

# Music Analysis and the "Drastic" Challenge

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## Introduction

In the last three decades the practice of music analysis has been subject to serious critical pressure: from the mid 1980s and through the 1990s as a result of academic trends associated with the "new musicology;"<sup>1</sup> and more recently, and more profoundly, from scholars who question the way analysis treats, or perhaps more correctly fails to account for, that most fundamental musical experience, performance.<sup>2</sup> Some of the clearest and most influential expressions of that critique can be found in Carolyn Abbate's "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?"<sup>3</sup> Abbate's title derives from a distinction drawn by Vladimir Jankélévitch in his 1961 monograph *La Musique et l'Ineffable*, which Abbate translated and published in 2003. The drastic experience of music, goes the argument, is active, time-dependent and manifests itself in material acoustic phenomena; whereas "gnostic" experiences are metaphysical approaches that encourage a retreat from the actual business of music into technical and hermeneutic abstractions of the "work" (a term to which we shall return shortly). In this brief paper I will address Abbate's challenge by concentrating on the first paragraph of her article, which introduces her most important and telling points, and is thus a suitable surrogate for her argument more generally. Ultimately I will suggest that there is a hint in this paragraph, something of an open door, through which a place might be found for analysis even within the kind of radically changed musicological landscape that Abbate proposes.

Of the six sentences in the opening paragraph, five are questions:

What does it mean to write about performed music? About an opera live and unfolding in time and not an operatic work? Shouldn't this be what we do, since

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the most prominent examples of this critique may be found in Joseph Kerman, "How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out," *Critical Inquiry* 6, no.2 (Winter 1980): 311–31; Joseph Kerman, *Musicology* (London: Fontana, 1985); Alan Street, "Superior Myths, Dogmatic Allegories: The Resistance to Musical Unity," *Music Analysis* 8, no. 1 (1989): 77–124; Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice: 1800–1900* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Kevin Korsyn, "Brahms Research and Aesthetic Ideology," *Music Analysis* 12 (1993): 89–103; Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Kevin Korsyn, "The Death of Musical Analysis? The Concept of Unity Revisited," *Music Analysis* 23, nos. 2–3 (2004): 337–51. There are many other examples that might be cited.

<sup>2</sup> Suxanne Cusick, "Feminist Theory, Music Theory and the Mind/Body Problem," *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (1994): 8–27; Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middlebury: Wesleyan University Press, 1998); Nicholas Cook, "Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance," *Music Theory Online* 7, no. 2 (2001); Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, "Compositions, Scores, Performances, Meanings," *Music Theory Online* 18, no. 1 (2012); Nicholas Cook, *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 505–36.

we love music for its reality, for voices and sounds that linger long after they are no longer there? Love is not based on great works as unperformed abstractions or even as subtended by an imagined or hypothetical performance. But would considering actual performances simply involve concert or record reviews? And would musicology—which generally bypasses performance, seeing meanings or formal designs in the immortal musical work itself—find itself a wallflower at the ball?<sup>4</sup>

Four principal issues arise from this paragraph: first, the distinction between performed music and the musical "work;" second, the nature of the activities Abbate has in mind when she speaks of "meanings or formal designs;" third, the possibility alluded to in her final question that musicology (including analysis) might ultimately have to fall silent in order to do justice to music-as-performed; and fourth, the way in which the word "linger" operates to undermine Abbate's argument.

### **Performed Music Versus the Musical "Work"**

Abbate's third question is entirely rhetorical.<sup>5</sup> She argues that we should, of course, acknowledge the drastic, time-dependent nature of music, and practice a form of musicology which "at its most radical allows an actual live performance (and not a recording, even of a live performance) to become an object of absorption."<sup>6</sup> By contrast the gnostic approach to music, Abbate argues, focuses on the musical "work," a term that arises three times in this one paragraph. The concept of the work as Abbate uses it reached perhaps its most comprehensive and decisive expression in Lydia Goehr's book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*.<sup>7</sup> Under Goehr's formulation the musical work is the idea that a piece of music somehow exists independently of performance, that there is such a thing as "Beethoven's Ninth" regardless of whether or not one is listening to it. Goehr traces the development of the idea of the autonomous, abstract musical work to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and argues that it remains particularly prevalent in musicology. It goes without saying that the methodology of traditional and familiar music analysis treats the score as if it were a representation of the music itself. Such analysis is thus dependent on the concept of the abstract musical work.

There are manifold problems which Abbate identifies as arising from practising musicology as an investigation of works of music in the gnostic sense. The gnostic attitude "bypass[es] the uncanny qualities that are always waiting nearby in trying to domesticate

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 505.

<sup>5</sup> One is reminded of Paul de Man's demonstration of the utility of reading rhetorical questions literally. In one way, this entire paper is the product of an application of de Man's deconstructive strategy to Abbate's third question; see Paul de Man, "Semiotics and Rhetoric" in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 3–19.

<sup>6</sup> Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?," 506.

<sup>7</sup> Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

what remains nonetheless wild."<sup>8</sup> At the same time it privileges a notion of "knowledge based on semiosis and disclosed secrets, reserved for the elite and hidden from others."<sup>9</sup> It gives the false impression that embedded in music is a kind of magical reservoir of "otherwise lost information, revelations about human kind or its societies that no other art can transmit."<sup>10</sup> While Abbate acknowledges that maintaining a certain gnostic distance between oneself and music can help to leave open the range of available meanings and experiences, she argues that it can also, on the other hand, "foreclose much that is of value, both intellectually and morally, in encountering a present other at point-blank range."<sup>11</sup> Not only would a musicology based on performance avoid these difficulties; it might bring considerable benefits. "The experience of performed music," she writes, "may well assist to free us from the devastating hegemony of the word."<sup>12</sup> Finally Abbate suggests that performed music's presence is somehow, and in some sense, a promise of life.<sup>13</sup>

It can seem difficult to argue against Abbate on these points. How can one really cavil with the suggestion that analysis should deal with that which is most unique and wonderful about music, its experience in/as performance? Nevertheless there is one respect in which Abbate's distinction between music-as-performed and the musical work seems open to further development or, indeed, to a degree of contradiction: she is not as clear as she might be as to what constitutes performance.

To begin with, it is clear that Abbate does not regard listening to a recorded performance as a drastic experience. Why this is so is not entirely clear from her essay, but it seems to emerge from the proposition that "the very fact of recording ... alter[s] a basic chemistry, making the event an artefact, handheld and under control, encouraging distance and reflection."<sup>14</sup> This immediately brings to mind, as an objection to Abbate's argument, recent scholarship by Nicholas Cook and Daniel Leech-Wilkinson that pays extremely close attention to nuances in the recorded performances of early twentieth-

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<sup>8</sup> Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?," 508.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 510.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 524.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 532.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 533. See also the passage at 534–535: "Music is ineffable in allowing multiple potential meanings and demanding none in particular, above all in its material form as real music, the social event that has carnal effects. The state engendered by real music, the drastic state, is unintellectual and common, familiar in performers and music lovers and annoying non-musicologists, and it has value. When we cannot stare such embarrassing possibilities in the face and find some sympathy for them, when we deny that certain events or states are impenetrable to gnostic habits, hence make them invisible and inaudible, we are vulnerable. For, denying mystery, the perplexing event, the reticence such things may engender, means being prey to something that comes to call at its nocturnal worst, as coercive mysticism and morbid grandiloquence."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 534.

century pianists and, it seems to me, stands as an exemplary demonstration of the ways in which analysis of music can take place by way of engagement with recordings, paying the drastic experience its full due. Listening to recorded music is perhaps the archetypal musical experience of our time, and many will no doubt say that a recording can be every bit as "physically brutal, mysterious, erotic, moving, boring, pleasing, enervating, or uncomfortable, generally embarrassing [or] subjective"<sup>15</sup> as listening to live music. Indeed, by many criteria, what distinguishes a good recording from a poor one is the sense that it is able to bring of the live performance. A good recording brings a sense of the drastic. It is not clear why Abbate is so firm in maintaining this boundary.

The difficulties with basing her argument on something called "performance" are made clear in the first concrete example Abbate gives in her essay. She describes the experience of accompanying a singer in a lecture-recital in a performance of "Non temer, amato bene" from Mozart's *Idomeneo*, and reports how, while playing, she self-consciously tried to ask herself the kinds of questions that arise from a gnostic, hermeneutic attitude to the score: where amongst the notes to locate an Enlightenment sensibility or subjectivity, the sense of absolute monarchy, or *Idomeneo*'s secret sexual agitation so frequently said to be implicit in this work? Unsurprisingly Abbate found that posing these questions meant nothing to her in her capacity as a performer: indeed there was something preposterous about the attempt. So far, so unobjectionable. However she proceeds to suggest that the difficulties the performer faces in adopting a gnostic approach apply equally, albeit with less force, to listeners:

. . . [I]f performing is a case weighted towards the drastic, moving to listening allows no vastly greater reflective distance or safer haven from the presence of musical sound. Listening as a phenomenon takes place under music's thumb.<sup>16</sup>

Granted, listening takes place in the moment, and is to a real extent time-dependent and carnal. To that extent it is drastic in Jankélévitch's sense. However there is something fundamentally different about listening as opposed to performing, which involves the application of great skill, craft and intense concentration, and thus requires a kind of mental activity quite distinct from that of the audience. To conflate these two activities under the term "performance," and to argue for "music-as-performed" is to gloss too quickly over a significant distinction. I will return to some of the consequences of this unhelpful obfuscation shortly. For now, let us turn to another key phrase in Abbate's first paragraph: "meanings or formal designs."

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 513–14.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 512.

## "Meanings or Formal Designs"

As the last sentence of the paragraph makes clear, Abbate regards musicology that focuses on meanings or formal designs as highly problematic: this composite phrase stands for the two kinds of musicology she is arguing against. The distinction Abbate draws between meanings and formal designs is between a musicology that adopts a hermeneutical approach and attempts to trace embedded meaning in music—the kind of approach typical of the new musicology of the 1990s—and more traditional formal and structural analysis. Much of her argument for performance is directed against the hermeneutical "new musicological" approach. Indeed for much of the essay Lawrence Kramer seems to be the unnamed bugbear,<sup>17</sup> and the hermeneutic approach receives the most sustained criticism (which is perhaps ironic given that Abbate's *Unsung Voices* (1991) is generally considered one of the foundational texts for the new musicology.) Perhaps Abbate felt that the case against analysis had already been made, for instance in Joseph Kerman's 1980 article "How We Got Into Analysis and How to Get Out"<sup>18</sup> and his 1985 monograph *Musicology*.<sup>19</sup> Her criticism of analysis certainly resembles Kerman's, namely, that analysis does not "get at what used to be called the music itself" and that, as a species of formalism, its "rush to descriptive taxonomies" and highly developed technical apparatus ultimately distances the analyst from real music.<sup>20</sup> Though analysts might cite their detailed engagement with the score as a kind of surrogate for the immediacy of musical experience, Abbate suggests they have "no business doing so. Like hermeneutics [analysis] is routinely fixated upon works and inattentive to actual performances."<sup>21</sup> Thus Abbate's critique is directed against both the new musicological procedure of locating historical and cultural meaning within a musical work, and the older, less fashionable practice of music analysis, particularly insofar as it is focussed on form and harmonic structure.

There are several points to be made here. First, Abbate was not the first to lump analysis together with a hermeneutical approach to musical meaning, and to criticise both on the same basis. In the course of the now famous exchange with Lawrence Kramer conducted in Volume 53 of the journal *Current Musicology*, Gary Tomlinson suggested that:

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<sup>17</sup> Karol Berger also notices the significance of the unnamed Lawrence Kramer as a target of Abbate's criticism, and, he adds, Abbate also seems to take aim at Susan McClary and Theodor Adorno. Karol Berger, "Musicology According to Don Giovanni, Or: Should We Get Drastic?", *The Journal of Musicology* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 495.

<sup>18</sup> Kerman, "How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out."

<sup>19</sup> Kerman, *Musicology*.

<sup>20</sup> Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?", 530–31.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

. . . [W]e need to move away from the whole constraining notion that close reading of works of music, of whatever sort, is the sine qua non of musicological practice. . . . It is not enough to cast our close readings in the light of new methods—narratological, feminist, phenomenological, anthropological, whatever. For it is the act of close reading itself that carries with it the ideological charge of modernism.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, even as early as 1993, Tomlinson foresaw a fundamental difficulty with the new musicology, namely, that it was every bit as reliant on an abstract concept of the musical work as was the practice of formalist analysis that it sought to displace.

Second, the criticism that all music analysis is a kind of formalism should not be accepted without significant scrutiny. In a direct response to Kerman's plea for a "more humane" musicology, a musicology that turned away from, among other things, the empty formalism and cultural insularity of music analysis, Kofi Agawu accused Kerman of being a poor historian.<sup>23</sup> Kerman's broad-brush characterisation of the entire practice of music analysis as "formalist" failed to acknowledge that the practice of music analysis had always been fragmented and diverse, and contained many strands that sat uneasily with the idea of formalism.<sup>24</sup> Kerman's critique, and by extension, Abbate's critique, therefore attacks a "straw man" constructed for the purpose of an argument, but which is not necessarily a valid representation of actual analytical practice.

A formalist view regards music as autonomous, distinct from the world, abstract, transcendental. The formalism of music analysis is often said to be manifest in the way that it seeks to demonstrate the organic unity and the structural integrity of music, and in the way that it explicitly or implicitly makes claims that such musical structures somehow represent or embody transcendental truths. However this kind of thinking may in fact commit a serious error of logic. As Julian Horton suggests,<sup>25</sup> prominent postmodern thinkers including Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Richard Rorty, "seem to be concerned, in different ways, with moving reason from the domain of truth to the domain of discourse."<sup>26</sup> That is, the idea of truth is generated by a form of language based on a particular kind of reasoning. Analytical truths, in this sense, are a function of style rather than transcendent qualities. It is not valid, therefore, to criticise music analysis on the basis that it makes claims to some transcendent truth, when in reality all it claims is to generate "truths" that are specific to its own modes of inquiry. To

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<sup>22</sup> Gary Tomlinson, "Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer," *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 18–24.

<sup>23</sup> Kofi Agawu, "Analyzing Music under the New Musicological Regime," *Music Theory Online* 2, no. 4 (1996).

<sup>24</sup> Agawu, "Analyzing Music under the New Musicological Regime," 16–22.

<sup>25</sup> Julian Horton, "Postmodernism and the Critique of Musical Analysis," *The Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2001): 342–66.

<sup>26</sup> Horton, "Postmodernism and the Critique of Musical Analysis," 351.

criticise music analysis as formalist is to make the category error of equating "the rational in music-analytic terms . . . to the rational as an instrument of post-Enlightenment philosophy."<sup>27</sup>

For these reasons it is valid to question Abbate's characterisation of analysis as formalist, and therefore to question whether it really presents the kinds of problems she describes and seeks to overcome by urging a turn to the drastic.

### "Wallflower at the Ball"

At several points Abbate raises the possibility that paying due regard to the drastic nature of musical experience might mean something of an end point for musicology as we know it:

In practical terms, [fixing upon actual live performances] would mean avoiding the tactile monuments in music's necropolis—recordings and scores and graphic musical examples—and in the classroom this is nearly impossible. In some larger sense it might even mean falling silent, and this is difficult to accept because silence is not our business, and loquacity is our professional deformation.<sup>28</sup>

Happily for academic musicologists, Abbate concludes that "a taste for the drastic need not dictate silence;"<sup>29</sup> however, she sounds the warning that it is not sufficient to turn to performances and treat them as "just another object awaiting decipherment, a recordable text subject to some analytical method yet to come."<sup>30</sup> Such an approach would simply be to transfer one's focus from the abstract musical "work" to the abstract musical "performance," in respect of which, presumably, musicology would commit all the same crimes of formalism and hermeneutics all over again.

Unfortunately, the solutions Abbate proposes to the conundrum are frustratingly vague. Worse still are the examples she gives at the conclusion of her essay of the kinds of writing about musical performance that meet her demands for an engagement with the drastic nature of the experience. In each case she describes unique and personal reactions to specific performances: the way her memories of 9/11 supplied the meaning of an unusual sound in an opera by Laurie Anderson; and the experience of hearing the tenor in *Die Meistersinger* struggle with a failing voice at a critical moment. One is struck by the profoundly subjective nature of these examples. They are essentially incontrovertible personal experiences and as such appear to have only a marginal place in academic discourse. If an engagement with the drastic means writing like this, then

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>28</sup> Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?," 510.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 513.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

essentially we may well be doomed to silence. The last point may provide something of a way forward.

### "Linger"

As indicated at the outset of this paper, the idea that musical performance can "linger" can be understood in a way that significantly undermines Abbate's argument. Here she is suggesting that performed music is uniquely valuable because its qualities linger in the mind. But if a performance lingers, has it not become, simply by virtue of being remembered and considered after it has gone, precisely the abstract object of the gnostic attitude? Karol Berger reminds us of Augustine's description of the temporal experience:

The mind not only marks attentively what happens in the present moment, it also expects what will happen in the future and remembers what has happened in the past. The experience is the gradually enriched palimpsest consisting of the superimposed layers of the constantly diminishing expected future, the ever-changing marked present in which the expectations are confirmed or disproved and thus instantly transformed into memories, and the ever growing remembered past.<sup>31</sup>

On this formulation, which can hardly be gainsaid, there is something reflective, distancing, indeed *gnostic* inextricably bound up with the drastic experience. One inevitably reflects on what has been and what might yet be even in the moment one is subject to what is. While listening, an audience member's mind shifts through a range of registers: from contemplating the skill of the performer and the beauty of the sound, to the historical context of the work, its similarities to and difference from other works, to other performances and recordings of the work that he or she has heard, and even to such mundane matters as what the soloist is wearing and what is for dinner. And yes, one of the registers of audience thought during a performance may well be directed at matters traditionally the subject of music analysis: form and melody/harmony.

Here we may draw something of a conclusion, a suggestion as to how analysis can engage with music in a way which does not fall foul of Abbate's legitimate concerns and criticisms of the gnostic approach. If analysis is to engage more directly with music-as-performed (and it seems logical that it does), it must almost certainly be concerned with listeners rather than performers. "Performance" is an unhelpful term that conflates and confuses two quite separate activities. Further, there seems no reason not to include the experience of listening to recorded music. Abbate's proposed exclusion of discussion of recordings from academic discourse seems to be a strategy designed to privilege one form of cultural consumption over its more widely practised alternative; and to permit musicology to focus only on live music may well be to perpetuate an unsustainable bias

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<sup>31</sup> Berger, "Musicology According to Don Giovanni," 497.

towards high culture. Such analysis as is practiced need not inevitably be "formalist," focussed on large-scale structural/harmonic organisation. There are plenty of ways to analyse music that do not aim at formalist ends.<sup>32</sup> And to the extent that it is so focussed, perhaps it should better be understood as simply a phrase regimen, a mode of discourse that facilitates an engagement with the score, but not one that makes a claim for transcendental truth beyond its own terms. Finally, music analysis should perhaps be regarded as a method by which we can give expression to one important but far from exclusive way to engage with music, an exploration of the way we can listen to music's structure, its gestures, its texture and harmony. Analysis might give expression, in acceptable academic discourse, to the way in which we can engage with the wonder and beauty of music's drastic moment.

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<sup>32</sup> For example, consider Naomi Cumming, "The Subjectivities of 'Ebarne Dich'," *Music Analysis* 16, no. 1 (1997): 5–44.