

## Introduction

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*Gavin Steingo and Jairo Moreno*

The question of value might seem beyond the pale in cases of sound and music. Sound and music are objects of immense accumulation, appreciation, exploration, and investment, not just for the human species but also among other species, and indeed the world. Sound simply *is*, its existence is inexhaustible, and remarkable things happen in and through it—end of story.

Why, then, the question of value? Divesting sound and music from naive notions of intrinsic value, the essays here examine heterogeneous modalities by which sound and music produce value in and as history, politics, and ontology. In turn, the very question of what sound and music are—of what constitutes them, as well as what they constitute—is precisely what is at stake. Amy Cimini and Jairo Moreno wonder about the political forms emerging when sound and music are entrusted to do something for someone—for which they propose the term *fiduciary*—and in particular the function of aesthesis in believing *that* one senses and that *what* one senses is true. Bill Dietz and Gavin Steingo reconsider the classical political challenges of music in relation to collectivities and crowds. What are the political

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stakes of a form that toggles between contagious paroxysm and the radical privatization of aesthetics? They propose “civility” as a means for regulating extreme violence and explore the contours of a musical experimentalism that might participate in this regulative politics. Naomi Waltham-Smith adds an acoustic dimension to Giorgio Agamben’s idea that there is a potentiality *of* potentiality: the potential *not to*. Against the backdrop of a notion of sound as something that resists particular identities and communal belonging, Waltham-Smith addresses two major strains in twentieth-century philosophy: the refusal of presence in French deconstruction (Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy) and the refusal of biopolitics in recent Italian thought (Agamben, Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno).

Ana María Ochoa Gautier evaluates the ecological turn in music studies, revealing in the concern to preserve both music and the environment a pervasive inability to think nature in the plural. Proposing the notion of “acoustic multinaturalism,” she makes a powerful argument to heed the call of earlier anthropological and ethnomusicological work, particularly the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Steven Feld’s acoustemology. From another perspective, Gary Tomlinson invites us to think a beginning, before the emergence of hominins, through a critique of a recently rediscovered avatar for musical power: affect. He argues that semiosis is irreducible to causal covariance between two entities and, following Charles Sanders Peirce, that semiosis begins only when a relation of “secondness” develops into a relation of “thirdness,” that is, into a relation to a relation. Tomlinson then brings this insight to bear upon recent speculative realist thinking, detecting certain limitations in object-oriented ontology, and supplementing Quentin Meillassoux’s mathematization of being with a Darwinian historicization of life.

Rethinking the difficult question of black music in the United States, Ronald Radano returns to Karl Marx in the company of the New South historiography to argue that black musical value derives from the anomaly of musical production within the context of slave labor. The anomalous sounding out of slaves in music and in song became an unobtainable kernel existing alongside and within the body of the slave-as-property, mysteriously “animating” the body and harboring a secret. Peter Szendy, in turn, takes us to the marketplace of pianistic technicities to find the Marx Brothers giving Karl Marx’s theory of fetishism both a sound track and a theatrical staging. He posits an inherent relationship between fetishism and music, in the sense that the former names the possibility of infinite exchange that the latter presupposes. But at the same time, both music and fetish suggest

the possibility of a certain coagulation: a freeze-frame or stuck key where eyes and ears grind to a halt. Rosalind Morris listens to Marx in detail, or rather to Marx as a listener and transcriber of workers. In “The Working Day” chapter of *Capital*, Morris detects a tension between dialectic and dialect, a tension between the voice of The Worker who confronts capital head-on and the voices of actual workers. A tension, yes, but also an aporia—and one, Morris suggests, that must necessarily be confronted by any political project that hopes to avoid collapsing into a mere aggregate of what already exists.

Each essay here, in its own way, reveals the profound ambivalences that any thinking of sound and music must necessarily confront. Whether the challenge is posed in terms of politics, ethics, history, epistemology, or ontology, sound and music are called upon to simultaneously complicate the problem and provide an exit route. But this route is immediately registered as a lure, and the optimism of the will flails against the pessimism of the intellect. Along this path, and through a series of turns, the value of sound and music becomes distantly audible, at once entrusting, civilizing, potentiating, relating, animating, freezing, and promising. And then: caught in these multiple snares, sound withdraws. From its completely remote place, utterly dark and utterly silent, sound severs all relations and attachments. Having done so, it begins multiplying those attachments once again.