

The Musical Ineffable Revisited: Hermeneutics, Psychoanalysis, and Media-Technological Reproducibility

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An assumption has persisted since the invention of the phonograph and the gramophone that the sonic experience afforded by media-technological recordings—the readily available, immediate presence of raw acoustic data—is entirely sufficient for the hermeneutic interpretation by listeners of musical content. This assumption has especially gained traction in the age of digital devices. But this belief in the power of technological reproducibility to facilitate musical understanding is challenged by a controversial category that is as powerful in its effect on the listening subject’s imagination as it is difficult to define: the musical ineffable, or, in psychoanalytic terms, the sonic Real.

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A complex and overdetermined concept, the ineffable signifies an auratic excess of sensuous immediacy, opening up the spontaneous recognition of something captivatingly beautiful, emotionally overwhelming, and spiritually significant in the midst of a range of intuitively felt effects at the core of the genuinely musical experience—effects that partially reveal themselves to attentive listeners while always remaining intriguingly strange and elusive. For these reasons, the ineffable may grasp the listener with bodily and affective intensity even though, or precisely because, its very “existence” can never be ascertained factually and beyond doubt. The ineffable, however, can certainly be described and debated as a contested, ambiguous, but powerful category (as I will attempt here) by the very discourse it continually challenges.

Inherited from a Romantic metaphysics of music, the musical ineffable has primarily been analyzed in terms of the listener’s encounter with the insufficiencies of hermeneutic discourses—as the gap between auditory sensations and the arbitrary signifiers typical of verbal language. But today, in the age of ubiquitous media, the ineffable ought to be understood also as an irreducible effect of historically changing technologies of sound (re)production. Thus, I seek to redefine the musical ineffable as a quality that subverts the rhetoric of hermeneutic analysis while reasserting itself as the acoustic traces of Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic register of the Real in the material conditions of media-technological reproducibility.¹ This doubly coded effect of the ineffable as a post-metaphysical category in the midst of media-technological modernity allows us to attain a better understanding of the interface between sensuous immediacy, verbal articulation, and sonic media characteristic of the exploration of new worlds of the auditory imagination.

Arguing in the tradition from Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche to Ernst Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno, Vladimir Jankélévitch, and Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari, Michael Gallope asks the important question: “From our perspective in late modernity, what is philosophically significant about music’s stunning force? Does it harbor a distinct kind of critical potential?”² Unlike the representatives of the German metaphysics of music (Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Ludwig Tieck, and E. T. A. Hoffmann), these later philosophers “do not venerate the ineffable impact of music as a transcendent art of feeling” but address a range of problems “that seem to exceed the boundaries of conceptual reasoning,” such as “a utopian potentiality that inspires hope (Bloch), an

¹ For a selective survey of the historical intersections of sound/music, philosophy, and media technologies, see also Rolf J. Goebel, *Klang im Zeitalter technischer Medien: Eine Einführung* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2017).

² Michael Gallope, *Deep Refrains: Music, Philosophy, and the Ineffable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 6.

ethical critique of modernity (Adorno), . . . the ephemeral movement of lived time (Jankélévitch), and . . . the syncopated, contrapuntal rhythms of sense and social life (Deleuze and Guattari).³ In Gallope's view, the ineffable is marked by a philosophically intriguing paradox because "music appears as a sensuous immediacy at the same time that it always remains mediated by forms and techniques."⁴ As he points out, "music's ineffability does not simply concern music's mediation by language"; rather, it is equally important "in the context of the twentieth century . . . to consider the significance of mechanical reproduction as a form of mediation," and in this regard Gallope mentions Friedrich Kittler's decisive contribution to our understanding of the "shift in the era of mechanical reproduction as epochal and irreversible."⁵ Here Gallope alludes to Kittler's theory that the invention of the gramophone marked a historical rupture, which together with film and the typewriter broke up the classical-romantic hegemony of the literary imagination into the separate and competing domains of auditory, visual, and scriptural modes of representation.⁶ As Gallope proposes, for Kittler, the phonograph enabled musicians to supersede the "cognitive selection" of music's "ordered intervals and ratios," insofar as recorded music "could readily make use of the entire frequency spectrum and harness the unconscious noise of the real" in Lacan's sense.⁷ Important as this observation concerning the media-technological Other of the philosophical side of the ineffable may be, it remains underdeveloped in Gallope's otherwise wide-ranging account of the historical unfolding of this concept.

Paying greater attention to this issue, Christoph Cox stresses that for Kittler, sound recording "opened an ontological domain foreclosed by theories of visual and linguistic representations" (such as poststructuralism and deconstruction). As Cox argues, "in Kittler's heterodox Lacanian idiom, recorded sound bypasses 'the imaginary' and 'the symbolic' to give access to 'the real': the perceptible plenitude of matter that underlies all representation, a material core that is not a fundament but a primordial flux out of which all signals and signs emerge and into

³ Gallope, *Deep Refrains*, 6.

⁴ Gallope, *Deep Refrains*, 10.

⁵ Gallope, *Deep Refrains*, 11.

⁶ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). See also Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens, foreword David E. Wellbery (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), esp. 206–346. For examples of the continued interest in Kittler's theories, see Alexander Rehding et al., "Colloquy: Discrete/Continuous: Music and Media Theory after Kittler," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 70 (2017): 221–56.

⁷ Gallope, *Deep Refrains*, 11; see also 156.

which they inevitably recede.”⁸ Hence, Cox continues, “phonography *discloses* the sonic flux as such, the primary noise from which music is derived, and it provokes a materialist account of listening and the voice that cuts through the domain of the symbolic and plunges us into the real.”⁹ Here Cox, like Kittler himself, arguably invests a trust in the directness, immediacy, and fullness of phonographic reproduction that underestimates the tension, indeed the dialectic, between the phonographic promise to disclose the Real as the psychoanalytic equivalent of sonic flux, on the one hand, and, on the other, the historically contingent, material limitations of the recording machinery expected to capture it.

A close focus on the complicated dialectic of disclosure and effacement in the media-technological reproducibility of the musical Real allows us, I propose, to attain a sharper understanding of the musical ineffable as a historically contingent category. As developed in his programmatic study *Music and the Ineffable* (originally published in 1983), Jankélévitch regards music as a cultural practice that defies hermeneutic deciphering because its sonic surface presence possesses a depth of meaning that is inexhaustible but not unfathomable. This inexhaustibility is the mark of music’s ineffability because the hidden purpose of music is to “*express infinitely that which cannot be explained.*”¹⁰ As Jankélévitch proposes, the ineffable “cannot be explained because there are infinite and interminable things to be said about it,” such as “the mystery of God” or the “inexhaustible mystery of love, both Eros and Caritas,” or poetry. As the prime manifestation of the ineffable’s inspirational and hypnotic force, music begins where verbal discourses fail and brings about a transfiguring enchantment, which “interminable words and innumerable musics will not exhaust”; it creates a sensuous, indeed bodily affective plenitude of meaningfulness that is “infinitely intelligible” but “also infinitely equivocal.”¹¹

If Jankélévitch tends to attribute essential validity to this category, for Lawrence Kramer—who is perhaps the most important proponent of musical hermeneutics—the ineffable is little more than an illusion and

⁸ Christoph Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 3; see also 87. As Cox stresses, central to his study “is the concept of the *sonic flux*, that is, the notion of sound as an immemorial material flow to which human expressions contribute but that precedes and exceeds those expressions” (Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 2, emphasis in original).

⁹ Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 76, emphasis added; see also 102.

¹⁰ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 71, emphasis in original.

¹¹ Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 72. For an extensive discussion of Jankélévitch’s views, see Gallope, *Deep Refrains*, 165–203; and Michael Gallope et al., “Colloquy: Vladimir Jankélévitch’s Philosophy of Music,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65 (2012): 215–56.

deceptive myth, a spectral relic “of a certain nineteenth-century vogue for sentimental metaphysics (not to be confused with the real thing)” and “*obviously* a cultural fiction.”¹² Against the Romantic metaphysics of a musically sublime inexplicability still echoed by Jankélévitch, Kramer holds on to the hermeneutic universality claim of language as the primary medium of all human experience and understanding.¹³ For this reason, he relocates the ineffable from its transcendental place *beyond* verbal articulation to a limit-position *within* discursive language, claiming that “language is the medium of the unsayable itself.”¹⁴ Following Jacques Derrida’s remarks on negative theology’s self-abnegating language, Kramer maintains the possibility of conceiving the ineffable as something that can be explained within the compass of hermeneutic vocabulary itself because this discourse always reflects, through incessant self-critique and self-revision, the possibilities and limits of its own interpretive desires and representational strategies. As Kramer contends, the ineffable, like any apophatic statement addressed to the unsayable, would then be nothing but an effect of a kind of self-emptying of verbal language, which acknowledges and even “retains what it denies in the form of a lack.”¹⁵ As the difference between Jankélévitch and Kramer suggests, the musical ineffable is a highly contested concept. Denoting something in a musical experience that largely escapes verbal articulation, it also unsurprisingly has elicited highly diverse scholarly assessments of its validity as an analytic category. Its contested status, however, can be given clearer, historically embedded contours if we relate it to the technologically mediated category of the psychoanalytic Real.

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In *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* Kittler proposes that phonography enables the mechanically direct reproduction of pure sounds without any regard for the human subject’s intentions and the verbal language

¹² Lawrence Kramer, *The Thought of Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 46, emphasis in original.

¹³ See also Michel Chion’s wide-ranging discussion of the auditory activity of linguistic “naming.” In contrast to musical notation, which hides the fact that it cannot deliver the totality of music that it promises, “*words, by their nature, designate incessantly, in their confrontation with the heard, that which they are insufficient to circumscribe.*” Michel Chion, *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise*, trans. and intro. James A. Steintrager (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 223, emphasis in original. This self-reflective property of language encourages the listener to strive for an ever more precise vocabulary with which to describe sounds, knowing that an exact correspondence between sound and words is of course impossible. See Chion, *Sound*, 224–30.

¹⁴ Kramer, *Thought of Music*, 46.

¹⁵ Kramer, *Thought of Music*, 49.

practices of hermeneutic interpretation.¹⁶ Splitting off the mechanical storage of sonic data from the interiority of the human imagination is part of Kittler's unorthodox transference of Lacan's three psychoanalytic registers to the media-technological differentiation of modernity. For Kittler, the Lacanian Symbolic—the order of language and the law—corresponds to the finite series of letters and numbers available on the typewriter. The Imaginary—the subject's immersion in visual fantasy, which Lacan derives from the infant's illusory experience of bodily wholeness during the mirror stage—resembles the continuity cuts and optical illusions of early cinema. And, finally, the purely acoustic inscriptions mechanically recorded by the phonograph are equal, or so Kittler claims, to what Lacan calls the Real.

The elusive Real, as Lacan proposes following Aristotle, "is beyond the *automaton*," which he identifies as the network of signifiers, or "the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs, by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle."¹⁷ Subverting the hegemony of symbolic representation, the human subject's encounter with the Real, Lacan insists, is always necessarily a missed encounter. In the analytic experience, the Real presents itself in the unassimilable form of trauma, imposing an "apparently accidental origin" of everything that follows in experience, and lies at the heart of the conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle.¹⁸ Stretching "from the trauma to the phantasy," which Lacan defines as a protective "screen that conceals something quite primary, something determinant in the function of repetition," the Real is hidden from the subject by the dream, "behind the lack of representation," while governing human activities more profoundly than any other force. While the Real is not accessible to the signifying network of verbal language, Lacan nevertheless suggests that it may be partially audible through acoustic channels that disrupt the illusory scenarios of the protective dreamwork. Upon the subject's awakening, the Real, he proposes, "may be represented by the accident, the noise, the small element of reality, which is evidence that we are not dreaming."¹⁹

This linkage of Lacan's Real to an excessive but unnamable sonority returns in Kittler's free adaptation of Lacan's category, a transferal from psychoanalytic experience to sound technology. Considering the elusive

¹⁶ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 15–16, 21–114. Kittler had developed his ideas on the phonograph already in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, esp. 229–64.

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 52 (emphasis in original), 53–54.

¹⁸ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 55.

¹⁹ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 60.

character of the Real, Kittler defines it in purely negative terms as an experiential leftover: “It forms the waste or residue that neither the mirror of the imaginary nor the grid of the symbolic can catch: the physiological accidents and stochastic disorder of bodies.” Since “only the phonograph can record all the noise produced by the larynx prior to any semiotic order and linguistic meaning,” the Real, Kittler concludes, “has the status of phonography.”²⁰ As Maren Haffke has shown, in Kittler’s system Lacan’s category of the Real corresponds to a kind of undifferentiated noise (*Rauschen*). Diametrically opposed to the symbolic regime of hermeneutics but presumably reproducible by media technology, this noise (as Kittler proposes *pace* Nietzsche) would be the model for an ideal, future type of music—music not as the symbolic filtering of the noise of the Real, but music beyond language and meaning, the sole equivalent of purely self-sufficient media technology and its acoustic data flows.²¹ Stressing that the Real is not an essentialist idea but a historically emerging achievement, perhaps even a sign of media-technological progress, Kittler proposes: “Thanks to the phonograph, science is for the first time in possession of a machine that records noises regardless of so-called meaning,” as opposed to “written protocols,” which “were always unintentional selections of meaning.”²² Connoting the undifferentiated flow of technologically reproducible acoustic surface data prior to and beyond the presumably distorting and fixating interventions of human subjectivity, intentional agency, and verbal discursivity, Kittler’s sonic Real is the materialist equivalent of the hermeneutically unrepresentable ineffable as a metaphysical category. The problem, however, is that Kittler erases the elusiveness of the Lacanian Real by claiming that its sonic manifestations attain physical presence in the grooves of the phonographic record.

It may be more in line with Lacan’s theory to argue that even the most advanced audio-technology can never actually capture the Real’s categorically unassimilable force itself. The musical Real has no direct presence in the medium of phonographic reproduction. Rather, what various historical devices—the gramophone and phonograph, the tape recorder, and modern digital devices—directly record in the storage space are the technological *traces* of the psychic Real, which human subjects—performers and listeners—experience as music’s irreducibly enigmatic and often indecipherable effects on their imagination, affective response, and regimes of symbolic signification. In this way, the phonographic reproducibility of the acoustic traces of the Real (but not the

²⁰ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 15–16.

²¹ Maren Haffke, *Archäologie der Tastatur: Musikalische Medien nach Friedrich Kittler und Wolfgang Scherer* (Paderborn: Fink, 2019), 249–330, esp. 265 and 288.

²² Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 85.

Real itself) points to something beyond it, namely, music's aesthetic ineffability, which subverts the illusory desire for closing the gap between the sonic surface immediacy afforded by technological mediation and the human subject's attempts to translate what is authentically heard into discursive language.

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Kittler is primarily interested in privileging the physical materiality of sound recording over the presumably distorting interference of human subjectivity, the individual act of listening, and hermeneutic language games. Hence, by force of his own technocentric system, he must neglect the status of the human subject's personal experience. By contrast, this important issue is addressed centrally in Michel Poizat's exploration of the interface between psychoanalysis and media technology in *The Angel's Cry* (originally published in 1986, incidentally the same year as Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*). Poizat, like Kittler heavily influenced by Lacan, traces the effects of the Real both in the structural properties of opera as a performative art and in the genre's technological reproducibility. Associating instances of musical silence with the Real, he argues following Jankélévitch, that silence in opera "articulates the signifying scansion of language" in the vocal score or "creates rhythm and phrasing" in the shape of musical pauses or rests.²³ But another type of silence functions as the logical neighbor of the celebrated diva's cry: both are furthest removed from the "signifying linguistic message" of speech.²⁴ Silence, in an act of effacement that Poizat associates with the death instinct, yields "to the continuous 'real' which, escaping all symbolizing processes as well as all naming, is cast out forever into absolute, deadly silence, supreme fascination and horror."²⁵ Or: "Where Mozart situates himself at the side of an often jubilant pleasure procured by the release of tension, Wagner is resolutely on the side of the quest for that unnamable residue which Lacan calls the Real," joining the listener's and the composer's desires in an encounter that "is bound up with the long-held note or the cry"—the sensuous materiality of the disembodied voice itself.²⁶ Even more radically, Poizat detects the Real's dual effects of

²³ Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. Arthur Denner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 87.

²⁴ Poizat, *Angel's Cry*, 90.

²⁵ Poizat, *Angel's Cry*, 92.

²⁶ Poizat, *Angel's Cry*, 126. See also Dolar's remark that the material visibility of the sound-reproducing gadget substitutes for the acoustic separation of the audible voice from its invisible source: "Radio, gramophone, tape-recorder, telephone: with the advent of the new media the acousmatic property of the voice became universal, and hence trivial." Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 63; see also 7–8. However, this separation of the voice from its source is anything but trivial; it lies at the heart of sonic reproducibility.

ecstatic fascination and bodily horror in Richard Strauss's opera *Salome*, where the eponymous character's erotically ecstatic *jouissance* is "as dissolute as her desire." Whereas the words uttered by Jokanaan (John the Baptist), the object of her desire, represent the moral order and the word of God, Salome seeks "her *jouissance* not only in this voice but—the height of transgression—in the real physical source of that voice," the mouth of the prophet's severed head. The literally unspeakable horror of Salome's desire is thus "*jouissance* in the pure real, the piece of dead flesh."²⁷

The opera lover's *jouissance* during a live performance or even while listening to a recording, Poizat argues, transcends the regime of verbal discourse, for instance the text of the libretto or scholarship about the opera. The voice of the opera singer on the verge of the proverbial cry is the culmination of "pure music free of all ties to speech." In these moments "language disappears" and the listener "is stripped of all possibility of speech."²⁸ For Poizat, however, *jouissance*, the bodily affective response to the musical Real, is something that eludes not only the verbal discourses of hermeneutic understanding but also, in sharp contrast to Kittler's theory, the capacity of technological reproduction. Its deficiency emerges as a direct effect of those intense moments when the overwhelmingly beautiful melody, especially of the female voice, changes into the visceral cry. The cassette tape recorder smuggled into the auditorium by devoted fans is meant to capture the traces of these unforgettable experiences, but the machine must inevitably fail. Only as an "autonomous object detached from the body that produces it" can the singer's voice "become the object of the fan's *jouissance*," but because this object of desire is "fragile and evanescent," no tape recorder, "however technologically advanced, can fully capture and reproduce it."²⁹ What the listener expects from the successful singer is an "instant of absolute ecstasy in the fantasy of finally possessing the inaccessible object of his quest."³⁰ In a sense, the failure of the tape recorder highlights typical aspects of what Poizat understands by the "voice as an object

²⁷ Poizat, *Angel's Cry*, 152–53. Referring to Poizat, Sebastian Leikert also associates the opera diva's cry, as well as the castrato's voice, with an attempt to capture the *jouissance* beyond the signifier by giving the Real, which he identifies with that which is covered and excluded by the signifier, a perceptible presence. The Real of sound, according to Leikert, is essentially undifferentiated and lacks any kind of object-like consistency. But the Real is not simply something unstructured or shapeless but marks that which is unbearable for the human subject. The operatic voice, Leikert seems to suggest, is ultimately not the manifestation of the Real as such but only the last protective screen before the Real's fascinating violence. Sebastian Leikert, *Die vergessene Kunst: Der Orpheusmythos und die Psychoanalyse der Musik* (Giessen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2005), 18–24.

²⁸ Poizat, *Angel's Cry*, 37.

²⁹ Poizat, *Angel's Cry*, 35; see also 95.

³⁰ Poizat, *Angel's Cry*, 36.

of jouissance”: this affect of irresistible exhilaration connotes “loss; inaccessibility; evanescence; impossibility and therefore prohibition; the source of a quest, of an asymptotic desire; the deified object (with its two faces of good and evil), dangerous if not deadly in its seduction.”³¹

Here, Poizat’s skepticism concerning the desire for arresting the ephemerality of sounds through technological reproduction also entails, implicitly, a critique of the long history of modern Western metaphysics, which, as Frances Dyson puts it with reference to Martin Heidegger, is gripped by a “‘representational thinking’ that cannot, but also prefers not to, accommodate sound,” instead privileging the seemingly stable presence of “permanent, material, and visual objects,” together with their theorization.³² In contrast to this visually focused metaphysics, Poizat legitimates the evanescent temporality of operatic sound as the poignant precondition of bodily affective ecstasy. What he underestimates is the acknowledgment that sound reproduction technologies do not necessarily diminish or distort the unique authenticity of original live performances. Rather, the precise relation between original and copy varies with the flexible interfaces between the recording, postproduction, and replay machinery in historically and culturally contingent listening situations.³³ Presumably, Poizat would not doubt that the acoustic data of the operatic cry can indeed be registered even on the comparatively limited tape recorder. But what exceeds, for him, this type of reproducibility is the enraptured listener’s ecstatic and transgressive bodily experience of the musical Real as the effect of the sensuous immediacy of the disembodied operatic voice during the temporality of a live performance. While emerging from the actual stage of the opera house, the effect of the Real unfolds exclusively in the subject’s imagination; it is not merely the reception of physical acoustic data but essentially a fantasy, whose evanescence and empirical unreality presumably defeats the objectifying hegemony of technological reproduction.

Poizat ultimately locates the musical Real primarily, or even exclusively, as emerging from the original live performance’s unique sonic atmosphere. Following Gernot Böhme and others, a sonic atmosphere

³¹ Poizat, *Angel’s Cry*, 150.

³² Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 75.

³³ For a critique of the logic of presumably more authentic original and technologically mediated, but seemingly deficient copy, see Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 215–25. The relation between original and reproduction also depends on the process of digitally remastering older media, such as vinyl records or magnetic tapes. Specific “improvements in bandwidth, signal-to-noise-ratio, and resolution,” as Arved Ashby has shown, have led to “advances in sonic clarity” and “previously unheard nuances,” opening up new “analysis and judgment of the performances themselves.” Arved Ashby, *Absolute Music, Mechanical Reproduction* (Berkeley: University California Press, 2010), 145.

can be defined as the enabling framework situation or conditionality of specific musical experiences.³⁴ The atmosphere is an intuitively immersive situation engulfing both the subjectivity of the listener and the sources of sonic events in a bodily affective manner. While the constituent components of the music emerging from this atmosphere—the musical score, its execution by particular performers and their instruments, and the acoustic parameters of the concert hall or recording/replay technology—can be analyzed quite precisely, the surrounding atmosphere of listening itself is felt spontaneously and intuitively even as it ultimately eludes explanation because its power originates in its essential indeterminacy.³⁵ In the context of Poizat's argument, it would be justified to regard this atmosphere as the irreducible reflection, the experiential reverberation, of the musical Real. What Poizat underestimates, however, is the fact that in modernity, the musical atmosphere is not exclusively confined, as he seems to think, to the original live performance in a specific architectural space such as the opera house. Rather, various recording and listening devices, too, from the now nostalgically celebrated, old-fashioned gramophone and Poizat's cassette tape recorder to the cutting-edge earphones of today's digital mobility, facilitate the listening subject's immersion in varying technologically mediated atmospheres, whose historically diverse forms in turn affect changes in the hermeneutic articulation of the musical meanings generated in these atmospheres.

Moreover, Poizat collapses two modes of sonic encounter into one another by suggesting that the insufficiencies of electromagnetic

³⁴ Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. Jean-Paul Thibaud (London: Routledge, 2017), esp. 167–92. Böhme links the concept of atmospheres developed by the New Phenomenology of Hermann Schmitz with music as a spatial event generated by modern listening technologies (see esp. 176–81). For the interface between auditory atmospheres and headphone devices, see also Stefan Niklas, *Die Kopfhörer:in: Mobiles Musikhören als ästhetische Erfahrung* (Paderborn: Fink, 2014) esp. 194–205. For the significance of sonic atmospheres for posthumanist thought, see Rolf Goebel, "Musical Atmospheres," *Critical Posthumanism: Genealogy of the Posthuman*, December 30, 2019, <http://criticalposthumanism.net/musical-atmospheres/>.

³⁵ See also Tere Vadén and Juha Torvinen, "Musical Meaning In Between: Ineffability, Atmosphere and Subjectivity in Musical Experience," in *Music as Atmosphere: Collective Feelings and Affective Sounds*, ed. Friedlind Riedel and Juha Torvinen (London: Routledge, 2020), 43–59. Also with recourse to Böhme's phenomenology, Vadén and Torvinen seek to explain the connection between musical meaning and ineffability by "seeing (parts of) musical meaning as a subjective experience, in which the separation between the subject and the object is not (yet or anymore) effective. In this account, the ineffability of musical meaning is a genuine phenomenon that cannot be remedied by, for instance, perfecting language or language use or by perfecting musico-philosophical study. Both the interminable search for musical meaning motivated by the obviousness of music's meaningfulness as well as the inescapable slippage of musical symbols (or, perhaps better, music *as* symbols) are here seen as unavoidable features of musical experience" (43–44, emphasis in original).

reproduction (the tape recorder) simply replicate and confirm deficiencies of the verbal discourses of hermeneutic understanding. But as Kittler's discussion of the sonic Real suggests, these two modes work on different levels. Verbal language and media technologies never operate simultaneously; linguistic developments and changing hermeneutic paradigms do not necessarily move in tandem with the history of sound recording. Thus, while it may be true, as Poizat proposes, that the tape recorder's technical limitations preserve (in my terminological modification of Kittler) comparatively fewer and less precise acoustic traces of the Lacanian Real, subsequent inventions—especially digital technologies, more sensitive microphones, and state-of-the-art loudspeakers, headphones, and earbuds—have substantially changed listeners' experiences of these traces. Thus, whereas the tape recorder for Poizat may have indeed made the distance between the diva's cry on the stage and its traces on tape more discernible, the sense of bodily directness and affective immediacy when listening to a digital file of the celebrated cry through state-of-the-art earphones today may actually intensify the terrifying yet exhilarating shock effect of musical *jouissance*. In fact, the solitary mode of listening to music through earphones in the varying surroundings of today's digital mobility may surpass anything that listeners can experience in the stationary position of their customary seat in the opera house or concert hall, where the bodily presence of other audience members creates a mixed atmosphere of both community and distraction that is different from the geographically ever-changing moods of earphone listening with the Sony Walkman or the iPhone.³⁶

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The ineffable, then, is not merely a metaphysical myth or cultural illusion but a Real (pun intended) factor in the cultural interface between media-technological reproducibility and hermeneutical discursivity. To illustrate this point, I turn here to the liner notes by Peter Korfmacher to the CD "*Zeit*": *Zeitgenössische Orgelmusik / Contemporary Organ Music*, performed by Friedemann Herz (1993).³⁷ Recorded on the monumental Schuke organ at the Kreuzeskirche in Essen, Germany, the disc includes a composition by Wolfgang Rihm (b. 1952) titled *Bann, Nachtschwärmerei* (1980). The German title itself is highly ambiguous; it could mean something like "Spell, Nightly Enthusiasm" (*Schwärmerei* connotes going into

³⁶ On historically changing modes of mobile listening, exemplified by the Sony Walkman and the iPod, see Shuhei Hosokawa, "The Walkman Effect," in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (London: Routledge, 2012), 104–16; and Michael Bull, "The Audio-Visual iPod," in Sterne, *Sound Studies Reader*, 197–208.

³⁷ Peter Korfmacher, liner notes for *Zeit: Zeitgenössische Orgelmusik / Contemporary Organ Music*, Koch/Schwann, Aulos, 3-1389-2, 1993, compact disc.

raptures, waxing lyrical about something or someone, and even swarming). Thus, the programmatic title suggests the musical exploration of an intense process of affective ecstasy coupled with sonic dispersal and diffusion. If Gallope's exploration of the ineffable seeks "to find ways to address and explain the befuddling, vague, and untranslatable specificity of musical experience at a certain register of philosophical precision,"³⁸ then Korfmacher's commentary seeks to translate the sensuous, captivating, and yet elusive sonorities of Rihm's piece, marked by a bewildering juxtaposition of melodic fragments, chordal agglomerations, and immense changes in timbre and dynamics, into hermeneutic language—not in order to decipher the music's meaning definitively but, on the contrary, to underscore the irreducible gap between the sonic and the verbal. Noting that in Rihm's piece "the function of organ music becomes the focus of attention," Korfmacher hints at the self-referential nature of the composition, in which the electro-mechanical properties of the instrument and the musical genre realized through its materiality become, to some extent, the very theme of the composition. But whatever the meanings of the piece may be, Korfmacher stresses that they never crystallize into stable contours and fixed substance: "Musical form becomes a spectre, the ghostly mirror-image of itself."³⁹

This statement is followed by Rihm's own interpretation of his piece, which is even more remarkable because it does not subscribe to the erroneous assumption that a composer's self-interpretation authentically captures his original intentions. On the contrary, Rihm dramatizes the necessary instabilities, lacunae, and unanswerable questions that the composition evokes in the listening process—his own and that of his audience:

As in a frozen suite, shivering skeletons follow each other: a monotonous introductory quarter-tone piece, a Misterioso (laments heard from the crypt; wasn't there something just now, or did I mis-hear? . . . continue to play . . . yes, surely, wasn't there . . .), an Aria (harsh and austere), a Recitative to a Sarabande (hesitant; a creaking noise under the church pew . . . bones, or . . .), a Toccata (. . . always the loveliest moment: when the Mass is over, the organ bestirs itself as if to revenge itself for having to sit idly for too long – but now no one is there, it is dark in dark . . . yet something creaked . . .) and then, suddenly, two more bars of Sarabande. Altogether a suite. Well-disciplined.⁴⁰

Rihm's commentary is surely a hermeneutic act, but one that ceaselessly vacillates between fragmentary hints of possible but never ascertainable

³⁸ Gallope, *Deep Refrains*, 16.

³⁹ Korfmacher, liner notes.

⁴⁰ Cited by Korfmacher, liner notes, trans. modified.

meanings and unspoken, perhaps unspeakable moments, which the organ plays and the audience hears but which are never completely expressible in words, even though the written commentary can allude to them in the shape of the signs “. . .” and “–”. These marks, visible but unpronounceable, connote the ambiguous status of the musical ineffable: the ghostly, indeed deathlike, and traumatic traces of the Lacanian Real, which viscerally seeps through the cracks and weak points of the very language that seeks in vain to articulate it. Commentaries such as these underscore the paradoxical nature of any act of self-reflexive hermeneutics. Precisely by virtue of foregrounding their own partiality—their perspectival orientation and incompleteness—they turn their deficiencies and even failures into a productive way of opening up our understanding of a musical composition that, among other things, seems to portray the Real as the ineffable unground of its sonorous presence. The recorded performance of a piece like this requires a correspondingly self-reflexive mode of attentive listening, one that seeks to experience the spectral traces of the musical Real as emerging from the interface among the composer’s self-interpretation (however subjective and partial, blind or insightful it may be), the performer’s realization of the musical score, the capabilities of the instrument(s), and the specifications of the replay media. In this way, the listener’s imagination becomes the very location where verbal hermeneutics and technological sound reproduction intersect as mutually reinforcing or self-questioning networks of musical understanding.

This doubly coded type of hermeneutical/technological listening is even more obviously foregrounded by a composition on the same CD by Hans Joachim Hespos (b. 1938), titled “SNs” (1975). Pronounced “essence,” the piece, as Korfmacher explains, enables the entire organ as an electro-mechanical machine of sound production to foreground its own performativity as the very theme of musical structure. Among the violently aggressive chord clusters, moments of silence, and soft, elusive timbre changes possibly produced by the organ’s flexible wind pressure and half-drawn stops, one hears, if listening with the help of Korfmacher’s annotations, “mechanical noises such as creaking pieces of wood, clattering stops, combinations on springs and thudding pedals.” However, in the absence of visual or textual clues that might help the listener to trace these sounds back to their presumable sources, they remain unidentifiable in their intriguingly sensuous but hermeneutically indecipherable traces of the musical ineffable/Real on the compact disc—instances of noise as pure sonic surface sensations in the age of avant-garde compositions that have dispensed with all traditional parameters of melody, harmony, rhythm, and timbre. In addition to the noises that Korfmacher mentions, one even hears explosive sounds resembling

gunshots that are unlikely (or so one hopes) to have been fired during the recording session but that effectively underscore the traumatic effects of the sonic Real emphasized by Lacan. In instances like these, listening for the recorded traces of the musical ineffable forces the audience to pay attention not only to the music but also, and perhaps primarily, to the parameters of its technological reproducibility—the ways one imagines the recording and replay machinery to have captured the sonorities of the original performance. Ultimately, then, such recordings motivate the listener to focus not only on the aesthetics of the musical score and its performance but also and simultaneously on the media technology itself: its electro-mechanical components; its position in sociocultural contexts of music production, distribution, and reception; and its effects on individual listening habits.⁴¹ Korfmacher postulates that by disregarding all conventional practices of organ playing, Hespos formulates “the tonal essence of the instrument, showing that it is capable of providing a wealth of further sounds as yet untapped.”⁴² Korfmacher’s hermeneutic endeavors advance a quasi-Platonic view of the organ as an ideal that any existing instrument or performance has only begun to transfer into material presence; they also, and more importantly, highlight the possibilities and insufficiencies—the irreducible partiality and historicity—of technological sound reproduction, whose microphones, storage media, editing practices, amplifiers, and loudspeakers, instead of capturing the ineffable Real as material presence, transmit the future possibilities of sound production and musical sensibility dormant in its acoustic traces.

* * *

Precisely by listening for the interface between hermeneutical understanding and technological sound reproducibility, the audience may experience an expansion of the auditory imagination. This, it seems to me, is of fundamental importance in considering the act of listening to music or other sounds as a cultural practice involving actual human subjects. The tendency of Kittler’s media-technological materialism, with its emphasis on the direct inscription of the sonic Real in the grooves of the gramophone, ought thus to be expanded or even corrected by a phenomenology of listening that reinstates the effects of the subject’s bodily and affective transformation through the experience of listening to sonic events. Inspired by Heidegger’s existential ontology, Günther Anders proposes that the subject’s location in a musical situation consists simultaneously of “being-in-the world” of empirical reality and a radically

⁴¹ See also Ashby, *Absolute Music*, 143.

⁴² Korfmacher, liner notes.

different mode/mood of “being-in-music.”⁴³ Here, one’s personal life becomes “imaginary” while the subject undergoes a fundamentally disruptive self-experience, transformation, and self-disclosure that reveals something radically different from the subject’s biography and ordinary lifeworld.⁴⁴ As Anders insists, the object or content of this self-referential disclosure is something that the listener can never precisely know or articulate.⁴⁵ What guides the listener in this process of indeterminate disclosure of an ever-elusive goal, Anders suggests, is a form of attentive listening (*Lauschen*), a radically directionless attitude of auditory openness without any preconceived, conceptual expectations. Resembling the ecstasy of mystical self-abandoning and catharsis, it constitutes a type of intuiting or inkling (*Ahnen*) that, as he stresses, allows the human subject to recognize that “this” world—the sphere of familiar and conventionalized everyday facticity—is not the only possible realm of experience but opens up, against the deafening noise of mundane surroundings, to an alternative, hidden, and transcendent realm of nonfixation and freedom, which may simultaneously be experienced with fear or hope.⁴⁶ This auditory inkling, which Anders does not hesitate to call metaphysical, can only maintain its indeterminate unpredictability if we trace it back not only to the subjective disposition of listeners but also to the efficacy of the musical Real, whose hidden but inexhaustible dynamic in musical performances accounts for an indefinite array of possible interpretive worlds in which listeners may explore their own aesthetic self-understanding and existential transformation.

Anders’s philosophy is especially pertinent today, in the age of digital listening, when the easy accessibility and consumption of a seemingly infinite number of musical sound files through the internet offers the listener the sudden transport into radically new auditory worlds that unexpectedly expand the subject’s habitual preferences, customs, and knowledge as to what music may mean. But the very expansion of musical horizons, beneficial as it certainly is for the diversity of our listening habits, does not imply that we get any closer to the sonic Real and the musical ineffable. Taking into account that changes in media technology directly affect the human subject’s perceptions and experiences, Sybille Krämer argues that, in the digital age,

⁴³ Günther Anders, “Philosophische Untersuchungen über musikalische Situationen” (1930/31), in *Musikphilosophische Schriften: Texte und Dokumente*, ed. Reinhard Ellensohn (Munich: Beck, 2017), 13–140, at 16. All translations from this source are mine.

⁴⁴ Anders, “Philosophische Untersuchungen,” 17.

⁴⁵ Anders, “Philosophische Untersuchungen,” 79.

⁴⁶ Anders, “Philosophische Untersuchungen,” 117–20.

on the one hand, the exponential growth of screens in smartphones attests to the ubiquity of flat areas: virtual surfaces, sites of artifice, have become fused with human hands. On the other, the electronic interface regains what the inscribed surface had cut off: an unfathomable and uncontrollable depth-structure lying “beneath,” now referring to the layers of the data universe connected by hyperlinks.⁴⁷

Applied directly to the experience of sound, this observation suggests that digital technologies rapidly enhance the difference between an ever-expanding availability of acoustic data versus the commensurately increasing inaccessibility of the sonic Real and the hermeneutically indecipherable depth of the musical ineffable. Thus, the further we explore ever new worlds of auditory virtuality, the more we are asked to reflect on what we can and cannot hear, what we may easily consume and what remains beyond our hermeneutic grasp, what can and what cannot be technologically (re)produced, and what we are satisfied with through our headphones and what may send us back into the concert hall. Thus, whether during a live performance or online, the force driving the exploration of other worlds of musical profundity is the musical ineffable, which may be regarded as the abyss of the musical Real at the hidden center of ever-expanding possibilities of technologically mediated plenitude, auditory sensuality, and hermeneutic reflection.

ABSTRACT

Inherited from Romantic metaphysics, the musical ineffable is a contested category; denoting something in musical experience that largely escapes verbal articulation, it also leads to diverse philosophical assessments of its validity as an analytic category. Its contested status, however, can be given clearer, historically embedded contours if it is related to Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic register of the Real across historically changing modes of media-technological reproducibility. This connection gives us new insights into the interface between sensuous immediacy, verbal articulation, and sonic media characteristic of the auditory imagination.

Keywords: auditory experience, ineffability, media technologies, musical hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, organ music

⁴⁷ Sybille Krämer, “Flattening as Cultural Technique: Epistemic and Aesthetic Functions of Inscribed Surfaces,” in Rehding, “Colloquy: Discrete/Continuous: Music and Media Theory after Kittler,” 244.