: as they saw it, sensation whenever it’s most energetic does not deplete but rather replenishes both that which is sensed and itself as well.

Absorption in something seen or otherwise sensed, such as those who are bored at a soirée in London (or in Paris?) may be grateful to experience, could perhaps exemplify contemplation as these two authors defined or re-defined it, as an activity without which the world’s metabolism would function much more poorly, provide far fewer benefits than it does. By contemplating something else, under such circumstances, one might procure enjoyment for oneself, perhaps tendering some back in exchange, and even contract a new habit, whether of sense, of perception, or of mind, possibly encouraging others to do likewise. Moreover, at the same time, one could further whet one’s own (and another’s?) appetite for the questions concerning habit and enjoyment themselves.

For a light-hearted illustration of their notion of sensation and its great importance in all the exchanges which make up the universe, Deleuze and Guattari turned back many centuries – strangely enough, to Plotinus. In the first few sections of the eighth treatise in the third of the Enneads, one meets with a rather buoyant, playful text which reads more like a thought-experiment than a piece of full-fledged metaphysics or the outlines of a doctrine – or else as an indication that he, being also a prominent inhabitant of the city of his time, may himself have known a thing or two about urbane boredom and the paths of thought by which his mind could flee from it.

The two authors set out the kernel which they found lodged in Plotinus’ reflections in the following passage: “Plotin pouvait définir toutes les choses comme des contemplations, non seulement les hommes et les animaux, mais les plantes, la terre et les rochers. Ce ne sont pas des Idées que nous contemplons par concept, mais les éléments de la matière, par sensation. La plante contemple en contractant les éléments dont elle procède, la lumière, le carbone et les sels, et se remplit elle-même de couleurs et d’odeurs qui qualifient chaque fois sa variété, sa composition : elle est sensation en soi. Comme si les fleurs se sentaient elles-mêmes en sentant ce qui les compose, tentatives de vision ou d’odorat premiers, avant d’être perçues ou même senties par un agent nerveux et cérébré.” Even an organism such as a plant, therefore, already has some rudiments or, perhaps a better term, pre-rudiments of the
perceptual faculties which, in species equipped with central nervous systems, permit the absorption in and of visual phenomena in particular, a mode of absorption without which the human capacity for νεωτία itself never could have developed as it did. (As for the authors’ fleeting reference to the earliest biological beginnings of olfaction, there is no need to pursue it here.)

This summary Deleuze and Guattari finished off by appending an interesting comparison: “De Hume à Butler et à Whitehead, les empiristes repren- dront le thème, en l’inclinant vers la matière : d’où leur néo–platonisme.”

Now, if the duo’s précis does indeed draw forth the right points from the text (and here I have no reason to address the question whether or how far this might be the case), then not only did the Neo–Platonism of these empiri- cists relegate Plato’s immaterial εἴδη to the footnotes, but Plotinus already at times downgraded them as well, or at least he was tempted to move in this di- rection, in some parts of his corpus.

His deviation here, however, if such it was, is not so surprising – for it appears to testify to the considerable influence upon him of Aristotelian thought. The notion that sensation (or else, if one prefers, perception, or even, in effect, as Deleuze and Guattari would have it, contemplation) first becomes absorbed in and akin to that which is sensed, and then, operating in the other direction, absorbs some quality of that thing via itself into the agent, may plausibly be derived from some remarks made in Aristotle’s treatise on the soul. Accordingly, I shall now briefly undertake an anabasis through a few passages in that book.

☛ The persistence with which many works of philosophy seek the element of similarity in this or that mode of comprehension (from the most elementary kind of sensation to the highest forms of knowledge or thought) between that which comprehends and that which is comprehended, may simply result from the old and very interesting metaphysical assumption that only things in some way like one another could possibly enter into such a relation. These similari- ties, of course, have themselves been defined quite variously. Aristotle also of- fered some definitions in this vein, but evidently he had also begun to doubt how fully sufficient that assumption actually was. For him, not merely what this or that sensory organ is, but what it can be and do, and also the nature of
the alterations that occur in its transition from an inactive to an active state, were the main points of inquiry when he addressed the topic of the human sensorium. He took the position that the organs of sense while in a state of inaction were unlike their respective sentiendra, yet became like them once active and, generally speaking, for some span of time from that moment onwards. Prior to the commencement of the sensing process, according to his summary statement, the sensory organ or sentient being is merely virtually or potenti-ally similar to the sentiendum in its real existence, "αἰσθητικὸν δυνάµει ἔστιν οἶν τὸ αἰσθητὸν ἣδη ἐντελεχεία,"

* and hence only once the process has begun can this lack be made good such that the sensitive faculty would become (or make itself) like the thing which it senses (or which makes itself felt) – "πάσχει μὲν οὖν όυχ ὁμοιον ον, πεπονθὸς δ' ὀμοίωται καὶ ἐστιν οἶον ἐκεῖνο."** This last is quite a compact sentence, but by virtue not least of its terseness, Aristotle’s formulation does seem to say that throughout the sensory process each of the participants acts and is acted upon in more than one way, while in any case there’s little doubt about the final outcome, for in the end some quality will be assimilated by αἴσθησις into the agent.

These few remarks by Aristotle were perhaps at the back of Plotinus’ mind when he put pen to papyrus and conveyed his botanical contemplations into words, however serious or fanciful was the spirit in which he intended the resulting prose to be taken.

However, some chapters further on in his work, Aristotle turned again to discuss αἴσθησις in general,*** providing a conceptual elaboration which I also should like to rehearse, as it diverges widely from that speculation in the Enneads, not to mention the theory in Deleuze and Guattari’s last publication, and evidently is incompatible with either of them. According to this subsequent account, the human frame is such that each of our organs of sense or perception, whenever it does discharge its own specific apportioned tasks, functions by virtue both of a reckoning or measurement or estimation (λόγος) and of a might or power or valor (δύναµις) within itself, that is to say, taking the meanings of these two weighty Greek terms together, by dint of an intrinsic and frequently revised assessment of its own relative strength and position,

* De anima, bk. II, chap. 5, 418a3-4. ** 418a5-6.
*** Bk. II, chap. 12, 424a25-b3.
a procedure most often carried out so quickly as to pass by unremarked. Hence this inner assessment ascertains the limits of the perceptivity of which the sense is capable – they are *limits* because every bodily sense–organ operates as a magnitude (μέγεθος) and as such has its field of operation in space – while also, well inside those extremes (ὑπερβολαί), locating the midpoint or mean (μεσότης) by heeding which that sense–organ will deliver the optimum of percipience. Yet even when its performance falters and is sluggish or downright poor, still the ruling principle (ἀρχή) inherent in it continues to exist, by whose leave the forms (εἴδη) of sensible things do enter in through ἀίσθησις without any of their matter (ὕλη).

To be sure, this intricate system in the individual human organism will hold together only up until a certain point – but obviously many other animal species lack it, while it is absent both actually and potentially throughout the entire realm of plant life, the theories of Deleuze and Guattari and the speculations of Plotinus notwithstanding. Aristotle quite rightly said as much: although plants are imbued with some amount of soul, they have neither the μεσότης nor the ἀρχή requisite for ἀίσθησις.

And yet the sheer visual and olfactory contentment which many plants afford us, may also convey a reminder of, a sweet warning about some of the perils which the human capacities of perception may from time to time have to confront, from within as from without. For instance, the initial moment of absorption when the power of sensation loses itself in something seen (or scented) and becomes like it, might suspend the process in which it is but one sequential part, and seek to prolong itself beyond any due measure. Then the μεσότης, the ἀρχή, and the agent too would vanish provisionally into an oblivion of delight, and who knows what could happen during the interval?

All the more worrisome a prospect, this, in view of what the human powers of perception may encounter if they stray too far afield, past their ὑπερβολαί, those approximate boundaries which it seems they have every reason to heed. According to Aristotle, a movement (κίνησις) of matter, whether of light, heat, sound, air, etc., which imposes upon the body a quantum of sensation greater than that which a particular power of perception could accommodate, will disturb or destroy (λύειν) the correlate organ of sense, quite possibly with finality, literally *undoing*, *dissolving*, or even *killing* it outright in the worst cases. Ἀίσθησις itself, therefore, whether unwittingly or by deliberate misuse, may im-
peril the human being of whom it constitutes one of the very most indispensable faculties – for, on the other hand, human beings would be utterly helpless without it. (The intrinsic constitution of human \( \alpha\iota\sigma\theta\iota\varsigma \), Aristotle suggests elsewhere,* tends of itself to ensure that when one takes pleasure (\( \eta\delta\sigma\theta\alpha\imath \)) in a perception, the sensation indicates that the sensed thing is good and that one’s soul is accepting it, in accordance with the particular capacity’s \( \mu\varepsilon\sigma\omicron\tau\iota\varsigma \), whereas feeling pain (\( \lambda\nu\pi\varepsilon\iota\sigma\theta\alpha\imath \)) signifies that the thing is bad and the soul would prefer to avoid it likewise. In the best case, \( \alpha\iota\sigma\theta\iota\varsigma \) is or should be a defender of the individual human body, on behalf of the entire soul.)

In his discussion of how capacities of perception might be damaged, Aristotle made plain his allegiance to a metaphysical assumption other than the one I mentioned earlier. For that first assumption already had slackened substantially: the criterion of the similarity which was believed to exist in any relation of knowledge, had loosened up considerably quite some time before him, and by his day it was a commonplace that the sun and the human eye were in some essential respect alike. But what sort of likeness between these two could there possibly be? – given that the eye is able to look at the sun only indirectly or by means of some precautionary devices, through a dark glass, for instance. Any human eye that sees the sun itself unshielded will be damaged by the overwhelming influx of sunlight into it, most probably permanently, as though in confirmation of Aristotle’s dire warning. In this specific case, therefore, an attempt to “save the likeness” by attributing it to the power of sight while the latter was in active operation, would have been implausible at best.

Here, however, the interesting point is that this most obvious of illustrations of the dangers posed to \( \alpha\iota\sigma\theta\iota\varsigma \) whenever it should happen to exceed that which it can actually sustain perceptually, was not utilized by Aristotle at all.

His oversight, so to speak, is itself remarkable. Why did he not? Well, in brief, Aristotle’s own philosophy was conceived with that other metaphysical assumption in mind: the finding, namely, that sight was by far the most eminent of the body’s powers of perception, and as such already a bridge upwards to the superior faculties of the soul and the mind – imagination, thinking, and contemplation. As a consequence, physical light, too, was granted a special

* Bk. III, chap. 7, 431a8-11.
higher status as being an active power and in effect immaterial, an elevation of light which is, it seems to me, a further reason why Aristotle omitted to mention how dangerous the thing could prove.

Whether light too is some sort of matter, or else whether as a movement or an active force it is in some way merely in matter, was not made especially clear when Aristotle offered his definition of what it is. Nonetheless, light is the prerequisite for all the developments which, according to him,* the sense of sight is unique in attaining, while their dual prestige explains why the term for the activity of the soul which works with images (φαντάσματα), that is, the imagination, φαντασία, was derived from the word for light, φῶς: “ἔπει δ’ ἢ ὦς μάλιστα αἴσθησίς ἐστι, καὶ τὸ ὄνομα” – that is, the word φαντασία – “ἀπὸ τοῦ φῶς εἴληφεν, ὃτι ἄνευ φωτὸς οὐκ ἔστιν ἰδεῖν.”** As for the φαντάσματα, they represent further elaborations upon sensations – mainly the visual ones – when they’ve arrived in the soul, once they have to some extent been filtered by the workings of αἴσθησις itself. Nor did the paradigmatic influence of vision stop at the φαντασία, for, Aristotle claimed,*** the activity of thinking (νοεῖν) always does have need of the φαντάσματα in the soul: much as the αἰσθήματα had previously summoned forth the powers of αἴσθησις, whether in acceptance or in avoidance, the φαντάσματα now prompt the soul to take thought, which it will do either in commending (φάναι) or in censuring (ἀποφάναι) them, embracing or else fleeing from them as it sees fit to do, “διανοητική ψυχή τὰ φαντάσματα οἷον αἴσθημα ύπάρχει, ὅταν δὲ ἁγαθὸν ἢ κακὸν φήσῃ ἢ ἡποφήσῃ, φεύγει ἢ διώκει.” Indeed, without or in the absence of a φαντάσμα the soul never can think at all: “οὐδέποτε νοεῖ ἄνευ φαντάσματος ἢ ψυχῆ.” And finally, the eminence of vision is affirmed once more in the activity which stands at the very pinnacle of philosophy’s efforts, nearly divine θεωρία, the contemplation that should irradiate the philosopher’s mind with pure delight. (See Aristotle’s pæan to this highest activity of the mind (νοῦς) in the Nicomachean Ethics.****)

But to descend back down to the damages which their misuse might inflict upon the body’s organs of sense. – Rather than a visual one, the example Aristotle provided of an excess of sensation was sonic in nature, as though to im-

ply that in its susceptibility to perceptual disorder, human audition was the paradigm of the other powers of perception, perhaps also including vision itself. This is an admission which may point towards some other ways of considering human sensations, pleasures, and perceptions which while not unknown have yet been rarely trodden, and from which the inquirers therefore may still expect some surprises now and again.

When any sentiendum initiates too strong a movement, the λόγος in the organ of sense will be overwhelmed, and hence the vital assessment that was its task can no longer be carried out. This occurrence, Aristotle noted, is similar to what happens to the sound whenever a string instrument is plucked too forcefully, “ὡσπερ καὶ ἡ συμφωνία καὶ ὁ τόνος κρουμένων σφόδρα τῶν χορδῶν.”* Both the concord of its sounds and the tones of each of them are obliterated under the sheer noise of this unmusical act, but just as obvious is the likelihood that the device itself will be wrenched out of tune, and this was the main point of Aristotle’s comparison. Here, however, the analogy itself turns against him and his overarching aims, for one could pursue it and ask: which human power of sense other than hearing is capable of being tuned, and hence of having its tuning destroyed? The answer would then seem to be: none of them. So, right at the outset, this route begins with the finding that something unique is disclosed in the power of human audition, and in this sense’s special rapport with the soul as well.

These could prove to be exciting discoveries, as – to exaggerate just slightly – hearing’s particular readiness for understanding and enjoyment, when examined with care, may suggest more to an impartial inquirer about the actuality of the human soul than the many encomia to vision ever could.

While everything of course will depend on how it is unfolded, Aristotle’s analogy may well contain much that could challenge his own metaphysical assumption in favor of vision.

* De anima, bk. II, chap. 12, 424a31-32.
The human capacity of audition has within itself a λόγος which, when it operates properly, does so in much the same way that the tones of individual notes and their musical concords all work together, whenever the well-tuned instrument is wielded with a modicum of skill. Probably this likeness between hearing’s λόγος and the separate notes (τόνοι) and concords (συμφωνίαι) which the string instrument is designed to make, also represents, for Aristotle, the similarity by virtue of which human ears can perceive them as they are. Obviously there must be some similarity between the hearing and the heard, for could music of this type ever have arisen otherwise in the first place? But how is this λόγος in its activity like a συμφωνία of τόνοι? Of course, one could infer that in this context, Aristotle’s term no longer bears the sense of a reckoning, measurement, or estimation (the words with which I previously glossed it), but now simply means a ratio or proportion, that is, a mathematical or musical relation between fixed quantities: a meaning which easily calls to mind some part of the sense of the word συμφωνία. Yet this word patently says more: the sounds it refers to join together of themselves, that is, they already are fit for each other, and the auditory pleasure resulting from their actual combination will be a sign of its rightness – at least to those whose ears are tuned to receive such a message. Accordingly, the ground of Aristotle’s analogy between audition’s λόγος, on the one hand, and the συμφωνία and τόνοι of an instrument such as a lyre, on the other, was not merely a quantitative but also a qualitative comparison, especially if, as seems to be the case, sonic quantities and qualities are necessarily interrelated in a music articulated by, for, and through τόνοι – where the τόνος itself is not simply the individual musical note but at the very same time the string in the state of tautness which emits it. During the performance of music such as this, perhaps even improvised right then and there, the specific qualities of these separate τόνοι when played as each ought to be, contribute greatly to the agreement amongst themselves which in turn can convey so much enjoyment to the audience. Thus, while in the midst of music like this, acoustic quality and quantity themselves enter into a συμφωνία and co-operate together, with the pleasure of it offering some indication or confirmation of the degree to which this is the best thing they can do, under the given circumstances.

(Moreover, now speaking quite generally, amongst all the arts, where else than in music do the quantities and the qualities interact and exchange places
with one another at greater length, more continuously, energetically, and repeatedly, and to higher effect? A work of metrical poetry would have to be very long and very strong indeed even to qualify to compete in this arena against music and its many concords.)

But let me not lose the thread. So, once more: how is the λόγος that’s inherent in the human capacity of hearing akin to a συμφωνία of τόνοι? What two or more things are arranged into a state of concordance while it is active, thus affording the entire soul – as though it were seated amongst an audience – a considerable feeling of acoustic pleasure?

Well, any significant attempt even to begin to answer this question would probably first want to ponder the amazing development of the power of music itself, for by comparison to its earlier periods, both the understanding of what symphonies themselves can be and do, and the enjoyment taken in them, have expanded immensely.

This analogy of Aristotle’s does seem to imply that the human sense of hearing, as an active power, might lift itself far above the level of perceptivity upon which it began, much as the various types of musical instruments themselves, once invented, are subject to considerable change and improvement throughout their subsequent careers. So, quite unlike the other powers of perception, audition would be peculiarly malleable or modifiable, and susceptible to a concerted program of training. Thus, much more than is the case with them, it may be educated or even educate itself: it could give itself other habits and come to entertain new pleasures, and will to some degree even perhaps be able to re-invent itself afresh. Yet, at the same time, it is markedly similar to musical instruments themselves in a further respect as well, namely, in the attentions required if they are to be kept ready for use, the regular tune-ups which restore the συμφωνία of their τόνοι, the sorts of painstaking repairs intended to maintain in good order the two main features built into the very structures of these devices from the beginning: a discernment of the tonal concordances which did please the souls of active auditors, and guidance concerning the rules to be followed in practice in order to produce that pleasure again. Now, taking all of the foregoing into account, it seems the soul comprehends this perceptive power as being always at risk of forfeiting its own attunement, and indeed all the more, the further the auditive capacity will already have raised itself by virtue of its own efforts – therefore, what it periodically
requires is a very careful tuning, some delicate procedures of self-regulation involving tightening, tautness, and tension, as though it itself were an extraordinarily complex string instrument. Hence, by applying these measures to itself, audition will seek to preserve as much of its percipience as it reasonably still can. (Of course, the vicissitudes of the physical organs of sense simply cannot be forgotten, for better and for worse. This is one of the reasons why Aristotle, for his part, took pains to state clearly that the various powers of human perception are not simply identical with the parts of the body in which each has its abode.)

Insofar as the \( \lambda \gamma \alpha \varsigma \) inherent in the human capacity of aural perception does conduct periodic assessments of the latter’s strength and position, the provisional conclusion, if it takes into account the very modifiability or malleability of audition, on the one hand, and the similarity of its own operations to a \( \sigma \mu \rho \omicron \omicron \nu \nu \alpha \) or, more likely, even while engaged in its most rudimentary modes of activity, to a concurrence of \( \sigma \mu \rho \omicron \omicron \nu \nu \alpha \iota \), on the other, might well be that the sense of hearing also distinguishes itself from the others by its having to heed not just one \( \mu \varepsilon \xi \tau \eta \varsigma \) but rather many \( \mu \varepsilon \xi \tau \eta \tau \alpha \zeta \varsigma \) – and indeed, all at once. Accordingly, the operations of audition’s \( \lambda \gamma \alpha \varsigma \) may themselves already evince, virtually, the character of locomotive activities in space. Actual hearing, for its part, is able to discern so many sentienda, each in effect at one and the same time, that its percipience will operate at every moment with several of these perceptual midpoints as its guideposts, and to attain its optimum of perceptivity it also has to apportion its attention between them, wending amongst them with dexterity. So, in consequence, human beings’ sense of the area around themselves would be shaped by the facility with which they can feel it acoustically, a procedure which is continuously occurring, albeit to an often unrecognized degree. (Here the substructure of audition in the body should be mentioned, that is, the physical locales other than the ears where a range of noise and vibration stemming from the outside is sensed, and also the vital tasks which the middle and the inner ear accomplish, namely, marking the changes in atmospheric pressure and maintaining the sense of balance. These infra- and semi-acoustic perceptual functions pertain directly to the space around the individual human being, and they are carried out also in those who cannot hear.)
The ἀρχή under whose control αἴσθησις operates as a whole, then, will be kept especially busy by the sense of hearing, if, as seems plausible, the latter’s specific μέγεθος has a closer correlation to space than those of the other senses. In certain specific situations, moreover, hearing may in fact have a greater number of practical tasks to fulfill than they do, although afterwards it usually is not given any credit for having discharged them. So, for instance, this sense might play some unremarked but essential part when navigating through a street filled by a crowd, or locating someone unseen within crowded rooms.

Audition’s closer rapport to space may in turn be one reason why Aristotle took the operations of its λόγος as a model for those of the λόγοι of the other senses – here one might even infer that it is aural perception which gives the rule to the other perceptual powers, vision included. In restating his contention* that an ὑπερβολή will spoil, ruin, or destroy (φθείρειν), not this time a sense organ itself but rather its sensory capacity for at least as long as the excessive sensation lasts, he proceeded by a rather cryptic kind of syllogistic reasoning. The gist of this line of thought is, I believe, more or less as follows: first he defined a human utterance (φωνή) as itself being a συμφωνία – then he claimed that the utterance when heard was like or even in some manner identical to the hearing of it, thus suggesting, perhaps, that this relation was a συμφωνία as well – thirdly, he equated the λόγος in the auditory power by which the utterance was received, to a συμφωνία. Whereupon he generalized from that acoustic λόγος or συμφωνία to the λόγοι of the other capacities of sense! In short: insofar as the sense of taste, smell, or sight would need to preserve itself as a συμφωνία, or else in a συμφωνία with its specific sentiendum, it was modeled on hearing; and in much the same way, whenever that other sense would discern its µεσότης while actively sensing something, it was applying a simple rule of conduct gleaned from hearing’s strenuous maneuverings amongst its own µεσότητας: adapting it from a far finer mode of perceptual activity, and the one considerably more demanding to sustain.

Now – after offering my apologies for this immoderately long excursion through Aristotle, as it’s turned out to be, which could well have strained the reader’s patience! – I should like to suggest that these findings about the sense

* Bk. III, chap. 2, 426a28-b3.
of hearing in its varied rapports with the soul may, albeit obliquely, disclose something of the ways in which the soul itself operates, at least at times. How the human soul takes its bearings, where and when and in whom it takes pleasure, and with what moderation, reserve, and self-control it understands and enjoys: these are some of the matters which might be approached best, tentatively and indirectly, as befits their elusive subtlety, once the difficult instrument called hearing has been practiced on. For the tones and the concords of the soul will prove still harder to handle – not to mention its dissonances and bouts of being out of tune.

One author who knew very well just how to pull back this curtain, decisa ma non troppo, was Stendhal. In an early letter* to his sister Pauline, he penned a few lines about some states which the human soul can attain. To begin with, he addressed the exaggerated notion of happiness entertained earlier by that mainly dispassionate Romantic, Madame de Staël, while also passing a cool censure on the dénouement of her disappointment which inevitably had followed. “Une ou deux fois par an on a de ces moments d’extase où toute l’âme est bonheur” – these are the moments marked by their own rarity and as such it would nearly amount to an insult to say they were happy. In fact they have little but the name in common with happiness, le bonheur, as the term is usually employed; with more precision they can be called bliss. Unfortunately, this difference Madame de Staël had failed to appreciate. “Elle s’est figuré que c’était ça le bonheur et a été malheureuse de ne pas le trouver tel.” By her bitterness afterwards, she clearly still wished it could yet be so. The vanity of such a posture is noteworthy; for, wrote Stendhal, even a little study of the human being would have disclosed “la rareté de cet état délicieux” and indeed shown just how infrequent it is, thus perhaps having saved her from falling prey to the illusion in the first place.

But what is this “état délicieux” that enlivens us just once or twice a year? A great irritation of our taut nerves – as though they were the violin strings of the soul. “Pour le produire, il faut un éréthisme,” and if one is to be provoked it will require a deliberate tuning of the loose instrument that we are, a grad-

* Dated 2 Fructidor An XIII (i.e., August 20, 1805).
ual tightening towards the maximum of what it can take and beyond, for the
pleasure first of listening to these notes, and then of hearing the cords quiver
and snap. It is an ascent up the scale: “une chanterelle de violon lâche donne
le ré, on la tend à son ton naturel, elle donne le mi, on la tend encore, elle
donne le fa, mais bientôt elle se casse,” and with this, “elle est en érèthisme.”
In nearly the same way, if we are to arrive at that last peak, “nos nerfs” are to
be stretched, producing those higher tones for the shortest of times, of
course. “L’état d’extase les met dans un état qui ne peut durer sans produire
d’horribles douleurs.” Hence, if it were prolonged, the nerves, and the soul al-
together, would not be hardened, but dissolved or destroyed.

Should this brief state then be called bliss at all? Probably not. Yet the
strange disparity between the condition and its name, is itself significant: it
may in turn call attention to the descriptive meagerness of this part of the
common store of concepts. (On the other hand, the further those who have
world enough and time dive into this lexicon, the greater the number of coun-
terexamples they might resurface with.) In general, the highest delectations
have usually been cast in terms of vision, and this choice very likely has also
induced some foreshortening in the actual experiences themselves – now, all
of this will seem even more peculiar insofar as those ecstatic moments, when
they do happen to strike the human soul, are felt inwardly as though during
them it were hearing rather than seeing.

With one’s ears held open, in accordance with this hint, some of the requi-
site distinctions may begin to announce themselves. So this very short state of
ecstasy, however ecstatic one feels it to be, is neither a source of happiness,
properly speaking, nor in itself an exemplification of joy or felicity or delight,
let alone pleasurable to the one momentarily enraptured in it. No, on the contrary,
if any pleasure is to be felt here at all, it will only come once the ecstatic state
in its very brevity shall have ceased. When one has been left alone, and to pick
up the pieces, as the case may be, then relief can set in, then elation can superv-
ene – however briefly – the feeling of negative pleasure, which retreats nearly
as rapidly as did the unbliss of which it is but an echo.

The brief moments of ecstasy which Stendhal was thinking about, if those
who are affected by them thereby receive an opportunity to witness just how
how high they themselves can be strung, always arise as culminations of ten-
sion, tautness, and tightening. Souls which deliberately seek these moments out, therefore, may actually have a predilection for pain.

Hence the complex of distinctions to be deduced from the sphere of specifically acoustic experience, should not comprise the group of terms for pleasure of one sort or another. Each of those concepts, notwithstanding its apparent formulation as a positivity and thus as fit to designate this or that real plenitude, remains in fact an index of a durable and endurable condition in which only to a lesser degree can some other and much more mighty intensity be felt – an inherent diminution reminiscent of the modulations Aristotle touched upon in his account of the μεσότης of human αἴσθησις. Within the domain of acoustic awareness, accordingly, a pleasure of whatever sort could be taken as pointing towards an intensity of a considerably higher kind, both quantitatively and qualitatively, of which the actual experience would then almost by definition prove to be painful. So, from each of these various concepts for the different pleasures and their respective modes of taking hold of the human sensorium, perception, soul, and mind, what one may want to abstract, is a separate term for a distinct sort of acoustic pain. And once this previously unavailable set of distinctions were elaborated, as a starting–point susceptible of further augmentation by dint of the subsequent findings, they could be tried out in the realms of the other senses as well, as applicable.

Within certain inexact limits, therefore – for does it not remain rather obvious that the human body’s ὑπερβολαί cannot ever simply be wished away by the mind? – what is commonly pejorated as “pain” could be distinguished more satisfactorily than it almost always has been, and in so doing its select public of hedonic auditors would come to understand and enjoy it better. (Pain, as Gertrude Stein might also have remarked, is not what it seems. Nor is it simply one force, and the relations amongst its varieties ought to be acknowledged, much as Hobbes did in the case of that other greatly misunderstood power in human life, fear.)

☞ Stendhal’s notion of the few human beings who treat themselves roughly as string instruments, has not forfeited any of its provocative power over the course of the two centuries since he set it down in his private correspondence.
On the contrary, with time it has grown into a great piece of prescience, and who can tell what notes or noises the future might yet strike up from it?

Now, however, I should like to point out one significant ambiguity it does seem to contain.

On the one hand, he seemed to forecast one or two of the shapes to be taken by the century’s furious dislike of the life it was leading.

Stendhal did say outright that this *delicious* tightening up of the human instrument could not last long. Soon its string breaks and the violin is put out of action for a while, but at least the notes were emitted and a sudden tempest of intense feeling had burst forth: it fumed, foamed, and faded. Some nervous damage had been risked for the sake of sheer sensation, therefore: and so this was a self–indulgence meant to stand both as a small revolt against the boredom which, under Napoleon, had begun to weigh heavily upon urbane society in its leisure (more so perhaps in Paris than in London), and also, somewhat more emphatically, as a protest against the frenetic activity in which it seemed tout le monde was more or less necessarily caught up at most other times. Nonetheless the whole age left its stamp upon these individual acts, precisely in the personal vanité they revealed, even unbeknownst to those who put their nerves under strain in just this way.

The young Stendhal was already amongst the keenest observers of society.

Yet in those few lines there seems to be another anticipation of the discontents to come, and this one leaps much further ahead. (“Je serai connu en 1880. Je serai compris en 1930.” And so he was.)

Quite possibly the damage inflicted upon the instrument did not represent an incidental risk in the course of bringing it to its own highest possible pitch of sensation – but rather it would become the very point of the whole endeavor. No longer would the effort yield an ascertainment of this human being’s own extremes. Self–destruction as such could instead disclose itself as being the guiding aim: this would be a destruction of himself not in the most obvious form and with the finality of an outright suicide, but as an act of turning upon himself in such a manner that the destroyer, while he was stretching
himself entirely beyond the limits he did believe he could bear, might at the
very same time be able to witness the devastation of himself that ensued. It
was the “horribles douleurs” themselves which he hoped to encounter, experi-
mentally. By inflicting them upon himself, at least he might perhaps come to
know, if only for the briefest period of time before expiring – but could they
not in fact then disclose themselves as something other than the unbearable
pain they seemed from a distance to be? – what they were.

This attempted destruction of oneself, with its premise that seems so illogi-
cal, could actually be implemented experimentally in the modality of acoustic
experience, given the unique self–reflexivity that is characteristic of the
human sense of hearing when it is active, especially in its very close rapport
with the powers of voice and speech, as well as on account of the considerably
greater internal intricacy of its own many operations. Otherwise – that is, by
focusing the attention on visual phenomena, on real appearances or those rec-
ollected or imagined for the purpose – the attempt would have remained a
sheer impossibility. (At least for the time being.) But those who would will-
ingly expose themselves unreservedly to explosions of sound and their rever-
berations and echoes, might indeed carry it out; as such this act could no
longer be a relatively innocent personal gesture, nor even especially vain:
rather, it was already a premonition of that nineteenth–century nihilism
which, several decades later, would begin to express and propagate itself by
deeds.

By whom would those deeds later be done? By those who might have hoped
to play some public role in political life, had the existing order been estab-
lished differently than it was, but for whom, under the given circumstances,
there simply was no place in it to be found. However, this “underground” had
probably derived the very notion of that which its denizens intended to ascer-
tain by, in, and through their nihilist actions, from an external source – al-
though they copied it out only with terrible simplifications – namely, from the
published works of some of their near–contemporaries amongst the philoso-
phers. The latter, had they lived in earlier ages, would probably have devoted
themselves to θεωρία as being the very summit of the philosophical life; but by
their times, in the midst of the nineteenth century, they were deliberately over-
turning that ideal, regarding it as having become a hindrance to further
thought, and seeking some alternate mode of fulfillment for thinking – at
times by means of a few living experiments they performed upon their own
and upon their selfhood as well. Hence the tone and the titles of their texts,
those features which probably attracted the attention of the nineteenth–
century “underground” in the first place.

(For the premier instance of such a philosopher, one can turn to Stirner.
That human beings should still act as loyal subjects under their own Geist, in
effect continuing to regard θεωρία as the supreme activity of the mind, this he
would not accept. Contemplation must cease to rule all thinking, or, as he
said, tyrannize over it – which does not mean that thinking at times could not
employ it as needed. “Wir sollen zwar G e i s t haben, aber der Geist soll Uns
nicht haben”* – that is practically his credo. Even freer was his remark later:
“Wenn Ich ihn” – der Geist – “zu einem S p u k und seine Gewalt über Mich
zu einem S p a r r e n herabgesetzt habe, dann ist er für entweih, entheiligt,
entgöttert anzusehen, und dann g e b r a u c h e Ich ihn, wie man die N a t u r
unbedenklich nach Gefallen gebraucht.”** One may look askance at his last
clause, but Stirner’s emphasis on human pleasure is worthy of note.)

Those later nineteenth–century nihilist acts were themselves still the deeds
of individuals, but in several instances their perpetrators did in fact perish.
The final thrilling awareness of themselves in extremis – this they often
deemed as sufficient inducement to go through with it. Nor was their inner
readiness itself entirely in vain, as it did not go forgotten: for, already many
years afterwards and a few decades into the twentieth century (the very mo-
ment when, oddly enough, Stendhal had predicted he would at last be under-
stood), a political movement which aimed to transform the state itself into a
totalitarian edifice, attracted its millions of members in no small part because
it held out before them the anticipation of just such a death. The thrill of it
was aroused in them acoustically even more than visually, insofar as this de-
struction of themselves they would, more likely than not, not have cared to en-
vision by any φαντάσμα of the imagination; but whether it was a few mesmeriz-
ing bars of operatic Tonbilder, or a redeployment of the sounds, signals, and
songs familiar to those who lived through the battlefields of twenty years
before, or the frightful shouting with which the impending was announced
during innumerable radio broadcasts, or a terrible aural brew of all of this,

those masters of propaganda disposed over the materials required to incite and excite their followers to the point where they as a mass would be *ready for anything*.

What I’ve suggested about the prescience of Stendhal’s notion of the human soul as a string instrument, has pertained thus far to one side of the story. Yet there is still something else in it – as befits the best metaphors, this one is ambiguous – which I should like to touch on briefly, before I return to Marc Yeats and his “Crowded Rooms.”

The ambiguity which I mentioned earlier stems from an evident fact: Stendhal’s own notion was not for the most part intended as a prognostication. Rather, it evoked by a complex metaphor something of the essence of an already long-established way of life: his comparison called attention to the nearly continual effort of self-tuning which is perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of the *life of pleasure* as such. He was rehearsing and summarizing what the whole very diverse tribe of bons vivants, lovers of art, music, theatre, dance, and literature, and the publics of various sorts – alongside les maîtres de la cuisine, artists, composers, conductors, musicians, singers, dramatists, actors, directors, dancers, performers, poets, authors, and athletes, all engaged in their own typical pursuits – undertook whenever they were active. This necessary concern for one’s soul as being akin to an instrument, and for that actual instrument human beings have been given, the faculty of αἴσθησις itself, was for the participants in this way of life always a concurrent activity accompanying whatever they found it worthwhile to do. An image of this hedonic concern in action: that is what Stendhal wanted to provide with his metaphor of the human violin.

Those who participate in the life of pleasure – is there a satisfactory term with which to encompass them all? – are, generally speaking, always also exploring their own *ranges*. What can they perform, what can they accomplish, what can they create, what can they perceive: finding this out from moment to moment, is the inherent sense of their various efforts, and at the very same time they ascertain what they themselves cannot now, or else cannot yet, hope to perceive, create, accomplish, perform. These inquiries themselves are their bonheur!
Breaking the instrument in the very attempt, while it is a risk which, precisely as such, might deliver some small frisson of its own, would be exactly what they all strive to avoid. May it amount to no more than a rare bitter occurrence!

With his image of how the lives of this tribe are conducted, Stendhal offered in essence or in miniature a defense and illustration of the βίος ἡδονικός itself. An illustration of what? Of the last of the three “styles of life” which, according to Aristotle,* may all be considered – for he had to grant that even the choice of this third is to some extent reasonable – as bearing their fulfillment within themselves, and therefore as fit to be pursued freely for their own sakes, each understood as the greatest of goods and thus taken to be sufficient in itself. (For its part, the good (τὸ ἀγαθὸν) seems to display self-sufficiency as one of its most eminent characteristics, “τὸ γὰρ τέλειον ἄγαθὸν αὐταρκες εἶναι δόκει,”*** and as a consequence, a self-supporting condition will be the desideratum that human life strives for and by which it is rendered worthwhile in the first place.***) This third βίος was the one Aristotle could not quite bring himself to name as such, impartially, instead employing a rather derogatory circumlocution (ἀπολαυστικός); nor did he attempt to list the varied human pursuits which upon further reflection would seem to comprise it. Much later, however, in the biographical sketch devoted by Diogenes Laertius to Aristotle in the Lives of Eminent Philosophers,**** it was at least designated fairly. But it is Aristotle’s bare acknowledgment which matters here, for his intellectual honesty moved him to admit that this third one could exist on the same plane as the βίος πολιτικός and the βίος θεωρητικός, and hence was their rival.

A rival. This in itself may begin to suggest why it has hardly ever been heard of since. Were the other two βίοι, their own mutual antagonism notwithstanding, leagued together against it in a fatal conspiracy of silence that succeeded only too well? If that is so, one might want to replay the great theme of the strife throughout our entire history between the βίος θεωρητικός and the

* Nicomachean Ethics, bk. 1, chap. 5, 1095b13-19, and similarly his Eudemian Ethics, bk. 1, chap. 4, 1215a35-b5. ** Nicomachean Ethics, bk. 1, chap. 7, 1097b7-8.
βίος πολιτικός – perhaps then it will not remain quite the same music one had taken it to be.

As for the life of pleasure as we have known it, however generally above-board and usually irreproachable was the manner in which it behaved itself in society, its reception has often been dismissive. At times it is denigrated and deliberately misunderstood, at times denounced forcefully as a mere frivolity. Yet it may have had its own good reasons for never objecting too much to all this: indeed, it prospers in its relative isolation, perhaps to some degree because it has avoided closer scrutiny from without. Its own aloofness does seem to serve it rather well.

Here we have arrived again in distinctively English surroundings, albeit not yet quite back amongst those “Crowded Rooms.”

This change of locale is all the more significant, for, as seems likely, all the usual clichés notwithstanding, the life of pleasure may well have been – and still be – pursued in England with a greater finesse than elsewhere. There it is touched with a finer feeling of what this pursuit may actually involve. Hence it will be, that if one places oneself sympathetically right in the midst of this better mode of activity, the insidious numbness brought on within the native environs of ennui, which then prompted some of its adepts to inflict sheer sensation upon their tired sensoria in the vain desire thus to reawaken them, would itself be felt rather differently and less impetuously, if it is even accorded much perceptual attention at all; and as for the boredoms spawned closer to home in the London drawing rooms, there are so many resources available to this art of enjoyment to counterbalance them, that they too may be taken in stride, and not drive one to embrace desperate measures.

So, right in the heart of the modern life of pleasure, whenever and wherever it understands, enjoys, and conducts itself à l’anglaise, one may find a gentle treatment of the sensorium, of perception, and of the soul, by means of which these human faculties could all inoculate themselves, often with success, against the hellish temptations to which other people, when moved by an overwhelming inner desperation that has got them in its grip, might succumb.

Dexterity in the handling of the interrelations amongst these faculties, has been a rather prominent feature in the works of the best English philoso-
phers, and the Scottish ones as well. Hobbes, for instance, noted of the ease with which human beings can lose track of the kinetic occurrences that give rise to all the appearances of the phenomena they perceive, that “this is the great deception of sense, which also is by sense to be corrected.”* Accordingly, the human being’s senses, although they are anything but infallible and so cannot be allowed to impose their rule upon the other human faculties, do not necessarily require a ruler above themselves, either. They may hope to attain a certain self-reliance and self-governance, and indeed, it’s more than probable that they have done so already. Hence, from the rather specifically English conditions which expressed themselves in Hobbes’ statement, one may infer that the life of pleasure, so well enjoyed and understood as it was in England, would render some unremarked but indispensable help in the vital task of ensuring that, firstly, the grave temptations to which sensation, or perception, or even the soul altogether, may at some point find itself falling prey, can be traced back to the external source from which they in fact issued, and that, secondly, the soul, or perception, or even sensation shall be capable of becoming aware of this externality on its own, so that, thirdly and lastly, it will correct itself – that is to say, in such an eventuality, it will rescue, preserve, or insulate itself, and perhaps its fellow faculties as well, from that baleful influence.

Hume, too, exercised a deft touch when he inquired into contemplation and the ends to which it might be turned. The liberation from the tyranny of θεωρία, the very thing Stirner would call for a century later, is already quite evident; in the Humean mode of philosophizing, contemplation was utilized as a means by which the philosopher would, not subject himself to habits, as though he merely wanted to exchange one master for another, but contract them provisionally, so that they might be tried out, in order to discern what they were good for and how well they would work, and perhaps also to ascertain better what the essence of pleasure was. With this experimental mode of thinking, one begins to bump up against the outer limits of the adequacy of the terms philosophy and pleasure themselves: as the inner activity of the thinker becomes more and more overtly self-experimentative and hedonic in character, the earlier approximate criterion for the nature of pleasure – in a

* The Elements of Law Natural and Politic, pt. 1, chap. 2, §10.
word, one will know it when one sees it – itself suffices less and less, that is, to him it becomes quite displeasing. (Or perhaps he will become even more displeased by it to the very degree that nonetheless he also finds it still to be pleasing and plausible, in a resentful half-acknowledgement of reluctance to avert his mind from the prospect of an immediate acquaintance which this criterion seems to hold out before him.) But such a consequence will in its turn seem interesting to him, and not come across as being an index of some immense corrosion of every single thing seeping out from the point which once was its center – or, at least, that wouldn’t happen so long as the life of pleasure itself remains largely intact all around, furnishing the implicit setting within which this thinker’s activity can take place. Still secure in the midst of that style of life, accordingly, once his inner experimentation had finished or paused for the time being, the after-feeling would reverberate with a tone which was (and still is, if one is lucky) nothing like any of the sentiments of trepidation blared out in other languages than English by the philosophers from Nietzsche onwards, so full of alarm in view of their different, more dire circumstances. (Looking around themselves in society, some of them probably had reason to conclude that the βίος ήδονικός too could no longer be counted on, while others may have been inclined to disregard its actual existence altogether, whether in their own or in other countries.)

▶ Well, by now it’s high time to rejoin Yeats’ evening party where I left it. What’s been going on, here, during the interval? There are still numerous voices echoing throughout these rooms. The conversations amongst the guests continue to run the gamut, from one-sided diatribes to brief interjections made more softly or in a higher pitch to some minor jousting for attention, while for around half a minute (from the 7:22 mark onwards) it sounds as though nearly everyone else has stepped out briefly – what’s going on, I wonder – and a slightly unnerving hush falls over those few who opted to remain inside.

But before we know it, the attendees are about to assemble again, and once they’re streaming back in, after I take a quick stroll around the room, over in a corner I espy a few guests who seem a bit awkward, a bit out of place: evidently they are not having all that much fun. But if they aren’t especially enjoy-
ing themselves, why have they come in the first place? (A question à la Gertrude Stein.) Could it be they were thinking of the moments of bonheur which (Stendhal said) occur only a few times a year and adventurously hoped to meet with something of the sort? For, after all, that sheer anticipation may bring some satisfaction of its own, regardless of the outcome: a sort of pleasure taken not because of the party, but in spite of it. Or are they availing themselves of their own boredom as best they can, rehearsing some prowess of their own and taking delight in it inwardly? Who can tell – perhaps one of their minds just found itself suddenly in a more thoughtful mood and now is abstracted off elsewhere for a minute or two of contemplation, entertaining the possibilities some new habit might perhaps afford it. And that fellow, evidently he’s tuned out those chattering at him, and is training his ears to over hear another conversation taking place across the room, sending a hint of a smile in their direction – or was that a wink?

This hedonic way of life does offer its specific compensations. The less the pleasure one feels, the more one may have to understand. Yes, enjoyment is a strange creature. (And a beast which that old auxiliary profession or amateur activity, criticism, need not always chase after.)

So, allowing oneself some acoustic latitude, when one delves once more into Yeats’ work, with ears that by now have acquired a better sense of what they should listen for, a few moments may step forward from the whole.

Every so often, in “Crowded Rooms,” the listener may discern some faint echo wafting through of a popular tune from long-ago decades – what could this be? Perhaps years before some song had left ever so slight an impression on one of the guests, and this evening something of its melody (catalyzed by boredom or precipitated by a special desire to please someone else in particular?) has surfaced again, now transposed into an association of ideas given breadth in a witty utterance, or modulated into the cadence of an eloquent or flirtatious remark: an influence quite unbeknownst to the speaker, and without any of the others ever realizing the slight oddness of the turn of phrase, which actually is an index of another place and time.

An auditor standing somewhat to the side of the gathering, on the other hand, could have just enough distance to notice the soft incongruence of the words as resulting from a borrowing, although without being any more able than they to identify its precise provenance.
Of all the human capacities of perception, acoustic αἴσθησις seems to afford by far the strongest assistance to an individual’s historical sense, while its own memory, although not the most profound, as the broadest does offer the key to an incomparable and very crowded storehouse of times and places, even if its filing system renders many of these records less than retrievable ad libitum. Hence, whenever and wherever the main pursuits of the βίος ἡδονικός, and in this context the life of music above all, are still sustained with sufficient care, that βίος might quite possibly contribute something helpful to the remedy of those individual mnemonic vagaries, by dint of self-organized and autonomous educational enterprises. Conversely, if like the other two the βίος ἡδονικός were also rapidly dissolving from within, having been in effect annexed by a self-aggrandizing power seeking its own “Platz an der Sonne,” then the universal auditory map of those earlier places and times, a mnemonic reference guide for a common realm upon which a sufficient number of people had been able freely to rely, would itself be conscripted into service, rewritten more and more to the tune of a réveil or a Tagwache, and so this prerequisite of musical life as well was drawn step by step into the general devastation which Nietzsche warned against, the desert. (“Die Wüste wächst” – throughout his Dionysos-Dithyramben he sought refuge from the sands, wherewith and in whomever he heard them – “weh dem, der Wüsten birgt ...”)

Much as the second part of “Pagan” may actually be a music about violence, perhaps some sections of “Crowded Rooms” are suffused with music about the power of memory and its vicissitudes.

Although the examples which now follow each represent but a surmise on my part, yet nonetheless, at least three times over, so it seems to me, faint mnemonic echoes of music from the past flicker through the more abstract mise en scène Yeats has created here.

Beginning at 6:10, a few slightly forlorn notes are let out by the clarinet. What they seem to show is a guest at the party, with one eye watching the responses of those whom he aims to impress, underscoring some words of Welt- schmerz with the cadence of a sigh; whereupon the listeners – or this listener, keeping himself a bit apart from everything that’s happening here – can discern in these tones a soft echo of what was done by the corresponding instrument at its most affecting many decades before during the “Liebeslied” in
Brecht and Weill’s *Dreigroschenoper*. Something of that sensitive sounding out of places and times from within, which those keen Berliners heard as being the ulterior aim to whose measure love’s sentiments in fact were cut –

Die Liebe dauert, oder dauert nicht
an dem oder jenem Ort

– an inner effort of human hearts which the two were able to convey very memorably indeed in their famous orchestration: somehow in turn their rendering of it found a way to undergird this fellow’s remark, in the midst of these “Crowded Rooms” so far removed from the London of Brecht and Weill’s imagination, translating its own wistful melody into the mode of human speech, even unbeknownst to him and his audience while he was speaking. Such can be the subsequent influence of a bit of music as a power in a human life – having embedded itself somewhere in someone’s memory and from there working its effects upon the soul – most potent when in so doing it goes unrecognized. To a slightly aloof observer may fall the best chance of noticing its melody is there at all, and this, it seems to me, is the suggestion which Yeats’ own music offers throughout this passage of twenty seconds. To suggest such a thing by musical means, of course, amounts to a short message in its own right, and, which is just as obvious, not every individual αἴσθησις would be predisposed to pay this envoi any heed, let alone to hearken to or to honor it.

Around two minutes later – in the meantime, while most everyone was stepping briefly out, those who remained probably beat an easy path to the bar – beginning at the 8:25 mark, there comes another such passage. Off in that corner, two, or, now one hears it, training one’s ears inconspicuously in their direction, three guests are finding themselves in a moment of mutual tension; reproaches are exchanged amongst them, from the sound of it; what the matter is, can’t be made out from this far across the room; but enough of it can be overheard that somehow I once more have that elusive déjà entendu feeling of encountering in speech, in a transposition of which the speakers may not be aware, an influence from another kind of source. This time, however, I must admit that for me it remains a je ne sais quoi, and so I can’t even venture to say whether the cadence was first met with in music, or in poetry, or on the
screens at cinemas, or via some other medium; nonetheless, in the very midst of this awkward altercation, in the softest of echoes, something one of them also has heard elsewhere seems to be very discreetly announcing itself.

Strange the sympathies of sounds that are shared!

Three or so minutes later, and the party has gotten louder, perhaps even a little raucous. Have the hosts arranged for a performance, transforming one of their rooms into an impromptu cabaret? I may as well find out ... Indeed, so they have. A musical entertainment, with drums and saxophone parts. And once more the sound of it rings familiar. These hired hands, what are they basing themselves on, or debasing? Tonight their playing is lagging desperately. Or could the fault lie with the request made of them? Clearly, all of this is just not working out as planned; guests are starting to fidget ... Then, at the 11:33 point, rather suddenly, the answer comes, and some amongst this captive audience show by a few wry smiles they too know the source of the melody. – Why, putting it mildly, it’s a loose reprise of the notes announcing Marlene Dietrich’s entrée into the nightclub, you know, in Blonde Venus. – What a disguise she wore in that scene! – Quite right, that’s the part these mercenary entertainers are cribbing from. – Badly. And much too slowly. – Yes, from that wonderful bit of Sternbergian cinema, with the lyrics and music by Coslow and Rainger, “Hot Voodoo.” – We could all use some of it here! – Not that any of them would have cared much for this poor attempt at an adaptation. – Indeed, it’s really turning this party into a mess. – Surely our hosts will be less than pleased. – Well, I think this is a cue. Shall we go?

Time therefore for a final voyage through this gathering and one last drink before taking discreet leave of that music from a farther room ...

Please do note: it’s for the sake of convenience in recounting my examples that I have measured out Yeats’ composition by the clock; but by this expedient I don’t mean to imply that its mise en scène is felt as passing by at such an even or at such a rapid pace. What matters here are the interactions of musical quantities and qualities in the αἴσθησις, and since this party evidently is going on mainly under the sway of boredom, serving thus as a foil for moments of other kinds, its perceived duration stretches out to a considerable length. With a fine sense of what such an elapsing of time required if his composition were to represent it convincingly, Yeats has written the work to fill
just the right number of bars, and fits a crowd at least ten times as large into a span of music lasting a mere fourteen minutes.

Now, if these three examples are taken together, it can be inferred that the storehouse of acoustic memories – of which the auditory capacity of perception is at times the keeper and at times the creature – may open its doors to several individuals at once, or to one alone, or to none of them. Whether it continues to be a resource at all, and, if so, when, how well, and to whom it shall be offered: quite obviously these are important matters in their own right. And yet, so long as the life of pleasure is still pursued forcefully and with finesse as a worthy end in itself, the tedium of its parties notwithstanding, then the relations amongst those who participate in it, of themselves and informally, by one route or another, more likely than not, will tend to make up for the individual lapses. Under these circumstances, therefore, the center does hold and things do not fall apart, for the time being at least. Hence, generally speaking, even in the midst of today’s conditions such a βίος ἡδονικός may still foster those encouragements to self-directing activity which Hume called “conventions,” the instances of concord that ease the way for all subsequent human reciprocities. (“Two men, who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement or convention, tho’ they have never given promises to each other.”*)

Yes, in the composer’s “Crowded Rooms” the life of pleasure is convening – while promises of various kinds might also have been exchanged. In order to find his way through this party and return from it, having heard, understood, enjoyed its hubbub of sounds as well as he did, several for themselves, others despite themselves, and then, with an understated comedic talent, freely to show in the work some guests in their unguarded moments misbehaving themselves senza tema d’infamia, a few inner reservations were probably requisite (and perhaps a home elsewhere in the country).

That this essay, too, begin to hasten towards taking its exit, now I shall turn to the last of Yeats’ works which has especially caught my attention. Even more recently completed, it is one of a series to which he’s given the title

“The Shape Distance,” and in it some of the same themes seem to recur, although this time he approaches them from another angle. Most obvious is the basic parameter: the two performers are to play independently of one another, and so, beyond the approximate concurrences which Yeats has written into the music itself, strict synchronization between them ought not to be expected. Hence, one might say, by way of providing an initial characterization, each performance will unfold in sound like a different dialect of one common language, where this latter itself is the sum of the harmonious concurrences of all its divergent varieties. And as a corollary: the greater the number of satisfactory performances of this work, far from becoming exhausted, the further its energies will develop from within.

The entire series, performed by Chamber Cartel, a new music ensemble in Atlanta which has appointed Yeats its composer–in–association, will be issued in cd format and via the Internet, and in advance thereof its performance of one of these variable works – the eleventh variation of it, for harp and piano, with Connor Way on the former and Amy O’Dell on the latter – has been provided by him on his Soundcloud page.

Variable music as a distinct genre, to be sure, abounds in similarly experimental work, and so Yeats’ explanation of his own intentions may help to clarify the specificity of what this series of pieces was intended to do – or rather, of how it was intended to do it. Not what this work is about, but how it is about it: this is the more abstract question which “The Shape Distance” seems to call for. (His series, he says a bit after the end of the portion of the video which I’ve excerpted on the website, shares its title with a set of paintings he has been working on concurrently.)

“Independently, but together.” Two instruments, of course, may as readily clash as accord with one another, and so, with Yeats’ words in mind, I should like to point out a few passages in this version of his composition where the parallelism seems especially felicitous, all the more because their concurrence, although it was planned for, is owing to no one.

During the passage of not quite thirty seconds beginning at the 5:15 mark, each instrument sounds as though both were speaking at and, in the interstices, responding against one another – at the end there comes a rather definite ending to this non–conversation.
Later on, for around a full minute from 8:55 onwards, the two instruments have evidently found themselves not merely in the same space but, more specifically, in the same room, and each is doing its ostentatious best to act as though the other is not there, although in fact, however they try to conceal it, they both are quite interested in one another.

Even small ensembles may find it difficult to work without a conductor, an overseer of their common time, and the challenges will be multiplied when, as in this case, the musicians are required to perform as though each were a soloist. That is obvious. Yeats’ elucidation of his aims as the composer of what is in effect two concurrent works in one, however, may prompt some further thoughts about the significance of such a procedure.

In the performance of “The Shape Distance,” the musicians’ inner feeling of time, which in itself is probably by far the most precise of all the many human capacities, is to be relieved of a certain stress imposed upon it by the requirement, not to heed the conductor, for in Yeats’ most recent pieces there hadn’t been one, but instead that a portion of the musician’s attention conduct itself from the musicianship of one fellow member of the ensemble to another, in order to maintain their common beat. Yet this new freedom is not license. Instead it is to move them to even further feats of exactitude as performers, each in relative independence from the others; they are to keep the time even more precisely than they otherwise would be inclined to do: and to a certain degree, nearly in unison with their instruments, each even is to a certain degree freely to be this time, feeling it from within as far as each is able, virtuosically.

An inner rapport with time such as this could well be considered as being the unique prerogative of auditory perception, given the great complexity of its inner operations and its varieties of attentiveness.

Whether in the course of this performance it is time which rules the musicians, or they which rule it – an occasion for this question would be lacking within the sphere of this musical activity itself (so long as the musicians are competent), although those looking in from the outside might well be inclined to raise it. Likewise the question of what this heightening of the inner feeling of timing might itself be good for, once the activity is over: this too is extraneous, admitting of no satisfactory answer.
In any event, their effort, which requires of them a considerable exertion of listening as well, a finer inward marking of each’s own time, in isolation from the times of the other musicians, as a concurrent activity while their playing goes on, may in its turn inspire the audience of “The Shape Distance” to greater acoustic attention for as long as the performance itself goes on, and perhaps afterwards. Hence it is not only the individual performers who are convened in intensive virtuosity – although the agenda was set, the activities will be self-directed – but each of the listeners, too. They also are there together, but independently. (In this boat, all have their own oars to pull.)

Between and around themselves these musicians are creating, out of the concurrence of their own self-regulations of time, a one-off space. This space has a unique shape: thus the title of the work. If one enjoys it while it endures, then one has understood it, but if not, then not. Its spatial character in each separate iteration of the work, therefore, is thoroughly hedonic, and thus, much more than is usually the case with orchestral music, any recording can only encompass it in a severe reduction.

The serial nature of this work notwithstanding, because “The Shape Distance” assumes that in any performance the participants will convene in a one-off activity, their virtuosity is more fittingly defined not as an instance of play, by now an inexact and overused notion, but instead as being fun – the human pastime that has rarely been found worthy of much thought at all but which does seem quite welcome in the βίος ἡδονικός. (To understand what fun is, should one not first enjoy it?)

Although Yeats himself does not speak of this side of the matter, if any particular iteration of “The Shape Distance” has a raison d’être at all, it would seem to be fun.

The sheer fun of a virtuosic activity in which the participants freely test out the precisions of which their perceptive faculties are capable – this notion itself sounds familiar. It too has been heard before. Oddly enough, then, Yeats’ explanation can summon to mind the intricate conceptual constructions grouped together under the rubric of a pre-established harmony, the piece of metaphysics for which Leibniz is most well-known. This is not the place to delve at any length into them, but from one of them in particular a few re-
marks do spring out. (Indeed, his construction does exist in a number of versions, as he too was a serial thinker, often setting a line of thought down in writing in variant iterations, each with its own accentuations and akin to a distinct dialect of one and the same language.)

Most often, Leibniz formulated his ideas in a patently theological idiom, but this cast of his thought, although one can’t simply disregard it, may be set aside here. The overarching conception that the universe is established by its creator as an immense complication of entities and activities that are wound up to various degrees, where some of them are able to wind themselves up until a certain point, is itself something quite other than a dogma of formal theology. His invocation of God is relatively inessential: not the clockmaker, but all of this clockwork itself, is Leibniz’ primary concern. Precisely so long as a great variety of synchronizations may still be expected from all of these concurrents – independently, but together – the universe is a process without a conductor. More to the point, nor would it really be in need of one.

Generally speaking, the writings and the thoughts of Leibniz will be comprehended most fully if one bears in mind the great extent to which Hobbes, whose works he knew early and well, remained implicitly the interlocutor for him throughout his life.

In the fourteenth section of his “Discours de métaphysique,”* Leibniz articulated his ideas in a visual dialect, but the sounds of his “harmonie préétablie,” as he would call it years later, do already shimmer through. And indeed, how extraneous are the ocular terms in which he framed his ideas! His music nearly springs out from the page.

All the substances in the universe or the world, said Leibniz – here he employed the two concepts synonymously – are produced by God “continuellement par une maniere d’emanation, comme nous produisons nos pensées.” But how do we in fact produce our thoughts? By the verb “produire” Leibniz did not refer to the various ways in which ideas may occur to human beings to
begin with, but rather, quite literally, the modes in which subsequently we bring them forth, that is, express them, initially to ourselves, and then to others. Why does one choose to express some ideas and not others? Very often, because in first thinking about them one has great fun, and this, just as much as the ideas themselves, is something one would like to share. Accordingly, while in this frame of mind, readying oneself to express them, one is hardly actuated by this or that ulterior motive, and here the question Why? could sensibly be asked only with reference to an action’s more or less immediate aim, and not with regard to its possible further effects. Now, it is this very frame of mind which Leibniz attributes to the universe’s maker, and hence it’s simply impossible to conceive that every single thought ever occurring to the divine mind would or could be expressed. (At least in any one universe.) Any existing substance in the world will be created only “si Dieu trouve bon de rendre sa pensée effective” – and why would this actualization of a particular thought be found good? Because it’s fun to examine from every possible angle its potential concord with a certain set of other thoughts, and hence this good proves of itself already fit to be shared. The prime motive of this whole undertaking, therefore? The fun taken in figuring out how to put it all together. Indeed, fun does seem to be an eminent instance of the good, insofar as it is an activity pursued for its own sake and as such may be characterized, in the old Aristotelian terms, as being a self-sufficiency or a self-supporting structure in itself.

Of course, Leibniz did say that this individual thought would be found good by God only insofar as its actualization could fit well into the ensemble of phenomena that is the universe, “le systéme general des phenomenes qu’il trouve bon de produire pour manifester sa gloire” – and this last clause seems to announce quite a different motive, thus imparting another and much larger sense to the question of the ultimate reason for everything. But it’s precisely at this point that the music in Leibniz’ conception is striking up! How so? Precisely because the explanation that the world has been made “pour manifester sa gloire” is itself so patently a cliché, and spoken by Leibniz not in his own voice but as though it were enclosed in invisible quotation marks. Comprehend this covert irony, and suddenly the universe does not appear to culminate in wonders meant above all for the eyes, but discloses itself in quite another mode. Now it may be heard, and indeed in accordance with the diver-
gent *shape distances*, as Yeats says, which open up to perception from the different locations within it, as though it were a self-conducting work of music.

If the tone of Leibniz’ clause does not register, nothing will be understood. Conversely, if his explanation is heard properly, as a *sotto voce* remark that contains no real answer to anything, then the very question to which it only seems to respond – the question *Why?* asked in reference to an ultimate reason – is itself only ever posed by mistake. *That* was his point. Consequently, what he called “*le systeme general*” is its own reason; and this in turn is so by virtue of the fun that was had in putting it together and, even more, on account of the fun that shall be had in figuring out how it all is put together. Precisely because it is *fun*, then, the world in its coherence is best likened to some sort of harmony, or even a virtually unending progressus of harmony of harmonies of harmonies of harmonies and so on. And so the optical terms in which Leibniz articulated his thoughts may be discounted as having been merely provisional *façons de parler*.

So, one may infer from the “*Discours de métaphysique,*” the best small-scale model we may devise for the universe as a whole is the idea of several immense works of music playing together in a marvelous discordant concurrence, for no other discernible reason than the sheer fun of it all. Furthermore, for their part, it is remarkable how far Leibniz’ own writings, he who is accounted one of the most serious of philosophers, seem to partake of the mood that goes hand in hand with the self-directing interactions called fun. Quite possibly there is in his many texts more of the βίος ἡδονικός than one ever had thought might be the case.

However, here I shall not delve any further into the metaphysics in his “*Discours*” or his other writings. Fortunately, in keeping with the tenor of Leibniz’ remarks, the global question *Why?* can be left to one side and another, rather more limited one posed instead. *How?* seems to be the better guide.

Our perceptual capacities are evidently fallible, but how does it happen when at times we misconstrue some thing in perception? In much the same way that, more often than not, the clockwork that is the universe functions fairly well, all the various parts more or less continuing to move with a certain basic degree of synchronization, so too, just as the whole of it, on the whole, “*est toujours veritable, nos perceptions le sont aussi*” – the answer, therefore,
lies elsewhere, and thus “ce sont nos jugemens, qui sont de nous et qui nous trompent.” (What a judgment is, may likewise be set aside in the present context.) How do our judgments deceive us? In keeping with the foregoing, there is a short answer to this question: whenever they do fool us, our judgments are having a bit of fun with us. In their inner readiness to do so, the most plausible of raisons d’être for the universe, fun for fun’s sake, is expressed in yet a further manner.

One would do well to hear the humor in these minor pieces of inner deception. Their mischief is largely innocent. Our judgments, whatever they or their inclinations may be in themselves, will involve us in at most mild errors, whenever we do listen to them, and listen through them, with a modicum of care. Then their trickeries can be held in check or corrected tolerably well, much as is the case with the lapses of the organs of sense, as Hobbes noted, many years before Leibniz devised the numerous variations of his “harmonie préétablie.”

꼬 All of these hypotheses – as, in conclusion, I should state clearly, that is what they are – may become more plausible when they are considered from out of the midst of the βίος ήδονικός itself. It is just this which Yeats’ numerous and quite English works of music have prompted me to do. For all our harmonies, today, however well-established they once were believed to be, are everywhere under threat. Over against such conditions, what a pleasure it remains, when the moment seems right, in a realm of musical life freely pursued for its own sake, that then and there the precise distance can be kept whereby the concords resound and again take shape in delight.
This Week’s Tracks from Soundcloud

(August 17, 2014)

In this Sunday evening round-up of three tracks from Soundcloud, Scandinavians have the lion’s share, while the odd man out is in effect a bleu-blanc-rouge trans-Atlantic collaboration.

☛ From the band of Danish and American musicians known as Hess Is More who commute between Copenhagen and New York, under the leadership of the multi-talented Mikkel Hess, a new album is set for an imminent release, and so, as a taste of what may be expected, in the tune “Bearsong” one encounters a single line of blank verse accompanied by a daydream of music in which disparate elements of instrumentation are artfully juxtaposed, in a mix that is both brooding and dreamy, and over which there hovers just a slight hint of warning. One ignores the claws at one’s own peril.

Entering the second year of its second century in 2014 is Erik Satie’s trilogy of “Embryons desséchés,” and the eccentric sense of humor in them has been drawn out and accentuated further in an arrangement for four toy pianos by an adventurous multi-instrumentalist in Philadelphia, Mark Zelesky; one imagines the Satie himself would have smiled at this transposition, for these tones warble like a music-box or a musical clock sending forth its figurines on their hourly jaunts, or indeed “comme un rossignol qui aurait mal aux dents,” much as per his own unique instruction.

The third track this evening hails from Iceland, and is the work of the composer Póður Magnússon (or, in the standard non-Icelandic orthography, Thordur Magnusson). Entitled simply “Saxophonequartet,” it was performed live a couple of years ago at a festival in his country called, fittingly enough, Myrkir Músíkdagar (“Dark Music Days”) by the Icelandic Saxophone Quartet, and his writing for these instruments does not disappoint: together they are moody and funny all at once.
The Fires of August  (Part I)

(August 27, 2014)

This summer rushing by, one can say with nearly no exaggeration, has shook to the noise of outbursts around the globe, while now the clamor is churning during the very month in which, a century ago, the World War had all at once overtaken everything. The coincidence (if indeed it is one and nothing more nor less than that) thickens the times further, as though they once again were a repellent atmosphere. Out of prudence, many are reflecting upon the current situation more precisely than they otherwise would have done or wanted to do, as a precautionary measure: the contingencies lowering on all sides seem that serious. Hence, with these inklings of war now striking some cohorts of minds, while passing other people entirely by, this August is riven by the worst suspicions; no matter the location, a peculiar tension can be sensed, the tone of them who are exerting themselves to fathom the imminent, before it descends.

The feeling weighing upon the early summer of 1914, to judge by some of the marginalia to the historical record such as the numerous personal testimonies, was excruciating to such a degree that when the war did finally break out, at the beginning of August, the definitive end to the preceding period came as a great relief. The impending inevitability of a looming historical event, generally speaking, has the stature of a myth, but how it happened that such a number did come to assent to it – the importance of comprehending this is itself very difficult to ignore.

Sheer relief contributed something to bringing many to acquiesce: that is one hypothesis. If it seems plausible, then one might want to consider the conditions they found themselves in and to which they sought an end, from the acoustic side. Such an approach could prompt one to consult the notations of sound, whenever they are available, taking them as evidence to be assessed in a minor genre of inquiry, a variety of the aural history people are beginning to talk about.

The voracious war–fires of August 1914 burned on for more than four years. Quite possibly it was the sounds of the battlefields which left the deepest
impression upon the soldiers, to judge from what some of the keenest testimonials of life at the front have said, when they are read with attention.

One of these writers in particular evinces great sensitivity to the new aural phenomena. Establishing a literary reputation by his early essays and novels, Ernst Jünger published, four years after the War ended (and two years after his first book, likewise devoted to his wartime experiences, the thereafter frequently revised In Stahlgewittern, had appeared), a collection of vignettes of what it had been like, those unprecedented cumulations he had lived through in medias res: Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis.* In passage upon passage, this distillate of a memoir abounds in noises that would not let themselves be forgotten; and the fields back to which they transported him, these I too shall now plunge through, briefly.

( Needless to say, Jünger was always at best an ambiguous personality, politically speaking. In the midst of the Second World War, the Allies took cognizance of his efforts against the regime in Berlin but remained wary of him and his intentions, as an American memorandum, declassified some thirty years afterwards, makes quite clear.)

The clipped cadence and the syncopes of Jünger’s prose are conspicuous features on the page, and the jostling is significant in its own right; yet I shall attempt to capture neither his tone nor his dithyrambic periods in my paraphrases, although perhaps some of it all will slide in nonetheless. Instead, in what follows, the German passages are included in full, mainly in parentheses.

My aim here is to convey something of his sense of the destructive element in which he and his fellows were immersed – the element whose other side, that is, the unintended constructive effects which he and quite a few others expected would manifest themselves later on, Jünger also took pains to anticipate.

☛ But first, something of the horrors.

☛ Towards the end of the segment he devoted to the sheer horror (“Grauen”) of the battlefields, Jünger recounted verbatim what one of his fellows, evidently a hardened veteran, had told him one night while they together held
the watch. Jünger had asked this older soldier what his most horrible Erlebnis had been, and he had replied with a short anecdote, telling it between drags on his cigarette, each casting a red glow upwards over the rest of his face. Soon after the war began his squad had stormed a building which once had housed a bar, broke into the barricaded cellar, set about dispatching – his verb is colorless, but they did it with an animal bitterness, he said – those they found there in the dark, while above them the house already was aflame. Probably set into motion by the heat of the fire, on the ground floor, an orchestraion suddenly began to play, and this, he averred, he never would forget: the untroubled blare of a piece of dance music mixed with the soldiers’ shouts and the last groans of the dying. (“Zu Beginn des Krieges stürmten wir ein Haus, das eine Wirtschaft gewesen war. Wir drangen in den verbarrrikadierten Keller und rangen im Dunkel mit tierischer Erbitterung, während über uns das Haus schon brannte. Plötzlich, wohl durch die Glut des Feuers ausgelöst, setzte oben das automatische Spiel eines Orchestrions ein. Ich werde nie vergessen, wie sich in das Gebrüll der Kämpfer und das Röcheln der Sterbenden das unbekümmerte Geschmetter einer Tanzmusik mischte.”)

Amongst his fellows, one may infer, Jünger’s own sensitivity to the acoustic dimension was shared by at least a few others.

Indeed, amidst the conditions of trench warfare, the soldiers had every reason to pay heed to all that they could hear.

When he turned his attention to the corridors cut into the ground by the war (“Der Graben”), his portrayal of them was unadorned. The trenches had frequent occasion to show their real face, whenever the call came and they disgorged their human waves onto the battlefield. (“Da zeigte der Graben sein wahres Gesicht. Alles fiel von ihm, womit der Mensch, der die Verhüllung des Gräßlichen liebt, ihn geschmückt und verziert.”) Then the horror of the trenches was exposed, in a devastation which now revealed itself truly.

Those momentary episodes of actual combat represented the highest point of the war, the extreme of exertion which topped all the horrible things by which human nerves had previously been stretched to the breaking point. First there came a paralyzing second of silence, in which one looked the others in the eye, and then a shout was raised – it was high, sharp, wild, blood–red – a glowing, unforgettable seal burning itself into their brains. This shout ripped the veils away from obscure worlds of feeling they hardly knew
were there, and made everyone who heard it rush onwards: to kill or to be killed. ("Das war der Höhepunkt des Krieges, ein Höhepunkt, der alles Grausige, das zuvor die Nerven zerrissen hatte, übergipfelte. Eine lähmende Sekunde der Stille, in der sich die Augen trafen, ging voran. Dann trieb ein Schrei hoch, steil, wild, blutrot, der sich in die Gehirne brannte als glühender, unvergeßlicher Stempel. Dieser Schrei riß Schleier von dunklen, ungeahnten Welten des Gefühls, er zwang jeden, der ihn hörte, vorwärts zu schnellen, um zu töten oder getötet zu werden.")

That existential decision in its stark simplicity, his essay insists again and again, echoes throughout all subsequent human life, however intricate or hollow the latter may have become, and will frustrate all the attempts to wish it away.

After the War itself ended, another kind of strife commenced: between civilian life as such, and in particular the life of the large cities with all their entertainments, and the soldiers such as Jünger who were returning by degrees to it. Which experience would set the pattern for the others – that was the salient question. The chaos of sheer stimuli in the metropolis on the one side, the intense Rausch they had lived through on the battlefields on the other: between these there was a simple choice to be made. If their Erlebnisse could not grip the masses of people who had had no direct share in them, then the returnees, as a body far fewer in number, would disaccustom themselves of them step by step, as they accommodated themselves to the others. ("Da wir der starken Räusche entwöhnt sind, wurden Macht und Männer uns zum Greuel; Masse und Gleichheit heißen unsere neuen Götter. Kann die Masse nicht werden wie die Wenigen, so sollen die Wenigen doch werden wie die Masse.") So at least it seemed to Jünger some few years after the War, not without some palpable resentment at the betrayal, not of anything so grandiose as a cause, but simply of the shape the soldiers’ sensoria had assumed during their years at the front, which evidently was demanded of them as a condition of their re-introduction to civilian life. Hence his discontent when, sitting in a cinema, watching the images flit by on the screen, what was conspicuous by its absence, was sound – Geräusch. ("Wie schön geräuschlos da alles gleitet. Man hockt im Polster, und alle Länder, alle Abenteuer schwimmen durchs Hirn, leicht und gestaltig wie ein Opiumtraum.") No: not succumbing to any such trance, that would have been with him a point d’honneur.

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Right in the midst of this strife after the War, trying to hold his ground against the diversions on every side, Jünger’s thoughts turned to that older type of mercenary, the Landsknecht, after whom he entitled this section of his essay, and his latter-day descendants amongst the infantrymen at the front. Embodying itself completely in the Landsknechte, some centuries before and now again, Jünger discerned war in the sheer brutality of its spirit, as though these soldiers were akin to conspicuous beasts of prey or to the most cruel barbarians hailing from the steppes. The spirit in war – free peoples in their civilized state cannot quite live with it, he seems to say, but nor can they live without it, either. A paradox of history which they ignore at their own peril. (Of course, in those earlier times, Jünger did not omit to note, that spirit took on more than one shape, not only flaming up in the Landsknechte but also instilling strength into that other, more refined type, the deliberate warrior more nearly representative of the heroic ideal, who in his conduct sought to uphold some measure of justice amidst the hostilities. Hence the spectators and students of history may well ask themselves, as he framed the question, “ob sich der Lebenswille eines Volkes klarer ausspricht durch eine Schicht von Kämpfern, die Recht und Unrecht zu unterscheiden streben, oder durch eine gesunde, kräftige Rasse, die den Kampf um des Kampfes willen liebt – oder, mit Hegel ausgedrückt, ob der Weltgeist sich durch ein bewußtes oder durch ein unbewußtes Werkzeug am wuchtigsten vertritt.”)

In any event, in the Landsknechte of previous centuries the spirit of war had burned, and it was afire again in the infantrymen of the World War. Completely, according to Jünger, and as such it drove these soldiers up until the limits of what they could possibly sustain – thus did the human mind, Geist, now assert all the power it could over matter. “Die Vollendung,” he insisted, “ist der springende Punkt.” And not merely the salient point: rather more literally, by these operations the spirit of war catalyzed a pointed and sharp transformation in the men at the front. What they underwent was a “Durchdringung bis an die Ränder des Vermögens, Gestaltung des Gegebenen in die eigene Form.”

When they were pushed towards the limits of what they could endure, in full concentration, the element in which these soldiers were immersed, was overwhelmingly acoustic. Here some showed themselves capable of moving fleetly past it all, Jünger wrote, as though striding gracefully along a tightrope
stretched out over an abyss, all the fearful raging of everything around them notwithstanding. From every side huge explosions were unleashing terrifying waves of sound, and yet their minds stood firm and they carried on as though all of it were simply a backdrop of mechanical devices or a stage–set, quite insignificant apart from the play they themselves were enacting before it. (“Gerade in Stunden, wo die fürchterliche Wucht der Dinge die Seele weich zu hämmern drohte, fanden sich Männer, die achtlos darüber hinwegtanzten wie über ein Nichts. Und jene einzige Idee, die sich für Männer geziemt: daß die Materie nichts und der Geist alles ist, jene Idee, auf der allein die Größe des Menschen beruht, wurde durch sie ins Paradoxe überspitzt. Da empfand man, daß diese Häufung von Knalleffekten, diese brüllenden Stahlgewitter, mochten sie noch so gierig sich bäumen, doch nur Maschinerie, nur Theaterkulissen waren, die erst Bedeutung erlangten durch das Spiel, das der Mensch vor ihnen spielte.”)

Such a deliberate and actually quite delicate insouciance of mind as this, by which the human fear of matter might be contained – modern industrial society in its furies of construction cannot do without it. There would certainly be room for these aptitudes in it once the War itself ended. (To take one especially obvious example: could the first several generations of skyscrapers ever have been erected otherwise than by workers unaffected by physical fear?)

When Jünger left the zone of these sheer horrors behind him, and turned to consider the War from other angles, he continued to insist that the brutal alternative embodied in war is an inescapable fact of human existence. This is quite clear throughout the pages in which he settled accounts with pacifism (“Pazifismus”).

Quite foolishly and at their own peril did the pacifists imagine themselves to have outgrown the recourse to arms, for everything most worthy about human beings – freedoms, civilizations, self–regulation all included – is maintained by virtue of a basic choice behind which war itself, in the best case, stands as the silent guarantor. As such one would do best to honor it. Igitur qui desiderat pacem, præparet bellum. (“Wohl wurden alle Freiheit, alle Größe und alle Kultur in der Idee, im Stillen geboren, doch nur durch Kriege erhalten, verbreitet oder verloren. Durch Krieg erst werden große Religionen Gut der ganzen Erde, schossen die tüchtigsten Rassen aus dunklen Wurzeln
zum Licht, wurden unzählige Sklaven freie Männer. Der Krieg ist ebensowe-

nig eine menschliche Einrichtung wie der Geschlechtstrieb; er ist ein Naturge-
setz, deshalb werden wir uns niemals seinem Banne entwinden. Wir dürfen
ihn nicht leugnen, sonst wird er uns verschlingen.”) Whoever it was who first
remarked, *You might not be interested in war, but war is interested in you,*
may well have cribbed the bon mot from that last sentence.

Honor, however, is always to be paid with a certain fine sense of balance.
Adulation of war could render offense to the latter as easily as the attempt to
ignore it might come across as a slight. Some explanations of the urge in
human beings which drives them towards war are cut entirely too loosely, and
even though one might employ them provocatively in debate pour épater les
pacifistes, they render frivolous that which actually calls for the most serious
thought.

Is it then so surprising that in the pages he dedicated to – rather, *against*
the pacifists, a number of such explanations should have been included,
wielded like a muleta before a bull? When one listens closely to them, how-
ever, Jünger’s own ironic tone can be detected.

One in particular is frequently cited as evidence against him. In it he stated
– but not in his own voice, as I said – that the yearning to destroy is rooted
deep in the human being, and makes short work of everything weak. Hence,
human *weakness* is itself an astonishing provocation, and it can elicit great fe-
rcity. This, he remarked, is the very old song of life that devours itself, and
which indeed cannot live without killing. (“Die Sucht, zu zerstören, ist tief im
menschlichen Wesen verwurzelt; alles Schwache fällt ihr zum Opfer. Was hatten
die Peruaner den Spaniern getan? Wer Ohren dafür hat, dem singen die
Urwaldkronen, die heute über den Ruinen ihrer Sonnentempel federn, die
Antwort. Es ist das Lied vom Leben, das sich selbst verschlingt. Leben heißt
töten.”)

But do parse his summary again. *What ever did the Incas do to the Span-
iards?* It was a rhetorical question on Jünger’s part. There is an obvious an-
swer which he had no need to elaborate. *Nothing.* This single negative unlocks
his meaning: the biological ode to human destructiveness he rehearsed in this
explanation, was reprised by him from the texts of the nihilists, not least on ac-
count of the attention they gave to physical requirements. Whether he himself
would ever have whistled it at all seriously, is more than doubtful.
(One should also acknowledge the part evidently played, in the irony of Jünger’s last sentence, by that ambiguous verb, the despair of the translators and of many others as well, “heißen.” – Of course, such a biological conception of the human drive to destroy, is itself quite tenacious. – Some decades afterwards it would be upon just such a basis that Bertrand de Jouvenel was to develop, in his own voice, an account of the natural growth of power in its self–exertion in political affairs. In the light of this theory, the relation between the powers of states and the disruptions of revolutions is quite other than it may seem at first, and hence “la rénovation et le renforcement du Pouvoir nous apparaissent comme la véritable fonction historique des révolutions. Qu’on cesse donc d’y saluer des réactions de l’esprit de liberté contre un pouvoir oppresseur. Elles le sont si peu qu’on n’en peut citer aucune qui ait renversé un despote véritable. [...] Ils sont morts, ces rois, non de leur tyrannie mais de leur faiblesse. Les peuples dressent l’échafaud non comme la punition morale du despotisme mais comme la sanction biologique de l’impuissance. [...] C’est la mollesse qui est détestée. [...] Ces révolutions n’ont été qu’en apparence des révolutions contre le Pouvoir. En substance, elles ont donné au Pouvoir une vigueur et un aplomb nouveaux, elles ont ruiné les obstacles qui s’opposaient de longue date à son développement.”*)

It was not weakness but courage that the soldiers, on all sides of this new trench warfare, encountered most often. Right in the midst of the hostilities, according to Jünger, substantial hopes were held for amity between the peoples in the period after the War – the amity of reconciliation supported by the strength of that virtue of virtues, courage, as it would live on in the aftermath. Thus considered, in retrospect from some future vantage–point, the hostilities would one day take on the appearance of the squabbling of children who since had laid their differences to rest. (“Es schien nicht undenkbar, daß eines Tages die beste Mannschaft der Völker aus den Gräben steigen würde, aus einem plötzlichen Antrieb, aus einer sittlichen Einsicht heraus, um sich die Hände zu reichen und sich endgültig zu vertragen wie Kinder, die sich lange gestritten haben.”) On a few occasions, this hope was even lent a fleeting shape during those moments when the hostilities were interrupted and soldiers from both sides met bravely and amiably in the no man’s land – for a

*) Du Pouvoir, bk. V, chap. xii.
brief interval, at least. In this section of his essay he told movingly of one such encounter.

The one indispensable trait, for Jünger, was courage. Not only does one have it going into the battle, but it also develops during it and by virtue of it. Hence it is the impetus which can sustain efforts of which the combatants hardly imagined themselves capable beforehand, and in this sense, only what can be fought for with courage is worth possessing at all. (All worthy human striving, accordingly, comprises a strong element of courage and unfolds itself to some degree as though it were a battle. In this universal sense we all have it in us “unsere Sache schärfer und schärfer zu vertreten, und so ist Kampf unsere letzte Vernunft und nur Erkämpftes wahrer Besitz,” a condition which holds true for the highest things as well, for “auch das Beste und Schönste will erst erkämpft werden.”)

Much as when the soldiers in this trench warfare had to muster all their courage to circumvent dangers that frequently manifested themselves in sound first and foremost, so too the paths beaten by courage after the War were often marked out by acoustic signs. The intensification of the sonic dimension as their courage had experienced it, was not lost; they were not willing, at least at first, to let it go. This resolution Jünger addressed in the segment of his essay he devoted to the virtue (“Mut”).

The reconciliation whose prospect had appeared before them in the trenches as a real possibility for the future, came to pass some years later, in the shape of a shared quality of courage. What does the term encompass, in this context? A few characteristics are prominent in Jünger’s account of it.

1. Courage such as theirs brought membership in the select circles which disregarded both the clamor of the urban masses and also what they thought of as the latter’s deceitful softness, instead dedicating themselves with renewed energy to the severe pursuit of their own ideas. The insouciance they had attained in the face of the unheard–of noises of the front, now in effect conferred upon them immunity against the various sonic temptations of the big cities.

2. Moreover, their courage was manifest in their powers of concentration. By it they were prompted always to accord primacy to the goal of their endeavor, whatever it may have been, rather than to descend into a maze of details – all those relating to the means to be employed. This was an attitude in
which the mind did indeed assert its power over matter, expressing itself in the definite forms of a language both sublime and forceful, one whose sheer sound was more beautiful and exhilarating than anything they had ever known.

3. This language of their courage, with its own valuations and depths, would be understood only by a few and hence was noble, and for this reason one could take it for a certainty that only the best, the most courageous soldiers, ever would be able to converse with one another in it. Reconciliation was too important a matter not to be conducted in a very selective manner.

("Und es tut wohl, sich im Kreise jener harten europäischen Sittlichkeit zu fühlen, die über das Geschrei und die Weichheit der Massen hinweg sich immer schärfer in ihren Ideen bestärkt, jener Sittlichkeit, die nicht nach dem fragt, was eingesetzt werden muß, sondern nur nach dem Ziel. Das ist die erhabene Sprache der Macht, die uns schöner und berauschender klingt als alles zuvor, eine Sprache, die ihre eigenen Wertungen und ihre eigene Tiefe besitzt. Und daß diese Sprache nur von wenigen verstanden wird, das macht sie vornehm, und es ist gewiß, daß nur die Besten, das heißt die Mutigsten, sich in ihr werden verständigen können.")

Courage, in sum, would express itself in the concentration with which they handled their language, pressing it into their minds’ service far more thoroughly than is usually done. Thus expressed, it could be recognized by those who had an equal share of it on the erstwhile enemy’s side, the difference in tongues notwithstanding, and so this virtue would play no small part in fostering the reconciliation they had hoped for in the trenches.

Although the First World War was over, the courage it had engendered lived on, while strife itself assumed other forms, and accordingly this is the point to state plainly how fully Jünger’s thinking, as he was quite aware, had been stamped by four gnomic words: πόλεμος πάντων πατήρ ἐστι, a saying which, when translated quite literally, announces that war is the father of all.

As either a great fire or a great wind – in the introduction to his essay, Jünger compared it to both – the War had melted a world down and cast another in its place. Soldiers who returned hardened from the “storms of steel” at the battlefronts were progeny of the War, and bore its spirit back into the precincts of the peace. Hence some of the precariousness of the latter, quite susceptible to being set aflame again from within.
Not only is war our father, declared Jünger, but our son as well. Thus the soldiers engendered him and he them, and in that fiery workshop they were at once the hot steel and the smith, martyrs of their own deed, driven on by the impetus in themselves. (“Nicht nur unser Vater ist der Krieg, auch unser Sohn. Wir haben ihn gezeugt und er uns. Gehämmerte und Gemeißelte sind wir, aber auch solche, die den Hammer schwingen, den Meißel führen, Schmiede und sprühender Stahl zugleich, Märtyrer eigener Tat, von Trieben Getriebene.” Although each of these literary, all too literary hyperboles deserves to be examined carefully at some length, the present essay is not the place to attempt it.)

Of course, Jünger had reason to invoke Heraclitus, the proponent of the notion that πόλεμος is the progenitor of everything and fire the first of all substances, all the others following as its transformations and returning into it periodically, in cycle upon cycle of “πυρὸς τροπαὶ,” as he wrote.*

To be sure, caution may be advised especially in this case. According to the account provided by Diogenes Laertius, Heraclitus, when once asked why he was silent, replied, So that you can chatter.** Only at one’s own risk does one attempt to interpret the remains of his work, as a whole or in part.

The one sentence which inspired Jünger throughout his Kampf als inneres Erlebnis, is evidently figurative in character. Both by reason of the enigma of it, and because it seems so weighty, I shall quote Heraclitus’ statement about πόλεμος in full.***

“Πόλεμος πάντων μὲν πατήρ ἐστὶ, πάντων δὲ βασιλεὺς, καὶ τοὺς μὲν θεοὺς ἔδειξε τοὺς δὲ ἄνθρωπους, τοὺς μὲν δοῦλους ἔποιησε τοὺς δὲ ἐλευθέρους.” (War is of all the father, of all the king, and some he sets up as gods, some as human beings, some he considers as slaves, some as free.)

None of these determinations is ever decided permanently, for otherwise Heraclitus would not have called this principle by the name he did; and hence the acts – a due weight should be given to each of his two verbs – by which

* In the words of the thirty-first fragment in Hermann Diels’ third edition (1912).
** Lives of Eminent Philosophers, bk. IX, chap. 1, 12.
*** In Diels’ compilation it is the fifty-third fragment.
πόλεμος distinguishes every single thing as having this or that standing, cannot last and indeed never do endure for very long. They are established that their status may be overthrown, however high or low it is deemed. The very positions in which it places all those separate things, will of themselves provoke further rounds of strife soon enough!

Πόλεμος is the force throughout the cosmos which keeps it churning from within, and thus in the state of order proper to it, however transient and disorderly its arrangements may appear to be, regarded from this or that position within it. For Heraclitus insisted elsewhere that the cosmos, in its very regularities which occur again and again, makes manifest an order susceptible to being known by the mind, when it heeds the principle within itself which he termed λόγος: so considered, the entire cosmos, appearances notwithstanding, will be eminently logical.

What this λόγος in the human mind is, was posed as a question by Heinrich Blücher during a lecture entitled “Heraclitus and the Metaphysical Tradition.” He suggested that the term designated the mind as intellect, the inclination to cold objective comprehension which Heraclitus himself was the very first to awaken, not least by his definition of λόγος as its principle. And yet, Blücher also noted, how spirited or indeed fiery the human mind must be, if it is to pursue its own inclination to know, regardless of the consequences! He drew attention to the incomparable courage or bravery by which the Heraclitus who devoted himself unreservedly to his own inquiries could constitute, in effect, the archetype of every scientist. “The fanaticism of detachment becomes visible, metaphysically paving the way for this great capability of man, and for the existence of the whole line of scientists. Only, in science it is but a partial capability, and this is as it should be. Heraclitus was this capability completely. He was, so to speak, a victim of his vision.”*

The fanaticism of detachment will prove itself to be a versatile attitude, with a number of possible applications. The author of Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis, for his part, had experience of several of them.

* A transcript of this lecture, held at Bard College on May 10, 1967, may be consulted on the website dedicated to Blücher, where an audio recording is also offered.
Yet is it quite so certain that the term πόλεμος signifies war or strife in Heraclitus’ fragment and nothing more? Somewhat as with the Latin word bellum, the Greek one may also have comprised another meaning.

That in fact it had meant something else as well, Grotius averred in his brief clarifications of the two concepts. After observing that war has often been waged not by states or other public groups but entirely privately, he added a brief etymological remark. “Est enim bellum ex voce veteri duellum, ut duonus quod fuerat factum est bonus, & duis bis. Duellum autem à duobus dictum simili sensu quo pacem unitatem dicimus,” he wrote. “Sic Græcis ex multitudinis significatione πόλεμος: veteribus etiam λύη à dissolutione, quomodo & corporis dissolutio δύη.”*

Thus he recalled how the word bellum derived from an older, more poetic duellum, signifying a fight between two men, much as the Latin noun bonus, the good man or the man of honor, earlier had been written duonus, in a thought-provoking piece of orthography, and bis, twice or twofold, stemmed from duis. But then he went on to suggest, more obscurely, that the term πόλεμος also meant the many, and just as the word λύη signified a dissolution (and hence could designate the consequences of strife within a city), so too did the term δύη, pain or woe, refer to the dissolution of whole bodies, that is, the sensation engendered by the loss of their unity as they divided into parts.

If these glosses are borne in mind, then perhaps Heraclitus, with his elusive words, had not pointed solely to war or strife as being the father of all, but, in addition, to the many, or the multitude, or the manifold – whatever these other terms in their turn might be taken as signifying in the context.

However, his readers found Grotius’ terse remarks to be rather less than clear, a perplexity which may be inferred from the efforts of the earliest translators to bring those lines over into French.

The early version by Antoine de Courtin** was not so markedly philological. “L’étymologie même du mot de Guerre en Latin n’y repugne pas : car le mot bellum vient du mot ancien duellum, qui signifie combat, comme de duo-

* De iure belli ac pacis libri tres, bk. I, chap. I, sec. II.
** Le Droit de la guerre et de la paix (Paris: Arnould Seneuze, 1687).
Car Bellum vient du mot ancien Duellum : comme de Duonus, on a fait Bonus ; & de Duis, qui signifie Deux, on a ensuite formé Bis. Or Duellum étoit dérivé du nombre Duo, & donnoit par là à entendre un différent entre deux personnes ; dans le même sens que nous donnons à la Paix le nom d’union (unitas) par une raison contraire. C’est ainsi que le terme Grec Πόλεμος, dont on se sert ordinairement pour dire la Guerre, donne dans son origine une idée de multitude. Les anciens Grecs l’exprimoient aussi par le mot de Λύη, qui emporte une Désunion des Esprits : de même qu’ils disoient Δύη, pour exprimer la dissolution des parties du Corps."

According to Barbeyrac, therefore, the many were signified by the word πόλεμος originally not least because that same notion was suggested by the words λύη and even δύη – but this short explanation itself did not seem especially satisfying, and so he proceeded to delve further into the matter.

To Grotius’ own few sentences, Barbeyrac added the following: “Cette Note est toute tirée du Texte, où ce qu’elle contient ne seroit pas fort agréable à un Lecteur François, et n’est pas au fond de grand usage par rapport au sujet. Notre Auteur, en donnant l’étymologie de Πόλεμος, le fait venir de πολύς. D’autres vont chercher ailleurs l’origine de ce mot, et il ne faut pas s’en étonner. Le pays des Etymologies est fort vaste, et présente bien des routes différentes, où chacun peut se promener à son aise. Il faut néanmoins, en faveur de ceux qui aiment ces sortes de recherches, et pour ne laisser rien à déviner dans les pen-

sées de notre Auteur, dire quelque chose sur les dernières paroles, qui sont ainsi couchées dans l'Original : *Veteribus etiam λύη à dissolutione, quomodo & corporis dissolutio δύη*. Les Commentateurs sont ici muets, sans en excepter G R O N O V I U S, Critique de profession : car il se contente d'expliquer le mot de Δύη par d'autres mots Grecs, où il ne trouve que ce sens, *quevis infelicitas* ; ce qui ne montre point la raison de l'étymologie de notre Auteur, ni l’application qu’il en fait. On pourrait d’abord s’imaginer qu’il y a faute dans le Texte : & je sai qu’effectivement quelques personnes ont cru qu’il falloit mettre encore ici Λύη. Mais toutes les Editions portent Δύη ; & je crois avoir découvert sûrement ce que notre Auteur veut dire, & ce qui lui a donné lieu de proposer ici l’étymologie de ce mot, qu’il fait venir tacitement de Δύω. Il a pris Δύη dans le sens de λύπη, *dolor*, que quelques Léxicographes notent : & il a eu dans l’esprit l’étymologie que PLATON donne de ce mot Λύπη, qu’il tire de λύω, parce, dit–il, que, quand on souffre de la Douleur, il se fait une *dissolution du Corps*, c’est–à–dire, des parties du Corps : Ἡ τε Λύπη, ἀπὸ τῆς διαλύσεως τοῦ σώματος ἕνεκεν ἐπωνομάσθαι, ἣν ἐν τούτῳ τῷ πάθει ἱσχεῖ τὸ σῶμα. In Cratylo, pag. 419. C. Tom. 1. Ed. H. Steph. Notre Auteur, à l’imitation de cet ancien Philosophe, tire Δύη de δύω, par la même raison : car de la *séparation* des parties du Corps, il s’ensuit que celles qui auparavant ne paroissoient que comme un seul Tout, à cause de leur union, font désormais *plus d’un*. Les principes de la Vieille Philosophie, dont notre Auteur étoit imbu, lui ont encore aidé à former cette étymologie : car on sait, que, selon ces principes, la *Douleur* est causée par une *solution de continuité.***

So, if Barbeyrac was right, Grotius had tacitly derived the concept πόλεμος from the more basic term πολύς, *many* or *the many*. Furthermore, but somewhat more circuitously, he had drawn the noun δύη from the word δύω, that is, either *two* or an emphatic *woe is me*, for he had associated the concepts δύη and λύπη, *bodily pain*, while recalling Plato’s etymology of the latter according to which it came from the verb λυεῖν, *to dissolve*, with the result that physical distress, whether it was called δύη or λύπη, would indicate that inwardly the body was in some manner splitting apart.
Striking as is the emphasis placed upon the significance of the number two, division, and separation in human life, it does seem to stand at odds with the notion that the term πόλεμος might actually mean the many or many.

Perhaps the underlying basis of Grotius’ equation of the words πολύς and πόλεμος – and the reason why it might deepen the understanding of Heraclitus’ fragment – is an awareness that war is not just one thing, nor even two. Rather, inside war itself, no matter how well-organized the manner in which the battles may be fought on both sides, great strife is brewing, such that it would contain not simply another war, but a whole multitude of other wars, all of which are themselves striving to burst out, so to speak. During a war, then, there will be innumerable conflicts that can easily flare up, and so from it, under certain circumstances, a general conflagration akin to the bellum omnium contra omnes could roar forth. Whoever manages to survive the devastation, would, in one way or another, have emerged with some distinct standing or status, for the time being at least, much as the fragment had suggested.

Precisely from just such a war, or even the eventuality of one, however, certain types of warriors would separate themselves – just as they would hold themselves aloof from any peace which would forget that it had been established by some manner of pact, and foolishly mistake itself for unity.

For these warriors, war itself would matter so much that they could not bear to witness it devolve into anything of either kind. Whether or not Jünger and his cohorts might be accounted amongst this select group, is a question I shall leave open. Much more significant in this connection, it seems to me, is Nietzsche’s appreciation of the old Roman warrior – the duonus, the man of honor who would not have hesitated to defend it in a duellum, and who did not fly before the prospect of pain – in whom he found embodied an admirably noble ideal. “Das lateinische bonus glaube ich als ‚den Krieger‘ auslegen zu dürfen: vorausgesetzt, dass ich mit Recht bonus auf ein älteres duonus zurückführe (vergleiche bellum = duellum = duen–lum, worin mir jenes duonus erhalten scheint). Bonus somit als Mann des Zwistes, der Entzweiung (duo), als Kriegsmann: man sieht, was im alten Rom an einem Manne seine ‚Güte‘ ausmachte.”*

That such a warrior’s own sense of self would have allowed him to fall for

* Zur Genealogie der Moral, first essay, sec. 5.
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

*Pro patria mori*

is quite doubtful. So perhaps *war, of everything the father*, may engender some *good*, after all, in the shape of a posture of the mind that is at once wary and independent.

The Fires of August  (Part II)  

(*August 27, 2014*)

Heraclitus was most profound when he addressed the *λόγος* at work in the human soul: here one is least sure one comprehends all that he himself meant by these terms, here the possibilities of dispute are greatest.* Yet it does seem to be the case that this *λόγος* designates at once the soul’s own inner drive towards knowledge and also the soul itself considered as one of the objects to be known: in both respects it is virtually infinite and *actually self-increasing*. What will be the significance of this energetic expansion in accordance with its nature? The question appears all the more pressing, as the self-induced growth of the *λόγος* is bound to generate much new strife in turn.

For this dimension of Heraclitus’ thinking, an especial sensitivity was shown by Blücher. The human soul as the object of its own drive to know, will always prove elusive. Any knowledge it manages to obtain of itself will only augment it further, and then the bits which it did comprehend will themselves become different than they were. Confronted with this alteration, however, it need not become despondent – indeed, the spirit or fire within the soul, or, in other words, the mind’s intellectual courage, can burn hotter in consequence.

Just because the human mind *can* enflame its inner drive to know, it *will do* so. By his unflinching espousal of this ceaseless activity, Heraclitus proved

* The two relevant fragments are the forty-fifth and the one hundred and fifteenth in Diels’ edition.
himself a visionary, for, said Blücher, “if we look at the development of the sciences, where every day something new is added and almost every four weeks a new science is made possible, then we must conclude that indeed, he was right, our knowledge of man is permanently growing.” As the intellect grows, it itself precipitates new conflict, inside, around, and apart from itself. “Unfortunately, the other parts of our mind are not growing as fast as science,” he added. “The intellect has outrun us, and science has been triumphant, because of, or thanks to, Heraclitus.”

In view of the great efflorescence of the sciences from the early nineteenth century onwards, many were the attempts to construe the sheer movement of the growth of knowledge as an evolution, that is, as going in a definite direction and even towards some sort of goal. The ultimate question posed by any such notion of progress, Heraclitus himself would have rejoined, cannot be answered, and hence it would be senseless to ask it at all. For him, by contrast, the increase is an unending end in itself, and thus he accepted, as Blücher put the point, that “the whole process of the cosmos leads to absolutely nothing. Except more development of energy, more quarrel, more strife, and that seems to have been his greatest joy.”

The fanaticism of detachment itself can develop into joy, if only it is pursued consistently and energetically enough. Strange joy! “To Heraclitus, the growing consciousness of the world, the growing world itself, is the only aim. There is no other aim. That makes the whole thing, finally, a bit grotesque. Doesn’t it?”

Yes, most likely – whenever this consciousness is pre–eminently visual in its operations. But if the λόγος within it seeks knowledge by means of the ears, and in so doing acts in accordance with dimensions of the λόγος in the cosmos which the eyes cannot hope to perceive, what then? In that case, would the growing awareness that is the endeavor’s sole aim seem quite so odd? After all, the fanaticism of detachment from what one sees and then knows, is rather different than an attitude by which one maintains some distance from what one hears and understands.

☛ At this point, and in order to reassure the reader that all this strife has not signified nothing, it is time to return to music. For music, as a unique power
in human life, has also expanded itself throughout the course of its own pur-
suit, much as knowledge has done. And would all the work that goes into
music (both the making and the listening) ever be expended without a great
drive to ascertain what orderly arrangements there may be in the cosmos and
in the human soul, not visually but acoustically? Accordingly, the λόγος in the
human soul increases itself by musical experience no less than by scientific–
visual observation, does it not?

Hence it is not only scientific knowledge strictly speaking, but also the
power of music which grows through, indeed, by virtue of the universal prin-
ciple Heraclitus called πόλεμος.

One instance of how this happens is afforded by those varieties of music
most closely linked to the life of peoples, namely, the folk musics in which
their historical experiences are given an audible shape, and specifically the
musical genres which follow on from wars, in shared mourning and com-
memoration: dirges, laments, threnodies, and the like. Here, at least some of
the time, the actual sounds of those wars, the sheer sonic tumult to be met
everywhere during them, are incorporated but largely tuned down, trans-
muted into the relative stillness of sorrow for the losses. These thoughtful cere-
monies diverge in their mood so far from the spirit of war itself, as themselves
to be in conflict with it – and yet it can also happen that, at some later mo-
ment years afterwards, the music played during them has almost impercepti-
ibly changed character and has itself become capable of inciting or strengthen-
ing a warlike spirit amongst those who are listening to it!

On the other side, the genres of folk music in which war is expressed di-
rectly – the various sorts of patently martial music, comprising fittingly hard
sounds – could well provoke something quite other than warlike spirit in their
audiences, even eliciting an antithetical sense of sadness, dismay, or horror,
however much they too may later find themselves in war’s midst.

In such vicissitudes of music as these, however unexpected they might be, a
listener may discern how the alterations in kind which Heraclitus had visual-
ized by his notion of the πυρὸς τροπαὶ, can also occur in the realm of emi-
nently acoustic phenomena.

Many are the ways by which war enters into music, and in turn is begotten
by it.
Both in remembrance of the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, and in order to exemplify some of the interrelations amongst music and war, some quite apparent, others considerably more subtle, and a few nearly imperceptible, I have put together a diverse though generally subdued Soundcloud playlist.

The first of the tracks is by Daniele Corsi, a composer in Rome of whose work one piece was featured on the website last month. This one is a composition for string quartet, “Perpetuum mobile,” in a performance given four years ago by the Cedag Quartet at the Forum austriaco di cultura di Roma.

Quite possibly the title of this piece might refer to the life led in large cities, full of incessant motion which seems to sustain itself, for the time being; right from the start one seems to hear a succession of tightly-wound people rushing onwards, arriving and going in groups, rapidly. These sequences sound like public scenes, their venue the city street, overhung with a tension felt by all: throughout these locales everyone moves very nervously. Listeners can feel the strain, as though they were there, too; when short passages of older popular music seem to flit by, one might infer that these people on the move are whistling or humming them to themselves, and then one begins to wonder about the precise date of all these happenings. These brief bits of the more popular music seem like they hail from the beginning of the twentieth century, and so the circle closes: something of that shared feeling of apprehensive expectation – the common attitude the present essay took as its starting-point – with which the coming war was awaited by many during the summer of 1914, did find a way to enter into, and to echo through, this piece of music. The listener is put on edge as a result, and once in this mood, when subsequently in Corsi’s work there is heard, not snatches of the popular music of a century ago, but bits of the melodies which circulate during our own times, a silent sigh may be let out: plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. And yet this very acknowledgement of a recurrence, in one further twist à la Heraclitus, could lend new strength to the λόγος in the soul which exhales it.

The second item is the main part of an EP put out via the Internet by In absentia, the moniker of a guitarist in Texas by the name of Ren Risner. Entitled Solitude, in it a solitary musicianship is presented, showing what the instrument in his hands can accomplish: Risner’s voiceless experiment upon
folk music, by the tuning of memory’s strings, does draw forth from within it
the melodies of loss latent there.

In one of his numbers, those melodies are themselves handled in an evoca-
tive manner. (The seventh and last of these tracks, a cover, has been omitted.)
In the fourth of them, “You and I,” in the acoustic foreground the listener
may observe a scene of leave-taking between the two people of the title – tak-
ing place with a suppressed undercurrent of emotion, as though this time
could well be the last – while off in the distance, out of sight but nonetheless
quite sharp and loud in their sound, other activities are ongoing. What could
they be? Why, perhaps one is hearing the preparations for the deployment,
conducted by means of an array of shrill sonic signals. Indeed, the setting of
this goodbye could well be an army base.

Through this piece of music, therefore, the listener may hear the echoes of
a few originally martial sounds, reverberating in a quite dampened manner,
and yet still somewhat piercing; as such these elements of the guitar–work do
or could refer to an actual experience, or else prompt the listener to imagine
what it would be like, in the fellow–feeling of a sympathetic act of reception:
while in Risner’s reverential hands the effect of all this is both understated
and affecting.

To my ears, therefore, “You and I” constitutes the emotional centre of Soli-
tude, and furnishes a map to the listeners who want to light out for the rest of
Risner’s album.

A song by the English duo now known as Whom by Fire – in their earlier
incarnation, they went by the name Caleb, and it was under this moniker that
I wrote about them around two years ago – is the third item. Oddly enough, it
too is entitled “Solitude,” and in the dark turn they give to the blues, Dan
Halamandres and Elyza Nicholas also wield their guitars quite evocatively.

In their “Solitude,” several forms of mourning in music are mixed to-
gether, in voluminous insistence, and so here too the listener senses the proxi-
mity of war. Probably it was always there in the blues as a kind of folk music,
but in this duo’s adaptation of it to other environs – they reside in Southend–
on–Sea – it comes to express some of the specifically coastal sorrows, and in
particular the uncertainties hanging over both the seamen and the sailors and
those they leave behind on land. Hence their blues takes on a naval shade, and
they make impressive use of some of the elements of maritime music, the fo-
cused singing, the shifting rhythms, the syncopic transitions: the characteristics which in themselves seem to anticipate how things may have been cut short while one was waiting as best one could.

Next is a cover of Depeche Mode’s “Enjoy the Silence” by the San Francisco band Uke–Hunt, courtesy of the Soundcloud page of its record label Fat Wreck Chords. This version, quite distinctively, is built around the frontman Spike Slawson’s ukulele, while alongside him, who is also the main vocalist, Uke–Hunt also comprises the saxophonist Jamin, the percussionist Randy Burk, and the bassist Joe Raposo.

Prominent in this rendition is the as it were polemical manner in which Slawson utilizes his instrument, making an aggressive rejoinder to those who prize it for its smoothness, while his vocal delivery, too, can be blunt, with some quite pointed vowels and ominous distributions of emphasis. So here it is not only words like violence which break the silence and come crashing in, but the music as well; those who wish to enjoy the silence will have to hunt elsewhere for pieces of music less obstructive of that nearly solitary dream, but aficionados of rougher or more unusual musical genres or sub–genres – Hawaiian neo–neo–punk? – may find much to like in this band’s efforts: a first album was recently released.

Fifth is another entire album, entitled Early & Late by the Danish ensemble Gáman, an initiative of the accordionist Andreas Borregaard, whose projects I’ve featured twice before, along with Bolette Roed on the recorder and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen on the violin. This trio comes together in a shared love of Scandinavian folk music, and in particular that of its own country, which is itself already diverse – all the more so when the Faroe Islands and, further afield, Greenland are included, as this album does. In several of its eleven tracks, these folk musics are performed in accordance with the “sound world,” as the notes to Early & Late remark, of contemporary music, the classical, minimal, and electronic kinds in particular, in order to see how well the old and the new genres will work with one another and thus “perhaps to reveal similarities and contrasts” between the acoustic comprehensions and self–comprehensions comprised in each of them. So this album, in the terms of Heraclitus’ fundamental conception, can give one to understand how music, as a sui generis activity of knowledge, may bring about the growth of the λόγος in the human soul. (Moreover, and as a further dimension of this ex-
periment, also featured are the trio’s performances of three recent works by the composers Rune Glerup, Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, and Sunleif Rasmussen.)

The interpretations of these folk musics offered by Early & Late, do at times seem to accentuate the quality of sorrow in them. But rather than attributing this characterization to a decidedly nostalgic attitude, as though in so doing the musicians had wished to intimate how near they stand to extinction, instead the interpreters’ choice seems to underscore the close proximity between the folk music and the people’s historical experiences which it had in some manner memorialized: first and foremost, wars and conditions analogous to them and the fatal consequences thereof. On the contrary, this datum of the history quite possibly constituted the musical brisance which excited the trio to undertake its experiment in the first place. If that is right, then so little were the trio’s interpretations performed in the mood of nostalgia, that their actual aim is to suggest how there still persists within the folk music itself the force of something like an unexploded shell. Hence the album is inscribed with an invisible but not illegible warning: the older music always should be handled with great care, as it remains, even now, very much a live power.

Next is a new work by the Amsterdam composer René Baptist Huysmans, no stranger here, with a title – “Cusp” – which itself is already resonant. – To be sure, the cusps he refers to are those within the composition itself, which “announce each time a different texture, with a different intensity or character,” yet these announcements of incipient transition, although they themselves are anticipated, become perceptible only once a slight interval of time has elapsed and the listeners, if they are listening hard, have been able to take a first reading of the soundscape in its new arrangement. Now, could one not with some plausibility, especially given our current circumstances, comprehend these small interstices of disorientation as akin in miniature to historical experiences of the brief interregna that are virtually impossible to ascertain in advance and afterwards nearly as difficult to define precisely? Therefore, right now at least, the ominous mood throughout “Cusp” is both untimely and timely. Hence, as unsettling as it may be in itself – and this work should unnerve the listener – it also seems to be an index of ...
Seventh is a short electronic work by the Israeli pianist and now also the electronica experimentalist Shiri Malckin, with the Parisian musician Jean–Marc Zelwer laying down a few small stones of his own by some phrases blown on the duduk. She has entitled it “The Salted Kiss” and so this lamentation – as it plainly seems to be – has for its occasion a poisonous intimacy. By the sound of it, here some sort of love has gone terribly awry.

The further one listens to this piece, or the more closely, the greater the sense that it is actually a dirge. Something is being laid to rest, in a confusion of distress, relief, and love – for love become grievous, nonetheless remains love of a sort. The inner indecisions of such a state of mind, are given expression in the variations which mark every slow step taken by this procession. By its very formality it affords all of them alike the room they need.

Another threnody is the eighth item. This “Lament for Young Lives Lost” is the work of the young South African composer Ernst van Tonder, and where the previous work was stately and reserved, this one is brief and even at points briefly overwhelming in the expression of its sorrow. – In the beginning the mechanical sound of a music box is heard (as though in a distant reprise of the horrible incident recounted in Jünger’s *Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*), and with the crescendo that follows, this work does more than invite the listener to grieve along with it. The composer has dedicated it to the “memory of all the young lives lost each day” – and here one hardly has to say how.

Ninth is a “Trauermarsch” by the German pianist Thoralf Dietrich. Last year one of his own compositions was featured here, a piece influenced by Erik Satie, and in this one as well the Frenchman has played a role, although Dietrich’s sense for composing is already rather distinctive, and if he follows through he could become the author of an interesting œuvre.

The last item is an older work by an English composer, the late Hermione Harvestman (1930–2012), whose first involvement with music was as a pianist, while later she became enamored of the Clavivox (one of the first synthesizers), and still later developed a considerable proficiency on the organ. The echoes of this personal history may be heard in “Most Kind & Gentle Death,” a work written in 1975, but at the same time, it is a memento mori which may speak to a listener at any point, and especially now, anno 2014.

Harvestman accounted for her productivity in a memorable way. “Music is a necessity I face on a daily basis – I think of it mostly as a curse – it haunts
my dreams, and insists on being made corporeal,” the composer said. “The only way I can get it out, is to record it.” So hers was an inner detachment of a sort which further thought may help the curious listener to fathom; but in the meantime, how soothing her piece sounds!

[For the moment, that meantime is the place to abide awhile in, as the end of August has nearly arrived.

In conclusion, accordingly, and occasioned by her name, an old Greek adage.

Θέρος, τρύγος, πόλεμος.
After the summer harvest, the war.

C. J. Darnieder

(August 29, 2014)

An “enthused enthusiast,” as he calls himself, is the young American classical composer C. J. Darnieder, and in his numerous works thus far (he is both productive and exacting, a frequent revisor of the already accomplished), the smaller pieces and also a symphony or two alike, one hears an exuberant style emerging, inscribing an impish sense of musical humor into the music and apportioning it with a deft touch. These compositions tend to take leaps, and even when they hew to a nocturnal mood, through their tempo and pace an overarching cheerfulness still buoys the listener up, as a countervailing power to all seriousness. Although they avoid elation and are not simply jeux d’esprit, frequently the results are light-hearted and sprightly.

Notwithstanding Darnieder’s conscientious declaration of his musical debts on his Facebook page, where the composers who’ve inspired him are
listed, with Stravinsky taking first place amongst them, the exuberance sounds to be his, whether one listens for it only on the whole, or follows it into the details – of which there are a great many in this decidedly non–minimal music, and of these quite a few constitute small moments or even miniature pieces of inventiveness in their own right.

Darnieder seems particularly inventive in adding a slight emphasis to what otherwise would remain a mere undercurrent, namely the competition for attention between the different instruments, or else their musicians – in other words, the nearly imperceivable antagonism which most often lends an undistinguished uniform tint to their mutual relations, is refracted inventively into a spectrum of acoustic nuances, a diversifying procedure which in some passages brings the music to scintillate.

On his Soundcloud page there are four works to be noted. The first, “Der Man Ferder Over” – the Norwegian phrase means the place where one crosses – a work for two pianos, was performed some years ago in Hannover (with a humorous pause elucidated in the notes under the recording), while the second, “Night Minds,” had its premier at Northwestern University, closer to Darnieder’s home in Milwaukee. Next are two of the “Preludes for Piano,” and lastly the third part, “Maypoles,” of his “Four Bagatelles for Woodwind Quartet,” where the mischievous humor runs rings around the title itself.

This Week’s Tracks from Soundcloud

(August 31, 2014)

Rather earlier than usual, today’s round–up – encompassing slightly more than the usual three tracks – starts with a bit of scenographic music from France and ends with a piece of choral music from Canada, while including a couple of works of more solitary music in between.
An electronic sound artist and composer in Toulouse, featured here once before, Christophe Ruetsch, has posted an extract of the music he devised for a theatrical production staged earlier this year in Paris by Les Sens des mots, a young theatre company in that city, directed by Thibault Rossigneux, of a play by Stéphanie Marchais entitled “Corps étrangers.” With a certain irony he’s called it “Tout – est – propre,” as this music is an intrusion, both understated and unexpected, by some other force or thing, which not least by its insistent softness did its share (presumably) to induce the requisite anxiety in the audience. (Although I have not seen this company’s production, nonetheless, taking this bande annonce as an indication, if at some point a video is made available, I imagine that it will be quite worth watching, albeit at times with one hand before one’s eyes.)

Of today’s tracks, the second is a performance by a musician likewise featured here before, the Utrecht pianist Danny van Straten, whose nom d’artiste is Gedrocht, of an energetic work by an American composer, Danny Buckley, called “Moonlight Funeral (Diana’s Final Breath).” By his capable hands the lunar glow of this piece is encouraged to shine, without extinguishing or obscuring the several dark flickers of melancholy that bespeckle the rapid procession overhead.

Third is a pair of versions of a new song by another artist featured here on a couple of occasions, the Canadian musician and singer known as Beaucrat – because each strikes flurries of sparks, I decided not to choose between them, electing instead to offer both. The number is called “Sometimes” and in either version it quickly conjures up the sights, the sounds, and even the smells of a dance-floor somewhere underground, a locale so cool it’s hot, and/or vice versa.

The fourth and last track is an exercise in pure fun by a Toronto band of singers who, the last few years, have been meeting once a week to do choral justice to some of the best pop songs, recording the results and sharing them
further via the Internet. While the members of Choir! Choir! Choir! – as they call themselves – range widely in their choices, one of them did catch my ear, bubbling over as it does with a shared vocal joy and so, actually in keeping with the inner tenor of New Order’s “Bizarre Love Triangle,” uncovering the spiritual in the original song!

A September Miscellany

(September 16, 2014)

With the autumn approaching, the time is right to tend to some of the tasks of maintaining the website, and so readers may notice a few small changes, mainly graphic in kind, here and there. Furthermore, there is an announcement to make: with an eye to extending the sources of the music I’m able to embed, I have opened a Spotify channel, and even though the Spotify embeds are in fact simply fancy links back to that system, still the possibility this membership affords me of putting together compilations which I’d be unable to assemble from Youtube or Soundcloud, and then of featuring them, outweighs the minor inconvenience to the reader. (Unfortunately, this other kind of embedded material will be accessible only to those who themselves have opened an account with Spotify and are logged into it; but those accounts can easily be set up, and moreover they are free of charge.)

Amongst the wealth of albums available on the Spotify website, I am particularly interested in older recordings which can be found on Soundcloud or Youtube only piecemeal if at all, most often in consequence of the copyright provisions. Classical music and recordings of poets or dramatists reciting their own work, are two of the kinds of albums which I have a mind to draw upon from time to time.

To begin with, and in order to familiarize myself with the workings of Spotify, however, my first of these playlists is devoted straightforwardly to that
influential pop–music phenomenon, New Order, from which, after many years, fresh music will soon be forthcoming. How the band will live up to its own singular past, of course, remains to be seen; but in the meantime this playlist is composed of twenty tracks of the music that was like a native element for many of those who first encountered it when they were in their teens and twenties. In assembling it I have drawn selectively from the less well–known numbers, proceeding chronologically, LP by LP, without passing over some of the energetic performances recorded for the recent album Live at Bestival.

Apart from spending the time to learn how to use this additional system (which evidently is no stranger to quirks and bugs), I also have a bit of a miscellany of music, from both Soundcloud and Youtube, which I should like to share.

By way of announcing his new album Some More Terror, issued by the Desire record label in France, the Canadian expatriate in England, Jack Duckworth, whose solo musical project (it is one of several) goes by the moniker Soft Riot, has posted one of its tracks on his Soundcloud page. This eerie piece of improvised electronic music is called “Private Lives at Dawn.”

Some years ago, a one–off collaboration between two Scotsmen (who may or may not have been living in Canada at the time), Paul Massie and Noah Shark, working under the name Le Peep, resulted in an album which is still available on their Myspace page. Yet it was two covers they did which really caught my attention, and because both have been presented more readily on the duo’s Youtube channel, I have put them into a short playlist there. The first is their cover of a mash–up of two different songs with the same title, “Bulletproof,” by La Roux and Radiohead, respectively, and the second is a version of Lady Gaga’s “Paparazzi.” Each is deliberately off–kilter or even a bit eccentric, musically and vocally speaking, but it’s probably on just this account that neither seems to have dated, even after half a decade – which represents nearly an entire epoch according to the official pop–music calendars of today.

A new song by the singer and songwriter Eli Lieb, who is currently pursuing his music in Los Angeles, “Zeppelin,” has been paired with a video on his Youtube channel. In this thrilling performance, as in 2013’s “Young Love,”
his engine is roaring – his pipes are even stronger this time – and so Lieb shows us what he can do, and how his career may be moving towards takeoff.

In London and elsewhere in the UK, the young singer Jasmine Thompson has been active on the tour circuit, as an opening act to Cody Simpson, while on her own Youtube channel she continues to make her recordings available to a wide audience. A couple of months ago she covered Beyoncé’s “Halo,” with a notable serenity, and I’ve added this version to the playlist.

Earlier this month, the New York jazz trio which I featured in January, Too Many Zooz, issued a second EP, entitled Fanimals, and like its predecessor it is also offered on their Soundcloud page. Meanwhile, in addition to numerous gigs above ground (they began as a fixture in the Fourteenth Street subway station), the three have also started to travel, performing in Maryland around a week ago, while an appearance in the Rencontres Trans Musicales in Rennes is scheduled for December.

Some months ago, the DJ and producer in Ghent, Oswald Cromheecke, already well-known under the moniker Boogie Belgique for his unique electroswing, which draws copiously – and very wittily – upon the sonic treasury of old Hollywood films, released a second volume of his album Nightwalker on the Bulgarian Dusted Wax Kingdom label. – Later this week he along with his live band will perform a couple of gigs in Cyprus, while next month an extended Greek tour is planned.

This Week’s Tracks from Soundcloud

(September 28, 2014)

Today’s selection of tracks from Soundcloud will come right to the point, as I’ve got a lot on at the moment (amongst which work on a few texts I hope to feature here soon). First of all is a track from a soon-to-be-released first EP from the sound artist Ashley Webb, put out by his own newly-founded record
label Lone Pursuits in Bristol, although they have now presented it in advance on both of their Soundcloud pages. Webb makes his music under the moniker My Blue Extremes, while the album, *Opaque*, concludes with a track entitled “The Time Spent with You.” Last but not least, this one, I find, opens the widest portal to the record as a whole.

☞ A London ensemble which I’ve featured before, the Portico Quartet, recently turned into a trio, the percussionist and Hang–player Keir Vine having left to pursue his own solo projects, while the drummer Duncan Bellamy, the bassist Milo Fitzpatrick, and the saxophonist Jack Wyllie have regrouped under the name Portico; and in anticipation of an LP which will be released next spring, the three posted one of the tracks on their Soundcloud page. With the assistance of the vocalist Jono McCleery, in “Living Fields” they have given quite a new turn to their abstract jazz sound, and if this track offers any indication, the forthcoming album will see them set off in a direction as yet un-wandered.

☞ The third of this evening’s tracks is a lovely performance of Ernst Toch’s third Konzert–Etüde for piano by Christian Seibert. This short work dates from 1931, but under this pianist’s capable hands its dissonances and slight syncopes don’t sound dated at all. (The recording was made more than ten years ago, as far I can ascertain, during a concert by Seibert at the Funkhaus in Cologne of several of Toch’s piano works, recently issued as a CD, from which evidently he has selected a few pieces to present on Soundcloud as well.)
This evening, the tracks are from Germany, or else about that country. To begin with, a set of “Vier erloschene Bilder” by a young experimental-minded composer in Berlin, John Strieder – a quadripartite work for solo guitar. These “pictures” (I do hesitate to agree with the composer that the best English equivalent for the key word in his title is “extinct,” and should prefer instead to translate it as “dampened”) were performed last year by the guitarist Carlos Bojarski in Buenos Aires; that city was evidently not entirely fortuitous as a locale, for throughout these four works themselves, and not only in the second of them, where its presence seems most audible, one may hear a number of the expressions of the Argentine capital in music, or perhaps even, more particularly, some of the moods correlate to its various genii locorum.

(In addition to his activity as a composer, Strieder also collaborates with the German band War from a Harlot’s Mouth. And apart from his musical pursuits, he is a painter.)

On his own behalf, Strieder says of his work that it only “depicts inner processes, being an expression of emotional, intellectual and philosophical content, conveyed just through the music itself” – hence those are all that his pieces represent. This disclaimer, of course, ought to be heeded and respected; nonetheless the whole external world will also be registered within them, in one way or another, and, in general terms, the existence of this influence no one could reasonably deny. (How does it imprint itself there: that is the question.)

☛ The second of tonight’s tracks is about Germany: “Leipzig 1989,” the work of the London composer Keith Gifford. “Nihilist music for a broken world” is what he writes, in his own words, and so it is not von ungefähr that Gifford should have dedicated – so it seems, to judge both by his title and the charac-
ter of this music – a piece to the events that occasioned German reunification, already a quarter-century ago, a development which has certainly played a considerable role in re-arranging the state of the world into its current shape. The nihilism one can indeed hear in his music, therefore, may be not Gifford’s own and instead that of our “broken world” itself, reflecting itself acoustically in his dissonances and jarring juxtapositions. And thus the intellectual attitude discernible behind this music, itself non-nihilist in character, in other words, would simply be a retrospective skepticism which, as time goes by, has better and better reasons for its distrust.

German conditions are also one of the topics addressed, although in quite a different way and less directly, in a response by the Berlin rapper Roni 87 to another rapper, recorded around a year ago but just as relevant now. This number, “Frieden ohne Freiheit,” rejects emphatically his adversary’s vocal advocacy of the old “deutsche Ideologie” in the version presently making the rounds, both in that country and elsewhere, broadly embraced in the streets as in the salons. In this song his denunciation is both instructive and pleasing – and also an expression of significant courage, given that he is taking aim at something which often purports to be nearly the general consensus.

For those who have trouble even imagining such a thing as German rap, Roni 87’s music – he recently released an album – demonstrates conclusively that the two need not exclude one another.

(On his side, Roni 87 evidently participates in a numerically small but quite outspoken current of opinion in Germany and Austria, the “antideutsche” scene whose positions are articulated in periodicals such as Bahamas in Berlin or Konkret in Hamburg, and put into practice by the activities of groups such as Café Critique in Vienna, to name some of the most prominent.)
Some Varèsean Themes

(August 1, 2015)

After quite a long intermission – which had its reasons, although expounding them would be both an imposition and a bore – henceforth I should now be able to devote sufficient time once again to this endeavor. The lengthy text which follows, was envisioned when I began it, some weeks back, as rather more compact than it has turned out to be; but the topics dealt with were resistant, and given that it had to be something fit to recommence with, after a while I decided to allow them and myself a free hand. Throughout this essay the reader will note more than the usual number of dates, locations, and references, which, although at first they might yield some confusion, are actually provided that one find one’s way more easily across a terrain which may appear quite unfamiliar. This expanse of historical material it seemed necessary to include in order to situate properly some of the work, thought, and place of one composer in particular who during a long career removed himself about as far as he could from all tradition.

A bit more than a month ago, under the aegis of the Holland Festival, a tribute was paid to Pierre Boulez (perhaps also in honor of his ninetieth year), his work “Répons” (in its third version) being given what was to the best of my knowledge its Dutch premiere. Twice it was played, in the enormous circular building on the Westergasfabriek complex where gas was once stored, by the Ensemble intercontemporain, the group he founded in the 1970s and for which he had first written the work some years later, positioned at the center of the space with the several soloists who’d been engaged for the performance stationed at points around the perimeter, while the audience was apportioned into quadrants in between, and then seated anew for the second of the two performances exactly ninety degrees further on, being shifted a quarter-turn to the left relative to all the musicians. A simple and effective expedient this proved to be, for a work devoted so obviously to the very experience of space, opening thus another route through it to the attentive audience. And indeed,
how different everything did resonate, the second time around! One change of location and the whole room was hardly the same.

At certain moments during the second performance, and precisely by virtue of the repetition, some musical influences upon the composer’s work which usually are rarely mentioned, if ever at all, could be heard rather clearly – or so they registered in my ears, at least: here a bar or two of film music à la Hitchcock, there some notes reminiscent of pieces by Ornette Coleman (an artist who will be greatly missed) seemed to shimmer through. Yes, along with much else these other works too are comprised in the space, or better, the spaces which Boulez’ own winds about, in active response to them.

The composer, alas, could not attend the Amsterdam event in person, let alone conduct the ensemble himself, as was his wont – but his original insight into the work remains incisive. He has pinpointed its special kinetic rapport with space: for, as Boulez has remarked of it, an experience of “Répons” should proceed like the visitor’s stroll down the spiral ramp in the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The gait one adopts while doing so – it is selected in answer to that unique architectural arrangement of space; and by analogy, then, some similar disposition ought evidently to guide the audience (seated though it is) in its virtual movement around the room while the musicians are at work delimiting it aurally.

Hence here the listeners are responding to music which itself is already a response. So, if these very terms contain anything beyond a misleading sedimentation of metaphor, one may well proceed to ask: to what, exactly, does it respond? The answer to this question does then seem to be: to spaces which, in some sense of the verb, speak. And thus their “speech” would represent the factum brutum prior to any possible acoustic encounter with them – although whether in this or that instance what they say will be heard at all, is another matter entirely.

In lieu of Boulez himself, the task of conducting “Répons” was assumed by the Ensemble’s current artistic director, Matthias Pintscher, and he discharged it well.

Boulez’ notion – or else, if one prefers, the notion which “Répons” can elicit from a listener – that spaces themselves are anything but mute, and
indeed may each harbor something like an intelligence capable of expression, attests evidently to his rather close kinship with an earlier and equally if not more path-breaking composer, namely, Edgard Varèse, whose body of work was honored similarly under the auspices of the Holland Festival some years ago. And so it is not exactly a wonder to find that the Ensemble intercontemporain, once again with Pintscher conducting, has posted on its Soundcloud page a recording by Radio France of a performance of Varèse’s “Amériques” it did, conjointly with the Orchestre du Conservatoire de Paris, in the Philharmonie in that city a few months back. The sound of their version is very clear, and so I should like to present it here.

Rendered with a crisp precision in this performance is the locus of musical modernism itself – the modern metropolis as an acoustic environment, a region extended chaotically and yet built up in accordance with pre-established topographical regularities. In both respects, one may reasonably assume that the locale which served as the model for Varèse, was his own adopted home, New York. From beginning to end, “Amériques” draws again and again upon the sonorities of that city, and even incorporates them into itself whole. To this characteristic of Varèse’s composition the musicians and the conductor (Pintscher, it may be noted, shuttles between Paris and New York) are conscientiously attentive, and the results sparkle.

With how much fidelity is the listener given to hear the vehicles, signalized by the numerous sirens, racing down the avenues during some emergency! Or the dissonances of crowds in the streets, with uproar, panic, and riots always latent on the scene, while many of the participants itch for the slightest excuse?

☛ That the composer’s creative imagination was driven by his great curiosity concerning space, seems to me to incontrovertible, but more tenuous and in need of substantiation is the idea that it was attuned to the metropolitan streets first and foremost, and indeed to those built according to a rectilinear plan, the consistent urban grid characteristic of Manhattan. Well, one could do worse than to consult Varèse’s own recollection of how he first became interested in the spatiality of sound – for the most potent of the terms in which he spoke of it do themselves seem like indices of any New York street.
In a newspaper interview* occasioned by his recent lecture in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Varèse recalled the early experience which first prompted him to inquire into the relations between space and sound. It was in his Paris years, during a performance of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony in the Salle Pleyel, that the activity or energy within space – considering how new the thought was, these terms should be understood as being merely initial approximations – was disclosed to him in something like an acoustic epiphany. “Probably because the hall happened to be over–resonant, I became conscious of an entirely new effect produced by this familiar music,” he told the interviewer, almost as though that experience had come to him amidst a clairvoyant (clairaudient?) trance or in a dream. “I seemed to feel the music detaching itself and projecting itself in space.” Hence the great familiarity of this piece of music had been set aside, for all at once the dimension of spatiality behind the music, so often overlooked, was brought into the foreground of attention, registering in ears now attuning themselves to its propulsive or even to its force–full nature. Orchestral music heard suddenly as being a sort of projectile – this feeling was primary and not mainly the derivate of some sophisticated conceptual analogy, as may become evident if one stops for a moment to consider Varèse’s experience and its ramifications, while heeding carefully the meanings of the very words with which he conveyed it, and especially those marked by that interesting prefix pro–.

The encounter in the Salle Pleyel had transpired decades before, and so one should not discount the possibility of retroactive adjustments or updatings having entered into Varèse’s recollection of it during the interval; yet to take him at his word, it may even have been the case that it was in that very moment that his subsequent relocation to New York was decided, the event predestining it that his later career would be continued there and in the quite different arrangements of space en Amérique.

Not for nothing did he state that the feeling which came upon him during that concert was an instance of the one “given us by certain blocks of sound” – where these blocks may well be akin to the urban variety, namely, the compact street–long conglomerations of architecture met with in a city like New

York. Or, if this interpretation of his choice of word seems to be too fanciful, one should consider the fuller description of those sound–units which he then proceeded to offer: “Probably I should call them beams of sound, since the feeling is akin to that aroused by beams of light sent forth by a powerful searchlight. For the ear – just as for the eye – it gives a sense of prolongation, a journey into space.” The metaphor is quite precise, for what kind of light–source did these last remarks refer to most particularly, if not to the headlights of automobiles in motion? And where, after all, would the greatest number of them have been found – vehicles in whose emblematic modernity a great promise was embodied? The answer is rather obvious. (This promise, for its part, played perhaps more than a minor role in having prompted Varèse to traverse the ocean to begin with – exactly one hundred years ago – and to start his musical career afresh in the United States.)

Reflect for a moment, if you will, on these beams or blocks of sound ... Even today, nearly eighty years after Varèse’s interview, his two ideas reverberate with the long rows of buildings and the linear thoroughfares that are such effective conduits of the intense lights and angular noises in New York.

Their character as just such conduits is made palpable to the eyes perhaps nowhere more intensely than on the screens at cinemas, quite possibly during the years of silent film even to a higher degree than in the sound–era which followed, for after all, they were not all that silent back then: one should not forget the music which very often was performed or played as an accompaniment in the cinema’s first three decades, as a means of underscoring the visual drama. (A case in point, where the scenes were already set up as though to invite music to accompany them: King Vidor’s The Crowd, from 1928.) For its part, Varèse’s “Amériques” – a composition devised, one may well claim, according to a cinematic pattern – conveys to the audience’s ears the same point about this spatial characteristic of the city streets.

Here the mise en scène – and the sirens one hears, repeatedly throughout the work, rushing forward and passing by, also help to define this setting – announces to the listener the main passages which follow, written as they were to comprise numerous sonic depictions of urban life, tumult, and danger. The Ensemble intercontemporain’s performance of “Amériques” presents these scenes with a sharp verisimilitude.
The existential uncertainties of the metropolis (whether they be actual, imminent, or imaginary in nature, matters little in this context) were to a great extent the topic of “Amériques” – but their importance for Varèse’s composition does not end there. In addition to providing the themes, they had a large share in energizing him and his musical creativity to begin with. Varèse himself was well aware of their role in this respect, to judge from what he confided in another newspaper interview,* this one conducted more than thirty years after the other, on the occasion of an exhibition devoted to him and his work by the Music Division of the New York Public Library. Although his remark reads on a first parsing as though it were nothing more than an impromptu utterance, as disposable as the paper on which it was printed, upon further reflection it too begins to seem weighty and dense – briefer, but just as much a well–considered statement as his comments three decades before had been.

Evidently the interviewer had asked him for his thoughts about New York City, and – thankfully! – found the remark interesting enough to quote. “It allows you to work,” was Varèse’s laconic reply, where allows probably meant something like encourages or incites. “The thing I do not like is what people call activities. What one finds here is not activity, but agitation. Much agitation.” Hence in this metropolitan environment, once the notion of activity is set aside, a close relation or even an intrinsic connection between the general agitation and an individual’s inclination towards work can be discerned, one which would remain more obscure elsewhere. Accordingly, one could plausibly conclude, this whole condition was a question to which Varèse had given considerable thought during his years there, if not even earlier as well.

And indeed, if that is the case, he did so not as some “theoretical” sideline or private hobby, but right at the heart of his own projects as a composer. (This would of itself suffice to justify the introduction of his statements here.) For one has good reason to suspect that this musical activity (if that word is still at all serviceable) was well–suited to be an experimental laboratory where the yoking together of energetic action (that is, in Varèse’s terms, agitation) and the predisposition to conscientious effort (or, as he said, work), a nexus which seems to typify the individuals in the modern world in nearly all their endeavors, could be examined carefully – when at the outset there is, not a

solid guarantee, but at least some modicum of assurance that with the results of this inquiry something worthwhile would be revealed, more or less veridically, and also a degree of certainty that the investigation might be undertaken in relative safety on the observers’ part. In a composition such as “Amériques,” for example, what the audience has been given to hear are sets of sonic representations, arranged in a quasi–cinematic manner, of the innumerable people, the denizens of the modern metropolis, who manifest that predilection for the effort called work as their second nature, amidst that great agitation wherein, as happens frequently, they encounter one another on the city streets or within other of its public spaces, while all of this is rendered into sound from a certain safe distance, as though by means of devices like the wide shots in feature films.

Just because Varèse did not neglect or overlook the intricate realities of danger, imperilment, and fear in the paradigmatic modern metropolis, as these tend to bestow a shape and a tone upon life as it usually is lived there, he found himself able, as in “Amériques,” with both fidelity and finesse to transcribe that tangled nexus of work and agitation into an orchestral music which, when performed as it deserves to be, has diminished in its pertinence or impertinence not a whit since it was first written, nearly one hundred years ago.

Yes, there are more than a few cheeky moments throughout “Amériques” – and this feature of the composition is not incidental.

Difficult though it may be to analyze adequately the nexus of agitation and work in the everyday life of the metropolis (and, increasingly, in the conditions of modern life generally), given how tangled this skein has gotten, Varèse does seem to have attempted something like just such an analysis in the medium of music. With what success, is a question that remains open, of course; but in order to furnish a point of reference, or else for the sake of a comparison, I should like to bring in a few observations pertaining to this very topic, drawn from another and far more ponderous source. Now, just because they are so complicated, even if the paths traced by them are by now no longer exactly untrodden, the following excursion will be rather lengthy. For this importunity I should like to ask the reader’s indulgence in advance.
At one point in an important essay written during the period of his philosophical career in which his major aim was to tell the story of what he called “Seinsgeschichte,” providing an account of its various epochs, as he envisioned them and their fateful succession, Martin Heidegger took care to recapitulate the transformations undergone at the outset of the modern age by the very understanding of what thinking itself is.

(For my part, I’d like to say clearly that I shall merely rehearse the account given in Heidegger’s essay, and do not mean to suggest that I accept it entirely or for the most part. Moreover, it should also be noted that his essay began life as a lecture, and that the textual adjustments it underwent before its much later appearance in print are evidently – substantial. My remarks pertain solely to one small portion of the published version, taken from a section which may even in fact have been added only just prior to the publication; therefore, although for the purposes of the discussion I’ll take him at his word as regards the dating, I also refer interested readers to the critical account of the alterations and their significance given in an article* by Sidonie Kellerer, a professor of philosophy at the Universität Siegen.)

According to Heidegger’s summary,** with Descartes and his new metaphysics of the mind as a thinking substance posed over against all other substances, the latter conceived under the denominator of their extension in space and thus understood to be of an entirely different kind, the two great desiderata of the modern age, namely, the calculability of all things and the conversion of knowledge into certainty, were expressed by philosophy for the first time. In accordance with this breakthrough, thoughts were re–conceived as being representations, that is, in contradistinction to the older notions of the εἴδη and the ἱδέαι, as inherently calculative and as seeking the maximum of certainty with regard to that which they represent. “Denken ist vor–stellen, vorstellender Bezug zum Vorgestellten (idea als perceptio),” wrote Heidegger of Descartes’ novel conception of what thinking does: it is defined as an intrinsically calculative act of the mind, and as such a fit counterpart to the calculat-


** See the ninth Zusatz to “Die Zeit des Weltbildes” (1938), in the 1950 anthology Holzwege.
ing conduct that was becoming ever more routine, more and more unavoidable in the most important zones of modern life (in science and in commerce, to name but two). “Vorstellen meint hier: von sich her etwas vor sich stellen und das Gestellte als ein solches sicherstellen. Dieses Sicherstellen muß ein Berechnen sein, weil nur die Berechenbarkeit gewährleistet, im voraus und ständig des Vorzustellenden gewiß zu sein.” This certainty itself does not remain static, but involves any number of energetic acts vis–à–vis that which is represented by the mind, acts whereby the latter reassures itself implicitly of its own powers, not least the superior power of imposing upon all those other substances some sort of uniformity, simply by virtue of its ability to represent them to itself as objects and as such as susceptible to being compressed together within one single representation – a mental image akin to a picture. “Vor–stellen ist vor–gehende, meisternde Ver–gegen–ständlichung. Das Vor–stellen treibt so alles in die Einheit des so Gegenständigen zusammen. Das Vorstellen ist coagitatio.”

In accordance with this rewriting, Descartes’ formula – “ego cogito, ergo sum”* – would actually have been something like an emphatic or indeed suspiciously over–emphatic declaration: Insofar as I remain capable of arranging things as objects and thus of assembling them together in my mental representations, I can continue to assure myself that I exist! Then, however, from Heidegger’s own summary in this Zusatz, it would seem to follow that once the mind embraces representation as its main mode of thinking, the procedure’s character of being an effort which it itself cannot afford to neglect for very long, lest its own power suffer from the disuse, will become more and more obvious to it, and thus the mind begins to find itself in a position where, whether it wants to or not, it must again and again approach and handle itself as though it too were mainly an object to be calculated, ascertained, collected. Arrived at this juncture, suddenly the entire profile of self–knowledge is altered. Henceforth, in general, the attainment of that knowledge cannot but be preceded by acts the mind has carried out upon itself, in order to configure itself into a perceptible form such that it may be known, i.e., represent itself to itself. And so it will be the case that performing these reflexive mental acts would require of the mind a considerable amount of work, while quite possi–

* Principia philosophiae, pt. I, VII.
bly affecting it with some *agitation* as well – for it may well be that by stirring itself up, it will succeed in raising the impetus it would have need of when it conducts the inquiry.

(Please note that Varèse’s two terms are introduced here again purposefully, as I don’t want to forget the raison d’être of the excursus, which is to cast a cross–light upon his brief but weighty remark.)

Heidegger’s account is thought–provoking (however much or little one may be inclined to accept it), and he too did not discard it, as amounting to nothing more than a provisional summary – no, some years afterwards, he recurred to the same theme, in order to treat it again, this time a bit more fully, and now explicitly with reference to the elevation of the will in the modern age as the most important power of the mind.

In “Nietzsches Wort ‘Gott ist tot,’”* an essay which was written in 1943, he suggested in effect that Descartes, though obviously without having coined anything like the term, had already had in view that basic determination of existence which the later philosopher was to call the “Wille zur Macht,” and that the contours of Descartes’ thought would be clarified best when this “will” were introduced into the analysis explicitly. If the thinking power of the mind became with Descartes above all its capacity of representation, as Heidegger had claimed a few years before, now he insisted in addition that “die Repräsentation ist hier keineswegs eine nachträgliche Darstellung, sondern die aus ihr bestimmte Präsenz ist die Weise, in welcher und als welche der Wille zur Macht ist.” This ante–version or forerunner of Nietzsche’s “Wille zur Macht,” in other words, is a *result*, and being a result it exists most potently whenever the mind has already represented something and in so doing transformed the thing represented into an object that can be calculated, depicted, manipulated, or collected, as the case may be, such that the mind re–confirmed to itself the present superiority of its own power of representation in the process – even though this is a process which, given the increasingly total eclipse of other modes in which the human being might live, must be repeated again and again by the mind if it too is to endure.

Consequently, the “Macht” which this “Wille” seeks to accrue for itself (and over itself) is a kind of knowledge of itself, or better, of the subject whose

* Like the other essay, it was published in 1950, in Holzwege.
will it is, whereby the very existence of this knowledge is a signal that the subjectivity of this subject has already been configured to be representable, as finding itself to be one amongst many agglomerations of calculable objects or properties. So, according to Heidegger, on the one hand, “innerhalb der neuzzeitlichen Metaphysik das Sein des Seienden” has defined itself “als Wille und damit als das Sich–wollen,” while on the other, “das Sichwollen aber in sich schon das Sich–selbst–wissen ist” – and thus he precipitated his readers into considerable perplexity. Which power of the mind, according to him, has actually made itself primary in the modern age and henceforth holds sway over the subject as a whole? He himself seemed to harbor some doubt about the answer – or perhaps he meant to highlight this state of conceptual confusion as such, and as a corollary, to imply that the will can most thoroughly dominate the rest precisely when it keeps itself in the background, as it were, operating secretly off–scene, or else as need be by putting on the cunning disguise of cognition, representation, or thought.

For, Heidegger contended, as in this respect no essential change had supervened since Descartes, the thinking subject still moves about in the space defined according to the requirements of mental representation, and lives ensconced in the configuration of being which he was the first to put into words. No less now than at the outset of the modern age, according to Heidegger, it remains the case that “[d]as Seiende (subjektum) präsentiert sich, und zwar ihm selbst in der Weise des ego cogito. Dieses Sichpräsentieren, die Re–präsentation (Vor–stellung), ist das Sein des Seienden qua subjektum. Das Sich–selbst–wissen wird zum Subjekt schlechthin.”

Yet if that is so, where then is the capacity which, as Heidegger alleged, had been raised to be the dominant power of the mind during the modern age, namely, the will?

At this juncture it is conspicuous by its absence.

Accordingly, Heidegger’s previous formulation which I quoted before, to the effect that the presence defined by the act of mental representation is the way in which and as which the will to power is, i.e., has its share of being, now appears – merely two paragraphs later! – to have been phrased poorly or hastily, at the very least, while Heidegger himself seems to have recognized his own lapse, though of course without acknowledging it. Without calling any attention to the correction, he proceeded to reverse himself and to identify, not
the result of the act of representation, but rather the very act of representing as comprising the primary locus of the will. This he did, silently cancelling his earlier remark, in a passage which, as it is inimitably Heideggerian, and moreover, seems to tremor near the edge of a slight delirium, I shall quote en bloc.


In these five sentences (they may each call to mind the sound of fingers tapping on a desk) Heidegger outlined a provisional solution of the problem. To summarize it: which contents are assembled together in the consciousness of this or that subjectivity, is determined by representational thinking, but that they are assembled there, and also how this is done – these more basic or primary operations pertain to the subject’s underlying subject–ness (which Heidegger, in an abstract neologism as unlovely in his own language as its counterpart would be in English, called its “Subjektität”), and are the sole prerogative of the modern will.

That with these sentences Heidegger himself believed he was offering a provisional solution to the enigma of the modern will, may be gleaned from his essay’s next move. For after one further sentence which added nothing, being mere literary padding, he began a new paragraph – and directed his attention elsewhere.

At this point Heidegger veered back to the topic he already had broached in the other essay five years earlier, namely, the question of the certainty which is made the criterion of truth during the age of representational thinking. The subject which thinks representationally, Heidegger now asserted, cannot be, should it fail continually in some manner to render itself assured about itself, its power of representation, and that which is represented by it. “Zur Subjektität gehört als die erste Wesensbestimmung,” he insisted, “daß das vorstellende Subjekt seiner selbst und d. h. stets auch seines Vorgestellten
als eines solchen sich versichert. Gemäß solcher Versicherung hat die Wahrheit des Seienden als die Gewißheit den Charakter der Sicherheit (certitudo).”

The precise mood, both grammatical and tonal, of these claims of Heidegger’s, phrased as they were in such an oddly official language, really ought to be examined closely, for they might well be saying something more than they seem to at first – but to do so here would lead me too far astray. In lieu thereof, I’d simply like to suggest that with these two remarks in 1943, Heidegger was recurring to his effort in the 1938 essay to define Cartesian certainty more precisely as being assurance, or better, surety, a quantum which representational thinking seeks to ensure for itself but which, not least by virtue of the very attention thus paid to it, could be rendered unsure with much more serious consequences than in earlier ages, given all that has been made to depend on it.

Without exaggerating all that much, the foremost implication of his two remarks can be elucidated as follows: the continual self-reassurance which must accompany the subject that thinks representationally – if it is to exist for long – in every one of its endeavors, all the calculating, depicting, collecting, etc., it undertakes, both conceptually and practically, is also made a more and more onerous task by the ever greater general ascendancy of this very same representational thinking.

Manifold accretions of uncertainty as the pre-eminent consequence, are met with nowhere else more obviously than in the modern metropolis, and hence this would seem to be the location where the sway of the representational thinking which abetted the gradual transformation of the world into a collection of pictures or images, as Heidegger insisted, is exerted most intensely.

Grave uncertainty – here I should like to attempt a definition of my own – can arise when the collisions of one “mens co-agitans et co-agitata” against another increase in number, frequency, violence beyond some definite point, a threshold whose actual moment of occurrence, however, will remain unforeseeable, imponderable, incalculable in advance. But even before that point would be reached in any particular instance, the general agitation raised by those collisions will already be pronounced (while also pointing towards, as though it were a harbinger, that even more extreme possibility), and moreover, insofar as the subject which thinks representationally must continue to do
so in order to endure, the agitations are quite unlikely of their own accord ever to abate very far, nor indeed for very long.

Meanwhile, the general condition of agitation – now turning back to Varèse’s usage of the word – with its propensity for escalating into outright conflict, will most likely heighten the inclination of individuals, and residents of the metropolis most of all, towards effort and indeed towards work – likewise in something like his sense – which is a mode of practical endeavor comprising various procedures whereby things are treated as and transformed into objects, in ways similar enough to the operations which representational thinking may involve, as to bring one to suspect that both processes might actually be intricately intertwined.

As for the concept of the will, it does not appear in Varèse’s remark as quoted – represented – by the interviewer in 1957; that is true. Yet is there not perhaps some way in which the essential operations of the will, in the shape it assumes during the modern age, as Heidegger proposed, albeit provisionally, in his two essays: namely, to supply the energy by which things are made into objects and then into mental representations assembled together within a consciousness, and to yield the self–reassurance which the subject of representational thinking always has need of if it is to continue to be – weren’t these dual operations which are intrinsic to the modern will, at least in Heidegger’s account of it, already rendered into sound in some manner and thus given to discerning audiences to overhear in “Amériques,” the composition which Varèse had finalized three decades before, in 1927? Yes, to my ears, it sounds as though they were.

How they were introduced into the music, in one or two representative instances, I shall now attempt to describe.

Of prime importance in this connection is a characteristic of “Amériques” which I mentioned earlier: its quasi–cinematic construction. Listening intently as the work progresses, one may well feel as though one is following the scenes of a feature film passing by on the screen – and not just any film, but one where the placement of the camera varies, at some moments locating the audience a bit off to the side of the action, as though we were bystanders to it, at others situating us in a rather closer proximity to it, or even directly within
it, amongst the protagonists. Accordingly, this music does comprise an analogue to the *point of view* of the dramatic cinema, the latter being a device which helps to delimit the definite scenes in a film and, so to speak, to pre-apportion the variegated attitudes that the audience will then be invited to adopt during each of them – that is, the entire gamut of responses to be aroused in the film-goers, from great antipathy all the way to strong sympathy or even to complete identification. (Whether in any particular instance one will choose to accept this invitation from the film’s side, and if so, with what manner of acceptance, is of course a different question.) Therefore, especially when the composition places us, the listeners, close by or even right next to its scenes of action (these scenes in which Varèse did so well represent the metropolis and its agitations), we are likely to infer both that “Amériques” is teeming with people, and that we are observing all that is happening from over the shoulders of one or more of the protagonists. How the latter perceive the metropolitan spectacle as it is going on around themselves – that too, consequently, is part of what this music evidently is giving us to hear.

So, thus situated at this interesting angle, by means of Varèse’s sonic likenesses we are given a chance to observe representational thinking in action, in the midst of an urban surfeit of agitation, objects, and images, and perhaps in addition – for those whom his music does strongly affect – an opportunity to examine this mode of thinking from the inside as well.

Around the 12:54 or 12:55 mark in the performance of the work by the Ensemble intercontemporain, when one has listened to the whole a number of times, the beginning of a discrete segment may be discerned, one which is demarcated by a shift in the audience’s implicit acoustic *vantage-point* (the compositional device analogous to the cinema’s *point of view*), and continuing for three-quarters of a minute, brought to a close at 13:40 by another such change of position. What this segment presents, is the repeated use of a phrase in a static manner, conjointly with an array of other instrumental sounds, so as to accentuate something like a momentary immobility, an abrupt pausing – a compositional tactic which is one of the signatures of Varèse’s style, as some musicologists have suggested.* Our inference while

this musical “Moment der Stasis” (as Nanz terms it) is occurring, might well be that here a protagonist is standing still and scanning the urban scene before him, transforming a number of disparate objects into a horde of images and then assembling these within a single representation – a perceptual and mental montage, one could call this twofold operation, yielding an interior panorama in which the elapsing of time has so little a share that this whole interval might seem to be fixed in a sort of present tense, the very condition of presence which representational thinking seeks, according to Heidegger.

This energetic three-quarters of a minute of music, for its part, can readily be understood as depicting some kind of tumult or political event in the city streets under the watchful eyes of the forces of the law – in the shape of deployments of police officers, for instance. Nothing has yet been undertaken, nor any clash actually flaring up, but no one on the scene of this agitation fails to consider what could happen next, and accordingly the atmosphere is electric with expectancy; one additional jolt and ... !

Here the music of each instrument, or else of each section of the orchestra, seems to represent a different participant in what is not quite yet, but is certainly poised to become, a mêlée in the streets.

All of this action is followed warily by the bystander whose evaluative vantage-point also seems to be ours, and thus we are well-situated to observe representational thinking from the inside, including those indispensable operations of the will without which, in Heidegger’s account, it would not continue to be.

With regard to this musical episode as a whole, there is still the task of ensuring that none of the various images which are being conjoined together into one single representation in this bystander’s mind, would come to overwhelm or to obscure any of the others (for such a result is all along a definite possibility); and hence, should one want to hear something analogous to the will in its operations (assuming that analoga for it are actually conceivable), what one ought to listen for is the aural evidence of some balance being maintained amongst these mental images. The tempo and the volume of the individual instruments, in this context where the set of instructions offered by a written score is at its least dispositive, are especially significant, insofar as here a finesse of musical restraint could convey to the audience some sense of just
such a modicum of order or arrangement being actively upheld vis–à–vis the images assembled into that bystander’s mental panorama. Evidently, then, in their recording of “Amériques” the sensitive co–operation between Pintscher, the Ensemble, and the Orchestre du Conservatoire achieves two things: it bestows an audible shape upon one of the composition’s own intentions, an intention which otherwise would remain at most half–implicit on the pages of the score, while also (as Varèse himself would say) allowing the performance to exemplify the inner workings of the modern will, the “co–agitatio” that is (per Heidegger’s provisional analysis) its exclusive prerogative.

Similar to this segment of three–quarters of a minute, but lengthier and rather more full, is the culmination of the work, which, in my estimation, begins around the 19:05 mark and runs through to the end. Here, one may fairly say, the mêlée which the earlier scene had announced as an imminent possibility, now explodes, the location probably having shifted in the meanwhile to one of the city’s larger squares. Although this time, consequently, from a somewhat farther distance, it sounds as though the scene is once again being watched carefully by one or more bystanders, whose vantage–point the audience has been invited implicitly to share. From this spot, therefore, we too are witnesses to the upheaval; just as before, the distribution of the sounds presents the scene to us as a collection of images assembled into one single representation, and so once more it seems plausible to infer that the power maintaining some order amongst them, is the will.

Because this later passage is longer and fuller than the earlier one, and/or because it is, not really the culmination, but rather the fulmination of the entire piece, the urban scene it represents seems to be very much more agitated, while its own “co–agitatio” is imbued with a considerably greater energy. Moreover, as there is no sound of anything subsiding right before the end, the usual obvious indication of orchestral closure during the moments when a symphony is rounded–off, evidently “Amériques” meant to leave the listeners in suspense, and the crisp precision of the performance and the eschewal of after–echo in the recording, bring this intention to expression as well.

This last scene of “Amériques” is also punctuated more often by the hiss of the sirens, and to some extent these too enter into the composition in the manner of mental images, collected alongside all the others in a representa-
tion by and for the bystander or bystanders. But on the other hand, they are understood to do so from afar, and hence one cannot claim that they also are present there in medias res, at least in anything like the same sense of the term presence – the quantum by defining which the modern will or indeed the will to power was said by Heidegger to exert itself and to be, thus at the same time offering an indispensable existential reassurance to the subject of representational thinking.

The acoustic dimension, it seems, is much better suited than the visual to convey the imminent approach of risks, threats, or dangers, from out of a distance advancing towards us (and then, if we are fortunate, receding as quickly away). How so? Precisely because through it the latter are conveyed and not represented. Therefore, once the ears transmit signals such as these to the mind, which does nearly instantaneously rise to recognize them, the ways in which the human being is then likely to be disposed to respond and to act on its own behalf, when they are proximate, in order to save itself, will evince quite a different character. Under such circumstances, the whole Man is to move together, and to distance himself from the peril, a sudden halt must first be called to the representational thinking in which the mind was engaged or entranced. To what inner power would this task fall? As it is a matter of an imperative act, would it not be the individual’s will, which thus commences in extremis to discharge another of its several responsibilities?

(Granted, on each of the preceding points I’m speaking very generally and passing over untold numbers of exceptions – but just so long as these remain the exception, some stratum of the common security will be preserved.)

Even in the modern age, the human will cannot so easily be reduced to the point where it could afford only one kind of security to the subject whose will it is.

If the acoustic dimension is fit – or attuned – by virtue of its own nature to register the entire range of different distances, doing so with greater precision than its ocular counterpart can hope to muster, then the critical account of representation which Heidegger’s two essays took pains to sketch out, wherein the paradigm is constituted by visual phenomena, does itself seem to be remarkably one-sided. To reach the results he did, however provisional these
may or may not have been, so much that is relevant was simply ausgeblendet in advance! And perhaps those results are compromised beyond repair: that is quite possible, the many protestations of the Heidegger–Versteher notwithstanding. Or at the very least, the train of thought I’ve summarized is evidently in great need of some amendment: this is a caution which any Heideggerians attempting to export this analysis of his tout entière to the sphere of sound, in order to comprehend the latter and its vicissitudes during the modern age, would do well to remember.

Although I myself would rather not dwell any longer on these bits of his two essays and their implications, preferring instead to hasten back to Varèse, his compositions, and his writings, one further round of commentary does seem unavoidable, I’m afraid, if only for the sake of speaking conscientiously of Heidegger’s shadow-side.*

Why did this other capacity of the will – to shut down representational thinking whenever exigent circumstances should warrant the suspension – not figure in the analysis offered by these passages in Heidegger’s two essays?

During the earlier period of his philosophical career in the 1920s, and above all in his main work Sein und Zeit, he inquired again and again into the kind of being which constantly finds itself thrown into existence in such a manner that its own facticity already indicates to it, whether explicitly or implicitly, that between it and itself there is always some distance. Accordingly, space too was a constant topic for him, along with the ways in which that sort of being (a being which the Heidegger of those years called “Dasein,” taking that ordinary German word very literally indeed) would orientate itself in and move about through it – and in this connection, however carefully he avoided using the term, one of his primary concerns was rather obviously the individual human will in the states in which it tended to find itself within the most modern of all modern conditions, in the metropolis.

As evidence for my contention, there is one passage in particular which stands out. It hails from Heidegger’s account of the mode of being which he

* For those who are interested not only in Heidegger himself and his case but also in the difficulties currently besetting his Gesamtausgabe, a recent article may be recommended: Adam Soboczynski, “Was heißt ‘N.soz’?,” Die Zeit, no. 13 (March 26, 2015).
termed “Befindlichkeit” – therewith pressing into service another of the language’s ordinary words, meaning usually something like a sensitive mood or a rather self–involved state of mind, but turning it inside–out in order to refer to the existential posture in which, when assumed by “Dasein” deliberately, the latter would attain the greatest awareness of the spatiality inherent to the kind of being that it itself is.

Because the three sentences comprising this passage are neither too long nor unnecessarily over–complex, I should now like to quote it whole: “Seiendes vom Charakter des Daseins ist sein Da in der Weise, daß es sich, ob ausdrücklich oder nicht, in seiner Geworfenheit befindet. In der Befindlichkeit ist das Dasein immer schon vor es selbst gebracht, es hat sich immer schon gefunden, nicht als wahrnehmendes Sich–vor–finden, sondern als gestimmtes Sichbefinden. Als Seiendes, das seinem Sein überantwortet ist, bleibt es auch dem überantwortet, daß es sich immer schon gefunden haben muß – gefunden in einem Finden, das nicht so sehr einem direkten Suchen, sondern einem Fliehen entspringt.”*

That last remark is the crux. The flight to whose primary existential significance Heidegger drew his readers’ attention – by what would it be actuated if not the human will recoiling from something which it very strongly does not want? Now, how is this unwanted something likely to be detected in the first instance? By the ears far more readily than by the eyes. Indeed, generally speaking, the dimension of audibility takes precedence whenever it happens that “Befindlichkeit” holds sway – for these moments, one surmises, come only infrequently. Thus, he insisted, during such a period an existence is aware of the distance that it itself is, not in the more common mode of perception, but by virtue of a sort of concurrent tuning of itself, conscientiously performed. And similarly it would be in a pre–eminently acoustic encounter that “Dasein” had found itself, as Heidegger suggested, and likewise with the even earlier moment in which it first fled from something else.

Indeed, throughout all of Sein und Zeit it is not only the labyrinthine reality of space which seems to have been one of his main preoccupations, but the intrinsic complexities of sound as well. Implicit as the setting of these inquiries, their “Horizont”** as Heidegger himself would have said, is the modern

* Sein und Zeit, siebzehnte Auflage, §29. ** §69.
metropolis; and the subtle stagings whereby it shimmers through in the back-
ground should not be forgotten – if one really wants to comprehend his book
properly.

During the next period in his career, however, Heidegger’s interests would
narrow substantially in their scope, at least insofar as he chose to express
them in print.

Space continued to figure in his thinking when he set himself the task of re-
counting his “Seinsgeschichte,” Heidegger’s overarching aim in that next
period, but now it was no longer the spatiality inherent to “Dasein” which
seems most to have interested him. What most appealed to him instead was
the space delimited by truth as the latter had been defined by a few thinkers
throughout the different ages of that history, and most lastingly, according to
Heidegger, by Plato, whose notion of ἀλήθεια he very often glossed during this
period of his career as “Unverborgenheit,” that is, an active de-concealing of
something in a place correlate to just this act, opened up for it in particular,
whereby at the very same time much else was obscured. To such a location as
demarcated by Plato, Heidegger returned again and again in later chapters of
his recounting of the “Seinsgeschichte,” at times for the sake of contrast, in
order to throw the very different thoughts of some other thinkers into sharper
relief, at times so as to discern the inconspicuous or hidden role which still
was played, in the thinking of those who seem most antithetical to Platonic
philosophizing, by that original outline of the place of truth.

Thus, in Heidegger’s 1943 essay, at the point when he spoke of the way in
which the modern will to power is – without offering an explicit clarification
of whether he was referring to Nietzsche or to Descartes or to both – he did
not end there. Rather, he proceeded to circumscribe what he called the truth
of this will to power. According to Heidegger, the latter’s mode of being “ist
zugleich die Art, in der er sich selbst in das Unverborgene seiner selbst stellt.
Darin aber beruht seine Wahrheit.” Its “Wahrheit,” therefore, occurs within a
specific location, a space that encourages acts which dispense with conceal-
ment, as though in a reprise of the older Platonic “ἀλήθεια,” and this antec-
dent dimension of truth which stood behind the thoughts of even the modern
thinkers, was itself what Heidegger had set out to expose. “Die Wahrheit, nach
der jetzt gefragt wird,” he insisted, “ist demnach nicht jene, die der Wille zur
Macht selbst als die notwendige Bedingung des Seienden als eines Seienden
setzt, sondern diejenige, in der schon der Bedingungen-setzende Wille zur Macht als solcher west.”

So it seems Heidegger, in 1943, suspected the will to power of extending itself within something like a *space* – albeit one akin only to a very limited degree to the space through which modern human existence actually moves about, the spatiality he had indeed inquired into back in the 1920s, most searchingly in *Sein und Zeit*.

Along similar lines, in the 1938 essay, too, space is not ignored as a topic, yet it was a severely truncated kind of space with which Heidegger dealt. (The very title of the text, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” as opposed to what one more nearly would have expected, namely, “Das Zeitalter des Weltbildes,” may already alert the reader that in it the topic of space, where *space* is taken in the primary sense of the term and not as a source of metaphors, will play quite a minor role.)

In 1938, by way of distinguishing the procedures of representational thinking à la Descartes from the older θεωρία, Heidegger had this to say: “Das Vorstellen ist nicht mehr das Vernehmen des Anwesenden, in dessen Unverborgenheit das Vernehmen selbst gehört und zwar als eine eigene Art von Anwesen zum unverborgenen Anwesenden.” No, the *presences* revealed by Cartesian perception are of quite another sort, Heidegger was right, that seems to be the case – but even so, their disclosure does take place in a *space* whose affinities to the domain of ἀλήθεια, and whose divergences from the real spaces of modern human existence, remain considerable. One has good reason, therefore, to doubt the veracity of his claim that the so-called *Zeit des Weltbildes* holds all of us moderns in thrall. And actually, Heidegger’s very proposal to that effect may itself have been devised by him to serve as something like a Platonic *myth*.

If, with the task he set himself of recounting his “Seinsgeschichte,” Heidegger found himself required to turn back so fully to Plato, it may begin to explain why his previous focus on *space* was narrowed down – or else *how* it shrank and was transformed, while his earlier concern with *sound* nearly vanished altogether. And much more specifically: what also may then become a bit more explicable, in the passages from his two essays which I’ve cited, is the absence there of any indication of another capacity inherent to the human will, such that it, as I surmised, could spring into action during situations of
danger to the subject – on Heidegger’s part a considerable oversight. (Merely an inadvertent omission? That remains to be seen.)

Evidently Heidegger’s basic attitude towards the public realm as such underwent a substantial change as he entered into that new period of his career, circa 1930. During the 1920s his self-positioning had been considerably more open, in a word, and this cautious openness had the upper hand throughout the constructive philosophizing in Sein und Zeit; but then the winds shifted and, in response to the vicissitudes of those years, he may have seen himself pushed to adopt something like the older Platonic stance vis-à-vis political life altogether: superior condescension as an inward posture.

Thus it could have happened that, for better or for worse, Heidegger came to embrace the mental reservations which were summarized very well by Pascal in a famous pensée.* When the philosophers of antiquity such as Plato had involved themselves in political affairs, he affirmed, they did so light-heartedly and even a bit in jest, for such involvement remained for them “la partie la moins philosophe et la moins sérieuse de leur vie,” whereas “la plus philosophe était de vivre simplement et tranquillement.” In simple tranquility: hence it was to bolster the shelter they had found in their βίος θεωρητικός that they turned their attention briefly to the βίος πολιτικός; so whenever “ils ont écrit de politique, c’était comme pour régler un hôpital de fous,” an undertaking requiring of them certain precautions if they were to address those inmates effectively, “et s’ils ont fait semblant d’en parler comme d’une grande chose, c’est qu’ils savaient que les fous à qui ils parlaient pensent être rois et empereurs.” Such politic stratagems were they to employ, faced with the loudmouths whom privately they deemed mad or bad, and thus in their public role those philosophers “entraient dans leurs principes pour modérer leur folie au moins mal qu’il se pouvait.”

Now, mental reservations of such a sort did not prevent Plato from journeying a number of times to Syracuse in order to advise the tyrants there – indeed, they may have helped to prompt him to go. And if one were so inclined, one might wonder whether Heidegger’s political involvements were motivated by somewhat similar considerations with regard to the political realm.

as such. Yet to attribute such a rationale to him would already amount to a very charitable explanation of his conduct in 1933 and afterwards, far more charitable than he himself deserves – here I use the present tense advisedly, for his case, as the recent publication of the *Schwarze Hefte* has again underscored, is anything but closed.

On my own behalf, before proceeding any further, I should like to state (for whatever it’s worth) that I have never been convinced by the numerous attempts to uncover already in Heidegger’s works of the 1920s even the beginnings of the trains of thought which come to prominence so reprehensibly in some of his publications during the 1930s and later – not to mention his other public involvements – let alone the clichés, prejudices, and hatreds he entrusted to his notebooks. Upon his opus, *Sein und Zeit*, whatever else one might say about its strengths and its weaknesses, nothing of all that rubbish casts a retroactive shadow, even now, in my opinion.

The next decade, the 1930s, really did bring about a major change in him and – what is of greater relevance here – his philosophical profile, it seems to me. Hodological turns of phrase and metaphors began to abound in his writings, occurring there more and more frequently, one might even infer, as his philosophical interest in the real spaces of modern existence receded: throughout this period of his career, to take him at his word, he envisioned his thought traversing *Holzwege* which his readers had never before espied, and posting *Wegmarken* behind itself for their benefit. And so in Heidegger’s new attitude one might perhaps discern something of the inward insouciance which, Pascal suggested, had secretly accompanied the foremost philosophers of antiquity when they undertook to play some role in the madhouse of political life.

On the other hand, there remains a disturbing proximity to acknowledge. Namely, the obvious nearness of some of the themes Heidegger spun out in public during those years, and above all his suspicion that representational thinking, by virtue of its intrinsic determination to calculate and collect everything it can, has taken control of the modern world entirely, to those passages in his notebooks wherein a blatant paranoia is exhibited – the one demarcated by words like *Machenschaften*, *Geist der Rache*, and *Weltjudentum*. These grotesque thoughts he reserved during his own lifetime for himself and his own inner circle, then, are displaying themselves today as offering some-
thing like a cartographic legend for at least some of the untrod paths Heidegger prided himself on having opened up in the public presentations of the various chapters of his “Seinsgeschichte.” Hence the thought-terrain of his inquiries during that period, far from being especially new, to a high degree had instead been plotted out well in advance, pre-arranged in its contours by a few persistent topoi. Those published results, Heidegger’s synoptic 1938 essay in particular, always seemed eerily predictable, and now one can begin to say why: any subsequent editorial alterations notwithstanding, their author, within the shelter of his private thinking, had fallen victim to the idées fixes of the “oldest hatred” – anti-semitism. (A malignancy which, to everyone’s misfortune, is currently emboldening itself once again.)

No, in my opinion, Heidegger cannot plausibly be excused as though in his conduct in 1933 and later he had attempted to follow the example of Pascal’s Plato. Nor can beneficence be attributed to him as a motive. His case was nearly the opposite, as he himself came close to admitting outright, in one uninhibited entry in his notebooks: “Der Nationalsozialismus ist ein barbarisches Prinzip. Das ist sein Wesentliches und seine mögliche Größe. Die Gefahr ist nicht er selbst – sondern daß er verharmlost wird in eine Predigt des Wahren, Guten und Schönen (so an einem Schulungsabend).”* He might as well have jotted down: the more the National Socialist regime does its worst, the better it will be. And told himself to suggest this very point in public in the times to come whenever and however he could – yet to do so with a cunning subtlety, not by clear words but through “Winke.”

With Plato’s own temperate self-justifications, of course, a reckless incitement such as Heidegger envisioned himself undertaking, beyond the bounds of any responsibility, has nearly nothing in common. His motivation in all this, on the contrary, very likely partook of the overwhelming frivolity of the intellectual élite (or those who deemed themselves such) between the World Wars, as dissected unreservedly by Hannah Arendt.**


** See The Origins of Totalitarianism, pt. 3, chap. 10, II, “The Temporary Alliance Between the Mob and the Elite.”
But to remain with Pascal’s pensée: had Heidegger himself, if only in the confident privacy of his notebooks, become even more unhinged than were many of the “fous” whom he addressed from time to time in public during those years?

This question is not posed rhetorically – for were there not perhaps significant inner connections between the representational thinking Heidegger denounced in his published essays, on the one side, and the vicious paranoia of some of the private thoughts in his notebooks, on the other?

Not wanting to extend the discussion of Heidegger and his failings much further, however, here I’ll mention only a few points which might bear upon an answer to this question.

1. Representational thinking, as Heidegger anatomized it in the passages I’ve been discussing from his two essays, takes visual perception as its paradigm, and must constantly be enacted over and over if its subject’s continued existence is to be assured. In both respects the account he provides of it refers to Descartes as the innovator of modern philosophy – and so one might well turn back to the passage* where he introduced the phantasmic hypothesis of an evil spirit who had established all the appearances of the world precisely in order to deceive him: “Supponam igitur non optimum Deum fontem veritatis, sed genium aliquem malignum, eundemque summè potentum, & callidum, omnem suam industriam in eo posuisse, ut me falleret.” The very idea of such an exceedingly energetic, industrious, and ill-disposed being, Descartes then proceeded to deny, but nonetheless this hypothetical personage seems to have haunted his thinking subsequently: and so, if the new “cogitatio” he was attempting to define were the iterative act of the mind he thought it to be, would such a paranoid conception not have had to be exorcised likewise, that is, again and again?

2. Hence representational thinking, in its Cartesian definition, may bring with it a new necessity of intra–mental self–discipline, a novel kind of house–keeping or indeed hygiene for, by, and in the mind – while yet by its very nature rendering the latter effort all the more difficult to sustain. Did Heidegger, when he sought to think Descartes’ “ego cogito” through from the inside, somehow overlook this grave consequence, and fail to implement cer-

* Meditationes de prima philosophia, 1.
tain intellectual precautions on his own behalf? Had he perhaps exposed himself unwittingly, not so much to some paranoid ideas in particular, but rather to an antecedent inclination of the modern mind towards the condition of paranoia as such?

3. If only because representational thinking à la Descartes is essentially both visual and iterative, it will tend once practiced past a certain point to become a need of the mind, an activity which the latter itself can no longer do without; thereupon it soon begins to impinge on the mind’s other modes of taking thought, in effect pushing them out or crowding them from the scene, as more and more images are assembled in the consciousness, all requiring the mind to pay some quantum of attention to them, in return for which it is reassured in one respect, energized and agitated in another: then is it quite so surprising, during the period in which Heidegger experimented with Cartesian thought by situating his own mind right in medias perceptionum, that his publications were frequently marked by an aggrieved undertone, while he would at times burst into a loud rage in his private writings?

When, in his 1938 essay, after specifying the essential difference between the much older sense of what actually took place when a truth was revealed, and the modern understanding of intellectual perception in its operations, as inaugurated by Descartes, Heidegger went even further – or let himself get carried away – and characterized that difference with a sudden barrage of imagery, as though he himself were all at once caught up in a momentary flashback or a hallucination. The sentences themselves rush on and yet jerk about; in them notes of disapproval clash with a conspicuous fascination: thus I shall simply quote it all in its delirious entirety.


Phrased in such wild terms, here the interior strife otherwise contained within representational thinking in its Cartesian version – in which form it
may constitute the underlying cause for the latter’s tendency towards paranoia – is let out.

According to this passage of Heidegger’s, the subject of representational thinking perceives all things according to one fundamental law: the attack. Hostility is its driving force, and above all towards/against itself. It represents itself to itself as though it were at war with itself, the distance between it and itself becomes a battlefield traversed in quick raids, for somewhere – but where exactly? – the enemy is hidden. It will not show itself; it must be represented and rendered safe: but precisely that is what it seeks to evade. Thus does this subject’s freedom propel it one way, its security beckon to it to take another. Then the agitations of its irresolute self-consciousness, jolting it to and fro, will practically guarantee that the subject which thinks representationally can never capture itself for very long. And finally – to round off this picture of Descartes’ “ego cogito” in action – in flailing about so, from repercussion to repercussion, the main by-product will be a burst of energy.

Throughout Heidegger’s 1938 essay, constructed it seems as a phantasmagoria of just such pictures of philosophical developments in the modern age, one of the topics was indeed the space correlate to the subject of representational thinking; but, in keeping with the implicit “horizon” of his explorations of the “Seinsgeschichte” generally, whenever he described that space the latter had been defined narrowly, indeed, too narrowly, already in advance. Although it certainly no longer comprised the simple and tranquil environs where, Pascal said, the thinkers of antiquity had spent the most philosophical part of their lives, nonetheless in Heidegger’s account that space was essentially private in character – and in effect one soundproofed on all sides.

If a case of paranoia (or some similar disturbance of mind) is ever a self-inflicted condition, the most basic proximate cause for its outbreak might be a prolonged exposure to a surfeit of visual perceptions or impressions without the dimension of significant sound that should accompany them, really or virtually: those who see everything while lacking a sonic key by which they would rightly understand anything, may turn in their disorientation to concoct all manner of unbalanced or outlandish “explanations” instead.*

* Compare the “Exkurs über die Soziologie der Sinne” in Georg Simmel, Soziologie, chap. IX, though his ideas are taken here perhaps further than they can bear.
The subject of representational thinking as Descartes had conceived of it, and thus at times Heidegger as well, may have found itself in just such a quandary: this point one could infer from his phantasmagoric essay.

And yet all of this was set at a far remove from the real spaces of modern and especially metropolitan existence (the existence which had indeed delimited the “horizon” of Heidegger’s inquiries during the previous period of his career) – even if that peculiarly suspicious cast of mind does come to infiltrate those spaces over the course of time. Another and more adequate understanding, as regards the eminence in modernity of the calculative thinking that seeks the maximum of certainty for itself (and is rewarded or reprimanded thereafter by surety’s withdrawal), would quite likely have followed, had so much attention been paid not to the formulations of Descartes’ “cogitatio,” but rather to the disposition of the mind that his contemporary Hobbes termed “reason”* as it grew ever more powerful and indispensable within “society,”** that is, in Hobbes’ definition the newly ascendant realm where private interests were pursued in public by those whom only their fear of one another, their anticipatory distrust of each other’s intentions,*** intentions of which they all would be made aware by introspection into or an inward reading of their own,**** had pushed and held together there to begin with. And should Heidegger, in some alternate universe, have opted to explore these other works nimbly and with an open mind, perhaps as a prophylactic side-benefit he would never have found himself amidst, or inflicted upon himself, the now not so private vices he confided to his notebooks.

Well, flights of fancy aside – in any event, much more acutely than Descartes, it was Hobbes who first discerned and analyzed the beginnings of a new configuration of private and public spaces, under the sway of common fears which delivered the indications of their power not only by sight but also, and perhaps even more significantly, by sound.

At this point, finally, I can return to “Amériques.”

* Leviathan, pt. 1, chap. v. ** Pt. 1, chap. XIII.
*** Elementa philosophica de cive, chap. 1, sec. 2.
**** Leviathan, Introduction.
Varèse composed this piece of music as though it were cinema. And not just any sort of cinema! Scene for scene, in its inner arrangements it was already virtually a sound–film – this at a time when the silent era had not even yet reached its end. A moving picture in sound of New York as the paradigmatic metropolis: that was the setting for the action, the several events in the streets which were whisked past our ears. Earlier I described in a bit of detail their staging and their content, as I’ve heard and understood them; now, in a more general way, I should add that these spaces which the work represents to us seem to be a domain that, at one and the same time, is public in character and yet serves largely as a stage for private lives. This is an urban environment which was built up from the start according to the requirements of modern society more or less as first defined by Hobbes – as being founded precariously upon the mutual opposition of private interests – the society wherein the public pursuit of private interest does not so much subordinate every action to the accumulation of wealth (although this latter motive certainly may seem to play the largest role), so much as it ensures, at an even more fundamental level, that nearly all undertakings will be assessed in the terms of success or failure, thereby imposing in advance a specific form upon most endeavors, at the behest of the inner evaluative dispositions of precellence and comparison.*

City–dwellers leading nothing more nor less than their private lives within the public space of the metropolis – where specifically in “Amériques” is this development given listeners to hear (as though it were simultaneously flashing by on a screen before our eyes)?

From the very beginning of the music, the sense that it is a narration, is pronounced, as a few instruments start up softly, in an establishing passage with their sound focused at one spot, in the middle of a room otherwise empty of life. Swiftly then it begins, this rapid quasi–cinematic compression of “shots” (their start–times are marked here as precisely as I can by the clock). Someone is waking up and stumbling out of bed (0:38) – trying to shake off his drowsiness (0:45) – a long day’s ahead and already he’s trying to think about what he has to do (0:51) – realizing how soon he will have to be at work (0:57) – though concentrating on anything is hard (1:01) – in New York it’s summertime and even with the window open the heat overwhelms everything

* Elementa philosophica de cive, chap. 1, sec. 2.
he straightens himself up, running his mind once again over all that he has to deal with during the day ahead (1:23) – the telephone rings and rings but he’s not a second to spare now for it (1:55) – his haste and inner tension are palpable and rising (2:18) – through the window the sounds down in the street, while at other moments muffled or almost extinguished, do burst in, when as now their source is near or right before it (2:23) – so the sirens start to stream into the apartment as one police–car after another races by at full speed outside (2:26) – almost as though they’re also a signal that it’s time to head off to work (2:49) – out his door he goes (2:54) – down a flight of stairs (3:01) – onto the street (3:05) – and into the urban maelstrom (3:08).

To be sure, this intro will in all likelihood present different facets of itself to each individual listener; my transcription of its scenes is probably going to diverge substantially from others’, should they undertake to itemize their perceptions: but such variations aside, the main point, I think, is that this music, as though it were a story, one narrated selectively by the arrangements of a quasi–cinematic montage, follows closely behind a city–dweller through his ordinary adventures, his small private odyssey within the urban environment during some unity of time, in the course of not even a full day but more probably a number of hours.

If the foregoing account of the music seems at all plausible, then the intro to “Amériques” will indeed orientate the listeners’ notion of what it is that they are hearing throughout the rest of the piece. Thus it would serve as the key to the tale told by Varèse’s composition: the peregrinations of a New Yorker from the first hours of a day starting like any other. And during the virtually visual evocation of this metropolitan environment which follows the intro, tracing some of the paths he takes through the city streets and marking some of the stopping–points along the way, a listener may well comprehend that the music could render it so well precisely because, from its very beginnings, it was as though established to be, not so much a backdrop for various kinds of self–display, drawing this or that kind of attention to themselves there, as simply a setting within which, in the broadest terms, private interests were pursued further, its nominally public character notwithstanding.

So: the intro of “Amériques” offers a key to the interpretation of the rest. From amongst the several operations which may reasonably be expected of an audience or a solitary listener, therefore, Varèse evidently wished to empha-
size two in particular, interpretation and orientation, and to bring them very close together, or even to suggest that, in relation to his own works, they are in effect one and the same.

Around a decade after he completed the revision of “Amériques,” Varèse set out on the lecture circuit, and, having accepted an invitation from the New Mexico Association on Indian Affairs, he delivered the talk which I mentioned earlier,* on August 23, 1936, at the Mary Austin House, in Santa Fe. Even though it was in fact entitled “Music and the Times,” in the course of it the composer made certain to comment upon the possibilities opened up by contemporary technology to those who would explore the nexus between space and sound. One passage, in which the composer appears to be speaking above all of his own compositions, is especially relevant in the present context, and so I shall quote it whole.

“Today with the technical means that exist and are easily adaptable, the differentiation of the various masses and different planes as well as these beams of sound, could be made discernible to the listener by means of certain acoustical arrangements. Moreover, such an acoustical arrangement would permit the delimitation of what I call ‘zones of intensities.’ These zones would be differentiated by various timbres or colors and different loudnesses. Through such a physical process these zones would appear of different colors and of different magnitude, in different perspectives for our perception. The role of color or timbre would be completely changed from being incidental, anecdotal, sensual or picturesque; it would become an agent of delineation, like the different colors on a map separating different areas, and an integral part of form. These zones would be felt as isolated, and the hitherto unobtainable non–blending (or at least the sensation of non–blending) would become possible.”**

Even over a distance of eight decades, Varèse’s programmatic statement remains a very clear, very distinct summary of what orchestral music was becoming able to do, with the assistance of the new sound technology (and moved as well by the achievements of the cinema’s by then fully audiovisual art), and thus of what it henceforth ought to seek to do, if it wanted to keep pace with the age.

The sounds of the orchestras, said Varèse in so many words, are themselves already virtually spatial in their mutual arrangements; in their aggregate state they can comprise masses, planes, and the beams which I commented on before: as such they practically offer themselves to a composer whose overarching interest is in space itself, its delineations, articulations, and interstices. Yet, at the very same time, it will be precisely to the extent that the separate parts played by the various instruments are isolated from one another, every one of them as though intent upon nothing more nor less than its own pursuits, and thus placed into ever–changing oppositions over against each other, that the whole composition can attain the maximum of musical energy. Zur Kraft wird daher der Raum! – that realization or some one like it, to infer from his remarks, will become possible once composers make ample use of the new technologies of sound.

If the separations between the instruments upon which Varèse evidently insisted, are meant to contribute the force which brings the music together as a whole, while, simultaneously, it is their sharply defined roles within that whole which also keep the parts they play at a remove from one another, then the orchestra itself in its very constitution resembles the metropolis as he envisioned it (in the brief remarks reported in the 1957 interview no less than in “Amériques” in its ultimate version in 1927): a collectivity not distracted but actually energized and propelled to work by all the various agitations occurring again and again within it.

That is one side of the metamorphoses orchestral music might undergo, by virtue of the new technologies. Another was pointed out by Varèse in his 1936 lecture when he spoke of the zones which the different instruments would be enabled to define. Perhaps then my sense of “Amériques” as having been constructed quasi–cinematically, relates to a work which was actually something of a special case, and so the idea should not be extrapolated over–hastily to all his pieces generally, for they might indeed, in contrast, more properly be un-
derstood as *cartographic* in kind – map–music. Composition as cartography: the conception is strikingly open–ended, but it does seem to presuppose that the listeners must learn to *read* any work composed in such a vein, if they want to *explore* it at all. As a consequence, when the listeners attempt to fathom works like these, interpretation and orientation will be concurrent operations, or even are collated into a single procedure.

Not only within the music itself, therefore, but also amongst the audience, trying as actively as it can to follow the performance of one of Varèse’s works, the “Moment der Stasis” (as Nanz would say) will be a frequent occurrence: a virtual cessation of movement, whereby an individual listener, if he so chooses, can apprehend the vantage–point at which the music is situating him. Most often, of course, and this is *the* challenge at these times, such stationary moments will already have gone even before one has recognized that they *are there*, or *were*.

In his 1936 lecture, when he spoke of the space which orchestral music would now increasingly be able to demarcate, Varèse evidently meant what he said. The notion of *dimension*, too – a word so susceptible to misuse! – was with him no mere metaphor. The demarcation of *zones* in the compositions, an objective which became possible to carry out thanks to the new sound technologies, required numerous calculations to be made, where the measurements would be taken according to certain dimensions. These *dimensions*, however, Varèse thought of in quite another sense than the 3+1 of the usual conception of space *and* time. “We have actually three dimensions in music,” he insisted, “horizontal, vertical, and dynamic swelling or decreasing.” In other words, none of the contemporary sound technology was ever needed for the symphonic music composed out of those three perennial dimensions, all the works which are indeed and do remain the mainstays of the classical repertoire; but with the new technical inventions the field of orchestral endeavors could itself expand, and concomitantly, Varèse went on to remark, “I shall add a fourth, sound projection – that feeling that sound is leaving us with no hope of being reflected back, a feeling akin to that aroused by beams of light sent forth by a powerful searchlight – for the ear as for the eye, that sense of projection, of a journey into space.”*

* Page 197.
At this juncture, an obvious next step would be to shift the focus onto Varèse’s great curiosity regarding the sciences of his time, and especially contemporary physics – an interest which it seems some of the physicists reciprocated – but I shall refrain from doing so.*

Instead I’d like to dwell for just a moment on that new fourth dimension as described by Varèse – for it was evidently a long-standing concern of his. His early epiphany during the concert in the Salle Pleyel, as he recounted it in the 1936 interview (which I spoke about earlier), was phrased in very similar terms. And yet in the lecture he touched on what seems to be the essential feature of this new dimension, whereas it was conspicuously absent from his statement as quoted by the interviewer: namely, the projection into space of some sound, as the new technologies enable us to hear this launching taking place, at the same time conveys to us an indication that it will never return, in the absence of anything in its path against which it would strike and then be, as he put it, “reflected back” towards us. Hence, if one wants to express this sound’s forlorn situation in the terms of cartography, Varèse’s fourth dimension would recede unendingly away in every direction of the compass from whatever spot it was at which the music had happened to set a listener down. True, space of this kind would still have a center – but how very tiny, how very lost it would be, sited amidst such an emptiness without echo!

(Recall the frightening lines in Pascal’s famous pensée!** By way of fulfilling his editorial role, Brunschvicg appended to them a few sentences from a work by Louis Couturat – a text*** which I also ought to quote here in passing, since it is one of those the young Varèse could readily have perused. Ac-

* The present text is already ethereal enough, no doubt, and really should not venture into outer space as a topic. Nonetheless, in order to whet the reader’s intellectual appetite, an essay by the musicologist Anne C. Shreffler may be mentioned: “Varèse and the Technological Sublime; or, How Ionisation Went Nuclear,” included in the anthology assembled under the auspices of the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, _Edgard Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary_. ed. Felix Meyer and Heidy Zimmermann (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp. 290-97.

** In Brunschvicg’s edition (Œuvres, vol. XII, p. 73), it is the seventy-second.

cording to Couturat, Pascal’s “formule paradoxale, si choquante pour le bon sens,” shows itself upon examination to have been geometrically and scientifically quite inspired. Having once examined it, the geometers (and, by implication, the physicists) will comprehend that “[l]e centre du plan est partout, car l’origine est un point quelconque pris à volonté dans le fini du plan ; la circonférence du plan n’est nulle part, car si on l’imagine dans le fini, on suppose le plan limité, ce qui est contraire à son idée ; et si on la conçoit rejetée à l’infini, ce n’est plus une circonférence : c’est une droite ou un point. Ainsi le plan infini est, à certains égards, analogue à un point, c’est pour ainsi dire un point immense ; et en effet, le point inétréndu et le plan infini se ressemblent par certains côtés. Chacun d’eux constitue une unité, l’un par son indivisibilité, l’autre par sa totalité.” Although here Couturat dealt with planes rather than volumes, merely a small further step of thought was required, and an observer during the fin de siècle could realize how perversely mobile each of these two unités is – as such both retreat away as they are approached by the mind and its scientific instruments – thus would one have found oneself carried already into the space of the next century’s theoretical physics.)

So, in the context of his itemization of these four musical dimensions, too, one may surmise, the typical metropolitan city–dweller, ensconced in his private pursuits even while out and about in public, was a figure very near the forefront of Varèse’s thinking. For those dimensions, taken together, constitute the grid by, through, and with which an orchestral work such as his can represent a map of modern society and the atomized lives tracing their long lonely courses amongst the zones of which it is made, unmade, remade, continually anew.

Quite possibly such an individual urban existence, as errant as it was arid, represented something like a primary datum for Varèse throughout his entire career. His 1936 lecture, at any rate, took up a number of positions round the topic, firing off several shots at the times along the way. Amongst the other questions he touched upon, evidently he was thinking about the typical character of that existence – comprising not least an increasing impoverishment of the mind and its culture – as being a condition which the age sought to hide as far as it could, hypocritically, but which in fact was in urgent need of honest acknowledgement, for everyone’s sake. However bad this general condition had already grown in itself, by the middle of the 1930s, the concerted effort to
conceal it was worse, for it actually permitted the insidious debility to spread further, and hence the clock was rapidly ticking down: this idea seems to have provided more than a little of the special impetus that is palpable, even today, eighty years afterwards, when one reads or re-reads the text of his remarks.

“We cannot, even if we would, live much longer by tradition,”* averred Varèse, nearly as his first word – and already today’s reader may gather that the composer’s aversion to tradition as such ran deep. A striking general avowal in any case, and especially from someone whose profession was orchestral music! Not so very clear at the outset, however, is what precisely the term itself referred to, as used by him. Was this seeming oversight perhaps nothing of the kind, having been in fact deliberate on his part? Did he extend an implicit invitation to the public to whom he spoke to ask themselves how it had happened that they all, more and more, whether they wanted to or not, would need to confront the obsolescence of tradition? Well, by no means could this have been anything like an easy query to respond to, back in the 1930s; whereas now, circa 2015, the very question which apparently he prompted them to inquire into, may itself come across as being more than obsolescent – putting the point mildly – and then again, mustn’t one doubt whether we today are generally in much of a position even to construe it as it deserves to be? Yet nonetheless, I should like to submit, had he refrained from posing it, not only in this 1936 lecture but actually under this or that guise throughout his career, in the end Varèse’s entire œuvre would have taken quite another, a less considerable, less coherent, and less commendable shape than it did.

☛ What might the composer have meant when he objected to tradition?

☛ One like-sounding declaration was put down on paper by Franz Marc, sometime early in 1915, while a conscript at the front. Prompted by what exactly we cannot know, the painter compressed his thought into one sentence, the thirty-first of “Die 100 Aphorismen: Das zweite Gesicht,” which Varèse certainly could have been acquainted with and appreciated. In this remark, as

* “Music and the Times,” p. 196.
one might expect, bold tones of sarcasm and irony are not lacking. “Traditionen sind eine schöne Sache,” Marc admitted, “aber nur das Traditionen-schaffen, nicht von Traditionen leben.”*

Marc’s meaning can be unfolded as follows. Traditions have something beautiful about them – as though they are at their best simply accoutrements, while much more often they serve merely to divert attention from things that are anything but beautiful. Beautiful in the strong sense of the word is only the brief creative act, whereas the traditions which would then spring up as the progeny, have next to no share in it, and actually were hardly what that act aimed at. As such, when considered in terms of beauty, their characters are at best neutral; while, on the contrary, the enterprise of living according to, by, and off of traditions, is an ugly thing indeed.

All that is the first unfolding of the aphorism – but there is more. For, on the other hand, the tradition-creating act will be utterly sterile if no traditions are brought into being by it. Would one then ever undertake it in the first place, for its own sake, without reference to those consequences, as it were? That seems nearly inconceivable; but if the progenitor does also think in advance of the traditions he is in the process of creating, while nonetheless reserving the beauty in the act for himself as his sole possession, the inheritors, to the extent that they abide in that role, will be left to lead hideous lives. Of course, they could quit this impasse if they themselves were to create traditions – but with that move the same problem would recur once again. (Nor should one forget that upon the sheer number of “traditions” extant at any given moment, there simply must be some practical upper limit.)

The tradition-creating act, albeit beautiful, now also discloses a cunning and calculating visage. One starts to recognize how two-faced it actually is. Rather often its unique beauty may even be horrible to behold.

In Marc’s one sentence, tradition, as the bequest, preservation, and inheritance of something from generation to generation – it is, in the first instance, quite literally, an act of handing-down – had its seamy side exposed. The existence of traditions requires of the generations that vis-à-vis one another they assume certain attitudes, which once may have been noble and praiseworthy,

* This particular aphorism was included in the posthumous collection of his work: Briefe, Aufzeichnungen und Aphorismen (Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1920), vol. 1, p. 127.
but to whose present state of decay the aphorism (rightly understood) alerted the reader.

As Marc intuited, something had gone terribly awry within tradition itself. What was wrong, and how did it come about? – to return to Varèse and the question he seems to have asked himself, and placed before them who had the ears to hear it.

To frame the briefest of answers (there is no room here for anything more) and one which Varèse himself might not have found too aberrant: modern society, a new formation detected and analyzed early on by Hobbes with the requisite acuity and foresight, whose driving force was the opposition of private interests posed one against another, as it took shape gradually began to undermine the older principles of a durable political organization, of which tradition so construed was by no means the least important, setting them further and further aside in such a manner that when, at a later point in this history, a deliberate defense of the very principle of tradition was mounted, the resistance did even abet the further corrosion of the latter from within.

Again in very schematic terms: the environment of the metropolitan city-dweller, the typical denizen of society as charted by Hobbes, is constituted in an entirely different manner than was that older fixed abode within the stability of tradition which had been offered to its adherents. As the modern kind of urban space expanded more and more, the typical dispositions of its inhabitants also aggrandizing themselves in the process, the continuum of traditional life would furnish ever less guidance whenever one attempted to orientate oneself in the public realm.

Once modern society had established itself beyond a certain point, disorientation – the increasing difficulty in orientating oneself in that realm and in moving dexterously about while within it – became a political question of the first order. Nor were those who sought to comprehend this change, the better historians of the nineteenth century first and foremost, spared the condition – they found themselves buffeted about by analogous perplexities as they strove to illuminate an age so absolutely new.

Of those historians, none conveyed more lucidly how difficult it had become to understand the transformations they saw taking place all around themselves, and then to draw up a map of the contemporary situation, than Tocqueville. While his foremost theme was the changes brought about in po-
itical life with the rise of modern society, he knew to apply his mind to the up-
heavals effected in other areas as well. The effort was all the more pressing, at
a moment when the records of the past themselves seemed to be falling silent,
providing to the impartial understanding no examples of anything even re-
motely similar, no signposts, no merestones, no fixed points of reference.

One sobering passage of his laid out eloquently the new predicament con-
fronting the citizen and the historian alike. As such Tocqueville’s statement de-
serves to be quoted whole: “Quoique la révolution qui s’opère dans l’état so-
cial, les lois, les idées, les sentiments des hommes, soit encore bien loin d’être
terminée, déjà on ne saurait comparer ses œuvres avec rien de ce qui s’est vu
précédemment dans le monde. Je remonte de siècle en siècle jusqu’à l’antiqüi-
té la plus reculée ; je n’aperçois rien qui ressemble à ce qui est sous mes yeux.
Le passé n’éclairant plus l’avenir, l’esprit marche dans les ténèbres.”*

Most obviously in the United States, but evidently in France as well, as
Tocqueville viewed the problem during those years, under the new conditions
the deliberate act of orientating oneself in space, both practically and intellec-
tually, was becoming ever more difficult to carry out. To be sure, at that his-
torical moment ca. 1835, a full century before Varèse delivered his lecture, tra-
dition still exerted itself as a countervailing power; and so it is hardly surpris-
ing to observe the historian, when he narrowed the scope of his inquiry to his
own country alone, also insisting that “la révolution” had not burst asunder
all continuity there, the most obvious appearances notwithstanding. Some im-
material items in particular continued to be handed down – certain ideas, sen-
timents, habitudes – as Tocqueville did not fail to mention, for otherwise he
would have had no threads by which to trace a course back through the past,
and then his study of the previous half–century of French history could never
have commenced to begin with.

Indeed, Tocqueville’s first sketch of his undertaking set out from just this
point. An essay he composed towards the end of 1835 and early the next year,
“État social et politique de la France, avant et depuis 1789,”** opened as fol-

* De la Démocratie en Amérique, vol. II, pt. IV, chap. VIII.
* It was written originally at the request of John Stuart Mill for the London and
Westminster Review, appearing in the April 1836 issue in an unsigned English ver-
version, in fact quite a liberal paraphrase, the work of Mill himself.
lows: “Des liens invisibles mais presque tout–puissants attachent les idées d’un siècle a celles du siècle qui l’a précédé.” Now, the existence of these “liens” between the ideas of the present generation and those of its predecessors, Tocqueville regarded as evidence that tradition still remained a power to be reckoned with, throughout that fifty–year span of time in French history. Of course, there too it was in retreat, beset more and more as modern society established itself; for contemporary France too this the historian took as a given, and accordingly, what especially interested him was the alteration being brought about in tradition itself. The nature of the relationship between the generations, he realized, was no longer the same. “Une génération a beau déclarer la guerre aux générations antérieures, il est plus facile de les combattre, que de ne point leur ressembler.” Even here, something essential was still being handed down from the earlier to the later one: namely, the set of “idées” which define its profile and in so doing preserve the likeness between the generations. Yet this contact took place in the midst of a furious enmity; and Tocqueville, for his part, found it very thought–provoking to see tradition itself being whittled down into a peculiarly mimetic procedure, of the sort whereby a pair of enemies do come to resemble each other by virtue of the hostilities in which they engage. Thought–provoking – and perhaps somewhat frightening as well, for if one listens intently to his very next sentence, a faint trembling may be overheard. “On ne saurait donc parler d’une nation, à une époque donnée, sans dire ce qu’elle a été un demi–siècle auparavant,” he claimed, and justified this precaution as being “surtout nécessaire lorsqu’il s’agit d’un peuple qui, pendant les cinquante dernières années, a été dans un état presque continuel de révolution.”

If only for the sake of fulfilling the historian’s responsibilities conscientiously, in order to describe the whole scene from without, sine ira et studio, Tocqueville had to worry that his own ideas might in fact, though without his really noticing, predispose him in a contrary direction, affiliating him unawares to this or that side, to the detriment of his work’s perspicacity and independence.

Since, however, my main concern here is to comprehend what Varèse meant by the tradition he so clearly had come to distrust, I have no need to say very much more about Tocqueville the historian. The outline he drew of the condition of the isolated individual in modern society, is as clear as one
could wish; while the intimation of a serious ailment inflicted under the given circumstances upon the principle of tradition itself, may be pursued quite far, if one wants to.

Yet it is significant that Tocqueville’s two statements date from the milieu of the 1830s, that is, from early in his career. Their great sensitivity owed perhaps not a little to the very newness of his subject, the presentation of unprecedented questions and topics as it was undertaken by an author whose accomplishments were just beginning to attain recognition. Much later on, possibly by virtue of all the time and attention he had spent in the meantime on his research, possibly for other reasons as well, one does not seem to encounter anything like those insights again; what the reader meets with instead is an avowal that tradition, or some power of a like efficacy, played and even continued to play a much greater role in all that recent history than was usually acknowledged: as though, the further his inquiry had been taken, the more did Tocqueville uncover tradition still at work, operating behind the backs of the people whom he studied and directing them in their endeavors. Once passed beyond a certain limit – to exaggerate slightly what then transpired – wherever the historian looked, this or that “tradition” was mainly what peered back at him.

At the outset of the major work he never lived to finish, one comes across the following remark: “Il y a un grand nombre de lois et d’habitudes politiques de l’ancien régime qui disparaissent ainsi tout à coup en 1789 et qui se remontrent quelques années après, comme certains fleuves s’enfoncent dans la terre pour reparaître un peu plus loin, faisant voir les mêmes eaux à de nouveaux rivages.”* Now, even those readers whose basic approach is not that of cautious skepticism, may find it difficult to take this sentence quite seriously: the notion that numerous laws and common practices did not so much vanish as go underground (flowing onwards like a subterranean river!) until, as though by a mysterious reinstatement of tradition, they emerged once more to water the fields of political life, is simply very convenient, to put the point mildly. Hence his remark, far from having clarified anything real at all, itself becomes a piece of evidence, an indication of a common tendency amongst historians to regard the objects of their researches in a specific manner, con-

* L’Ancien régime et la Révolution, Avant-propos.
struing them in advance as if their own inmost intention were to enter into tradi-
tion, and during all that time they had mainly been awaiting the chance to
do so. What Tocqueville’s passage discloses, even malgré lui–même, therefore,
is a déformation professionnelle des historiens, a preliminary (or subliminal)
acquiescence to the principle of tradition as such, which we all, however pro-
fessionally or otherwise we may happen to be involved with history, ought to
regard warily.

Sharper than Tocqueville’s late remark, and actually closely attuned to his
much more important early statement, is a sarcastic pronouncement by a con-
temporary French author who cannot reasonably be called a historian, Jules–
Amédée Barbey d’Aurevilly. Around the middle of the 1840s, in the capital, he
was well–positioned to see how the sphere within which the principle of tradi-
tion still held good, kept on shrinking – indeed, by then one of its best bul-
warks, namely, les mœurs, could hardly be relied upon any longer, and had
even passed under the control of the other side. “On retrouve Herculanum
sous la cendre,” the Parisian wit exclaimed in one of his essays, “mais quel-
ques années sur les mœurs d’une société l’ensevelissent mieux que toute la
poussière des volcans.”* Whereas tradition once stood as a guarantor of the
durability and the continuity of a body politic, modern society led another
kind of existence entirely, instantiating itself instead continually from mo-
moment to moment (much as Descartes’ thinking substance upheld itself in
being). With its ascendancy, as Barbey d’Aurevilly noted, mainly one certainty
alone would be left intact: merely a brief period of time was needed for this
society without precedent to efface the traces of its previous self, so malleable
had even its mœurs become.

All at once, to amplify his point, la modernité had taken hold in Paris: a
centre of modern society ruled by that arbitrary despot, fashion, the city
which was paving the way for its changes to occur in the blink of an eye, as
Barbey d’Aurevilly himself knew well. How nearly impossible a task all this
would leave behind, for later historians to sift through, if the best of them
would even dare to undertake it! To speak without irony of tradition in this
connection would have been nearly perverse, already in the 1840s; and all the
more so only a few years later, during the Second Empire, for, amongst the

* Du Dandysme et de G. Brummell, chap. VI.
vast construction sites that Paris would soon comprise, it was ever more the case that, much as Tocqueville had already witnessed amidst everything transpiring across the Atlantic, “l’esprit marche dans les ténèbres.”

With this, probably enough has been said to convey at least some idea of what I imagine had led Varèse to caution his audience so emphatically against any sort of recourse to *tradition*.

Whatever remained of it, one gathers, stood in his view in the way of an honest confrontation with the impoverishment of mind brought on by modern society – hence it amounted to a sort of diversion which, given the circumstances of the 1930s generally, was showing itself to be increasingly pernicious. Frivolity (earlier I referred to the predilection for it of the intellectual elite between the Wars) was actually quite a widespread problem during those years, assuming any number of forms, even within his own field of endeavor; and thus there was ever so much which Varèse had good reason to react against implicitly when he forecast tradition’s complete demise.

Given this antipathy on the one side, it is not especially strange that Varèse, in the very same lecture, should have characterized the present–day state of his field in nearly opposite terms. According to him, “we are at a new primitive stage in music today”* – and this reality, or else this imminent possibility, he seemed to welcome.

His idea was not that the times were ripe for an entirely new tradition to be created and handed down; no, that was not the point at all. The present had to be confronted without the help of any tradition, in music and in other spheres of endeavor, if the conditions brought about by modern society were to be approached as they were, for better and for worse, rather than in the falsified and distorted form they would assume whenever one persisted in viewing them sub specie traditionis. And as for the remnants of tradition which still played an active role within organized musical life at its most serious and creative, one needed to recognize how obstructive they continued to be.

A composition such as “Amériques” – to return to a work wherein Varèse implemented a decided rejection of musical tradition – declares its own rela-

tive disinterest in older elaborations of harmony, in favor of the more elementary (the composer himself would probably have said: *primitive*) harmonies between the tones which the various instruments could produce. This inclination was stressed by one of his peers, Henry Cowell, in an early article* analyzing the composer’s procedures, as being one amongst a number of compositional practices which distinguished him from most or indeed all of his contemporaries. “Just as harmonic combinations of sound qualities are emphasized above harmony itself,” wrote Cowell, “one finds that dynamic nuances on the same note, or repeated tones, often take the place of melody,”** and at times, indeed, melody is dispensed with altogether. Now, what did the composer aim to accomplish by paring down the commonly available means so thoroughly? Cowell formulated the main consequence as follows: “Removing from the listener’s ear that which it is accustomed to follow most closely, sometime almost to the exclusion of everything else, naturally induces a keener awareness of other musical elements such as rhythm and dynamics.”*** Such a “keener awareness” amongst the listeners is one of the sensitivities which “Amériques” sought to foster (even though those to whom Varèse’s work does not appeal, might dissent from the verb *to* foster and say instead, *to force them back upon*), setting out to meet this goal all the more deliberately insofar as those other sonic “elements” embody music from its more spatial side, and hence were accorded major roles in a composition which had chosen to ally itself with some of the cinema’s experiments (montage in particular) – while also proceeding to eschew, it is fair to say, the traditions of orchestral music and indeed to locate itself outside the domain of tradition as such.

Fidelity to the individual sounds was one of Varèse’s main reasons for his stance, noted Cowell, and in scoring his own works he went to great lengths to indicate the exact qualities which the musicians should strive to lend each of them in performance. In comparison to those of most other composers, his scores abounded in expression marks applied to the separate notes, and in his view such detailed instructions were nearly a sine qua non of the whole endeavor. Composers who supplied them only haphazardly, or neglected them in the main, were on occasion the object of his contempt, Cowell reported, and

of those falling in this category he did not hesitate to say, “They do not know how they wish their music to sound.”* Instead they handed their works over to others, or, in other words, to the repetitions of tradition, leaving it to the recipients to determine the precise sound to be given to all those constituents of the music. A peculiar uncertainty on those composers’ part, and a strange carelessness, both of which they justified implicitly by an unwarranted trust that the subsequent heritage would handle the bequest satisfactorily: this common attitude, it seems to me, was what Varèse simply could not stand.

Lest one imagine that his expressions of antipathy represented merely the tantrum of a musical enfant terrible, I should add that the exactitude of sonic quality he demanded was brought a bit further into the realm of possibility with each additional refinement of the new sound technologies during those years. The techniques for increasingly faithful reproduction of the tones of the instruments, were beginning to open a way for those so inclined to circumvent tradition entirely; handing a work of orchestral music down, with all the variegated insecurities attendant upon that transaction, was henceforth not the only conceivable mode of passing it on, for in the form of a recording on electromagnetic tape a composer could with relative ease simply leave it or the relevant part of it behind, once the work was done to his satisfaction: and Varèse’s conscientious attention to the minutiae of the separate notes in his scores, as recounted by Cowell, already anticipates how composers might soon simply leap over whatever there remained of the principle of tradition, as a no-longer insuperable obstacle.

A transmission of a composer’s intentions beyond the limitations imposed up until then by the usual operations of tradition: this is a very disconcerting thought! And likewise with the new vantage-point that these technologies were clearing away vis-à-vis the history of music itself – not only the regard for musical works gone by, but also the nervous anticipation of the history of those which one day will have arrived (as though in a tacit admission of the future’s primacy in the underlying order of time). At least to begin with, here too, no less than within the precincts of modern society generally, minds would have found themselves wandering in obscurity, those of the professional music historians not excepted!

* Quoted by Cowell on page 12.
On the other hand, given that a practical alternative to the principle of tradition was rapidly becoming an option for the composer, the actual procedures comprised in it (as the handing–down from generation to generation of the works, the instruments, and the paraphernalia of music) could be studied from the outside, with greater impartiality and acuity than previously had been possible. In consequence, from that moment onward, music’s past could be approached by listeners aware of the vagaries that the intercessions of tradition had instilled into the sounds themselves – those whose ears were open enough to notice sonic phenomena which others literally had never heard in this or that piece of it before. So surprising might be the map they’d then draw up, once they *lit out for the territory*, heeding the new technology and having quit tradition’s school.

A revolution in acoustic perception was being brought about by the new technologies, and this change, during that incipient phase at least, manifested itself most palpably in the rapport to the elements of past music: more readily than before, they could be heard apart from the various adjustments made to them subsequently in the course of tradition, and thus they were less definitively *past* than they once had been, situated anew, if not now within the present period strictly speaking, at least considerably less distant from it than in earlier ages.

Increasing exactitude as the new possibility for acoustic perception, was an idea at the forefront of Varèse’s thinking about music not only in the later decades but right throughout his career, one may well surmise; this consequence of the technological advancements could have spawned his intuition that there was a layer of significance in works of music which their nominal creators had not put there, an antecedent dimension of meaning lodged in the very sounds of which they were made: and with the assistance of the new technology, to complete the thought, such deposits of sense might, with some skill and luck, be raised into audible perceptibility.

Varèse, as he recounted in several of his lectures, credited an early reading of Josef Hoënë Wronski’s essay “Philosophie absolue de la musique”* with

* An extract was published by Camille Durutte in the introduction to *Esthétique musicale: Technie, ou Lois générales du système harmonique* (Paris: Mallet-Bachelier and E. Girod; and Metz: Typographie de Rousseau-Pallez, 1855), pp. v-xvii.
the notion that significance or sense could be found in the individual sounds of which pieces of music were comprised. One formula in particular attracted his attention – Hoëné Wronski had written of “la corporification de l'intelligence dans les sons”* – and even though by this phrase the author most likely had referred to that which a composer would have more or less deliberately put into the work, Varèse for his part took it to describe not a transitive but rather a self–reflexive operation, as though those sounds themselves were, grammatically speaking, both the subject and the object of Hoëné Wronski’s sentence, whereby the works of music would serve as their instruments. Thus each sound would itself be the sonic self–embodiment of some significant intention, quite apart from all the meaning which might be superimposed upon them by the conscious creativity of human music.

Think what one will of such a conception – in the era of the new technologies its plausibility would have grown, by virtue of the hitherto unheard signification which the latter seemed poised to uncover amongst the sounds.

The notion that individual sounds might be imbued with something like autonomy, already in themselves, does seem to inform Varèse’s early declaration regarding the musical instruments he wished to bring into being. “Je rêve les instruments obéissants à la pensée,” he announced in a brief text** entitled “Que la musique sonne” – obedient to thought, yet by no means necessarily to his own thought! Quite possibly here too he was recalling that “corporification de l’intelligence,” the otherwise unremarked self–embodiments of mind in particular sounds, which it would be the achievement of such instruments as he dreamt of to express. When, once invented, they were put to the test, then it could happen that, “avec l’apport d’une floraison de timbres insoupçonnés,” those devices “se prêtent aux combinaisons qu’il me plaira de leur imposer et se plient a l’exigence de mon rythme intérieur” – the inner rhythm of the composer’s mind (or soul) which, while he himself could not possibly claim to know it definitively, would at least, in contrast to those other

* Page vii.

** It was published in Francis Picabia’s 391 (New York), no. 5 (June 1917), a couple of years after Varèse arrived there.
anonymous deposits of intelligence in the sounds themselves, be recognizably his and his alone.

“A composer knows about as little as anyone else,” he would insist decades afterwards, “where the substance of his work comes from.” (That was the position Varèse took towards the end of the “Autobiographical Remarks” he delivered at Princeton University on September 4, 1959.*)

From the very beginnings of his career onwards, Varèse, it is safe (?) to say, really did see himself as journeying into the spaces of the sounds, a region otherwise nearly unexplored.

The instruments which he anticipated in 1917, of course, could also be the devices to whose invention the great strides taken by the technology, during the years ahead, would contribute.

It was no accident when Varèse chose to speak in this early statement of his inward rhythm, rather than of melody or harmony, in either the singular or the plural. What had he had in mind by this term? Well, with it he may have referred not to an inner datum or concomitant of his consciousness, a continuously–produced result or by–product of his musically active mind, but to a more primary force of inner cohesion, perhaps even an intrinsic power without which the mind could not possibly hope to turn to good use all of its own – to recall his felicitous word from the 1957 interview – agitations.

Late in his career, in the 1959 Princeton lecture, he offered a brief summary of what rhythm does.** “Rhythm is the element in music that gives life to the work and holds it together,” said Varèse, as though to underscore the fissiparous tendencies within the elements of which a piece of music is composed, inclining if unchecked to fall apart of their own accord. “It is the element of stability, the generator of form” – with this claim the composer recurred implicitly to his axiom that musical forms are results, the shapes assumed by the compositions as they crystallize: thus what rhythm does, is to exert the requisite quantum of pressure upon them prior to their completion. However, is not the rhythm in a work, once finished and formed, itself also a result – and if so, from what and from where would it stem? Now, according

* Chou Wen-chung included an excerpt in his compilation, under the title “Rhythm, Form, and Content,” and I have cited it (p. 204) from this source. As for the original typescript, it is in the collection of the Paul Sacher Stiftung. ** Page 202.
to Varèse, in his own works “rhythm derives from the simultaneous interplay of unrelated elements that intervene at calculated, but not regular, time-lapses.” Hence the rhythm in them is a *derivation*: the obvious conclusion, therefore, is that it derived from nothing other than the force he had mentioned several decades before, his “rythme intérieur.” Can one infer that it, accordingly, was in Varèse’s opinion the basic guarantor of coherence in its domain, within the musical part of the mind? If that is right, then it, however irregular in its operation it may seem to be, is intrinsically a calculative power positioned over against all the intra-mental constituents of music, and as such this interior power of rhythm, in contradistinction to the actual rhythm evident in works of music, would actively engender “a succession of alternate and opposite or correlative states” – thus going some ways towards meeting that “definition of rhythm in physics and philosophy” which Varèse commended to his audience.

As an inward power of the composer’s mind, by virtue of the *rythme intérieur* those inner sonic elements would be positioned and assembled by it in just such *successions*, modulating in consequence the *agitation* within itself and thus maximizing its predilection for *work*.

Here, it is not too much to say, Varèse seemed to delineate what a full-fledged *rhythmic thinking* might be, and how it might proceed vis-à-vis the disparate elements it comes across, wherever it should happen to find them, whether sheltered within its own interiority, out amidst the bustle of the world, or at any spot somewhere in between.

☛ Was Varèse (he an exact contemporary of Kafka and Karl Jaspers) all along primarily a *thinker*? Had his main reason for distancing himself from tradition been the experimental thinking by, with, and about rhythm which he practiced throughout his life instead?

☛ A rhythmic mode of thought, when conceived as Varèse seemed to understand it, will necessarily partake of calculation – of the mathematical, quantitative, and instrumental procedures for dealing with things, which are as easy to denounce in theory as they are hard to avoid in practice. For a rhythmic think-
ing like this, neither could there be a way to get around those procedures, nor, what is more important, would any overwhelming urge to abandon them be felt. Much as I suggested before in the case of his “Amériques,” the field of operation proper to this mode of thought remains modern society, at least for the time being, and especially its crystallization in the paradigmatic metropolis, the immense location whose grid was arranged as though its aim were indeed to facilitate any number of the successions of alternate and opposite or correlative states of which he spoke in 1959.

Some years further on, talking with Gunther Schuller,* the composer, as though to suggest that the implicit setting of his musical endeavors had always been modern society, the type of society constructed out of untold numbers of interests in mutual opposition against one another, mentioned in passing one of his own early formative experiences. During his childhood visits to Burgundy, recounted Varèse, he had admired the “pure structural architecture” of the masons there, they whose “every stone had to fit and balance with every other,” working with a precision he himself would emulate as best he could, a few years later. Thus inspired, already in 1905, in one of his first pieces, Varèse remembered, “I wanted to find a way to project in music the concept of calculated or controlled gravitation, how one element pushing on the other stabilizes the total structure, thus using the material elements at the same time in opposition to and in support of one another.”** Now, of what else would a music like his have been the rendering, and indeed a rhythmic one, if not modern society in its purest expression, as realized in the innumerable interactions of opposites comprising the immense metropolis?

So, it seems to me, surroundings such as the largest cities constitute the native element of this Varèsean mode of thought. From that urban source, by one detour or another, the disparate sounds originate which it, should it happen to be a composer’s thinking, will in turn compress and present in actual works of music. Thus the very agitation wherein it finds itself and makes its home, is conveyed rhythmically along with the rest of those sonic materials, into an audible form.

Even before it ever arrived there – in Varèse’s own career, one hundred years ago, in New York – this mode of rhythmic thought was already attuned to the big-city constructions of significant noise. These, and the manifold uncertainties of modernity generally, it will be quite well-positioned to handle, with more or less the right degree of composure and distance, keeping its wits about it and not falling prey to this or that mental debility, and especially not the paranoia which threatens to afflict the representational thinking of the modern age (as it was exposed and attacked by Heidegger, who seems to have known it from the inside).

Varèse’s own specifically rhythmic thinking, one might suspect, which sharpened his feeling for the not exactly unintended but yet inadvertent humor of the incessant alterations in the metropolis, and thus enabled “Amériques,” for instance, to be as cheeky as it at times comes across as being. For the composer’s mode of thought had contributed more than a little to his deliberate rejection of tradition – not least in relieving him of the concern with having his works enter into it in their turn, an attitude which in itself is rather in conducive to musical risk-taking or even to letting the music out to have a bit of fun. This nexus was I believe what he himself was pointing out, at the end of his conversation with Schuller, when the composer insisted, half in jest, half seriously, that “I don’t care about reaching the public as much as I care about reaching certain musical-acoustical phenomena,” for his main goal all along was always “to disturb the atmosphere – because, after all, sound is only an atmospheric disturbance!”* To this insouciant notion of sound he had no need to add: though not to humorless ears made timid by the musical tradition!

To reach certain musical-acoustical phenomena was what he most wanted to do: this amusing double entendre should not be overlooked. Could there have been a moment of earnestness in it, perhaps? Was Varèse in some sense actually aiming to address them, more than the concert-going audiences? If so, it would accord well with the conception he drew out of, and/or had projected into, Hoënë Wronski’s single phrase.

Perhaps his witty last word, for its part, was not merely a shallow passing remark. Did he mean to suggest that the atmospheres of disturbance he

* Page 37.
wished his music to convey, had in fact been brought about by heeding those disturbances of atmosphere otherwise called sounds? Were that the case, it might clarify something one hears every so often throughout his works, namely, their flashes of humor – at times when the sirens in “Amériques” break in the interruption is both unexpected and funny – for such brief lighter moments too were derived from his intent listening to those agitations of the air.

Most striking of all, in his last round with Schuller, Varèse laid stress upon the idea that their audiences were to some degree only the incidental recipients of his works, being not so much the intended listeners as by–standers simply afforded an opportunity to overhear them. Whether from this opportunity a longer acquaintance would develop afterwards, was neither the composer’s main concern, nor (if the personification is at all plausible) what his works themselves hoped for. In Varèse’s own case, all of them (a second such personification) had their hands full as they sought to ensure that the musicians not diverge too far in the performance from the way the whole ought to sound.

With regard to the eventual performance of the works, Varèse entertained some reservations about the fidelity which the musicians would observe. During a conversation he and his friend, the painter L. Alcopley (the pseudonym of Alfred L. Copley) held in January 1963, and published five years later,* he expressed them forthrightly – phrasing his point quite generally, assuming perhaps that the time had come for a laconic word or two on the subject. Professional musicians, said Varèse, “are, after all, actors (I include conductors) before an audience and therefore tempted to show off.”** Quite a harsh assessment, this, on a first perusal, and so one might be inclined to dismiss the remark altogether, as being yet one more instance of the age–old theatrical prejudice; but precisely because he put his objection in such categorical terms, it also leads one to recall his principled aversion to the musical tradition as such. The vagaries induced in the sounds of which works of classical music are composed, not simply as they are handed down from generation to generation, but also, by virtue of the concomitant of this process, namely, the care–

lessness of many of the composers themselves, during the constitutive stage when the compositions were created in the first place – this was the sorry state of affairs pointed out by Varèse which I mentioned earlier – now, these imprecisions of sound are not the end of the problem.

On the contrary, one major result of all that sonic vagary can be a great latitude accorded to the performers – in other words, the very condition of his-trionic license he skewered in 1963 – allocated to them especially whenever those composers who lacked an exact idea of the sound they wanted, as Cowell recalled Varèse having said some forty years earlier, did bequeath to posterity scores that were insufficiently instructive and hence open to all manner of interpretation. And then this unfortunate freedom (as he saw it) may very well become endemic, solidifying into something like a venerable institution in its own right, just because it, amongst its other functions, can readily serve as a convenient safety-valve for any dissatisfactions that happen to arise within the ranks of the performers.

If the sharp remark Varèse confided to Alcopley is approached from this angle, probably it will seem not nearly so strange and off-putting as it looked at first.

Also worthy of note is the emphasis his comment laid upon the distance between the work of music in performance and those who are performing it. Much as with his rapport to the audience as such – if he was indeed concerned more to “reach” not it but rather the sounds themselves – here too Varèse could have regarded all the performers as being in some sense incidental to his purpose, in contradistinction to the work itself. If that is so, pieces of music were made by him not for the one, nor for the other, and least of all for tradition: what he had in mind instead, was an idea of musical works whose mode of construction would predispose them to be transmitted in an entirely different way.

With this I’d like to turn, finally, to address one well-known statement that at first seems positively mystifying, coming from him, yet which the foregoing may help to clarify.

“When new instruments will allow me to write music as I conceive it,” Varèse declared in his 1936 lecture, the resultant works would seek to express
the great energies inside space itself. (Whenever his compositions accomplish this to a satisfactory degree, one might add, they will poke fun at the old notion that space is the most inert thing of all, raising a laugh or two at the stupid prejudice underneath that tenacious idea.) “Certain transmutations taking place on certain planes will seem to be projected onto other planes, moving at different speeds and at different angles. There will no longer be the old conception of melody or interplay of melodies. The entire work will be a melodic totality. The entire work will flow as a river flows.”*

Of course, today’s reader could construe these four last sentences, like much else in his 1936 lecture, simply as presaging the full–fledged sonic environments Varèse sought to construct later in his career; but the onrush of spatial imagery, metaphors, and similes in it, I think, actually referred to something else – namely, to the tradition he had denounced a few minutes before, at the outset of the talk.

Let me take these four sentences in order, each individually.

1. The first of them is a more compressed yet also more complete statement of his conception of a musical composition whose structure will unfold like a zonal map: for in his works to come the evident delineations of volumes were to manifest themselves through all the dimensions he went on to mention, and would never be laid out upon some surface to consult, as a literally flat schematic representation. While the “transmutations” on the various “planes” should appear to the ears as being “projected” from one towards another (an acoustic bombardment?), these sonorous movements ought to avoid conveying the misimpression that some unification is taking place in the course of it all. Hence the isolate condition of these separate elements and the absence of any indistinctions amongst them, shall continue to be observed.

2. With this second sentence, implicitly he was summing up the many interactions taking place between the disparate sounds, while identifying outright the obvious result of all their concurrent tumult: a work such as he would envision it (at least as long as its elaboration remained true to his own aim) could not possibly comprise any “melody or interplay of melodies” in the usual sense of the term, that is, as established throughout the musical tradition. Well, what was the “conception” of melody which prevailed there, according

* “Music and the Times,” p. 197.
to him? Without saying it in so many words, or indeed having had much need to do so, by this he was referring to the elements of a typical composition in whose performance the musicians might most emphatically indulge their inclination to show off (as he said to Alcopley, nearly thirty years later), especially whenever the composers had failed to supply detailed instructions in the scores, and in whose reception the audiences might take the pleasure that they had come for (even in lieu of anything else) – on both sides he discerned an insidious corruption of melody with which the tradition itself, by that late stage, was tacitly d’accord.

3. Instead of such a partial conception, in his third sentence he turned his attention towards the musical composition as a whole. Soon it would, indeed must become a “melodic totality,” and, to the extent that some of the extant musical instruments are still given parts to play in it, the score of a work of this new kind will be delivered fully annotated, equipped with the precise instructions applied to the individual notes which were in his view so unfortunately neglected. Musicians, in consequence, will be given much narrower grounds for their theatrical predilections: that is, both less scope as well as less reason for those small acts of self-assertion which, if they achieved anything, may actually have eased the way for them to acquiesce to the principle of tradition in general and to the existing order of the orchestra in particular. And, regarding the pleasure provided to audiences by the melodies, which still did much to reconcile them (when such assistance were required) to their allotted place within the system of tradition, after an “entire work” becomes one great melody, likewise less of it will be offered – or rather, henceforth the nature of the pleasure taken in the music will also change altogether. It becomes rather an all-or-nothing proposition: henceforth, the composition as a whole will be pleasurable, or it will not be.

4. By the fourth and last sentence, most likely he was speaking of a number of “flows” at once: of the way in which the work would advance towards its end, to be sure, but also of the quick fidelity with which the musicians (assuming that there continue to be parts for them to play) will perform it, and of the cool appreciation with which listeners ought to receive it. Melodically–rhythmically this “river” will wind along – which would not prevent the music from swelling at times into a resounding torrent, nor from pausing in a short standstill at others, its surface then sparkling with any number of bright shim-
mers. As for the performers and the audiences, staying afloat in this music’s currents will be enough of a challenge; while it is ongoing, the diversions they knew from the tradition are left behind. Could then a work of music such as this possibly be overtaken in its turn by tradition? – no, the idea is precluded in advance. Its channel was dug to bring it elsewhere; it shall reach another sea.

This account, I hope, has shown how Varèse’s remark, when examined more closely, is not nearly as mysterious as it seemed to be at first, even though one may have anticipated finding that it would pertain to something other than the question of tradition.

The further one reflects upon his position, the bolder will it seem – a perception which of course need not signify assent – just as one should expect from a man confident or foolhardy enough to say more than once what he did in his conversation with Alcopley: “Contrary to general belief, an artist is never ahead of his time, but most people are always far behind.”*

To conclude: the works to which Varèse gave a shape throughout his career, wherever they happen to end up, were made not for tradition and its familiar world of accolades, orchestras, audiences. Deriving their significance from another source, they flow for their own sake alone, although this, of course, does not prevent anyone from plunging into them, now and again, if one’s strokes are swift enough.

An Exhibit of ZERO in Amsterdam

(August 31, 2015)

Currently and for the next few months on view in the Stedelijk Museum here in Amsterdam is an exhibition devoted to the artists from a number of countries who, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, gathered into a group known as Zero – an association which, while itself relatively short-lived, has been graced by an influential after-life, particularly over the last decade or so, with the establishment of a foundation dedicated to it in Düsseldorf, its home-city, nearly ten years ago, and a noticeable renewal of interest lately in the movement generally as well as in several of the artists participating in it individually.

What one sees everywhere in this exhibition are the materials of which the work of art is comprised, being made into its subject-matter as well; and even though this tendency may look at first sight to be a reduction, by the use of such procedures the significance of the object can in fact be multiplied – whenever the artworks are still objects strictly speaking, for here instead it is often an environment or even simply an experience. With regard to the former, the grids or other spatial arrangements they depict seem to be meant to be read, as though they were maps; thus the especially close consideration they evidently want to elicit, both for some particular parts and for the placements of these within the wholes, which should call forth from the viewers a certain bestowal of attention: the eye and the mind focusing in now on this spot, now on that, now pulling back in order to obtain a more synoptic view, all these motions together manifesting a conspicuous rhythm. Here, accordingly, the acts of looking collate into kinetic procedures, disposed, it may even be, so as to outline some incipient rudiment of music.

And with regard to the few forays beyond the object which further enliven this exhibition, most notably the “Lichtraum (Hommage à Fontana)” created in 1964 by Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, and Günther Uecker, the nearly or quasi-musical manner in which they display themselves, is obvious.
Well, now is not the time even to begin to rehearse this chapter of art history, yet for anyone in the vicinity who is curious to know more, the current exhibition, both ample and well-organized, may be recommended, especially as Amsterdam is the third and last stop on its itinerary, after New York and Berlin. And all the more so, as concerns music, given that it features, amongst other works, Jean Tinguely’s delightful sound-emitting 1958 assemblage “Mes Étoiles – Concert pour sept peintures” (loaned by the Museum Tinguely in Basel), while also providing a glimpse, albeit on video, of a “Licht-Ton-Maschine” devised by Hermann Goepfert in 1960–61, the “Optophonium.”

Works solely of visual art worthy of especial consideration in the exhibition include Oskar Holweck’s “9.VIII.58” (1958, on loan from the ZERO Foundation), Otto Piene’s “Kreisweiß” (1957, from the Hubertus Schoeller Stiftung, Leopold-Hoesch-Museum, Düren) and “Gelbgelbweißheißschnell (Stencil Painting)” (1958, from the Sammlung Lenz Schönberg, Söll), Pol Bury’s “Erection molle” (1961, from the Sammlung Lenz Schönberg), François Morellet’s “Sphère-trames” (1962, from the Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen), and Arman’s “Nucléide” (1964, from the Stedelijk’s own collection).
Two views of Mack, Piene, and Uecker’s “Lichtraum (Hommage à Fontana)” as installed at the third Documenta in Kassel, 1964

(Images courtesy of the ZERO Foundation)
Hermann Goepfert’s “Optophonium” (1960-61) as installed when the exhibition was on view at the Guggenheim Museum in 2014 (Photograph by David Heald, courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum)
Otto Piene, “Kreisweiß” (1957)
The Hubertus Schoeller Stiftung, Leopold-Hoesch-Museum, Düren
(Image courtesy of the ZERO Foundation)
Pol Bury, “Erection molle” (1961)
Sammlung Lenz Schönberg, Söll
(Image courtesy of the ZERO Foundation)
Arman, “Nucléide” (1964) (Image courtesy of the Stedelijk Museum)
Oskar Holweck, “9.VIII.58” (Image courtesy of the ZERO Foundation)
In this exhibition, as is only proper, a prominent role is assigned to Yves Klein, even though he declined to participate in the first exhibition in the Stedelijk of the Zero artists, in 1962, given that the group in its heyday, in his view – as he wrote that year to the museum’s director, Willem Sandberg, in the letter of January 29th which is on display in the current show – “ne représente aucune tendance nettement affirmée. Ce n’est que l’assemblage hétéroclite de diverses recherches expérimentales.” Allowance made for a certain rhetorical exaggeration, Klein’s point remains salutary – indeed, any exhibition of the works of Zero is bound to present a quite disparate collection of pieces. Nor ought one to forget how his œuvres, at that stage of the development of the “nouveau réalisme” he propounded, sought to distinguish themselves as far as they could from materiality in general.

One key to all of Klein’s work, it’s said, is his singular sound composition of 1949, the “Symphonie monoton–silence,” first performed at the Galerie Internationale d’Art Contemporain in Paris, on March 9, 1960, conducted by Klein himself. As a complement to the current Stedelijk exhibition, it seems fitting (albeit inadequate – this is music meant to be listened to live) to share a recording of it, made some years ago by an ensemble under the aegis of the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna, on the occasion of an exhibition devoted to him.

Chordal sound followed by a silent void, as per the title of the piece, represents in this case anything but a youthful prank. To those who concentrate on the whole performance, a distinctive intensity may be conveyed; the second half in its intention has nothing to do with relaxation: rather, it sets the stage for something quite different to occur, if the artist himself is to be believed. For, concerning this blank culmination, in his essay “Le Vrai devient réalité”* Klein wrote that “[c]’est ce silence si merveilleux qui donne la ‹ chance › et qui donne même parfois la possibilité d’être vraiment heureux, ne serait-ce qu’un seul instant, pendant un instant incommensurable en durée.”

Yves Klein in his apartment, Paris, 1959
(Photograph courtesy of the Yves Klein Archives, Paris)
Yves Klein at work on the “Fire Paintings” in the Gaz de France laboratory, La Plaine Saint-Denis, 1962
(Photograph courtesy of the Yves Klein Archives)
Above: Yves Klein, “Relief éponge rose sans titre (RE 32)” (1961)
Preceding page: “Peinture de feu sans titre (F 67)” (1962)
(Images courtesy of the Yves Klein Archives)
“Relief éponge or sans titre (RE 47 II)” (1961)
(Image courtesy of the Yves Klein Archives)
“Le Rose du bleu (RE 22)” (1960) (Image courtesy of Christie's)
The score of the “Symphonie monoton-silence” (1949/1961).
(Image courtesy of the Archives de la poésie sonore & numérique)
“L’Accord bleu (RE 10)” (1960),
(Image courtesy of the Stedelijk Museum)
For Further Reading

The listing which follows, being yet tentative, is compiled first and foremost as a set of notes to myself – it serves as a mnemonic aide (the title is meant quite literally). Rather idiosyncratic, no doubt, and extensive it may be, but in offering this bibliography here for consultation I should like to hope that those who do peruse it would find a number of suggestions amongst this array of signposts. Be assured that music as a subject stands behind the choice of these entries, even when the reasons for their inclusion might seem less than obvious; any appearance of haphazardness in the selection notwithstanding, there is some connection, or at least there seems to be one, to me, albeit only incipiently. – In their content the items assembled here are variegated, and though the central focus, as in the Musicuratum project as a whole, is circumscribed by our present moment, in the following a considerable number of much older works can be found as well. As regards their kind, the entries run the gamut – including periodical literature of several sorts, poems, and letters, in addition to various types of books and, in a few instances, materials published on the Internet. And, concerning the various elements of bibliographic information in what follows, they are as complete and as accurate as I’ve been able to render them, all of it compiled with an eye towards the readers’ ease of reference, and hence the extant entries may well be emended occasionally. – Although I cannot vouch now in detail for the quality of each single title listed, and nor ought their inclusion here be taken as an endorsement, nonetheless I should like to state that all of them have been chosen with deliberation and care.


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There are many individuals to be thanked here, in quite a few different locales around the globe, though of course none bears any responsibility for the Musicuratum project in general, nor for anything I have written or shall write under these auspices.

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In the first part of 2012, the singer Landon Gadoci, in Austin, kindly answered my long-distance inquiries during a period which then turned out to be that of the website’s gestation, and even in some manner helped catalyze my interest in undertaking such an endeavor to begin with. It is not by chance that his work was first written about at the outset, nor that I have devoted some longer and I hope more informative texts to it subsequently.

Some weeks prior to launching the website, during a couple of long and very good conversations here in Amsterdam, Mattijs van Bergen listened with a sympathetic and sharp ear to my plans as they were developing, and offered several pieces of well-considered advice, while a few weeks after I had set it up, in a further talk he tendered some additional suggestions which also proved particularly fruitful.

Quite a bit before I had even thought seriously about establishing the website, Mariah Blue, also in Amsterdam, graciously heard me expatiate on my ideas in several of their iterations and was forthcoming with numerous recommendations and tips concerning several of the musical scenes in this city.

Likewise in Amsterdam, Tsead Bruinja, for his part, also signalized his interest in the project some time before the website took shape, providing
some much-needed encouragement as well as several pieces of practical information.

Numerous others in Amsterdam have at different points in time shared their interest, encouragement, and—a lovely Dutch word—ondersteuning. The composers René Baptist Huysmans, Luiz Henrique Yudo, and Michael Bonaventure (all of whom just recently initiated a new musical collective called Muiz Manz, which seems promising indeed) have been supporters of my endeavors from early on, and I consider myself fortunate to have been able to actually meet them, while Alexandra Duvekot, of the duo Saelors and the band Light Light, has shared her enthusiasm in numerous personal communications. And, as regards those who are not professional musicians, though some are professionally involved in musical life in other ways, I should like to acknowledge how pleasant, instructive, and timely the conversations I’ve held with Arthur Olof concerning classical music in the Soviet Union and its successor states during the twentieth century, with José ten Berge on some contemporary classical music and contemporary dance, with Helena Spanjaard on Bach and also on the fine arts, with Gregor Langfeld (who has also on occasion corrected my German) on painting, aesthetic theory, and poetry, with Hans Abbing on the institutional conditions of music performance, with Maya Gordon on American and Israeli music as well as on American, English, and Hebrew poetry, with Jack Faber on some topics in contemporary music and film, with both Merel Schrama and Joshua Bevers on present–day pop music and on graphic design, and with Gert Jonkers on a number of matters relating to the music scenes in Amsterdam and in London, have all in their various ways been.

In New York, too, there are quite a few individuals to whom thanks are due. The singer and songwriter Andi Kristins has been a supporter from quite early on, and towards the end of 2012 the composer Adam Cuthbért introduced himself to me and has followed my work with great enthusiasm since then, also introducing me to his frequent long–distance collaborator Daniel Rhode as well as to two other composers in the city, Brian Petuch and Rosalie Burrell, both of whom have evinced a similar interest in it and with whom I’ve had some illuminating discussions, as well as to Steven Swartz and Sarah Baird Knight, the impresarios at Dot Dot Dot
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Elsewhere in the United States, variously located, there are several other musical professionals whose interest – communicated in each case through the various portals of the Internet – is deserving of recognition. The composer Dan Tramte, currently pursuing an advanced degree in Denton, Texas, has been from early on an enthusiastic supporter and a participant in interesting long-distance exchanges about philosophy and phenomenology; also during the summer months in 2012, the singer and songwriter Alyn Mearns, resident in Hickory, North Carolina, who performs solo as Yes the Raven and collaborates in the duo The Belfast Boys, has shared his enthusiasm, his work, and also his love of Auden’s poetry; somewhat later in 2012, the singer and songwriter Maxwell Demon, who di-
vides his time between Bellport on Long Island and New York City, introduced himself to me and has followed my project avidly since then; more recently, during the last few months, I have had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of the composer Nomi Epstein (in Chicago), the sound artist Jeremy Henry (in Dallas), also known as the Haus of Glitch, and the musician Jan Hendrich (in San Francisco), whose moniker as a solo artist is Qepe, each of these three having responded with interest to the project; and not long ago, the singer and songwriter Ben Sevier, who (in Phoenix) records under the name Wyly, penned a quite fine piece of encouragement for my efforts on his own website.

Also in the United States, amongst those whose interest is not, or is not mainly, professional, David Wurtzel and Martha Weintraub in New Jersey have offered an enthusiastic response to my project in its sheer unexpect-edness; in Los Angeles, over the past several years, conversations with Albert Maghbouleh and Eric Gordon concerning a number of topics relating to music, served later on as a source of more general encouragement, while, more recently, Harry Haese, Lisa Singer Haese, and Julianne Singer have also expressed their curiosity about and support of the project; and from the San Francisco area, Bryan Girard by his own musicianship, Rosemarie DeWeese Girard through her interest, and Karen Voets with her pointers, have all communicated some impetus and enthusiasm to it.

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Closer to home, in the hub that is London, are several individuals whom I also should like to thank. Early on the composer Matthew Shlomowitz conveyed his approbation of the text written about his work in a quite encouraging manner, while a bit later the singer and songwriter Jack Stan-
ton, at the time still a student at Oxford but since graduated and then relocated to the capital, approached me via Soundcloud, and has continued to follow the project since then; and more recently, the impresario David Metcalfe of the agency Forma Arts and Media, the mash-up artist Jonas C., who operates – despite spurious measures taken against him in the name of copyright – under the moniker Daft Beatles, the musician and producer Chris Garland, whose current musical project is The Psychedelic Manifesto, and the theoretician Inigo Wilkins, who maintains an interesting blog under the title Irreversible Noise, have all conveyed their interest in actual conversation, through personal communications, via Twitter, and by means of a blog link.

Elsewhere in England, the composer Rory Smith, currently living in Leeds, responded with appreciation and enthusiasm to my first text about his work, and has continued to follow the project since then, and, somewhat later, the singer and songwriter in Salisbury, Jonnie Allen, has done likewise.

In Paris, Marieke Wiegel graciously offered a number of pertinent recommendations, while it was also a great pleasure to meet the quite musical film-maker Xavier Baert, whose lively conversation and interest in my project have been encouraging indeed. And in the same city, the man behind the main fansite for the singer Eli Lieb, Michael Berthe, has also offered some choice words of encouragement in personal communications.

I should like to thank Jacques Joseph Roux, a sound artist in Givors, for his enthusiastic response to my project; similarly, The Sandman’s Orchestra, a French duo in Lille comprising Léonie Gabriel and Pierre Laplace, replied very kindly to my text about them and has remained in communication subsequently, as has, several months before, the composer Franck Christoph Yeznikian in Lyon; while, earlier still, the poet Pierre Auriol, now living in Montpellier, has conversed amiably in person and by personal communications about French poetry, including his own, Greek and Latin literature, and Debussy and Puccini; and most recently the sound artist Edouard Trolliet, a resident of Tarnos, greeted the text occasioned by his work with an encouraging enthusiasm.
In Berlin, another sound artist, Christoph de Babalon, responded kindly to my interest in his work, as did the singer and film–maker André Schneider, with a gracious reference to mine on his own website.

Lisa–Gwendolin Eichberger, in Cologne, a singer who participates in the experimental ensemble Turm der Liebe, has shown a like interest, commencing with my discussion of one of its numbers in a longer text.

The Milanese composer Giovanni Dettori has followed my project with an uncommon degree of care and understanding, and I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to make his acquaintance by means of personal communications.

In Brussels, the musician and radio programmer Salvatore Créme, formerly of the Venezuelan band Electrometro, responded enthusiastically to my project and has taken the time to answer some queries at length, while personal communications with the electronic musician known as Analog 80 have also been encouraging.

Residing in Budapest, Dee Rüsche of the London–based band Nói Kabát took an interest in the project early on, as did, at the beginning of this year, Ferenc Fehér of the bands Tripes and Industrial Wave Studio, in Kaposvár.

In Oslo, the singer and songwriter Jonas McDonnell, and in Bergen, the film–maker and fashionisto T–Michael, both of whom I’ve written about, have responded encouragingly.

Finally, further afield, for their enthusiasm and kind words, and often their readiness to share their music with me, I should also like to thank the singer and songwriter Stephen Carmichael, in Brisbane; the multi–instrumentalist and singer Samm Bennett, in Tokyo; the composer Mithatcan Öcal, in Istanbul; the DJ and producer Michael Dee, better known by his nom d’artiste as Mobidextrous, in Singapore; Michael Day, who works under the moniker of the West Coast Fruit Co., in Auckland; the artist, singer, and songwriter Givan Lötz, in Johannesburg; and the band Tango crisis, in Buenos Aires.
A Note on the Text
(And on the Type)

The text used in this book follows nearly verbatim that which appears on the website, yet in view of the infeasibility of including the embedded video and audio players which constitute such an important feature in the presentation there, some slight adjustments have been made to the phrasing of passages where those devices are introduced or referred to, and the same holds elsewhere from time to time, for instance with the self-referential words and phrases which do indeed make perfect sense in their original setting, and with the bibliographic or other details given in the footnotes. As regards typographical and other errors, much as on the website, here too they will be corrected silently whenever I happen to notice them: hence, for the most authoritative version of this document, for those readers who prefer it in the form of a PDF, especially if one has leafed through or printed it out some time before, the file currently available on the website ought to be consulted directly.

As regards the typefaces utilized here, I began with the idea of arranging these pages as a battleground of Bodonis – a family which is a personal favorite and whose members are seemingly able to lend a proper shape to words about music. After several graphic iterations I have returned to this idea, and indeed throughout these pages a few select varieties have been juxtaposed.
The index that follows is keyed solely to the text and to the introduction (apart from the epigraphs and most of the bibliographic information contained in the occasional footnotes); it comprises with few exceptions only the proper names and the titles of the works – the musical compositions, albums, songs, books, articles, etc. – mentioned therein. (Sometimes, however, a mere allusion has been identified here.) Yet these have been entered in this index in the manner of inclusive reference to that which they designate; hence the range of the page numbers that have been provided is broad. Moreover, titles have also been listed independently of their creators, while the members of musical ensembles, groups, or bands (excepting those who are commonly known) are cross-listed individually. As for artists or writers who employ noms de plume or d’artiste, they have been listed twice, although the parallel entries under their own names are restricted to the latter alone. At the end of the index, finally, are the few items which start with numbers, ideograms, or symbols.

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