As a composer active in the contemporary music community in the United States as both a creator and producer of new works, I am both challenged and discouraged by the inability of the existing concert environment to engage audiences as what I will call “active participants” in the performance of new works. For the purposes of my discussion, I am speaking of the concert environment as the cultural context which, embedded in each audience member, performer, and composer, shapes the reality in which performances are perceived. Though many new-music groups have experimented with the physical aspects of the concert—using alternative spaces, developing “theme” series, throwing parties—in general, changes such as these have been minimally successful in developing audiences for new works. I contend that the reason for this
lack of success lies neither in the music itself nor in the physical environment in which it is performed, but in the cultural context that surrounds it.

There are two components of this context I will address: one is the typical reception of new music in the “art music” community, that is, those people who regularly attend “classical” concerts; and the other is the perception of “art music” performance in general. I will argue that the music community generally treats new music as an unprivileged “Other” as opposed to dominant, culturally privileged “historic music”; that in a society that continues to identify in and valorize the tonal tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, new music can be nothing but the Other in the presence of a historic tonal majority, and that the reproduction we in the art music world call “performance” is so steeped in metaphor that experiencing any music performance in an active way is seldom a possibility.

Critical to this discussion is my construction of performance as a temporary community in which composers, performers, and audience members are all active participants, with an audience’s hearing of a work as the final step in its creation. In other words, music does not exist until it is heard in performance. My ultimate intent is to create a paradigm for music reception which grants agency to the listener in a dialogue with any music, particularly if it is unfamiliar. My personal hope is that this may enliven the contemporary art-music scene with audiences who enter performances empowered to engage in them actively.

I. NEW MUSIC AS “OTHER”

Lacanian psychoanalysis postulates one moment in the construction of individual identity as the “mirror phase,” a period of recognition by a child that any face s/he sees is not him/herself. This identification constitutes a critical initiation into the process of self-definition. Thus identity begins with an awareness of what one is not rather than what one is, a process of dividing and differentiating that continues with increasing complexity throughout one’s life. As a result, our culture has as a primary tenet of its construction of reality a compulsion toward binary labeling, and particularly with regard to the act of identification, we continue to rely heavily on that with which we do not identify to create our perspectives on the world.

Feminist theorists have focused much of their critical inquiry on issues of identity, as the binary “male” and “female” is one of the earliest a child
distinguishes. From this perspective, the masculine/feminine binary has been mapped onto many human activities via metaphoric association and assumption. Julia Kristeva, for example, discussed masculine patriarchal writing as a style incorporating linear development and feminine writing as counterhegemonic in its nonlinearity. Carol Gilligan’s traditional view of human psychology identifies a masculine approach to relationship as hierarchical as opposed to a feminine approach which is more web-like. Music also can be viewed as subject to this phenomenon, and Susan McClary in *Feminine Endings* revealed that traditional music discourse maps the binary masculine/feminine onto strong/weak and normal/abnormal in many ways. Contemporary feminist theory can be useful then, as a model for reevaluating the ways in which music traditionally has been defined and identified.

*Feminine Endings* provides many examples of this new criticism in music scholarship. McClary cites and problematizes the identification of cadences as masculine and feminine as a simple example, and points out that “feminine” as defined by Willi Apel in the *Harvard Dictionary of Music* is more “romantic,” implying that masculine cadences are more objective and rational (McClary 1991, 10). Of course the very idea of terms like “strong” and “weak” being applied to music is troublesome, as McClary argues. How does one define the strength in the “feminine” composing of Chopin, for example? And how much more troubled, if even possible, these binaries become when audiences attempt to use them to interpret music from the second half of the twentieth century, when much to their dismay there is still no emerging dominant style, still no fixity or predictability to the composers’ work, no stable reality on which identification based in binary thinking can comfortably rest. Living in a culture identified in a historic tradition makes the new even more problematic, for one’s own identity may be threatened by what is not tradition-bound. Never knowing what to expect, how difficult attending a contemporary music concert in this cultural context may be, living in the possibility that cadences may not be identifiable at all, much less whether they are strong or weak.

In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali discusses many aspects of this troubled relationship between language and music. One of his important points is that music cannot be equated with language. He says, “Quite unlike the words of language—which refer to a signified—music, though it has a precise operationality, never has a stable reference to a code of the linguistic type. . . . It has neither meaning nor finality” (Attali 1985, 24). In other words, music is unstable, and so the attempt to attach a stable linguistic meaning or final interpretation to the work is in direct conflict with the work itself. Later he notes:
The musical message has no meaning, even if one artificially assigns a (necessarily rudimentary) signification to certain sounds, a move that is almost always associated with a hierarchical discourse. (Attali 1985, 25)

In Attali’s interpretation, the attempt to attach to music signifiers such as strong/weak or masculine/feminine immediately invokes a hierarchical discourse, and the possibility of subversion is created simultaneously. Nowhere is that subversion expressed more than in new music, and it is the threat of this subversion of both the verbal and the musical languages that have defined music for generations that has created a backlash in the music community, inferring that our cultural Other, new music, is irrational, abnormal, and, by implication in our binary culture, culturally weak and ineffective.

A 1989 article by Susan McClary entitled “Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition” illustrates another new criticism, that of cultural studies which, simply put, seeks to reveal the meanings in works that are inferred by the cultural contexts in which they exist. In the article she makes a case for the avant-garde having silenced itself through its musical inaccessibility, and criticizes the university for promulgating this music when the tendency of university students is more naturally toward a more “popular” style. As such, it provides a good example of language which reflects the hegemonic relationship between the “historic” music community and the new, but as is often the case, these attitudes are encoded in the language which defines that relationship. I use this article, then, as an example of those underlying attitudes which often inform and define the cultural context surrounding the reception of new music.

The use of the term “avant-garde” is the first bit of troubling language encountered in this essay. It is used to identify so-called institutionalized modernist university composers who write “difficult” music, juxtaposing them with postmodern composers outside the university who have achieved popular success. McClary cites Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, Steve Reich, and Meredith Monk as examples of successful postmodern musicians (McClary 1989, 58). One of the problems with this argument is that all four of these musicians were initially considered “avant-garde,” and as each of them achieved popular success they continued composing in that way, thus ceasing to be “avant-garde.” The word, of course, is primarily an adjective used to identify work that is experimental or unorthodox in nature, but so many composers, critics, and historians have used it to identify so many different types of music and artistic movements in the last century that the term has ceased to have much meaning whatsoever.
How can music be unorthodox when there is no stable orthodoxy? This was so much the case even by midcentury that in 1954 John Cage, comparing his compositional approach to other prominent composers in the *Music Lover's Field Companion*, quipped, "I prefer my own choice of the mushroom. Furthermore, it is avant-garde." Cage in his inimitable way revealed the meaninglessness of this term, particularly when one attempts to attach it to an unstable art form.

My point here is not to quibble with an expression that is probably better used to describe compositional intent than music itself, but rather to point to the almost desperate labeling that often characterizes discussions of new music. The implied binaries in "Terminal Prestige" abound: avant-garde/accepted, university/independent, prestigious/nonprestigious, unsuccessful/successful, all mapped by metaphoric implication onto the original binary: Self/Other.

The author of "Terminal Prestige" clearly identifies with the postmodern musicians named in it, and the "avant-garde" becomes Other as a result. Laurie Anderson's satire of "difficult" music is lauded as an apt appraisal of music that incorporates "the kind of complexity that listeners by and large find incomprehensible" (McClary 1989, 58). But aren't most difficult things characterized by a complexity that many find incomprehensible? And "difficulty" is not the only quality that breeds incomprehension—sometimes it is the language one speaks. It is no coincidence that often those deemed "successful" musicians are also those who use tonal references in their music. Such condemnations of the incomprehensibility of the "difficult" characterize an identification with historic music, and are slightly reminiscent of the American tourist frustrated with the Italian train conductor because he doesn't speak English; because s/he finds him incomprehensible. In order to address new realities, new music must often speak new languages which initially may seem incomprehensible. But is an inability to understand the Other reason enough to discard what is being said? That such chastisements of the avant-garde are still possible as indictments of the validity of the "Difficult" is a clear sign of continuing identification in the dominant hegemony of historic music. If one feels compelled to attack the "avant-garde," one's primary musical identification is probably in the "historic."

What is most disturbing about these reductions by the art-music community is that they are so seldom based on thoughtful encounters with the music of the "avant-garde," but rather with what these composers say about their music. Our culture in general is driven by the desire to "know," and the university as an institutionalized repository of "knowledge" is particularly bound by the binary "knowledgeable" and "knowledgeless." In music discourse, both theoretical and historical, this often
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resembles an epistemological quest for the abstract origin of the composer’s thought behind a composition as the meaning of the work, and it continues to haunt even the most radical of music criticism. I return to “Terminal Prestige” for an example.

McClary’s critique of “the avant-garde” in this article is extremely problematic in its reliance on composers’ writings about their music and culture as the primary source for critiquing their music. Much of this article is devoted to critiquing composers’ writings, including those of Roger Sessions, Arnold Schönberg, and Milton Babbitt. McClary does discuss Milton Babbitt’s Philomel in the article, and her interpretation of this work is powerful and convincing. She hears the piece “quite straightforwardly as an anti-rape statement in which the victim is transformed into the nightingale to sing about both her suffering and her transcendence.” She continues:

her [Philomel’s] change from material being into music . . . and her forging of triumph from violence . . . all serve to acknowledge the horror of the crime and yet the possibility of survival. They also resonate with many of the modernist problematics (the anxiety over decentered identity; the reconstitution of subjectivity through complex recombinant procedures; the retreat from the material world into pure autonomous sound). . . . (McClary 1989, 75)

This is a valuable critique which provides a metaphoric interpretation, useful from both a feminist and a historical point of view, to derive meaning from the work. Through thoughtful listening and languaging, the difficult has become comprehensible. Unfortunately, McClary turns to Milton Babbitt for validation of this interpretative style, and doesn’t find it, for her reading of Babbitt’s writings is that they “discourage one from attempting to unpack his composition along these lines. Indeed, he warns us not to get hung up trying to map the events of pieces onto the ‘mundane banalities’ of real life . . .” (McClary 1989, 75). Why would one assume that what Babbitt has to say about his music is of any significance to how one hears his music? The question “Who Cares if You Listen?” has been attributed to him, but in the presence of his music, who cares what he says about it?

Such an inquiry seems to rest deep in the heart of the musicological tradition where historical research has provided many interesting details about a composer’s life and times, and then those details are often used to inform an “authentic” interpretation of a work. Yet I often find myself wondering what relevance, in the end, this has to how a contemporary audience will receive the work. This tradition of referencing source documents becomes particularly troublesome with the works of composers
who are still alive, for the temptation is great, particularly when the work is difficult, to ask the composer what s/he means by what s/he says. Yet such a request forces a change from the language of sound to the language of words, and in that translation a new text is created which may or may not illuminate the music itself. Certainly when experiencing a performance of a new work, one must rely on one’s own interpretation to make sense of what one hears.

The condemnation of the avant-garde expressed in “Terminal Prestige” is illustrative of the general anxiety, anger, and abandonment generated in the art-music community by music that is constructed to be historically subversive and resistant to fixed meaning. In a music culture dominated by the continued reification of the historic, the design of the new could be experienced in no other way. How then does one address this music without invoking hierarchical language? How, as Attali suggests, does one address its “meaning” generated through its operationality?

Recent feminist writings addressing various aspects of identity politics have looked at the political efficacy of identifying oneself as a woman, a defining that is both fundamental to and problematic for feminist politics. There is little agreement in the feminist community about what actually constitutes “woman,” for the term excludes the host of other labels that constitute identity, such as race, age, and so on. Judith Butler, in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, for example, questions the necessity of this fundamental identification and states:

The feminist “we” is always and only a phantasmatic construction, one that has its purposes, but which denies the internal complexity and indeterminacy of the term and constitutes itself only through the exclusion of some part of the constituency that it simultaneously seeks to represent. (Butler 1990, 142)

New music is analogous to Butler’s “feminist ‘we,’” for it too is phantasmatic, and the listener actively engaged in performance is compelled to construct an experience of what is essentially a phantasmagoria, a phantasm moving in time. (It is important to emphasize here that this is particularly the case in the performance of new music, where the repeated listenings possible with recordings are unavailable.) But any attempt to define the act of music denies the internal complexity and indeterminacy that music is being in performance. Within Butler’s model, any act of defining always occurs in an oppositional (binary) framework, and at that moment I contend that the act of music ceases for the listener. Because defining is binary and music is not, the act of defining is opposed to the
act of music and at the moment of definition the ability to experience the phantasmagoria “music” ceases to exist. For example, as soon as a listener identifies a musical moment with the word “cadence,” or “successful,” or “Baroque,” or “oboe,” the act of music disappears. In place of that experience is a linguistic object, what we generally refer to as “music.”

To go a bit further with my mapping of Butler’s argument, our culture falsely presumes that this move by the listener to qualify music is necessary for the listener to have agency, to “understand” the music. That somehow, what constructs musical identity, whether it be formal, social, historical, or whatever, is the music; that identifying a cadence in a work by Carter, recognizing the style of Stockhausen, becoming aware of the misogyny expressed in an opera, is the experiencing of music. Yet according to Butler each of these acts of signification creates just another piece of oppositional epistemological discourse: “this” implying “not-this,” “that” implying “not-that,” and by engaging in epistemology the listener reifies those oppositions as a necessity for engagement. As a result, epistemology contributes to the problem of agency for the listener I am seeking to solve. In other words, each identification of a cadence reifies that there is some thing to know about this music, that there are some fundamental truths about music that are the experiencing of music. By extension, if we have no language for what we hear, we deem it incomprehensible—this is probably what most people mean when they say they don’t “understand” new music. I am not denying that there is much to know about any music a listener encounters, but rather I am questioning our cultural assumption that knowledge of any of those things is a necessity for successful engagement with music, and that the ability to invoke that knowledge in the listener is a criterion for successful compositional work.

Butler points out, based in widely accepted anthropological documentation, that our epistemological view is inherited as a philosophical imposition, but it is not a necessity. A Western listener’s creation of binaries, then, is only one possible signification, an epistemological one. For Butler, the question of agency is ultimately a question of how signification and resignification work, with the epistemological mode itself as one possible signifying practice, that is, “knowing” about the music is only one of a myriad of ways of experiencing it. Importantly, she argues that at any point after having been signified, the identity that has been created is “merely a piece of inert entitative language,” for “signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition.” We as listeners may think we have discovered some meaning in the music, and signify it as such, but the language that is a result of that signification is inert. For Butler, “all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’ then, is located within the possibility of variation.
on that repetition” (Butler 1990, 145). Our experiencing of music may be expressed in repeated signification, but that expression is distinct from the actual experience of the music. Potentially, repeated signification could free us from the domination of whatever we experienced the moment before, and most importantly, could free us from the domination of a “truth” to be “known,” that new music must be understood to be valued.

I find Judith Butler’s construction of gender identity to be useful as a way of beginning to rethink our experience of musical identity, especially with regard to new music where historical preconceptions are particularly problematic. But in many ways, whether the musical experience is via recording or performance is of little consequence to my discussion so far. The next section will focus on the performance experience itself and how that experience might facilitate “active engagement.”

II. Music in Performance

What is the nature of the cultural construct “art music performance” in Western society as it is currently interpreted? Edward Said in “Performance as an Extreme Occasion” describes it as “an inflected and highly determined point of convergence where the specific and the general come together, music as the most specialized of aesthetics with a discipline entirely specific to it, performance as the general, socially available form of its cultural presentation” (Said 1991, 17). This is an accurate description of our culture’s definition of the performance experience. Performance is a special occasion in which audiences know that they are hearing the music of highly trained composers being performed by highly trained performers who possess unusual skills and talents that set them apart from the general public. Another bit of knowledge that enhances this sense of distance is that art music has a specialized vocabulary attached to it, created by music theorists, historians, and critics, and the degree to which audience members do not possess this knowledge is perhaps proportional to the distance they feel.

Said’s view of performance is typical of Western culture’s perception of the concert experience, as an evening’s outing, a “something to do” that is a form for generally passive activity. This objectification of the performance experience works well enough for the social function that concert-going often fulfills or for the general desire for an aesthetic experience, but there is little here to distinguish concert-going from attending the ballet, a play, or a film. My original question of what exactly identifies the performative moment in music remains unanswered.
There is very little discussion of this in scholarly music discourse, in which the experience of music is addressed outside of the performance context, as if listening to music on CD and in performance are identical activities. Because music historically could not exist without performance, I contend that contemporary audiences have come to assume the reality of the performance of music (often resulting in little compulsion to attend), and that somehow, in the last fifty years as recording technology has developed, the reality of performance has merged with the separate reality of listening to recordings. This unintentional merging has had a particularly profound effect on the performance of new music, most of which is never recorded or sometimes, because of its conceptual bases, is impossible to represent via recording (Cage’s 4’33” is an obvious example of this style, and at the other end of the continuum I wonder if there is not a considerable amount of “tape music” that should not be intended for traditional performance contexts).

The emergence of the genre “performance art” among visual artists is an example of an art form where performance until recently did not exist, and in this new form performance has been theorized in a way that has been missing in music criticism. In Unmarked: The Politics of Performance, Peggy Phelan discusses performance broadly with regard to photography, film, theater, performance art, and Operation Rescue in support of her political agenda, and in the process postulates a theory of the ontology of performance. I find much in her discussion that is useful in distinguishing the performative in music, an already invisible, or unmarked, art form.

Phelan states:

Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented . . . : once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance’s being . . . becomes itself through disappearance. (Phelan 1993, 146)

Music’s entry into the economy of reproduction has always been heralded, and unquestioned. Our current fascination and intoxication with digital reproduction probably mirrors that of our ancestors’ delight in the Victrola, as evidenced by an RCA ad in the Ladies’ Home Journal which exclaimed, “Bring the opera into your own home!” This is an impossibility, of course. Opera is not performed on Victrola or on compact disc; we do not experience “the opera” when we listen to a recording of it. As Phelan states, performance only lives in the present and the experience of
the present cannot be reproduced. One of the ways we know we have experienced an opera is that it disappears, becomes silent, and the experience can never be reexperienced.

Phelan theorizes performance as “the art form which most fully understands the generative possibilities of disappearance. Poised forever at the threshold of the present, performance enacts the productive appeal of the nonreproductive” (Phelan 1993, 27). What identifies the present, the nonreproductive, in a music performance? One general way might be in the creation of a work, and since in my construction that creation requires performance, a nonreproductive present occurs each time an audience member listens to a composition for the first time. Performances of historic works that are seldom heard receive lots of attention because they are created again for many listeners. The creation of a new interpretation of a familiar work when played by a different ensemble might be another type of present. But the more familiar a work becomes, a familiarity often bred in repeated listening to recordings, the more difficult it becomes to experience its creation, and instead we experience its reproduction in performance. It is at this juncture, I argue, that, beyond the circumstances of the physical environment in which the listening takes place, the experience of a work on recording and in performance is almost identical. If one accepts Phelan’s definition of performance, contemporary audiences seldom experience a performance of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, but rather, a live reproduction of it.

This calls into question the inclusion in the standard repertoire that is so often cited as a failing of new music, for in order to enter the repertoire a work is condemned ultimately to reproduction, and its chances of actually being performed become less and less. I believe that this is an important way in which much new music is subversive to the historic tradition, in that it does treat performance as generative and nonreproductive, that a basic conceptual component of its existence is its disappearance. In the performance of new works an audience member experiences music that s/he will probably never hear again, and in this way experiences a present that is unfamiliar and anxiety-provoking in a culture identified by reproductions of old music.

In her ontology of performance, Phelan makes another important distinction between her Lacanian notion of metaphor and a related figure of speech, metonym. She postulates that:

Metaphor works to secure a vertical hierarchy of value and is reproductive; it works by erasing dissimilarity and negating difference; it turns two into one. Metonymy is additive; it works to secure a horizontal axis of contiguity and displacement. (Phelan 1993, 150)
As an example of metonymy, she uses the statement “The kettle is boiling.” In this statement, because the water is understood to be contiguous with the kettle, the word “kettle” can displace the word “water.” In fact, the kettle is not boiling, the water is. As she notes, the relationship is not metaphorical: “the kettle is not like water (as in the metaphorical ‘love is like a rose’), but rather the kettle is boiling because the water inside the kettle is.”

Examples of this kind of language abound in the musical vernacular. For instance, suppose I am listening to a broadcast and state, “Mozart is on the radio.” In actuality, there is no Mozart sitting on my radio, but rather, I am hearing an orchestra playing Mozart being broadcast via radio waves. But the orchestra is not “playing Mozart” either. Perhaps it would be more correct to say “They are playing Mozart on their instruments,” or better still, “The members of the orchestra are playing instruments, and on those instruments they are playing music that was composed by a man named Mozart.” To go back to my original statement, Mozart is actually not on the radio, but rather I am hearing on loudspeakers a broadcast of a recording of some orchestral musicians playing on their instruments music composed by a man named Mozart.

On some levels, this sounds like so much semantic trickery. But language does shape our perception of reality, and there is much that is made invisible in our musical metonymic statements when they are understood as metaphors. Like the kettle that boils, “Mozart on the radio” is a shorthand for a set of contiguous, additive relationships: Mozart to his music, the music to the instruments, the instruments to the musicians, the musicians to the orchestra, and so on. Instead of this metonym, however, I contend that we experience this statement, and others like it, as metaphors. Many become one, dissimilarity is erased, and Mozart is reproduced.

Contrary to popular belief, Mozart does not “live on in his music.” This romanticization of the act of composing negates the fact that Mozart’s music is an artifact of his life and of the times in which he lived. And the recordings of his music are artifacts of our times, valuable commodities that increase in value partly because our culture identifies them as metaphors for performance. Why buy a ticket to a performance when you can buy a CD for half the price, and hear “Mozart” reproduced perfectly over and over again? Implicit in this commodification is the confident belief that music that has been recorded has more cultural value than music that has not been recorded, for at least it is more enduring. By extension, the more a work is recorded, the more valuable it seems.

In a Western society that valorizes the mind over the body, “Mozart on the radio” is also more comfortable than a performance partly because
we don’t have to deal with all those people, all those bodies on the stage and in the audience that clutter the performance space. But even in performance, our language does its best to negate the presence of human beings. We go to hear “Ozawa conducting Beethoven,” as if Ozawa with his back to the audience is all that exists between us and the dead Beethoven. Our metaphoric constructions negate that there are hundreds of musicians and audience members present and that Beethoven, comfortably, is not.

I remember how horrified I felt the first time I overheard some musicians discussing their rehearsal of “the Dusman.” At the time I didn’t understand my reaction, for it seemed as though I should have been pleased with the obvious care they were taking with the performance of my music. Now I understand that, in a sense, I was made invisible by that statement. I am not my music; I am a person that composes music, and by giving my music my name, those musicians, unintentionally certainly, erased me. In our metonymic language understood as metaphor, Beethoven and I both cease to exist as beings, though he is dead and I am not. The irony, and the lie, of the composite effect of these linguistic constructions is that Beethoven “appears” to exist, and I, as a living composer, “appear” invisible. The paradox of our music culture identified in reproduction is that if Mozart is on the radio, he “lives on in his music;” he has been “reproduced.” But if “Dusman is on the radio,” my very existence contradicts my reproduction, and I deny the culture of reproduction simply by being alive.

In a culture which demands that composers live through their music, the body of the composer, the living presence of the composer, can only be experienced as subversive. This explains the presence of a contemporary work on a symphony orchestra program being experienced as, at best, a novelty, and at worst, a threat, with these two reactions heightened if the composer is actually present at the performance. If the body of the composer is female and/or nonwhite, it becomes all the more difficult to deny that body’s presence, and so the performance becomes even more novel, or more threatening.

New music subverts the culture of reproduction in many ways, and as a result undermines performance, history, language, and often, depending on the composer, its own identity. What remains, then, in the presence of new music? Where is the cultural value in this subversion? For Phelan, it is the discovery of real hope:

The widespread belief in the possibility of understanding has committed us, however unwittingly, to a concomitant narrative of betrayal, disappointment, and rage. Expecting understanding and
always failing to see and feel it, we accuse the other of inadequacy, of blindness, of neglect. . . . It is perhaps past time that we begin to attempt to see the inevitability of misunderstanding as generative and hopeful, . . . rather than a betrayal of a promise. Or to put it slightly differently, perhaps the best possibility for “understanding” . . . lies in the active acceptance of the inevitability of misunderstanding. (Phelan 1993, 174)

Though Phelan’s discussion of performance actually addresses the understanding of cultural differences, I believe her theory is an apt metaphor for the relationship between the art-music community and its “other,” the performance of new music. Perhaps if we could accept the inevitability of misunderstanding new music and its performance, we could be free of the sense of betrayal and disappointment to which our culture is currently committed. And perhaps if we could begin to redesign our cultural constructions of the reception of new music performance along the lines Butler and Phelan suggest, attending concerts could be more than thwarted expectations of understanding and reproduction. Potentially, they could be a present where human “being” could be transformed from a noun back to an active verb.

III. Afterword

It may seem by the end of this discussion that I am advocating the abandonment of language altogether with regard to music, that we should simply allow the sound to wash over us and let it go at that. I am not. Speaking about our experience is as valuable a human activity as making music, but one must not be mistaken for the other in the process of one informing the other. As Phelan states:

Writing, an activity which relies on the reproduction of the Same (the three letters cat will repeatedly signify the four-legged furry animal with whiskers) for the production of meaning, can broach the frame of performance but cannot mimic an art that is nonreproductive. The mimicry of speech and writing, the strange process by which we put words in each others’ mouths and put others’ words in our own, relies on a substitutional economy in which equivalencies are assumed and established. Performance refuses this system of exchange and resists the circulatory economy fundamental to it. (Phelan 1993, 149)
In other words, these words that I write have nothing to do with music per se, and could never hope to. Rather, they are aimed at creating a paradigm for listening that allows for active engagement, unattached or attached to pre-existing language or experiences as the listener wishes.

A return to Lacanian psychoanalysis might find the musical experience in the realm of the Imaginary, the preverbal, presymbolic, premirror phase. Sound is a communicative act long before language exists, but once language is engaged the child:

is banished from this ‘full’ imaginary possession [of reality] into the ‘empty’ world of language. Language is ‘empty’ because it is just an endless process of difference and absence: instead of being able to possess anything in its fullness, the child will now simply move from one signifier to another, along a linguistic chain which is potentially infinite. (Eagleton 1983, 167)

What I am seeking in this discussion is some freedom, particularly in new-music performances, from understanding or possessing what one hears as a necessity for valuing the experience. I am postulating that there is potentially great value in not “understanding,” in experiences that elude the symbolic or representational. There is no doubt that tonal music has become representationally encoded (as a friend always reminds me, film music always lets you know when a bad guy is lurking in the bushes), and that this coding is available to composers as a signifying tool. And certainly all music is subject to meanings imposed by the culture in which it sounds. But in performance a listener may be blocked from “imaginary” meanings by language which does more to negate that musical experience than to assist it. There is value in speaking, and there is great value in remaining speechless. Likewise, the meaningfulness of some music may reside in the potency of its “meaninglessness.”
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NOTES

1. It is an interesting aside to note that McClary promotes music that succeeds outside the academy while writing from within. Though she criticizes the avant-garde for having no impact on society in general, neither will academic articles, I expect, though I question whether this negates their value. To compare Milton Babbitt with Earth, Wind, and Fire from the view of the culture “at large,” then, ignores the many cultural confluences that this particular pairing exemplifies and misstates the case.
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