

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

During the course of my undergraduate studies, I have found myself wavering between two mindsets, roughly characterized as the “universalist” and the “skeptic.” The universalist *aesthete* wishes a universal law through which we may interpret the artistic value of any given art object. He is sick and tired of people degrading the music he likes and wants something to appeal to above mere opinion. The skeptic *postmodernist* sees this desire as a ruse—a desperate last-ditch attempt to imbue value into a world of contingencies and relativisms. He knows that all we have is our *opinion* of music, and that ultimately, we aren’t even in control of our own tastes. There is simply the endless parade of styles and fashions that brainwash us with speed and repetition, dulling our senses.

This thesis, as a response to this internal dilemma, is a thought experiment designed to overcome this dichotomy, and present it as a true dialectic. We will have access to the musical works that the critic has access to, and also to his bag of critical maneuvers. Many of these maneuvers take cultural relativism into account. But in my eyes, there is a loftier goal for the contemporary critic. It is the desire to posit a *real* artistic value that gets around the universal claims of a Kantian or formalist critic of the past. For, although these methods of interrogating artistic practice are unfortunately chauvinistic, they strongly reveal the real purpose of the critical endeavor—that is, to explain the real value of art in our society. And I fear that the farther we plunge into a deconstruction and fragmentation of institutional values, the less capable it will be to defend artistic endeavors at all in future generations.

Therefore, in the following three chapters, I will take the reader through a dialectic. In the first chapter, I will tow the postmodernist line, beginning with Foucault and Canon, showing the inevitable problem of delimiting music with *critical language*, as critique never exhausts the possibilities for understanding music (and the myriad formulas that the postmodernist presents). In my critique of formalism, I will focus on Heinrich Schenker's hierarchical analyses, and a critique of Modernist formulations of universalism, in the form of Theodor Adorno's writings. I will argue, following from Foucault's theories of canon formation, that when we lift the veil of limited institutional value, all music seems to coexist in a plurality.

After a critique of formalism, I will present, in the second chapter, a sampling of special cases of contemporary music, including sample-based music, which call out for a new manner of analysis. What do I mean by this? Pieces such as the Plunderphonics works by John Oswald, as well as music by composers who straddle the interface between "popular" and "serious" music often challenge presuppositions about musical style which challenge notions of musical autonomy. However, we must utilize *some* critical understanding of this music if we are to reveal its value.

I will thus, in the third chapter, present the groundwork for a critical understanding of music that I call *music-as-discourse*. This model, in which I liken music to language, with both a stylistic and contextual level of meaning, arises from my understanding of Rose Subotnik's critique of formalism, and the possibilities it holds for both sample-based music, and Foucaultian discourse. *Music-as-discourse* has us perceive music *as* a series of "linguistic" statements in historical sequence rather than simply the canonical referent of music criticism. This, I believe, relieves sample-based music from

some of the problems it poses to traditional musical discourse. The discourse, which has simply represented music (which is viewed as essentially non-linguistic), *with* critical language, has set music and musical discourse at odds, and led to the “problems” of the Modern.

In the first chapter, I will simply consider the practice *of* musical criticism, as it has occurred up through the mid-20th century as modernism, and show how a universalist critical thread often prevents us from viewing music in *any* way that concedes the plurality and multiplicity of music’s place in contemporary culture.

CHAPTER ONE: FORMALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

A Foucaultian Set-up

Things change. And observing the material output of human culture can reveal changes in the structures of knowledge and the context for new innovations and conceptions. An investigation into artistic practice, and a holistic, humanistic, and philosophical application of the information gathered, can help shed light on the way we *represent the world* by revealing the dynamic structures that shape our world and our representations of it. And like varieties of expression, there are many critical applications we may then extrapolate from the patterns and progressions we may discover. Hegel observed changes in our structures of knowledge, and outlined a historical evolution from a focus on the structures of religion to the structures of philosophy. But if, in some terrifying nightmarish future, the works of the great philosophers, artists, and theologians were all forgotten, would our world still be recognizable, and could we still progress to Hegel's end-point? For although the existence of an *a priori* artistic consciousness is too great a reduction, it is certain that our world views are predicated on a rich cultural memory observable *in* the man-made world. Although many of our greatest artistic, philosophical, and religious concerns have not changed drastically over the course of human history, it is certain that our world *has* changed. Above all, I believe that what has changed is the *form of knowledge*, and what counts as real knowledge, which grounds the possibility of knowledge at all. In science, these may be the conditions by which we

understand statements about the world to be factual. Likewise, in artistic practice, the meaning of our artistic products and processes are what is at stake.

Due to the normalizing day-to-day experience of the world, the conventions of culture, and the continuity of language, the ultimate contingency of our cultural prejudices and tastes are often forgotten until the next great change, or reevaluation of the culture. We take our artistic sensibilities for granted, but they are intrinsic to the process of reflection. In his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault outlines a possible way of addressing the changes of culture that pollute our understanding of the process of *discourse*. He divides *discourse* (that is, any group of statements that belongs to a single system of formation) into a series of types of discursive statements, which may have the appearance of order and continuity, but are ultimately incompatible and distinct—succeeding one another, intervening on one another, and perhaps coexisting, but never forming a true *continuity*. Of course, it is difficult to determine what constitutes a “single system of formation.” Generally, one of the side effects of an ever-expanding culture is the fragmentation of disciplines into sub-disciplines and thus, the existence of a dynamic power structure that handles every aspect of knowledge. In the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault sets forth the *canon* and the *commentary* as ways of understanding the conditioning of our knowledge. The canon is the body of institutional beliefs that are held fast as the basis of disciplines, and more generally, civilization itself. For instance, there is a general understanding that Western civilization is grounded on knowledge of the Bible and the works of the Greek philosophers. These are the canon, the *book* underpinning our society. Likewise, sociology has the works of Weber, Marx, and Mill. Music has treatises of harmony, and critical writings as well as the music of the “great

composers.” How does this reification of certain ideas occur? According to Foucault, this is achieved through the discursive patterns of commentary—the invisible, though genuine, history of thought that has privileged one belief over another due to the Nietzschean will of the society. Not simply the work of individual tyrants, canon is slowly built through the natural processes of societal change from one generation to the next. Choices are made, and they quickly accumulate validity. However, because of the historical necessity of this process, it is revealed to be pragmatic, and rarely in the true common interest (whatever that would look like). Musical culture’s accumulation of narratives about the greatness of the composers is only the commentary provided by individuals, but held in high esteem, in order to maintain the discipline *of* music.

But one can never *really* know the truth about any given discipline. In fact, new disciplines emerge *due to* the intrinsic discontinuities of discursive statements. For instance, in *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault reveals the problem of attempting to combine radically incompatible ideas of “otherness” with the single label of *madness*. For Foucault, the individual traditions and explanations that we attribute to changing understandings of *madness* do not, upon close inspection, clearly belong to a single, growing body of knowledge about “madness,” stemming from objective, scientific facts. Rather, what we label *schizophrenia*, for example, cannot be understood as a clarification of earlier forms of “madness” such as *dementia*. In one century, the fool was seen as a religious symbol; in another, the mentally ill as patients for the psychologist. The dynamic power structures that circle and delimit the discourse only have the scrutiny of authority in common.

For Foucault, this is simply the way that language (and the linguistic world) works, and one must concede a kind of epistemological dead-end, especially as the discourse of civilization grows and multiplies. Foucault believed that the fragmentation of knowledge into the disciplines of culture creates a hierarchy of control. And although Foucault tends to focus on issues revolving around the infringement of personal freedoms (the construction of madness in *Madness and Civilization* and sexuality in *The History of Sexuality*), such a discursive view can be used to view any system of formation. In some ways, art is even more interesting in this respect, because the “purpose” of art is so tied up with the preconceived views of societal “common knowledge.”

In a naïve sense, I take this to mean that if one wants to ground some ideal “art-itself,” it would consist of everything ever said about the topic, and everything every considered “art” *per se*. The practical problem with this noumenal object is that as we begin to unwind the discourse, the notion of art itself begins to disappear. The *canon*, as it were, bolstered by the perceived validity of the *commentary*, can no longer be seen as *valid* as the commentary is systematically deconstructed.

Critical musicology has admitted a kind of parallel to Foucault’s notions of contingency in the *musical discourse*. That is, the critical understanding of music, which tends to rely on fixed “axioms” that treat music as a kind of science or math, or as a stable set of intrinsic signifiers, may not be so simply understood. New Musicologists, such as Susan McClary, attempt to show that the conventions that govern most Western music also play a semiotic role, emulating underlying critical worldviews. The governing notions of tonality that underpin most conventional Western music rely on a presupposition of the rationality the tonal system suggests.

My methods involve paying attention to semiotics, narrativity, genre, reception history, and cultural theory. Rather than protecting music as a sublimely meaningless activity that has managed to escape social signification, I insist on treating it as a medium that participates in social formation by influencing the ways we perceive our feelings, our bodies, our desires, our very subjectivities—even if it does so surreptitiously, without most of us knowing how.¹

So, for McClary it is not enough that the music of Beethoven is beautiful, or that it utilizes large-scale tonal organization. According to McClary, Beethoven's music presents a violently rational masculinity, with its jarringly propulsive rhythms and triumphant reassertions of the tonic. For some contextualists, tonality itself is a structure that represents a critical worldview of Enlightenment rationality, and therefore the meaning of a classical piece is not simply the organization of the musical material, but the cultural significance of that organization. McClary asserts that classical music is “about” a “succession of hierarchically related harmonies [animating] the moment-to-moment activity, producing both coherence and a sense of spontaneity.” They are “dynamic, progressive, rational, and driven by mechanisms that arouse and eventually satisfy desire.”²

¹ Susan McClary, “Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music,” in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 211-212.

² Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 67.

The contextualist approach to music criticism can be a bit subjective and opinionated, but this subjectivity itself reveals a problem for the canon. It reveals the tendency to see music as possibly referential, and certainly not formally inscrutable. With a contextual understanding of music, it is difficult to show the great difference between “pure music” and “programmatic music.” All music becomes open to a new historical and critical understanding when we are willing to observe traits in musical scholarship as strikingly similar to Foucault’s theories of discourse.

For instance, it is clear that music has an apparent *continuity*, but also a *discontinuity*. The division between High and Low reveals such a conflict. Although there is a historical, stylistic dialogue between the classical tradition and the music of the *volk* from the Renaissance through Liszt and Bartók, the significance of these connections has been covered up by the institutional value of authorship. Like today, when “folk singers” copyright arrangements of century-old tunes³, the composer’s creation of a piece that incorporates peasant melodies tends to respect the composer’s brilliant uses of these melodies over the melodies themselves, or their anonymous sources. And so, there is continuity, in the sense that a classical piano piece may derive its scales, say, from peasant music, but there is a discontinuity in the way the commentary presents this connection. There is no mistaking a band of gypsy musicians from the Berliner Philharmoniker. And there are countless other examples. For instance, there is the attempt to squeeze a particular composer or piece into a designated place in the canon. Is Ravel really an *impressionist*? Does Mahler really write *symphonies*?

3 While not exactly centuries old, “Baby, Let Me Follow You Down,” an old blues, is copyrighted under the name “Eric von Schmidt.” This is because Bob Dylan learned the song from him and credited it to him on his first album, *Bob Dylan*, Columbia Records, 1962.

The notion of a stable musical aesthetics has been tenuous ever since the first commentators posited such a system. And musical *practice* has been and continues to survive even when it goes against the theoretical bases that explain music or justify its value or validity. What should be “universal truths” are always revealed to be simply possibilities that are taken up for one reason or another. And this is easiest to see the further back we look.

While the Greeks or Medievals did *talk* about their music, and even formulated theoretical treatises, they often addressed the subject in vague, esoteric, and quasi-religious ways. When the Greeks discussed “the modes,” they did so by appealing to the “emotional,” or expressive ability of music, primarily through the use of metaphor.

...the musical modes differ essentially from one another, and those who hear them are different affected by each. Some of them make men sad and grave, like the so-called Mixolydian, others enfeeble the mind, like the relaxed modes, another, again, produces a moderate and settled temper, which appears to be the peculiar affect of the Dorian; the Phrygian inspires enthusiasm.⁴

These were their contexts for understanding music, and their text about music reveals canonical expectations similar to later formalism, not because they said the *same things* about how music ought to be, but because of the similar value *they gave to their thoughts* about the meaning and purpose of music.

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, Book Eight, Part V, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://classic.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.5.five.html> (accessed May 3, 2005).

Even later, this kind of cultural relativism is apparent. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson argues in *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music* that most of the conventions relied upon in resurgent performance of this musical period (and our greatest knowledge of this music comes from the interest in “authenticity”) are based on conjecture and the historical barrier of the later musical *a priori*.

Even on historical grounds it must be clear that there is no possibility of adequately reconstructing such a view of a musical work as might have held by the most educated and perceptive musicians of its time. Such a view, were it available, might still be open to substantial amplification by a similarly expert musician of a succeeding generation, able to see the period in question in its *larger context*. And ultimately, however much we may be able to recapture of a period view—using such evidence as notation, theory treatises, literary sources and archives—what we then see in the music has still to be expressed in terms which make sense to us. Thus analyses of surviving works, while taking careful account of what we know of period techniques, have to proceed from, and to seek to explain, what we currently see and hear in the music. There is no other view available to us.⁵

However, earlier musical discourses reveal more than a kind of cultural relativism. They show that the critical understandings of one period do not even exhaust

⁵ Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, “Machaut’s *Rose, Lis* and the Problem of Early Music Analysis,” *Musical Analysis* 3, No.1, (March, 1984), <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0262-5245%28198403%293%3A1%3C9%3AM%27LATP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-8>

the musical practices of that period. Like today, ancient music treatises attempted to streamline and translate general practice in order to educate and put forth solutions to problems of composition and performance. Musical practice, on the other hand, continued to do its own “talking”, and changed and progressed due to the innovations of specific musicians or groups of musicians. While we remember and perform the music which was influenced by Medieval and Renaissance theory, and which is easiest to analyze and understand, some music doesn’t seem so clear, doesn’t appear to *fit*, and appears odd. As Dorit Tanay says in “‘Nos faysoms contre Nature...’: Fourteenth-Century *Sophismata* and the Musical Avant-Garde”, even as late as the fourteenth-century, musical practices such as *ars subtilior* cannot be explained particularly well with *theory* in the traditional sense, but rather must be understood within the context of a larger cultural interest in logic, philosophy, and numerology.

I find this useful, because it shows that the *zeitgeist* cannot be exhausted by any canon of explanatory papers. With this in mind, as well as the evidence that musical aesthetic truths seem to be far from universal from time to time, I wish to show how conceptions of musical meaning have changed more specifically by unraveling musical formalism and classicism as it has evolved into the early 20th century. Unfortunately, just as the understanding of the Western canon evolved, the Western canon began to change. And here we can see the discontinuity between the universalist expectations of critics and musical praxis. Despite the many attempts to formulate and reformulate a critical justification for the universality of the music of Mozart and Beethoven, each attempt

ultimately fails when we interrogate our knowledge in the context of the critical discourse.

Formalism and Autonomy

For a long time, to be a connoisseur of music meant understanding the stylistic conventions of a Beethoven symphony, and being able to “follow” a work within the tonal framework of Western harmony, like one keeps score at a baseball game. One could marvel at the choices a composer made, because these choices would seem novel or fantastic within the framework of the system, which would seem to delimit creative possibilities—making the great composers and works stand out from those that made the most obvious and clichéd prototypes of, say, the Sonata-Allegro form. This is the basis of the film *Amadeus*. Salieri was a composer, but Mozart was *the Composer*. Of course, the world is always more complicated than the presentation one receives in an introductory lecture, or a “historical” film. In this section, I wish to deconstruct a variety of understandings which are bolstered by formalist criticism, and which reveal, in their reversal, a model for a single contextual model for a broad-based discursive critical understanding of music. In some senses, this is the easiest strategy to attack musical understanding, since it is predicated on the 20th century’s ongoing questioning of conventions. However, I wish to show that even 20th century adoptions of formalism are unfortunately shortsighted, because although they arise from different social conditions than 19th century, they still wish to make universal claims of a form of classicism or essentialism.

I will begin with what I believe is a normative understanding of Mozart's music, and the questions it raises of a musical canon of knowledge. Then I will address two historical formalists, one from the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, Heinrich Schenker, and one from the middle of the 20th, Theodor Adorno. I believe that each formulation of formalism reveals a similar weakness: swirling around practice, there is always a critical discourse in music that paradoxically weakens the autonomy of music that formalists wish to attribute to the objects of their criticism. In this sense, even formalism concedes to elements of contextuality and reference in their criticism by implicitly appealing to the structures of convention as stand-ins for the large system and structure to which they are representative.

Case Study: Mozart

This is a case study of Mozart, the kind of picture one may receive if one read every introduction to classical music book in a public library. It draws upon notions revealed in works as disparate as *Amadeus* and the romantic critic Hoffmann.

Among the individuals still revered, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart stands as an almost inescapable figure. More than simply a name in the long list of society's patriarchs, Mozart not only established several long-lasting *stylistic* precedents in his treatment of the sonata form, but he is uniquely portrayed in today's culture as a musical genius—someone who *understood* music better than any other. He conceived of music in a far more advanced and complex way than most listeners could imagine, but understood fundamental tenets of musical enjoyment so intuitively that he was able to create music that could be enjoyed by all. And this "intuitive understanding" still seems to hold true

today, in the culturally resonant melodic fragments that are recalled again and again, remaining fresh even in the minds of today's unrelentingly fashionable, commodity-driven "culture junkies." A simple search in any Internet search engine or on-line file-sharing application reveals that Mozart's music will continue to hold rewards for every age that has the tools to appreciate it.

The stories of Mozart's magnificent memory for music and ability to "compose in his head" certainly qualify as extraordinary, and reveal the efforts of the historians to place Mozart as a kind of high priest of music. In historical terms, of course, he was following Haydn's lead, but at the same time it is hard to compare the two without thinking of Mozart as the more transcendental composer. Whereas Haydn was a great cultural barometer, and the first significant composer in the symphonic tradition, when Mozart began to explore the language Haydn helped to create, it seemed that Mozart was perhaps born to do so. He was able to perform magical acts of historical progression and synthesis. He, for instance, empowered his orchestral music with the same drama found in his operas, a drama deriving from a true understanding of human emotions—controlling us by commanding our innermost desires. He cut through the murky realms of the previous century, which stretched from the spiky emotional dissonances of Monteverdi's revolutionary opera to the abstract games of Bach's private paper music, consolidating aspects of both extremes, and presenting his compositions as well-balanced essays on tonal hierarchy, in forms which represent the familiar Western integration of logic and metaphysics (the rigorous, though naïve, evolution of thought to a new institutional paradigm of rationality).

Whether or not the grand narratives about Mozart's abilities are true, it can be assumed that the mainstream of musical scholarship regarded him in this unique light. He was a consummate musician able to tap into a different kind of consciousness, prized and inaccessible by the general public. In this way he was a mystic. But he worked with the self-determination and new concerns of an Enlightenment thinker, using a system of structure that emulates the logical progression of a philosophical argument and in the process, perhaps metaphorically linked the rationality of the mind to an objective mechanistic cosmology. These are the concerns of the critics, and Mozart passes with flying colors.

The Problem With Asking Too Many Questions

Asking questions of this commentary-fueled picture reveals the goals of the canon, and the problems that emerge when we attempt to distance ourselves from the discourse. The autonomy of Classical music and the cultural peak it represents are so fundamental to our understanding of the discourse of music that to deny it as simply contextual makes one reconsider the notion of intrinsic meaning in music. But this is exactly the kind of intellectual revolution required to understand the *importance*, as well as the contingency of the discourse. Thus, we must not assume that simply because a statement about music is ultimately bound to the critical discourse (and thus by definition, "merely" linguistic) it has no bearing on an understanding of music itself. Rather, these underlying concepts are what must not only structure the discussion of music, but also create the context for our musical enjoyment. They reinforce cultural norms, and thus, the creation of new artworks as well as new criticisms. Just as a

discussion of musical meaning is impossible without a musical object, so is a discussion of the musical object impossible without our intuitive understanding of the music's meaning.

Conversely, this does not mean that all of our conceptions of the music are necessarily accurate simply because they are reinforced by the grand narratives of musical meaning. The difficult and lofty enterprise of delimiting and demystifying the class of musical objects means "viewing" these musical forms from a perceived seat of objectivity (or at least keeping an open mind). If we accept an essentially dual-substance theory of music (with an ambiguous/"unknowable" meaning encircling an objectively viewable form), then we must ask what constitutes the fundamental nature of any musical form—what kind of "thing" the musical object is, and then determine what, for instance, Classical music "is." And this is where the difficulty comes. We are forced to make judgmental decisions that will impact the rest of the discourse—for there is as much confusion about the nature of the musical object as there is ambiguity of music's meaning.

Academic scrutiny and understanding of the musical object usually utilizes a variety of tools to present the "story" of a piece of music. Usually, we are presented with a formal outline of some sort that is supposed to be, in the strictest sense, what is going on in the music. But it is hard enough to figure out what the music is. Obviously contextual sources aside, we are faced with the fact that the music manifests itself in a variety of guises: in performances, in recordings of performances, as copy written "works," documented as notation, and, perhaps, in the composer's head. Because music

is possibly the most difficult of the arts to isolate, it is difficult to know what factors influence our understanding of music.

We could call each of these forms of music, except perhaps the contents of the composer's head, which would at least be understood as somehow causally related to the music. Unfortunately, it is, of course, beyond the scope of any current discipline to know how musical structures were manifest in, say, Mozart's head, and to determine if the music manifested itself in Mozart's head differently than in Wagner's head, or Leonard Bernstein's head. But no matter our view on this topic, each opinion that could be said would reveal a limited notion of musical essence. I do not wish to deny the possibility that music can be many things simultaneously ("mere" sounds, natural mathematical relationships, culturally influenced forms), but I also do not want to posit that the ultimate nature of the musical object as we conceive it cannot be sorted out logically simply because of its perceived multiplicity.

The fact that music is translated through a variety of media—from composer to score to performance to listener—indicates that much of the composer's intent cannot be shared by the listener. And yet, musical analysts have always relied on every tool available to find out about the music. They listen, consult the score, dissect it into sections, reduce it to components.

One may simply attempt to "spell out" what occurs in a piece, which amounts to a description of one's understanding of the piece's stylistic context. This is often described sequentially, although sometimes it is done in terms of "structural importance." One may perform such tasks on a variety of levels, hoping to show, perhaps how the composer may have gone about the task of creating a piece. Ultimately, however, every formal

analysis is stunted by the fact that the musical object's perceived autonomy is a separate matter from the process of creation or the linguistic labels given to stylistic conventions. Through the critical discourse, which posits artistic masterworks, the musical object seems to take on an inscrutable and radically unified wholeness. The deconstruction of critics takes away the very qualities they wish to imbue the music with. After all, no two analyses are the same. Additionally, it is impossible to know the whole story of how a composer such as Mozart may have gone about composing a piece of music.

Despite all these problems which music presents us, we nevertheless come to critical understandings thanks to critical discourse, which hides all of these problems by positing unity where there is multiplicity, continuity where there is discontinuity. Far from freeing us from the problems of delimiting the music object, these critical understandings ultimately trap us in new and more insidious conclusions. While the apparent goal of criticism is to streamline understandings so we may all participate in the creation and appreciation of music, it instead places tyrannical limits on the possibilities of what music is and should be like. Considering the incredible variety of sounds and arrangements of sounds found throughout musical history and from one subculture to another, this side effect of critical "clarification" is to destroy the possibility of understanding music with any other models, while maintaining the same kind of legitimacy in the critical discourse.

Examples—Schenker and Adorno

An example of critical limitation in action is one of the great music theorists of the 19th and early 20th centuries—Heinrich Schenker, a truly supreme formalist in an age

of formalists. He is the great example of an individual who valued an understanding of the musical score as a prerequisite to understanding music fully—taking the musical “connoisseur's” (musician and composer’s) attitude as the mean rather than a listener’s. Ultimately, he was responding to the generally slippery notion of what is important in music, and attempted to pin it down on all levels—creating a formula to perfect the translation from score to performance and critique, which he held as companions.

Schenker believed that a composition could be reproduced correctly only if the performer had grasped the composer’s intentions as revealed by the score, and if he had developed an aural sensitivity to the hierarchy of tonal values which it expressed.⁶

Schenker believed that every tonal work (and tonal works were his only concern) relied on a fundamentally hierarchal structure, which he generally described with three major levels of structural significance, labeled the “foreground,” the “middle ground,” and the “background.” He believed this system would “work for all structures, not just reductive analyses of sonata principles.”⁷ The foreground consisted of the sensuous medium of all surface notes, the immediate experience of melody. The middle ground consisted of the larger scale movements of tonality, and the background consisted of the tonal centers a piece traverses, relying on the notion of the tonic triad as the fundamental structure of tonal music.

⁶ Allen Forte, “Schenker’s Conception of Musical Structure,” from *Readings in Schenker Analysis*, ed. Maury Yeston (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 8.

⁷ Heinrich Schenker, trans. Orin Grossman, “Organic Structure in Sonata Form,” from *Readings in Schenker Analysis*, 38.

An aesthete, Schenker believed that most laymen appreciate music only on the more sensuous, emotional level of the foreground, and a deeper understanding of the music, required of all music connoisseurs, comes with an intellectual understanding of the background and middle ground as well. Indeed, according to Schenker, only with an understanding of the background and middle ground does the foreground gain its true significance, a fact that eludes many, but accurately describes the workings of the piece within the tonal hierarchy. This distinction of levels of musical understanding was described as the “struggle between coherence and novelty.” “The layman desires melody as a fulfillment of the moment,” he said, “[but] melody can be seen as a broader horizontal realization of vertical ideas.”⁸

Schenker’s contribution to theory was his belief that each small element in a piece is important only within the “context” of the whole piece.

“Just as Freud opened the way for a deeper understanding of the human personality with his discovery that the diverse patterns of overt behavior are controlled by certain underlying factors, so Schenker opened the way for a deeper understanding of musical structure with his discovery that the manifold of surface events in a given composition is related in specific ways to a fundamental organization.”⁹

Of course, this method only works with the most diatonic tonal music (Beethoven, Brahms, et al). Canonical composers as diverse as Wagner and Stravinsky fail to achieve “genius” status, due to their unique takes on structure. Schenker is, of course, one of the

8 Heinrich Schenker , 51.

9 Allen Forte, 7.

many who give special status to the Classical style, equating the conventions of the tonal system with the notion of musical autonomy.

This is unsurprising, for the style of most diatonic classical music can often be reduced in Schenkerian analysis with few loose threads. However, Schenker's understanding of context, which aligned itself with notions of musical autonomy on the one hand, and unraveling the "genius" composer's intent and methodology on the other hand, seems blind to the underlying contextual factor which links the two.

This contextual factor is the *style* utilized in the creation of the musical object, a style that is rarely fully autonomous. And it must be conceded that the more familiar an audience is with a style, the more likely they are to enjoy it. The process of translation decoded through any process of interrogation (in, say, Schenkerian analysis) can only work in a world that already concedes contingency to a shared method for addressing the musical object.

However, the scientific reduction of a Schenkerian into foreground, middle ground, and background relies on a specialized method for addressing the musical object that is not shared by all those who appreciate Classical music, namely the notion of structural levels, a "genius" method of composition which cannot be taught, and a process of "structural listening," which relies on an acquaintance with the musical score.

At this point, we can see how formal understandings of one kind of music can disregard the contingency of the very stylistic elements that hold the music together as an objectively viewable form. Of course, Schenkerian-style analyses cannot purport to give all music an equal chance, only music in which the "tonic triad" holds a modicum of

significance. What Schenker does reveal is how commentary-fueled canons are created, and the kind of commentary that is needed to justify a given canon above other works.

However, the stylistic concerns of formalism are not the only critical prescriptions that place one kind of music “above” another. As notions of 19th-century “Romanticism” were questioned by the rationalizing force of modernism, the stylistic autonomy of Mozart or Beethoven was seen by composers such as Schoenberg and critics such as Adorno as radically abstract. And the institutional commentary-fed validity of “autonomous art music” was reified and turned into a normative aesthetics for music in modernity. Part of *this* reification of autonomous art was the continued, explicit denial of any sense of Foucault’s explanation of the repressive power of illusory Institutional values, including, of course, the notion of music as discourse, or language. This aspect of classicism, and musical autonomy is equally important for my purposes, since “sample-based” music not only questions stylistic norms, it blatantly refers, and is *not* autonomous. Therefore, a critique of modernist formalism is needed.

In “Music and Language,” a broadly formalist treatise, modernist critic Theodor Adorno outlines the problems of thinking about musical meaning in terms of language, and yet, in his insistence on the closed formal system, and his reification of abstraction, he neatly creates the possibility of just such a conception. He says that music resembles a language, but is not a “semiotic system.” The meaning of an English sentence can be understood if one knows English syntax, the meanings of the individual words, which stand for things in the real world, and the appropriate cultural associations they bring. Music is often described in terms of language, with its phrases and sentences, but musical “sentences” do not stand for anything else.

Instead, according to Adorno, there is an apparent “ambiguity” of meaning, as we unwittingly attempt to equate the “language” of music to language. The traditional formalist view, a thread that runs from Eduard Hanslick to the Pieter van den Toorn, is that music resembles “dance and architecture”¹⁰ more than literature in its total lack of external referent. Whereas the “subject” can clearly be isolated in various portrayals of the same subject matter in painting, literature, and drama, a purely musical setting does not clearly reveal any specific subject existing apart from the notes themselves. Thus, in music, there is no division between form and content, which are identical, and to speak about meaning in music is to speak about the notes themselves.

In her discussion of “structural listening,¹¹” Rose Subotnik brings up that, in Schoenberg’s case, the musical “idea” truly supersedes style. She quotes from *Style and Idea*, “[the responsible composer] will never start from a preconceived image of a style; he will be ceaselessly occupied with doing justice to the idea. He is sure that, everything done which the idea demands, the external appearance will be adequate.”¹²

Though Schoenberg’s music, and its “idea,” may appeal to the Schenkerian need for autonomy (though it would not fall into foreground, middle ground, and background), it is unlikely that his music is as easily understood or enjoyed by the public. Can we thus concede, with Schenker, that the only true enjoyment of music comes from structural listening? Or does it rather seem that most music relies on a style, which presents itself in

¹⁰ Eduard Hanslick, trans. Gustav Cohen, *The Beautiful in Music* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1956), 119.

¹¹ Rose Rosengard Subotnik, “Toward a Deconstruction of Structural Listening: A Critique of Schoenberg, Adorno, and Stravinsky,” from *Deconstructive Variations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

¹² Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975), 121.

the foreground, translated through a familiarity, and that music without a style is paradoxically less likely to convey an idea?

Unsurprisingly, Adorno holds up “autonomous” and abstract modernism such as Schoenberg, and doesn’t say much about art such as Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, or the musical Avant-Garde that surrounded him. If he were to have done so, he may have discovered the way out of the major problem of Modern Art, the seemingly irreversible division between high and low. What Adorno identifies as “art” is actually only a splinter of the larger art culture. The mid-19th century commodification of culture, which grew into the mass culture of the 20th century is, for Adorno, the fundamental condition of the Modern. And the only legitimate Modern art is that which rigorously challenges the commodity-status of culture (specifically the move towards commodity as “commodity through-and-through”), and in its autonomy is still capable of expressing the individual genius creator. What, then, of the “popular” culture? Adorno doesn’t like it, even though it is the larger sphere of influence, and in Habermas’s terms, “the lifeworld.”

Andreas Huyssen, in *After the Great Divide*, attempts to understand the circumstances of the Modern/mass culture that Adorno is concerned with, and he quotes John Brenkman’s historical analysis of the Modern.

The European bourgeoisie, still fighting to secure its triumph over aristocracy and monarchy, suddenly faced the counterrevolutionary task of suppressing the workers and preventing them from openly articulating their interests.¹³

¹³ John Brenkman, “Mass Media From Collective Experience to the Culture of Privatization,” *Social Text* (Winter 1979), 101.

Adorno's exemplar of the modern is Arnold Schoenberg, who *never* pandered for an audience. What, then, of the "popular" culture? As a commodified form of culture, "popular" music is seen as a "thread bare" ready-to-wear cultural product, which relies on a mindless audience and the control of an elite group of lowbrow fashion mongers.

What would it mean for culture to be a "commodity through and through?" This is a claim, one would think, that Adorno should have to justify with a competent critique of so-called commodity forms. Unfortunately, Adorno's brutal attack on popular forms does not include formal critique. He sees the specter of fascism in every pop hit, and is unwilling to make the jump toward actual analysis. It is as if by virtue of his stamp of "commodity through and through," popular culture is by definition devoid of the possibility of genuine expression or originality, and thus Adorno is unwilling to take the time to address specific formal aspects of popular music. Instead, he relies on a few dogmatic assertions based on his distrust of standardized forms, seeing the signs of mass culture as a greater signifier for not only the imminent destruction of earlier social and economic conditions, but ultimately for a world devoid of art.

If the concept of decay, which cultural philistines love to cite against modern art, is justified anywhere it is in popular music.

My Fair Lady [is] a show that musically fails to meet even the most primitive standards of originality and inventiveness.

[The hits] reckon with the immature, with those who cannot express their emotions and experiences, who either never had the power of

expression or were crippled by cultural taboos.

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Although part of a larger program criticizing mass culture, his exploration of popular music cannot extend past a few pages of biting attack.

Though many have criticized Adorno's lack of attention to the specifics of popular forms, I wonder whether this neglect is not simply a result of his Marxist program, or whether he simply affirms the Modernist aesthetic that "formal autonomy=genuine expression" using a Marxist basis to justify its claims. The formal, academic art of Modern movements are, for Adorno, the last bastion of genuine expression, because they rely on formal autonomy and a distanced individual genius. But there is more to this division than standardization in the "song hit" vs. the formal autonomy of integral serialism. Schoenberg's cultural discourse is different from "Hungarian schmaltz [and] Prussian Puppchen brutality,"¹⁴ not only because of its "genius"—underlying Adorno's Beethoven/genius worship, there may simply be an elitist hatred for the mob.

There are many examples in Adorno's own lifetime that call his basic premises into question. Movements such as Dada and Surrealism, which also embraced Freudian and Marxist critiques of Modern culture, were, however, significantly different in that they attempted to unite art and life—distorting the distinction between form and content, but not through abstraction. Rather, these artists were just as likely to draw their material

14 Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 22-27.

15 Theodor W. Adorno, 22.

from the world of mass culture as academic formal deconstruction. And commodification itself was turned back on itself as social critique. In other words, Dada and Surrealism took discourse as read, and created discourse about discourses, without a reliance on the autonomy of art for art's sake. Artists such as Man Ray and Buñuel embraced the spectacle of the Parisian cinema, for instance, and philosophized upon its psychological effect. And because they knew the culture, they could manipulate its signs. They turned it back upon itself, recognizing the changes of the Modern age, and thus, igniting a seemingly new way of making art—not trapped in the Utopian formalism of the past, but allowing their art to take the form of commodity—not Adorno's "commodity through and through," but a discursive statement that admits of the discontinuity in the apparent continuity. The artwork reveals the individual artist's point of view within the context of the discourse as illusion of continuity and autonomy.

Formalism, it seems, is trapped by its own indefensible defenses of itself. Can we really believe that the only good music is that which displays three hierarchical levels, or which is the least understandable? Is popular music bad in the tautological ways Adorno wishes to present? The narratives of musical autonomy are terribly contingent both in a formalist and a classicalist ideology because they cannot hold over time, or explain the changes in practice over time.

With this critique of formalism in mind, we may open our eyes wider and take in the full musical universe as it truly appears. In the later part of the 20th century, the definition of music, like that of art in general, has been broadened. My analysis of this deconstruction is that musicians and composers simply could not hold on to autonomous definitions of "music" after the simultaneous impulses of populism and avant-gardism

threatened the narrowly balancing formalism of high modernism. These defenses of music, like the formulation of a “Medieval” theoretical system, were written long after the creation of the practices they praise, and only provide defenses of these disintegrating practices.

Today, there is a new aesthetic breakthrough begging to be understood. But it requires an approach that does not discourage an understanding of the critical discourse, and how it shapes our individual and societal appreciation of music. Rather, this breakthrough can be seen as the larger application of Schoenberg’s emancipation of tonality to the discourse of music-itself.

The obvious flash point of this breakthrough is John Cage, who claimed not to distinguish between sounds, and also began the process of defacing the myth of musical autonomy. I hold John Cage’s ideas very dear, because although he worked within a particular stylistic milieu, he did a great deal to expand general notions of what music can be. In a shimmering moment, he revealed the artificiality of the institutional definition of music, as part of an avant-garde program of deconstruction.

Although Cage despised rock ‘n’ roll, the Do It Yourself aesthetic of garage bands is mirrored in the experimental nature of pieces such as *Music of Changes* or *Indeterminacy*. And in one of a million historical overlaps, John Cale, a pianist who worked with Cage and David Tudor (as well as the New York experimenter LaMonte Young) went on to create The Velvet Underground, the premier American Garage Band, which adopted stylistic elements from Cage and from Young’s more minimalistic, meandering piano scores. *4’33”* is certainly a personal statement in the medium of sound, and did more than open the door to musical experimenters. Cage injected the musical

discourse with a freedom that stretched into the popular sphere and would forever change music-itself.

But since the 1960s, Andy Warhol, John Cage, and the Velvet Underground, there has been another breakthrough in the musical discourse which is not as stressed as the role of John Cage's avant-garde deconstruction. This is the digital revolution, which has led to new methods of music making, and, I contend, a further elaboration of the deconstruction of notions of institutional, or "autonomous" music. Information about historical connections and influences between pieces are more available than ever before. And the digitization of music has made no fundamental class, or institutional distinction between high and low music. They are sold in the same arena, and Philip Glass writes symphonies based on David Bowie albums, just as "ambient" New Age recordings of John Cage pieces circulate on file-sharing networks. Works such as *Plunderphonic*, by John Oswald, point the way to a new aesthetic of musical creation and reception, based on a new understanding of music-as-discourse. There are a variety of different, but similarly educated composer/performers, who value the novelty and above all the plurality of sounds (that is to the larger field of musical discourse) and their cultural referents (that is, to the even larger field of cultural discourse). They consider no division between high and low, because digitization has hidden the institutional signs of value (everything, for instance, is a copy). At the same time, digitization, and the information revolution, has allowed the traditionally slow process of meaning-apprehension to accelerate, and the discourse to grow exponentially. The methods available to de-and-reconstruct the musical material in works such as *Plunderphonic* reveal that, indeed,

practice may change our values, and values change our consciousness and reception of art-in-general.

I believe we have entered a period in which the wealth of discursive possibilities in the field of artistic creation has overshadowed the institutional norms that have held fast into the era of modernism, whether these norms be notions of musical autonomy through Schenkerian or Adornoan formalism. Because of this, I believe our notions of discourse must be expanded, as the information which contextualizes our notions of musical meaning are provided in the form of a much larger and more open framework. The Internet, for instance, allows individuals from different cultures and socioeconomic levels to speak as equals. And the number of opinions available is mind-blowing.

But attempting to understand the discourse isn't enough. To do so would once again whitewash the issue of real musical practice. I believe that contemporary music reveals a world-view that more or less accepts basic ideas of subjectivity, contingency, and relativism, as well as the subversion of commodity and institutional values, as a theoretical starting point. In the next chapter, I will describe this new music, and provide a rich context for understanding it.

CHAPTER TWO: SAMPLES AND EXAMPLES

In the last chapter, I addressed some of the problems of musical formalism, namely its ultimate contingency and the unfair value it gives to some music over others. This, remember, is due to the privileged place that the canon of specific works attains through the intermediary of the musical formalism. In this chapter, I will describe some of the music that has interested me over the years, but which I feel inadequate to critique, because the critical apparatus that would allow such a criticism is simply not at my fingertips. This is music that the critical systems of musical formalism ignore or look down upon, because it cannot be stylistically reconciled with the canonical works or the critics' formal systems.

I do not wish then, from this conclusion, to imply that formalist criticism is the only form of musical criticism around. However, contextual criticism, such as Susan McClary's, which concedes historical contingency, appears to fall into many of the same traps as the work of formalists. McClary's work, in which she deconstructs contextual meanings in a variety of musical forms, can frequently seem inconsequential despite the myriad epiphanies which link context to content, and trace the sometimes invisible strings of influence through analysis.

For instance, when we learn that Schubert's homosexuality may be manifest thematically in the *Unfinished Symphony*, or that the true history of the blues is that of the exploitation of African culture, we may ask ourselves, "What bearing does this

information have on an immediate appreciation of the musical object?," especially if we still hold onto a semblance of artistic autonomy, and disinterested criticism.

For these reasons, I will attempt to simply present a variety of findings in contemporary music as objectively as possible, without attempting to highlight what contextual value they may have as *the way* to understand them. I shall leave my critique for the next chapter. For now, I will simply present examples of music that I believe *call out* specifically for a new critical understanding. I will also present quotations from commentators who take new critical approaches to contemporary culture. It is my hope that these will provide possible clues for a critical understanding of this music, or at least the paradigm shifts that seem to have occurred over the last century.

The first striking discontinuity between a formalist story of music and the music I have observed is that the ironclad division between high and low may not be so solid. There are individuals who place themselves in positions that may have formerly seemed controversial, but have now transcended the nominal labels of the previously fixed institutional hierarchy. Of course, one must perceive continuity if one is to perceive discontinuity, and I do not mean that institutional praxis has been abolished by individual practice. This is obviously not true. Instead, I merely wish to offer a few examples of a perceived realignment of perceptions of continuity. Milton Babbitt, for instance, is a composer who lived two musical lives, one in a world of academic composers, atonality, and scientific precision—the other as a maven of Broadway and popular American song. These lives did not meet on the level of practice, despite a passion for both. There was always “serious” and “popular” music. Raymond Scott is an example of a composer from the time frame (both figures were on the forefront of electronic music in the 1950s), but

one who may be seen as prefiguring a more contemporary musical pluralism.

Raymond Scott is the composer of *The Toy Trumpet* (CD track 1), *Powerhouse*, and other famous tunes known mostly from arrangements by Carl Stalling—the composer for Warner Bros. cartoons. However, Scott also worked in the cutting-edge on electronic music, composing works such as *Soothing Sounds for Babies*. This work cannot simply be pigeonholed into “serious” or “popular” music categories. It is a three-hour-long stretch of soft electronic ambiance, which clearly anticipated works like Brian Eno’s later “ambient” works like *Music for Airports*. It is unclear what audiences at the time thought they were buying when they purchased the album in the 1960s, with its smiling Gerber-like baby photo on the cover of its three volumes. Clearly, this was an experiment in both composition *and* marketing. This was not music that had been heard before—it certainly did not fall into the conventions of the “pop” music of the time. And this work, which utilized experimental stylistic forms, and electronic instrumentation, but was sincerely marketed for the public, is not the only example of Scott’s inventiveness and embracing of the signs of both popular and serious music. Scott would compose advertising jingles for toy companies and IBM, create electronic versions of his popular “novelty” jazz compositions, and combine this “vulgar materialism” with an experimental spirit just as independent and uncompromising as Charles Ives or Harry Partch. Just as neglected by the mainstream public as Milton Babbitt, Scott used his obscurity to create a personal world of sounds that responded to modern culture and music. Taking a cue from the tape composers Pierre Henry and Pierre Schaffer, who first spliced music, sound effects, and ambient noises together to create a new listening experience called *musique concrete*, Scott created works such as *Don’t Beat Your Wife*

Every Night (CD track 2), which splices de-contextualized advertisements and electronic splashes, to create a work of art that accepts the full range of expressive possibilities given by the culture. Scott composed music for cartoons, but they were extremely difficult to play. He made advertising jingles, but they utilized tape manipulation and synthesizers he created in a studio he dubbed “Manhattan Research Inc.” With pieces such as *Limbo—The Organized Mind* (CD track 3), he and Jim Henson (later of Kermit the Frog fame) recycled material from an IBM advertisement, and created a short narrative psychodrama about a man who can file each of his memories perfectly in his file cabinet-like mind. The situation quickly turns to disaster when his bad memories become misfiled. Utilizing sound effects and jarring electronic noise, this narrative is about as far from the “happy” jingle as possible. And these two pieces present the two halves of the work done at Manhattan Research Inc. *Don’t Beat Your Wife Every Night* and *Limbo—The Organized Mind* reveal that Scott found a way to make even the most vulgar commercial form, the commercial advertisement, into a potent form of personal expression. These hybridized pieces, while only one form of expression available to the contemporary composer, nevertheless provide the seed of a new music that was to emerge out of *musique concrete*. Like the painting after photography, and the novel after film, music after the tape contains new expressive possibilities. And these possibilities specifically point the way toward an acceptance of discontinuity. The splice is the new element, and grows from its humble beginnings to infiltrate all forms of music. Does this facilitate a “new way of hearing?” And if so, what is the larger context for this change? I wish to present two long quotes about changes in technology that brought about the current paradigm of information perception. I will then show how these examples relate

specifically to understanding music that utilizes these technological changes. The first is from Jonathan Sterne, talking about the emergence of telephony, and the emphasis it placed on the ear for the purposes of sound and sound reproduction. The second is from Paul D. Miller (DJ Spooky, that Subliminal Kid), and relates to the use of the “cut” in all post-cinematic media.

Jonathan Sterne on the emergence of telephony:

Prior analyses of sound had been more oriented toward a particular Source—theories of sound took the voice and the mouth, or music and a particular instrument (such as the violin), as ideal-typical for the analysis, description, and modeling of sonic phenomena. The mouths and instruments were taken as *general* cases for understanding sound. Sound-reproduction technologies informed by this perspective attempted to synthesize sound by modeling human sonic activities like speech or musical performance. In contrast, the new sciences of sound would in a sense (or, rather, in the sense of hearing) invert the general and the specific theories of sound. No longer themselves general categories of sound fit for theory construction, the mouth, the voice, music, and musical instruments would become specific contenders for audition in a whole world of sonic phenomena. In this new regime, hearing was understood and modeled as operating uniformly on sounds, regardless of their source. Sound itself,

irrespective of its source, became the general category or object for acoustics and the study of hearing.¹⁶

DJ Spooky on the emergence of the “cut”:

It’s been a while since the autumn day in 1896 when George Melies was filming a late afternoon Paris crowd caught in the ebb and flow of the city’s traffic. One of those random occurrences that always seem to be at the core of history then took place. Melies was in the process of filming an omnibus as it came out of a tunnel, and his camera jammed. He tried for several moments to get it going again, but with no luck. After a couple of minutes he got it working again, and the camera’s lens caught a hearse going by. It was an accident that went unnoticed until he got home. When the film was developed and projected it seemed as if the bus morphed into a funeral hearse and back to its original form again. In the space of what used to be called *actualites*—real contexts reconfigured into stories that the audiences could relate to - a simple opening and closing of a lens had placed the viewer in several places and times simultaneously. In the space of one random error, Melies created what we know of today as the “cut” - words, images, sounds flowing out the lens projection would deliver, like James Joyce used to say “sounds like a river.” Flow, rupture, and fragmentation - all seamlessly bound to the viewer’s perspectival architecture of film and sound, all utterly malleable - in

¹⁶ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 33

the blink of an eye space and time as the pre-industrial culture had known it came to an end.¹⁷

I take these quotes to be enlightening possible answers to the questions “Does [the splice] facilitate a “new way of hearing?” And if so, what has caused this change? I also think these quotes address the original question brought about with the Raymond Scott example—that is, does this “new way of hearing” necessarily privilege a kind of musical pluralism over a hierarchy of musics? The first quote is from Jonathan Sterne’s *The Audible Past* (2003), a book which attempts to explain the cultural origins and implications of sound reproduction, beginning with Alexander Graham Bell’s earliest experiments with the ear phonograph (a machine that used an actual human ear as a conductive membrane!). Through the course of his research, which spanned the creation of the numerous early sound recording devices and their mass-cultural reception, Sterne came to the realization that a fundamental change in *thinking about sound* was required to create the modern world of telephony and phonography. Sounds had to become *equal and emancipated*, as the focus was changed from designing sound reproduction to model diverse sources of sound, to focusing on their universal endpoint—the human ear. In other words, the differences between sounds were not what created the sounds: for the purposes of sound reproduction, the practical difference between the *sound* of a violin and a trumpet, a jungle and a crowded street was not *the difference* between a violin and a trumpet, a jungle and a crowded street—but rather, only their distinctive imprints on the recording media. From this, it seems to follow that a cultural norm of music predicated on the power of recording can easily delimit the once slippery notion of the essential

¹⁷ Paul D. Miller (a.k.a. DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid), *Rhythm Science* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mediawork/MIT Press, 2004), 81.

nature of any music. When we focus on the ear, rather than, say, a score, or the contents of a composer's head, we can easily point to the record as the source of the music. And unlike a Schenkerian analysis, any understanding of *this* music must be heard. However, as a record, this music also retains its objectivity. Every time it is played, it will sound the same. There are many other aesthetic conclusions to be drawn from this discovery and the subsequent paradigm shift Sterne describes. Because all sonic transducers are modeled after our own ears, our ears can be "fooled" by recording media into believing that, say, the violin is being played in the middle of a crowded street even if the two were simply played on two Gramophones at once. The auditory experience is similar to the experience of collage, or any context in which the "artifice" of art seems to be glaringly transcendental.

Unlike the music of the 19th century, which could certainly be programmatic, in examples ranging from the timbre of the English horn in Beethoven's Sixth Symphony (*Pastoral*) and Mahler's use of the *fiedel* in the Fourth Symphony to create a sense of "the demonic," or "the country," to the wind-machine in Strauss' *Alpine Symphony*, the new expressive potential of recorded sound would not be relegated to the realm of "special effect"—clearly separate and secondary to the more important sonic material, the tonal *music* played by the live orchestra.

I cannot help but see the advent of recording and the experiments of composers like Charles Ives snugly fitting into the new sonic paradigm together, as if to justify this historical hypothesis. In Ives's purely orchestral music, there is a sense in which a true sound-collage is being used, utilizing orchestration and poly-tonality to mimic sounds as they truly heard. When Ives has two different melodies playing against each other, in say,

Three Places in New England, it truly sounds like two bands converging. And this experience can be seen in two different lights. First, it can simply be heard as programmatic. However, in its composing “for the ear,” it seems more than *simply* programmatic. He does more than simply evoke an air of pastoralism, he actually has a brass-band play a brass-band tune. Through this transformation, we can see a freedom that reveals the seed of musical pluralism. Because Ives’s musical decisions are focused on a specific sonic outcome—the choice of his material can be anything that provokes this outcome. And the experience of this music functions just as much on the “musical surface,” as in the deep structure of formal construction. As music becomes more mimetic in its possibilities, the imaginary structures of construction, brought about by the need for fixed, abstract conventions which “fill-in” for emotional states, are no longer our only refuge. Of course, music is still the most abstract of the arts, and I do not mean to suggest otherwise. However, music, which exists in the medium of *sound* need not simply be the auditory expression of paper music, once the surface textures of sound are allowed to vary in complexity as well. What music is “about” seems to be the full range of composing *for the ear*.

It is with this physical evidence that John Cage seems justified in his call for the equality for all sounds. But the story does not end here. For, at the beginning of the 20th century, there was another new context with which to understand sound. The experience of two brass bands converging may be highly mimetic, but this is simply a maturation of the possibilities already available in 19th century orchestral music. The experience of listening to a gramophone playing jungle sounds while another gramophone plays, say,

Caruso singing *La Donna é Mobilé* is strikingly different in *kind* from mere quotation or program. And this is where Miller is most useful.

Paul D. Miller's *Rhythm Science* (2004) is a sprawling and enlightening series of essays about the attempt to understand contemporary culture. In the essay "Rhythmic Cinema," Miller, a prolific electronic composer and conceptual artist, attempts to equate the emergence of *musique concrete*, and the influence of the "cut" in music to the discovery of the first film "cut." Although Miller does not specifically show the links in practice between the early film cuts and our perceptions of modern music, his book, as a holistic, freewheeling path through his personal reflections on the contemporary world makes one consider the integral, but invisible, impact of technology upon our everyday conceptions and perceptions of the world.

In Miller's essay, the "cut" of *musique concrete* is the same "cut" of a DJ who combines the foreground, middle-ground, and backgrounds of a dance track, or an ambient soundscape sourced from field-recordings. The "cut" is also synonymous with the most violent juxtaposition in Surrealist and Dada montage. The "artistic" experience fostered by the traditional avant-garde in formulations such as Breton's "objective chance" can only come about through the process of confusing life and art. For this reason, in music, the *sounds* of our everyday subjective experiences must be perceived objectively through the natural combinatory power of the mind. In "the Surrealist Situation of the Object" (1935), André Breton described the Surrealist experience of "objective chance," "That sort of chance that shows a man, in a way that is still very mysterious, a necessity that escapes him, even though he experiences it as a vital

neccessity.”¹⁸ Surrealist works attempt to replicate and provoke this experience, sparking memories of the unconscious by depicting a seeming melding of conscious and unconscious modes. Works that include the juxtaposition, or the violent cut, in Bréton’s formulation, provoke active interpretation of the world rather than passive acceptance.

This new objectivity of chance leads us to new possibilities of artistic expression, and ultimately to the power of sample-based music, which I feel is the most tangible expression of technology utilizing the impulses of the avant-garde and “post-Warhol populism” to create a music that grapples with sounds and signs of our time. If Mozart represents the values of the Enlightenment, then I find that sample-based music represents the artistic possibilities and values of the consumer age.

Before I go on to finally reveal “sample-based” music, I will quickly recap, so as to make its emergence all the more revelatory. It seems that avant-garde attitudes derived from Dada and Surrealism have provided a new way for artists and composers to respond to the changes in technology, as well as institutional notions of beauty. The possibilities of *musique-concrete*, latent in such referential forms as programmatic music, achieves a new, *purely sonic* character as the sounds-themselves gain prominence in the age of recording. Because the sounds-themselves are full of referential possibilities, which link music to other music and to other sounds, and because contemporary technology has the ability to reproduce these sounds perfectly from ear to ear, composers can exploit sounds and the power they have upon by presenting them to us in the context of a *new* form of pure music. Unlike the pure music of the past, which rejected sound in favor of relationships between abstract tonal systems, this pure music is concerned with the

18 André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 268.

connections sounds have in our mind, as they form a kind of gestalt sonic simulacra. In Ives's music, this may be the sum-total of the familiar tunes he presents us with, and their intersection with the conventions of 19th century tonality. In Scott's music, this may be the intersection between the simple and complex, the experimental and the established. Therefore, the effect of this music, which has the ability to fool the ear, and plunder from popular culture, has qualities similar to Pop Art and Surrealism's *objective chance*. This is due to the recontextualization of the ordinary into the artistic, and vice versa, which provokes new contexts for understanding both the nature of art and of our commodity forms. From these roots, we come to Plunderphonics, and John Oswald. Oswald, who emerged as a compositional figure in the 1970s, comes from the polyglot world of post-phonographic musical practice; he is a composer and an improviser, and he straddles the worlds referred to as jazz, pop, minimalism, and *musique concrete*. He has composed orchestral works, ballets, string quartets (one of which was commissioned by Kronos), and he has worked in rock'n'roll and jazz improvisation. However, he began with *musique concrete* and this is probably what he is best known for. After experimenting with many techniques and styles in the early 1970s, he chose to focus on one that he dubbed "Plunderphonics," culminating in the release of *Plunderphonics* album in 1989. This then became his preoccupation for the next eight years, and he enjoyed fame and massive underground cult status. Although the word Plunderphonics means only "stolen sounds," John Oswald's Plunderphonics are more than simply an excuse to plagiarize, as most music inevitably does, or to re-release other people's material under his own name, like the work of Audrey Flack. In these works, Oswald systematically dismantled commercial recordings and used the material as fodder for brand-new compositions

which inevitably act as both a commentary on the original material and a brand new composition, which may use preexisting sounds and conventions, but takes these elements and places them in a variety of new compositional contexts. Although Oswald's Plunderphonics project may have begun at a time when his products would certainly be deemed illegal if released commercially, the project was complicated as other forms of "plunderphonics" became a main source of Popular music. One may ask at this point what the difference is between Plunderphonics and the works of contemporary composers like Luciano Berio, George Crumb, and others who compose music that obviously references other music. To this, I reply that the differences between Plunderphonics and *Sinfonia*, for instance, are significant. Plunderphonics is done purely in the medium of the sound-itself. There is no score, and there are no musicians to interpret. In Plunderphonics, the sounds themselves are copied identically. Most importantly, Plunderphonics *cannot* be analyzed in the way that *Sinfonia* can. One can go bar by bar and never forget that *Sinfonia* was composed by a composer for the concert hall—it is not a pure commodity product, and it does not emulate or directly dialogue with the pop music of dance halls.

After all, sample-based pop hits, the direct result of live shows in which DJs mixed and matched different rhythms, melodies, textures, and timbres from records, grew in popularity with the emergence of hip-hop in the 1980s. And hit songs began to emerge in which the musical backing for rappers was directly "sampled" from preexisting commercial recordings. By the mid-80's, the DJ became a superstar, finding more and more exotic and esoteric material to use in new tracks. Hits like Run-D.M.C.'s "Walk this Way," (CD track 4) a cover of the Aerosmith song that used the actual music from the Aerosmith record, and the Beastie Boy's *Licensed to Ill* album (CD track 5), which used

splashes of Led Zeppelin and AC/DC gave Oswald a new, and unexpected audience.

Oswald responded to this phenomenon by marketing his Plunderphonics project as a call-to-arms to allow sample-based music, with its myriad possibilities of expression, and the relative availability of sampling technology, the same kind of legitimacy as so-called original popular music. After all, Plunderphonics was something brand new—a chance to create a new kind of music that uses our new technology and does not subjugate it to the old. And thus, Oswald saw Plunderphonics as more than just an artistic statement.

Experimenting with sample-based music himself, and seeing the explosion of interest in sample-based music all over the world in even the poorest communities, Oswald saw the sociopolitical impact of this affordable, homespun consumer form. People were interested in making music with this new technology, and as a free-jazz improviser, among other things, Oswald saw the potential for a new musical explosion. During World War II concurrent with Cage's reestablishing the percussive status of the piano, Trinidadians were discovering that discarded oil barrels could be cheap, available alternatives to their traditional percussion instruments which were, because of the socially invigorating potential, banned. The steel drum eventually became a national asset. Meanwhile, back in the States, for perhaps similar reasons, scratch and dub have, in the Eighties, percolated through the black American ghettos. Within an environmentally imposed, limited repertoire of possessions a portable disco may have a folk music potential exceeding that of the guitar. Pawned and ripped-off electronics are usually not accompanied by user's guides with consumer warnings such as "this blaster is a passive reproducer". Any performance potential found in an appliance is often exploited. A record can be played like an electronic washboard. Radio and disco jockeys layer the

sounds of several recordings simultaneously. The sound of music conveyed with a new authority over the airwaves is dubbed, embellished and manipulated in kind.¹⁹

Amid all this hip-hop and social advocacy, Oswald also released his own sample-based music to the musical community. His auditory cut-up of a preacher and Led Zeppelin appeared as an insert in the Canadian magazine *Musicworks* (CD track 6). In a 1994 interview with Brian Duguid, Oswald described how he came to create more and more Plunderphonics pieces during this period, including using the Beatles' *Revolution* in a ballet. The definition I'd set up for plunderphonic was music that was recognizable in some way, and the transformation of that music. I think the most successful examples use music that is the most recognizable. It's more delightful to me to have these pop figures, and by pop I also include Beethoven, as the working materials. There are things that work as *plunderphonics* for me, I've got a tape based on Edgard Varese's *Poeme Electronique*, and had the same sort of experience of having changed round something that's very familiar to me, and there are examples on *plunderphonic* of stuff like that: Anton Webern, and Ligeti, and Cecil Taylor, and Captain Beefheart. But the ones that were most interesting to me were things like Bing Crosby, where you'd play it for somebody who had no great knowledge of all sorts of other things that were happening in the twentieth century outside of the pop mainstream, they'd have some sort of reaction based on that thing that's recognizable within it. The thing that's very nice in a way is that I

¹⁹ John Oswald, "Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative," [http:// www.plunderphonics.com/xhtml/xplunder.html](http://www.plunderphonics.com/xhtml/xplunder.html)

think there is a bridge between things that are often ghettoized as being extreme twentieth-century avant garde techniques and pop music. The two things can coexist.²⁰

Oswald released the *Plunderphonics* album, containing pieces that deconstructed the Beatles, Michael Jackson, Anton Webern, and others, to radio stations in 1989. As Oswald predicted, the pieces that got the most notice were the ones that used the most familiar sources. His liner notes include:

Track 7 – “Pretender” – Over the course of this song Dolly Parton gets an aural sex change.

Track 4 – “White”— Bing Crosby sounds a little pink on our version of the best-selling single of all time.

Track 24 – “Rainbow” – Judy Garland's theme is played in a dozen harmonic layers. Eventually only the slow, low ones are left.²¹

But what *does* one make of this music? After discarding formalism, and presenting theories, possibilities, and quotations, I will attempt, with this rich context in mind, to present my own notes about a single *Plunderphonics* piece. However, it isn't easy to come to any definite conclusions. This is one of the problems of formal deconstruction. And for this reason, I'm simply attempting to describe the music before I analyze it *per se*.

Brown (CD track 7) is 3'56.” This may be the length of a standard pop song, as are many of the pieces on *Plunderphonic*, though its structure is not perhaps what one

20 Brian Duguid, “Interview with John Oswald, *EST* issue six (Summer 1995), <http://media.hyperreal.org/zines/est/intervs/oswald.html>

21 Geo. Ray Brain, “Plunderphonic- Album Notes,” <http://www.plunderphonics.com/xhtml/xnotes.html>

would expect from a standard pop song. Like much *musique concrete*, there are more “quick changes” going on than can be discerned initially, so that the experience of the music continually changes as one listens to it several times. A series of distinct musical moments can be discerned, each utilizing a different combination of musical materials and style of recombination. Most basically, I identify the sounds of the hip-hop group Public Enemy, James Brown, and a bop saxophone as the main sources of the music. The Public Enemy track seems to be from *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (CD track 8), their landmark second album, which is noteworthy for containing sound-effects, as well as beats, among their samples. The liner notes identify the saxophonist as Charlie Parker, and a shooting gun sound effect as “Matt Dillon’s”, from the opening of the TV show *Gunsmoke*. *Brown* is typical of pieces on the *Plunderphonic* album, because it is a dense, and highly original composition, but its meaning, if it has one, is unclear. There are many possible connections to be found between Oswald’s source of material, but like the examples of Ives, Scott, and even Berio, it is unclear how to think of these connections without appealing to earlier formal models. While we may have a laugh at the oddness of it, and it certainly seems from Oswald’s comments this is intended, there seems to be something more going on here with the sounds-themselves. The piece, though titled *Brown*, is attributed to Public Enemy, not James Brown. In this release, Oswald attributes each track to only one of the many artists he uses. And at first, this label seems appropriate. The first few seconds of the piece are dominated by Public Enemy’s distinctive “Bomb Squad” production style. Still new at the time of *Brown*, Public Enemy’s beats were themselves plundered from a variety of sources, and they utilized a heavily condensed, sound-effect driven mix which sounds somewhat similar in

some aspects to the music of Italian Futurists like Russolo²². Police sirens and high-pitched squeals, along with the sometimes smooth/sometimes hiccupping contours of “scratching,” in their original context, evoked the lack of stability and threat of danger always hovering above the lives of inner city blacks of southern California. Like the loud and violent raps, the fast and precarious juxtapositions of the music seemed to be filled with an emotional restlessness.

Oswald skips through this easily identifiable material quickly in the first seconds of the piece. He has heavily edited material from a variety of sources to create an intense and sudden burst of beats and sound effects, but quickly it is interrupted by different, but also identifiable sounds. There is the noisy Charlie Parker, and an especially forceful James Brown, who is always stammering, stuttering, screeching, and squealing at his highest ability.

After each of these elements is introduced, the three engage in an energetic and disconnected dance that swirls through the stereo range. Beats bounce, horns blast a single phrase looped quickly and pitch-shifted up. Brown is clipped in grunts and moans. A loop forms from the variety of sources, and its tempo modulates like a vamp. As the loop is trimmed, the rhythm briefly emphasizes the offbeat and there is a jazzy rhythmic complexity.

For a moment, the ensemble crystallizes into a heavy free funk ensemble, until the samples begin to diverge again.

Out of this chaos, a JB’s horn blast emerges like a ray of light. For the next two minutes, the Godfather of Soul brings out an assortment of his “greatest hits”—in the

22 For instance, *Risveglio di una Citta (1914)* (CD track 9)

form of horn blasts and screams. In a conscious metamorphosis, the initial high-pitched squeal which features prominently in Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions* has been replaced by a new squeal manufactured from James Brown's high-pitched screams. Gun sound effects shoot out a rhythm.

Is Oswald playfully replacing Public Enemy with a new simulacra of pop-culture violence, or simply presenting us with a history of "brown" music? Like most Plunderphonics music, the "program," if there is one, is unclear. What seems clear, however, is that Oswald's music could not do *what it does* without using samples, and the impact that they have on us *as distinctive and recognizable sounds*. In his interview with Brian Duguid, Oswald describes this phenomenon.

Any time I wanted a particular sound for something and realized that the particular sound was something that already existed in somebody else's piece of music, I thought, well, if this is the best example of it, I could do something else, but what I'm really just doing is paraphrasing or making a facsimile. I shouldn't compromise, I should just stick the best thing in there. I would make a piece for a choreographer, and as an example for rehearsal, take that guitar-chord thing from the beginning of The Beatles' "Revolution" and do an infinite loop of it. I had the intention of replacing that with another guitar player. I brought Henry Kaiser into the studio, and we'd sit around trying to imitate the timbral quality of that guitar, it was easy to get the rhythmic feel of it. We got a facsimile of it, and it was pretty good and it had its own little interesting characteristics, but in the end I liked the other one better. I might have liked it better, the John Lennon version, because it had precedence, things are in a sense your roots, that you've heard for a long time,

they're difficult to supersede. Cover versions of popular songs are very perverse things. So I would keep the John Lennon thing, and then I'd think, well, it seems like the sort of thing you could get in trouble for doing, well John Lennon got killed, and I was in no position to ask him for his permission. And the people I knew were working for him, imagine trying to call them up and trying to get permission for a no-money project? So, I was doing all this stuff but I didn't have any sense of it being easily available to other people.²³

As one might expect, the primary response to *Plunderphonic* has been to praise Oswald's deconstruction of familiar pop-culture signifiers. He is seen in the context of the long line of "Pop Artists," such as Andy Warhol, David Salle, Matthew Barney, Douglas Coupland, and others who are burdened by the label "postmodern." Popular online music magazine *Pitchforkmedia* had this to say of *Plunderphonic*'s recent reissue: While parts of *69 Plunderphonics 96* are immensely fun to listen to, other parts are just as much fun to analyze. "BtIs," the first track on the retrospective, begins with the resonating final chord of the Beatles' "A Day in the Life," a beautifully blasphemous way to open up an album that pays little heed to any kind of musical convention. As if that weren't enough, the opening chord of "A Hard Day's Night" is then layered directly over that famous final chord of "A Day in the Life," resulting in a chord that sounds like utter dissonance, but makes perfect sense from a logistical standpoint. This is the musical

equivalent of painting big flirty eyelashes on a picture of Jesus Christ. And it rocks.²⁴

I'm not quite sure why "Btls," (CD track 10) is the "musical equivalent of painting big flirty eyelashes on a picture of Jesus Christ," considering the understated nature of this track—one of the more creative re-contextualizations that isn't necessarily burdened by overt quotation (after all, only single chords are used). But this reveals the difficulty of separating the cultural associations we have from the sounds-themselves.

And this may be a complication to understanding sample-based music. Meanwhile, when musicologists like Chris Cutler attempt to give *Plunderphonic* the true artistic autonomy and "authorship" that the original tracks possess, he seems to be making the case in a legalistic manner.

of *The Great*

Parton's single once
high speed cassette

turntable, finally a hand-

seamlessly together). Apart from

of controlled deceleration, which is,

modifications have been made to the

although the source is plainly fixed and

and reading of this source are all highly

Oswald's own intention and skill. So much so

to argue that the piece, although 'only' Parton's

So I hear John Oswald's version of Dolly Parton's version

Pretender, effectively a recording of Oswald playing

through, transformed via varispeed media (first a
duplicator, then an infinitely variable speed

controlled reel-to-reel tape - all edited

the economy of this single procedure

as it were, played by Oswald, no

original recording. However,

given, the choice, treatment

conscious products of

indeed that it is easy

record, undoubtedly

²⁴ Matt Le May, http://pitchforkmedia.com/record-reviews/o/oswald_john/69-plunderphonics-96.shtml

forms, in Oswald's version, a self-standing composition with its own structure and logic - both of which are profoundly different from those of the original. Oswald's *Pretender* would still work for a listener who had never heard the Parton version, and in a way the Parton version never could. Though the Parton version is, of course, *given* - along with and against the plundered version. What Oswald has created - created because the result of his work is something startlingly new - is a powerful, aesthetic, significant, polysemic but highly focused - and enjoyable - sound artefact; both a source of direct listening pleasure and (for our purposes) a persuasive case for the validity and eloquence of its means.²⁵

At the beginning of the chapter, I attempted to raise some questions about the validity of an exhaustive attempt to isolate “contextual meaning.” It is difficult to say what *Plunderphonic* is about precisely because the question of its contextual meaning seems to be what it *is* about. On the one hand, we have Oswald’s powerful sociopolitical statements about the importance of sample-based music, which, in an almost Marxist-context is seen to restore agency to a disenfranchised part of the population. We then have his reasoning behind using samples in his own compositions: because the sounds he wishes to use are best found in prerecorded material. Both of these reasons for sample-based music skirt the most obvious outcome of this kind of music, however. What is to be done about the fact that the cultural associations we have for these samples infringe upon

²⁵ Chris Cutler, “A History of Plunderphonics,” originally in *Resonance* 3, no. 2 and 4, no. 1, <http://www.l-m-c.org.uk/texts/plunder.html>

our understanding of the artist's intention? Why does he use these samples in this way, rather than other samples in another way?

Oswald, has, himself, complicated this issue by denying an explicit program or politics in the music itself, but at the same time, courting the outrage of a copyright-bound music industry by, for instance, making the cover of *Plunderphonic* a nude woman's body with Michael Jackson's face. It is easy for a hip pop-culture media outlet like *Pitchforkmedia* to see Oswald as a musical Jeff Koons—another misunderstood artist whose use of appropriation has branded him a kind of outlaw art-kid.

On the other hand, artists and critics like Cutler attempt to stress the opposite view, selling Oswald as an extremely personal artist. Cutler says that one need not have heard Dolly Parton's original in order to appreciate *Pretender* (CD track 11). This seems to me to be taking Oswald too seriously in the other direction—from heteronomy to autonomy.

Synthesizing these views, and taking into account Oswald's full body of work in the field of Plunderphonics, I would say that this extreme example of sample-based music *is* the music which must be explained if we are to form any "aesthetics" of sample-based music, which is fast becoming the norm in popular music. Over the last few years, artists like Jay-Z, who utilizes esoteric samples as the basis of his rap music, have become the darlings of both critics and consumers. Sample-obsessed rap producers like RZA now do film music to movies like *Ghost Dog* (1999), directed by Jim Jarmusch and *Kill Bill* (2003-2004), directed by Quentin Tarantino. With the Plunderphonics project, people began to take serious notice of the implications of sample-based music, and Oswald

himself has answered back by continually advancing and obscuring the “meaning” of his project.

I argue that, following from the preconceived notions of music we have, these confusions arise from trying to fit Plunderphonics into our notions of what music is, or should be. Although formalism like Schenker’s, or Adorno’s is not in vogue, there is a normative sense of where different cultural products fit in the hierarchy of institutional imperative. For now, RZA and Jay-Z can be explained as mutations of the normative consumer entertainment form known as “pop” music. But, as pop becomes the more advanced technological and expressive medium, it cannot simply be discarded as a kind of vulgar materialism with no real value or meaning. We must think about music differently—not simply in terms of “high” and “low,” or “autonomous” and “heteronomous.” The institutionally-constructed value that we place on aesthetic objects, and their discursive role in the realm of imagination and cultural critique may begin to change more dramatically as the technology of the digital age begins to structure our thoughts and memories in a new 21st century paradigm. Like DJ Spooky’s “cut,” and Sterne’s explanation of telephony, perhaps the advent of this new highly referential and obscure music, which takes sounds and their associations in a rich stew, will turn out to be the newest paradigm shift. When *Plunderphonics* was initially released to radio stations in 1989, Michael Jackson had all copies burned for copyright reasons, although he himself plundered Beethoven’s 9th Symphony at the beginning of his *HIStory* album. Was this a double-standard, or merely an unclear time, in which the connection between what Jackson was doing and Oswald was doing was unclear? There has been a historic change since then. *Plunderphonic* was re-released commercially in the year 2000, and it

has yet to be pulled off the market, despite being the most explicit appropriation of a variety of pop music's sacred cows yet created. For these reasons, it is essential that we come to some understanding of plunderphonics, and other sample-based music. I hope to do so in the next chapter by returning to Foucault, and providing a model that concedes to the discontinuities of discourse in such way as the splice renders necessary.

CHAPTER THREE: MUSIC AS DISCOURSE; PLUNDERPHONICS AND FORMALISM

I hope that the last chapter made clear that Plunderphonics dwells among a complicated jungle of cultural referents and critical responses. And although I assert that sample-based music has the ability to affect an audience in new and unique ways, I cannot say how or why this may be until the *facts* of its reception are understood in a clearer light. It is easy to provide quotes from a variety of media sources, but I will now synthesize these views and attempt to create a formal architectonic within which we may objectively judge them. If this seems like a regress to a formalist paradigm, I argue this is necessary for any critical pursuit that attempts to understand and categorize a society's

artistic output. Otherwise, description and analysis ultimately become something else. I read *Conventional Wisdom* by Susan McClary and the works of Greil Marcus¹, as personalized narratives of music's many social roles. But *this* kind of endeavor is distinct from a clear explanation of music that can guide a listener to music appreciation. For this reason, I want to keep the positive aspects of traditional formalism (namely, its systematic thought and its objectivity) and dull its negative aspects (its frequent chauvinism, for instance) without resorting to a purely subjective form of criticism or simply a deconstruction of earlier formalist dogma.

At the heart of this matter is a simple question: How, amid our myriad understandings and responses, can music like Plunderphonics be described? While this is a general problem for music as a whole, it is all the more perplexing for Plunderphonics, which appears *at first* to emerge without clear stylistic antecedents.

In *Deconstructive Variations*, Rose Subotnik addresses the importance of sifting through "purely formalist" understandings of music until they reveal *other* descriptive elements hidden in the cracks. Her best example, is Schoenberg and Adorno²⁶, who both rely on *technical* understandings of music, but let their dogmatic understandings of formalism color this "scientific" pursuit. And, analyzing Adorno, or Schoenberg's analyses, we should *separate* the curds of critical dogma from the whey of technical analysis. After all, their understanding of *formalism* is distinct from the formal structures in their musical works. And yet, we sometimes need their explanations to understand

26 For instance, *Lipstick Traces*, or *Invisible Republic*

27 Rose Subotnik, "Toward a Deconstruction of Structural Listening: A Critique of Schoenberg, Adorno, and Stravinsky" in *Deconstructive Variations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 148-176.

what would theoretically be clearly perceptible in formal music. If we follow Subotnik's model, we can see a way to categorize these curds and whey separately, revealing a sort of "extra-musical" description hidden within formalist descriptions.

These "hidden" descriptions expand the possibilities of "musical description" such as the categories that Peter Kivy presents in *The Corded Shell* (*technical, emotive, biographical, and autobiographical*), and function on the level of *meta-critique*, as well as the description of the music. We can see Subotnik dividing the heady mess of Kivy's so-called technical description, and showing how it is often, *in practice*, colored with biographical and autobiographical elements. Is it enough to say that *together*, all these elements would make up a formal understanding of Schoenberg's music? For when we talk about Schoenberg's music, it is difficult to separate these elements due to Schoenberg's ingrained formalist ideology, which privileges notions of "art for art's sake." More intuitively, but also less easily clear, Subotnik seems to appeal to the usual sense of the "extra-musical" (i.e. *the whole set* of information we glean that is not covered by the purely *technical*) as another essential key in the understanding of music. Keep in mind that this does not simply refer to that large category of Kivy's: the emotive. And I take this experience to include not just some purely scientific account of musical structure, added to or contrasted with emotion and contextual knowledge. Rather, our *experience* of music cannot be delimited or understood outside of our continual approach toward the art object *as the object of a multi-faceted discourse*. Problems of description—paradoxes, if you like—emerge most perniciously, it seems to me, when we attempt to clearly define our "pure" experience into simple and discrete forms.

Using Subotnik's deconstruction of the kinds of formalism I addressed in Chapter One, I feel that deconstruction of musical *discourse* becomes the next phase in my endeavor. I feel that Subotnik would tend to agree that the art object *should* be understood as the object of a rich discourse, although she does not necessarily tell us the limits of this discourse or how it functions. I wish to present two quotes that provide the two goals of a musical description that expands to include discourse. The first quote is her division of *structure* and *style*—a telling point, because although it collapses the timeless quality of even Kivy's endeavor (although, to be fair, his subject of "music" is clearly aimed at a canon only slightly larger than Adorno's), it still carries with the clear signs of description needed to understand the conventions of musical objects, and their historical emergence. Both Schoenberg's work and that of Adorno provide massive evidence of the degree to which the communication of ideas depends on concrete cultural knowledge, and on the power of signs to convey a richly concrete open-endedness of meaning through a variety of cultural relationships. Their work supports the thesis that style is not extrinsic to structure but rather defines the conditions for actual structural possibilities, and that structure is perceived as a function of style more than its foundation. Even in a crude sense I would argue that if we are forced in musical analysis to grab hold of one end or the other of the dialectic between a style and a structure that are always affecting each other, it makes most sense to define the composer's starting point as his or her entrance into a preexisting musical style.²⁸

28 Rose Rosengarad Subotnik, *Deconstructive Variations*, 167-68.

We “define the composer’s starting point as his or her entrance into a preexisting musical style.” This statement alone posits the idea of *style* as a clear cultural idea, which I understand as a conventional touchstone of musical practice. In an ongoing and changing practice, style also changes. How? Since composers enter the discourse and depart from it, leaving their variations and combinations of style *in response* to previous ideas, these touchstones must belong to a heavily delimited *discourse*.

It is also clear that in our rich understanding of musical history, the full realm of the “purely musical” and the “extra-musical” is just as important as their stylistic or structural components. And this second quote provides a context for thinking about the *discourse-itself*, and the individual expressive and interpretative minds that change cultural ideas through their individual discursive statements. Such a [stylistic] emphasis *does* require a constant effort to recognize and interpret relationships between the elements of a musical configuration and the history, conventions, technology, social conditions, characteristic patterns, responses, and values of the various cultures involved in that music. And such an effort almost invariably requires a willingness to recognize at least the possibility of some positive value in the kinds of immediate, though often diffuse and fragmented, sense that sound and style have for nearly all musical listeners.²⁹

Creating a diagram for discourse

²⁹ Rose Rosengard Subotnik, 172.

It is easier to apply deconstructions of musical discourse and musical style to the works of the past. We see styles and their antecedents. We can see how one work emerges from others. For this reason, in traditional music, I have tended to favor historically contextual analyses over purely formalist ones, because the axioms of formal analysis tend to rely on standard compositional responses to standard formal structures. Contextual analysis can help enrich a notion of how a piece addresses these structures, but also can ask questions that reach outside of these "purely musical" borders. For instance, when attempting to understand the importance of Beethoven's symphonies, we cannot take their history for granted. The Seventh Symphony can be described thoroughly, key-change by key-change, and the significance of its composition need not be faced. Luckily, however, the things that make Beethoven's 7th great for a Schenkerian are the same things that make it great for a contextualist. One could say "Beethoven shows how drama can be understood through the subtle beauty of tonal connections." Or, one could say that Beethoven merely makes good compositional choices through an understanding of the tonal system—underlying the piece is simplicity and balance. Whether the Symphony is painting or a chess game, the tonal system gives a common denominator to address a variety of descriptions. Perhaps this is due to the state of the heavily delimited discourse of the 19th century—and the fact that ideas of structure and ideas of style tended to influence one another in an almost teleological paradigm, as Subotnik has shown in her discussion of Adorno and Schoenberg.

On the other hand, a Plunderphonic piece may lead us to a variety of questions, such as "Can we understand the meaning of a Plunderphonic piece in a way similar to our understanding of traditional music?," and "What specific additional meanings can we

glean?" Additionally, "Is there a way to objectively judge them?" In this last case, the advantages of a traditional formal analysis, colored by cultural ideas of structure and style, would seem to come in handy. Or, in Kivy's terms, we could make an autobiographical description. We could simply go back to the "Plunderphonics" essay by John Oswald and search for answers to these questions. But while this method would aid contextual analysis, in itself it would not contain the potential answers that Plunderphonic music holds, an essential step if Plunderphonics is to have the level of aesthetic confidence in the face of divergent discourses that previous musical forms have long-past achieved.

Taking Subotnik's description of earlier music into consideration, I wish to put forth a possible way of describing how Plunderphonics and subsequent pieces might begin to be understood stylistically, as well as in the richer contexts of a heavily-delimited discourse. Hopefully, this analysis will unpack some of the importance of Plunderphonics by putting these pieces into some sort of historical perspective.³⁰

I have said a lot about discourse, and it is here that I shall finally make the plunge and talk about music-as-discourse. This is not easily done, and requires numerous distinctions to be made. I do not mean that music is the same as talking, or writing. I do not even mean that music *must*, as its primary goal, seek to "say something." What is clear, however, is that any piece of music that can be defined as distinct from another,

³⁰ Asking such questions as "What is this music's meaning?" and "Is there a way to objectively judge it?" necessarily take us into the realm of aesthetics. While philosophy plays a role in my theory I do not wish to place a heavy emphasis on philosophical words and contexts that have no bearing on the matter of this specific music. Therefore, I will attempt create new words and phrases that are free from the heavy baggage of this weighty discipline.

whether composed or improvised, must be *thought of* as music. There is nothing fixed about music outside of time or space. There is no Platonic sense of music. I take music simply to be a socially-constructed form of art in the medium of sound. However, in order to understand sound as *music* and not simply as noise or “sounds,” something about the music must be intelligibly *musical* about it. Remember that Foucault has defined a discourse as a series of discursive statements belonging to a single mode of formation, which have a semblance of continuity despite their ultimate discontinuities. For the purposes of talking about music-as-discourse, we must simply label this “single mode of formation” *music*. And for each traditional, “linguistic” discursive statement, we may substitute a musical work. In a practical sense, musical works are “discursive statements” because they are intended to be encountered as intention.

Our semblance of continuity is the sense that one piece emerges historically from others. The ultimate discontinuity is that each musical work is ultimately only “itself”—and can easily be identified as such.

I will distinguish music discourse, or talk *about music*, including music-critical discourse, or the talk of music critics and commentators such as Adorno or Subotnik from music-as-discourse. In addition, music-as-discourse must be defined so as to distinguish the musical objects Adorno addresses from the musical objects Subotnik addresses. I label the *intended sonic manipulations* of a piece “the discourse of sonic pattern.” This is the discourse by which we can hope to answer the question, “How do we describe this piece of music,” in the purest sense. This is the sense in which so-called “extra-musical” understandings are traditionally discounted—the *technical* for Kivy. Note that the discourse of sonic pattern is not “the discourse of sonic form” or “the discourse of sonic

logic.” As Subotnik has pointed out, these understandings of music, though they are often conflated, belong to the realm of extra-musical as well as, say, Kivy’s *emotive* descriptions. They are contingent, inter-subjective, and not understandable as clearly discrete historical steps. When a critic such as Adorno posits logic or structure in the discourse of sonic pattern, he *is* positing (in the music-critical discourse) just this: that the discourse of sonic pattern contains notions of structure and logic intrinsically.

Therefore this full category of the “extra-musical,” a misnomer because it makes up the bulk of our musical understanding, including Kivy’s other three descriptions, and the meta-critical, are needed as well, just as in traditional music. In traditional music, emotion is thought to reside in music, as well as mimesis, and other elements of cultural-connectedness. Adding these aspects to the discourse of sonic pattern adds a secondary series of possible answers to the question of musical meaning, especially to the question, “What additional meanings can we glean?” I wish to call this hybrid with the discourse of sonic pattern “the discourse of sonic possibility,” for it encompasses the whole possible object of musical description. While the discourse of sonic pattern is more closely identified with Adorno, the discourse of sonic possibility is Subotnik’s fuller understanding of music-as-discourse. With the distinction within music-as-discourse between the discourse of sonic pattern and the discourse of sonic possibility, a few divisions in Subotnik begin to become clear. A Subotnik inspired, “extra-musical” discourse helps to get at the root of the historical problem of pitting any system of description against formalism by collapsing formalism. Formalism sets itself up as “above and beyond” the constraints of history, but in fact, it is merely a paradigm beholden to a historically particular *critical discourse* that purports to transparently

unpack the discourse of sonic pattern. In fact, musical “formalism” is merely a meta-critique of music-critical discourse, espousing certain views of beauty over others, and not even getting to the *real* matters-of-fact underlying the discourse of sonic pattern—the full-range of historical conditions which allowed the 19th century symphony to emerge in the first place—as a stylistic evolution from earlier conventions of sonic patterns.

I hope to describe Plunderphonic and other pieces in such a way as to explain the possible roles of the discourse of sonic possibility, without making the same mistake of confusing the artistic object with the musical discourse which shields it as “commentary.” I show how Plunderphonics pieces themselves utilize the discourse of sonic possibility in such a way as to create a drastic change in the means by which the music-critical discourse can cement a clear musical formalism.

A Historical Split in the Discourse of Sonic Possibility

In music, as it has emerged, the discourse of sonic possibility has tried to reduce itself into the discourse of sonic pattern. This is because, in music, the most readily-available sonic content of any music (as understood through artistic conventions) is the manipulation of pattern and certain basic ideas of pattern. This may initially lead one to believe that the history of music is simply that of a well-defined discourse of pure sonic pattern, and nothing else. However, the discourse of sonic pattern, as it has emerged, can also be understood as the history of larger systems of artistic abstraction that belong more properly to a larger discourse of sonic possibilities. The discourse of sonic pattern, as it has been envisioned by many canonical composers and commentators, is, after all, only

one *possibility*. Through the historical process of canon formation, the discourse of sonic pattern has emerged as the only possible discourse for critics such as Schenker. However, music cannot be purely understood as a pure discourse of sonic pattern once it is conceded that the specific conventions we equate with these sonic patterns are only understood in specific contexts of reception. Together, these points lead us to the importance of reference, which is pivotal to understanding music-as-discourse.

Because music can be understood as a discourse of sonic pattern, and also as a referent to other cultural expressions, the history of music can be understood as a story of parallel discourses. For instance, when Susan McClary describes emergence of Baroque instrumental music from notions of drama displayed in early Italian opera and oratorios, we can see a split between the discourse of sonic possibility and the musical discourse that eventually led to the emergence of "pure music"—what was once referential and contextual quickly became logical and autonomous due to formal revisionism. In “Turtles All the Way Down,” the first chapter of *Conventional Wisdom*, McClary argues that the cadential forms (including the evergreen V-I cadence) emerge from specific solutions to setting text in operas through the creation of the aria ¹.

Although there is no longer the specific dramatic content in the symphony that is understood to be in the opera, in the form of either arias or recitatives, this sonic material carries with it the pattern of the earlier system, which in its turn is an abstraction of previous conventions of dramaturgy. However, in order to delimit these abstractions, commentary and reference to any available source (usually through the conventions of style) are needed to create an intelligible piece. Therefore, in music we have the competing impulses of contingency and autonomy. The autonomy of music comes about

from its apparent lack of reference, once that reference has been freed of its original context. The contingency is music's reliance on the initial reference to come to its historical position, and its subsequent need for convention to appear "musical" at all.

I therefore posit an irreducible UR-discourse, which gave the "purely musical" elements of music (the qualities of tonality, for instance) their distinctive character. At this stage, the sonic outcome of an initial "extra-musical" concept and this extra-musical element were not seen as competing, as in the case of the Baroque composer coming up with a way to express emotion with a cadential structure. If a sonic element were meant to function mimetically, it would not pose a problem to the autonomy of music. The discourse of sonic pattern then emerged to manipulate the once extra-musical concepts (such as the V-I cadence) as they became solidified as the rules of abstract music. This discourse is still more distinct from the music-critical discourse, which examines the whole enterprise with language, and makes value judgments. But it is the mystery of the split into these two halves that makes the discourse of sonic possibility so tempting. Although music may seem autonomous and purely logical and analytic, it actually relies on myriad contingencies. If we understood this, I believe we could make more honest music that is not beholden to false dogmas. This possible future I entitle "music's imminent self-awareness."

By this, I mean the destruction of the mystery of music, which is only fostered by the critical agent. For there can be no mystery in unaffected prime matter of music, which as John Cage has displayed, is the lowest common denominator of sound. The formalist critic attempts to shield the contingency of the discourse of sonic pattern by asserting in the critical discourse the special properties of the "purely musical"—which turned out to

be the "purely critical," or truly extra-musical; for sonic patterns exist outside of the realm of good or bad. However, the music-critical discourse and this kind of "blind formalism" are at a significant disadvantage. While they enrich an understanding and appreciation of music as they would like us to understand it (and in the discourse, this is equivalent to creating a canon and shielding it with sufficient commentary), it cannot explain *or* promote the culturally-necessitated advancement of musical practice. The effective critic can only observe musical practice, and then posit in the music-critical discourse the existence of a fixed form of the discourse of sonic pattern that is inevitably at odds with the full scope of musical practice. Of course, this is not the only possible role of the critic, or those that play the role of both critic and artist. For instance, critics may come out in support of new practices, of avant-garde notions and ideas.

But the avant-garde has historically found itself stuck in the rigorously defined, critical atmospheres, in which commentary far outweighs the work-itself. The Futurists wrote more manifestos than anything else. Surrealism's founder, André Breton, was likewise too busy explaining Surrealism most of the time to actually create anything surreal. Avant-garde sensibilities inevitably self-destruct when they are faced with these canonical expectations and fall into the realm of traditional reception. What remains from these movements should show us how practice actually proceeds: not through movements, but the impact of the art upon individuals that make up the institutions, and the *stylistic* changes brought about in future works.

Music has done well in its mystery and abstractness, and shielded itself altogether from the avant-garde (with some notable exceptions, such as John Cage, Fluxus, some free improvisation, etc.) But musical practice has *also* begun to free itself from the

stifling atmospheres in which critique outweighs sonic antecedents. Many examples of musical culture indicate that music has rendered avant-garde ideas productive rather than destructive. For instance, Brian Eno, a British pop musician in the 1970s, influenced by minimalistic rock groups such as the Velvet Underground, and by such pop-embracing artists as Andy Warhol, rediscovers and reformulates Erik Satie's ambient music via John Cage, leading to new precedents in studio production, as, for instance, displayed in the trilogy of albums Eno produced for David Bowie between 1977 and 1979. Later, Philip Glass, in his own style of minimalism composes symphonies for orchestra based on these albums. Then, electronic music pioneer Aphex Twin creates a new sample-based piece of *musique concrete* that combines Bowie's voice with the Glass symphonies (CD track 12). There are hundreds of similar examples.

And with Aphex Twin, we return to John Cage's "all sounds are equally valid," in the context of sample-based music, which takes the discourse of sonic possibility as a more expansive and less-rigidly defined element of music with which to compose a new piece in the discourse of sonic pattern—still existing, less fixed to one pattern or another thanks to the allowance for previously "extra-musical" elements to gain superiority. Returning to my critique of Adorno in the first chapter, and his notion of the commodification of music ultimately challenging the musical autonomy he wishes to grant Beethoven or Schoenberg: I say emphatically yes. This "autonomy" is revealed to be the worst kind of illusion: one that limits the possibilities of art, and the agency of individuals that do not buy into the self-ingratiating world of Modern composer, in which we must study and scrutinize the life and the work of one man for ages in order to arrive at the true potential of "art." This may get us toward something, but it will never be clear

what, outside of the particular answers “planted” in the music like some game of hide-and-seek. Entertaining this may be, enlightening even. But this cannot be the only goal of art. After all, intentionality, and primacy of structure may *seem* at one point to be the apotheosis of the artistic endeavor, but the discourse of sonic possibilities reveals a multitude of additional meanings are always there as well. Luckily, Schoenberg has survived. But it is because the culture market has begun to find his strange sounds are saleable in a world where difference and eclecticism matter. This kind of historical turn-around, in which a figure reviled by critics can spurn a huge discography and active performance, reveals that the music-critical discourse does not monolithically determine the popular reception of a composer’s music any more than the commodity of “popularization” is monolithic in its establishment of indistinguishable plastic products. Together, the popularity of Schoenberg in musician’s circles and the growth of niche markets have allowed the democratic institution of commercialization to keep Schoenberg’s music afloat.

Again, to counter Adorno: this is due to the freedom of the musical commodity market. Why the “freedom” of “commodity?” Because commodity is ultimately free from music-critical chains. The reality of the musical world, in which Varese’s records may well be used to test record players³¹, is the “consumer” world in which we encounter *sounds* and their patterns in a variety of contexts. Commodities find their audiences not out among the infinite, in Platonic forms, but rather in the every-day world of cultural reception. Adorno couldn’t have imagined that popular music would challenge our

³¹ Famously, Frank Zappa’s first encounter with Varese occurred in this manner. See Jim Cotter, “Frank Zappa (1940-1993)” from *Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: a Biocritical Sourcebook* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 593.

presuppositions of what music could be. However, the commodity of music is a “popular” phenomenon, which swallows up the divisions between high and low. The technology of recording, which changes music for both DJ Spooky and Jonathan Sterne, also creates the real condition Cage describes, by creating the lowest-common denominator of sound as an identifiable element. Therefore, the object of our artistic deliberations is no longer the music-critical discourse itself, displayed in a discourse of sonic pattern, but rather the discourse of sonic possibilities, in which the commodified music functions on at least two simultaneous levels. First, it exists as pure sound for the first time. Sounds act as instruments, and are valued for their timbral qualities. They can be manipulated in any way we like through digital manipulation. The structures by which they are recombined by a piece reveals something other than a pure form. This is because at the same time that this commodified music *sounds*, it also *references*. The Plunderphone is a subtle, but powerful reminder of this fact.

Yes, it is clear that I am countering the earlier status quo, and that my zeal for the music I love may blind my objective lens. However, I doubt that even Adorno could claim that musical commodities today are a monolithic category of undifferentiated tissue. The claim that the true expression of the individual is being replaced by some simulation of “genuine emotion” is harder to dispel. But the burden of proof would seem to be on the traditionalist. After all, who is not affected by the time that they live? And the variety of products that emerge in the discourse of sonic possibilities are so strikingly individualistic and diverse, I find any argument for the homogeneity of emotions to be unjustifiable. Once again, John Oswald is my primary example for the sample-based composer, but there are literally thousands of good examples. A search of archive.org, the

open-source media library (which allows donations from anyone) reveals a virtual smorgasbord of discursive statements in the discourse of sonic possibilities.

Plunderphonics and Music-as-discourse

John Oswald can thus be understood as belonging to a new world of music discourse and music-as-discourse, in which the object of his *Plunderphonics* is not simply the discourse of sonic pattern, or the music-critical discourse, but rather, the discourse of sonic possibility, fostered by the dual nature of the plunderphone. The reason Oswald is hard to define and describe with traditional labels is because he doesn't really belong to any of them. Rather, the sounds and references to practices that he uses are brought into the new context of the Plunderphonics piece, which responds to all of the associations we have through the discourse of sonic possibility in a *new* discourse of sonic pattern-the discourse of sample-based music. Perhaps this is why Oswald chose to focus on Plunderphonics, rather than cementing himself into the pre-established discourses of jazz or "serious" music. The freedom he sought could only be found in a *new* branch of discourse. And the emergence of similar uses of samples could only have made this choice seem all the more topical and exciting.

We can look at Oswald's music in this biographical and autobiographical manner easily, since he talks about the importance of popular music forms often. However, we don't need to, since the equivalent to a "technical" description of Plunderphonics would be meaningless unless it referenced the sources Oswald clearly references. This is why I questioned Chris Cutler's statement that a Plunderphonics piece, such as *Pretender* could

be enjoyed if one had never before heard the original Dolly Parton version. While his statement may be true, we should not fall back upon the critical practice of subjugating context to musical autonomy. Clearly, this music refers—and not just through some mimetic technique. It refers because it *is*. Now, it is unclear why it refers, but this reference is *important*. Perhaps it provides a model for the discourse itself. When I speak of music's imminent self-awareness, this is the conclusion I tend to come to.

I concede to formalist views in that I believe music may be *about* music, if it is to be music and not simply sounds. Biographical and autobiographical descriptions must be merely supplementary. I believe I can come to some conclusions about Plunderphonics simply by understanding it as music and music-as-discourse—as sounds and as sounds in connection. Plunderphonics must mean something because it *references* something specific, and because it does not diverge from institutional notions of music so much as to seem like noise or *just* sounds. It clearly belongs to the discourse of sonic pattern.

However, the *Plunderphonics* album is an entry in the discourse of sonic pattern that admits to the discourse of sonic possibility. It may even function as an element of an UR-discourse for a future sample-based music, which will gain its own sonic patterns. It is clear however, that for the moment, that, in referencing the whole sphere of musical commodity—that is, including Anton Webern, Cab Calloway, the Beatles, and the rest, it admits that the sonic atmosphere we now dwell in is made up of *more* than sonic patterns. It is made up of actual, recorded sounds as well. And this fact, which seems so obvious, has been downplayed by many composers who place sonic pattern above everything else. These sounds, which are technically the property of others, are also, like the patterns of

Classical music, the shared communal property of those whose musical world is based on them. Therefore, not only what *counts* as music is delimited institutionally, but so are *sounds* themselves. Plunderphonics creates new connections with old materials. Therefore it rehabilitates the discourse of sonic pattern by rehabilitating the agency by which the creation of new patterns can come to be an artform. For Oswald, this is achieved through “Plundering,” or stealing. Stealing becomes the method by which sounds can regain the importance that has been lost through the music-critical discourse, but which has remained essential to those outside of the system who still love music intellectually and emotionally. Sounds regain this importance by rehabilitating the discourse of sonic pattern *as* the discourse of sonic possibility. This is the possibility of sounds creating an intuitive connection *by virtue of* the individual, subjective, and contingent disjunction of the individual’s preference.

In the music-critical discourse, it is admitted that, through the discourse of sonic pattern, one style influences another. In the musical discourse after the discourse of sonic possibility is admitted, it must be seen that *specific* sounds in certain combinations can be said to influence future combinations of sounds. It is in this manner, I believe, that we can evaluate and understand *Plunderphonics*. It is an open-ended activity that utilizes the most public appearances of music—that is, their sounds, in order to promote the creation of new sounds through recombination. The patterns which emerge are patterns which emphasize the discourse of musical possibility—that is, they are divergent, but are bound to fall into stylistic patterns. *Plunderphonics* utilizes the full palette of structure—through-composition (*Pretender*), architectonic composition (such larger works as *Grayfolded* and *Plexure*), using each to highlight the sounds being used and the

possibilities of their patterns, as well as their sounds as elements of the larger realm of the musical discourse and the discourse of sonic possibilities.

Although much formalism is predicated on the discourse of sonic pattern, a view of musical meaning should also include the discourse of sonic possibility, especially as musical works begin to innovate stylistically and make explicit their connections to the conventions of recorded, commodified music. When attempting to explain such contemporary works as the hip-hop collage or even the post-*musique concrete* variety of sample-based music, it is important to take a stance that does not reduce these works to the status of humorous side-note to the “real” music of the culture. I have not provided concrete methods for analyzing Plunderphonics and its kin, but I have presented a possible model *for* understanding and analyzing these works that presents them in the long line of convention-challenging popular art forms from Surrealism to Pop Art. Surrealism and Pop Art are important to the discourse of art because they have changed our understanding of what art *can be*. Likewise, Plunderphonics, in the same way that telephony changed our understanding of sound, and the first cinematic cut changed our understanding of traditional narrative, has the power to enlarge the scope of *musical* criticism and understanding. When we take a more inclusive view of the set of musical objects, we will see we are not limited by specific stylistic limits or formalist designations which privilege *any* understanding over another (whether this understanding be predicated on harmony or genre theory), but rather part of the larger discourse which includes all sonic possibilities. My next goal will be to provide a model for a possible critical analysis of works such as Plunderphonics, but that is the task of another work. For

now, the universalist and the post-modern can both hope to coexist. The universalist knows that the issue of musical universals is only *really* a matter of viewing history in its entirety. Although the specifics of our music may change, the nature of music-itself does not change if it is viewed fundamentally as a discourse in the manipulation of sound. Likewise, the post-modernist can be assured that in the future, the music that arises from our inter-subjectively determined conventions will surely be open to the limitless possibilities of the human mind. And because music *could* sound like anything we could possibly hear, it is an entirely contingent and historically determined endeavor. I hope that the format of this thesis has made apparent that the subjective connections between diverse elements of the culture can come together to form the new foundations for future understandings. In the case of music-as-discourse, to discover the future...we need only to listen.

EC

APPENDIX: MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Track 1	Raymond Scott – “The Toy Trumpet” From <i>Reckless Nights and Turkish Twilights</i> Released October 27, 1992 Originally Released in 1939 Sony Music Entertainment Inc. #65672	2:59
Track 2	Raymond Scott – “Don’t Beat Your Wife Every Night!” From <i>Manhattan Research, Inc.</i> Released May 16, 2000 Basta Records #9078	1:44
Track 3	Raymond Scott – “Limbo- The Organized Mind” From <i>Manhattan Research, Inc.</i> Released May 16, 2000 Basta Records #9078	4:33

Track 4	Run D.M.C.—“Walk This Way” From <i>Raising Hell</i> Originally Released in 1986 Arista Records #16408	5:09
Track 5	Beastie Boys—“Rhymin’ and Stealin” From <i>Licensed to Ill</i> Originally Released in 1986 Def Jam #27351	4:08
Track 6	Plunderphonics—“Power” From <i>69 Plunderphonics 96</i> Released May 29, 2001 Originally Released in 1994 Seeland Records #515	3:46
Track 7	Plunderphonics—“Brown” From <i>69 Plunderphonics 96</i> Released May 29, 2001 Originally “Released” in 1988 Seeland Records #515	3:56

- Track 8 Public Enemy—“Rebel Without a Pause” 5:02
From *It Takes a Nations of Millions to Hold Us Back*
Originally Released April, 1988
Def Jam #27358
- Track 9 Luigi Russolo—“Risveglio di una Citta (1914)” 3:58
From *Futurism & Dada Reviewed*
Released 1988
LTM Publishing #2301
- Track 10 Plunderphonics—“btls” :56
From *69 Plunderphonics 96*
Released May 29, 2001
Originally “Released” in 1988
Seeland Records #515
- Track 11 Plunderphonics—“Pretender” 3:34
From *69 Plunderphonics 96*
Released May 29, 2001
Originally “Released” in 1988
Seeland Records #515

Track 12

Aphex Twin—“Heroes [Aphex Twin Remix]”

5:18

From *26 Mixes for Cash*

Released March 25, 2003

Warp Records

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