

The Death of Narcissus: On Musical Subjectivity

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On the first page of the preface to Michael Steinberg's excellent book, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music*, the author states that the book's origin can be located specifically to "August 1990," when he was giving "a short preconcert lecture on Brahms at the first Bard Music Festival." He continues: "To an audience awaiting a performance of the D minor piano concerto, I argued that the urgency and debate in Brahms's musical texture engaged cultural issues and differences as well as musical ones" (xi).² A telling set of reflections is in operation here. First off, it is claimed that the urgency and debate within Brahms's music reflects a similar kind of urgency within the broader world of culture beyond the piece. The urgency of this musico-cultural dynamic is then made to reflect the urgency of Steinberg's own act of persuasion. "'Absolute' music, I argued, lived in the world and spoke to it" (ibid.). The assumption here is that the audience he was addressing at the time would not immediately have considered pieces of music, particularly not vaunted works of the Western canon, to be participants in such vexed forms of engagement. Academics, it transpired, were equally guilty of such myopia. Even over ten years after the 1990 lecture, Steinberg still found that "the case for music as a dimension of history, and therefore as a concern of professional historians, seems still to require special pleading" (1). Steinberg's aim in writing the book was therefore to address this problem and convince the cultural historian to start taking music seriously.

Placing music within its cultural and historical contexts has, of course, long been standard practice for musicologists. But these days, nearly ten years after the publication of Steinberg's *Listening to Reason*, the contextualization of music is not only utterly conventional within the various branches of cultural studies, but also functions unambiguously within the more immediately financial economies of concert programming and promotion, and recorded music sales. Regularly, concert series are organized around works that were produced in particular contexts; whole arrays of lectures and other educational events are put together in order to draw in audiences to such series. By all accounts, it works quite well, and this would seem to be a sign that context is not just a concern of academic historians, but also a successful player in a broader world of cultural values that concert promoters can now cash in on. The proliferation of niche markets for recorded music, I suggest, works in a similar fashion: consumers are,

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² Michael P. Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 246pp. All page numbers in the text will be indicated by parentheses in the main body of my essay.

in part, being drawn in by the allure of a particular context in which a certain kind of music potentially participates.

The practice of contextualization can be an effective means of convincing people of music's import, and so would seem to be a good thing. My thoughts in this article, however, are directed to the problems that emerge when such cultural and historical exegesis is perceived automatically as *the* most effective means of supporting music's cause. I am therefore working with the assumption that in many spheres contextualization has indeed become such a default position for talking about music.³ Part of the problem with the contextual stance in relation to music is, as Martin Scherzinger has succinctly put it, that it "risks reading right through the musical text as if it was a mere representation of the social."⁴ Drawing on the psychoanalytic notion of narcissism, I will be using an extended reading of Steinberg's *Listening to Reason* in order to enact a critique of this belief in music as primarily just a *reflection* of an already-existing cultural sphere. By means of this critique, I will be making the argument that music's import lies as much in the fact that, rather than just replicating what is already existent culturally, it can actually introduce something new into the world. This something else can, I assert, sometimes act as a remarkable antidote to the numerous dangers attendant on becoming caught up in the fascination with reflections that constitutes the narcissistic position.⁵

In the myth, Narcissus falls in love with his own image, which he sees reflected back at him from the surface of a pool of water. It is precisely because he persists in trying to see this image in a pure state—free from the distortions produced by the ripples on the surface of the pool—that he eventually dies. He wants to see himself perfectly reflected, but the ripples are the reminder of something other than his image of himself that foils his attempt at pure self-repetition. One of the morals that can be read out from the myth is that we need something other than what already exists in order to exist. If we try to ignore, or do not find, this something else, we are dangerous not only to ourselves, but to others too. In the myth, Narcissus's obsession with his own image encourages the wood nymph Echo to become likewise obsessed with Narcissus. The result of this obsession with someone who is self-obsessed is more repetition: for Echo can only repeat (echo) what Narcissus says, and eventually she withers away and commits suicide. Music, I argue, is like the ripples on the surface of Narcissus's pool; it is one of the potential means by which we stop culture getting caught up into an ultimately deadly cycle of impossible, narcissistic repetitions. In order to illustrate my point, I will bring a close reading of Steinberg's *Listening to Reason* into dialogue with various aspects of psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Jacques Lacan. I will argue, on the one hand, that Steinberg's text is radical for its resistance to thinking about music as merely a repetitive reflection of culture, but on the other hand disappointingly conservative for backtracking away from the full implications of this.

The first four chapters of Steinberg's book consist of a series of essays that chronologically chart a dramatic narrative regarding music in the long nineteenth-century as it struggled to enact, as

³ For an extensive political critique of the use of context within musicological work, see my "Music After All," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 62/1 (2009), 145-203.

⁴ Martin Scherzinger, "The Return of the Aesthetic: Musical Formalism and Its Place in Political Critique," in Andrew Dell'Antonio, ed., *Beyond Structural Listening? Postmodern Modes of Hearing* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 253.

⁵ For Steinberg's own brief remarks on the Narcissus myth, see pp. 46-47.

opposed to reflect passively, subjectivity.⁶ For Steinberg, nineteenth-century music has genuine value when it is able paradoxically to inhabit a number of performative fictions that we nevertheless perceive as possessing real presence and authenticity: “[M]usic can and does speak in the first person...[and it] operates in the present tense...Rather than narrating...it shares with its listeners a discovery and presentation of the self as a performative act”(9). In part, Steinberg follows the typical practice of the postmodern academy, and rejects Enlightenment notions of the autonomous subject. The Enlightenment subject is one “whose epistemological legitimacy depends on its transparency to itself” (7); it sustains itself on the illusion that the world can be understood without mediation, directly, as if it merely passed into our consciousness like light waves passing through a clear transparency. However, if Steinberg rejects the idea of transparency he is also careful not simply to opt instead for a fully culturally-determined understanding of subjectivity. If the subject is not transparent, neither is it a mirror-coated surface that just reflects and re-presents the cultural world in which it finds itself.⁷ In the first four chapters of the book, Steinberg is vigilant to sustain a critical distance between the subject (and thus music) and its cultural determinates. This is not to say that the historical conditions that give rise to Steinberg’s notion of subjectivity are irrelevant to him. Indeed, for Steinberg, subjectivity is a thoroughly historical phenomenon. In his understanding, it is only properly feasible with the onset of Modernity, which he locates (conventionally for academic historians in the Anglo-American tradition) at the beginning of the long nineteenth century, specifically with Mozart in the late eighteenth century. The subject of Modernity emerges for Steinberg as the last (and for him, most successful) of three attempts at formulating subjectivity since the beginning of the seventeenth century. The first two attempts had been unsatisfactory because they had been unable to extricate themselves from tendencies towards oppression and domination.

First. The Baroque subject asserts its own autonomy, and yet endlessly finds its freedom reinscribed back into the rigid representational discourses of absolutism and other forms of early modern state power. To be noted here is that the historical time frame in which Baroque forms of subjectivity are being formulated is split philosophically between the worlds of Descartes and Hobbes. We might say that in the former (Descartes), the subject is a noun (“the subject”), the source from which autonomous thought, and thus autonomy, emerges: *cogito ergo sum*. However, in the latter (Hobbes), the subject is more an object, the recipient of a verb: it is that which is subjected, a being placed under the restrictions of a form of power.⁸ The former is that which, through the autonomy of its thinking, can resist the world in which it finds itself, and so is capable of breaking the cycle of what I earlier referred to as narcissistic repetitions. The latter is that which merely reinforces what is already in existence, and in Steinberg’s analysis this oppressive form of repetition, which he refers to as a cult of representation, is repeatedly and virtuosically equated with Catholicism—a religion that revels in the

⁶ After the introduction, the chapters respectively are 1 “Staging Subjectivity in the Mozart /Da Ponte Operas”; 2 “Beethoven: Heroism and Abstraction”; 3 “Canny and Uncanny Histories in Biedermeier Music,” primarily on Mendelssohn and Schumann; 4 “The Family Romances of Music Drama,” on Wagner; 5 “The Voice of the People at the Moment of the Nation,” concerning Brahms’s *German Requiem*, and Verdi’s and Dvořák’s requiems; 6 “Minor Modernisms,” on Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Bartók’s *Bluebeard’s Castle*, and Jánáček’s *Makropoulos Case*; and 7 “The Musical Unconscious,” on Mahler.

⁷ For a critique of the topos of the mirror in postmodern cultural politics see my “Postmodern Mozart and the Politics of the Mirror,” in Simon P. Keefe (ed.), *Mozart Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 214-242.

⁸ The paradox of the subject as both autonomous and subjected has been intensely examined from the more ahistorical perspective in Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), a book with which Steinberg briefly engages.

power of images and representations.⁹ By contrast, music, by means of the ease with which it inhabits abstraction and a world outside of the need for conceptual clarification, is often scripted in Steinberg's understanding of the Baroque as being in a dissonant relationship to representation. Provocatively, Steinberg often mediates music's resistance to representation through the idea of Protestantism.¹⁰

Second. For Steinberg, the subjectivity formulated after the Baroque by the Enlightenment is unsatisfactory because it dramatizes the division between itself and the world in such a way that the subject becomes predominantly just a force of domination. The subject's autonomy, which in the Baroque was pitted against oppression, now becomes the source of oppression itself. To follow the classic argument of Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with the Enlightenment subject, *reason*, which was meant to be the universal by which we were to be linked, and the guarantor of our rights and equalities, transforms into *instrumental reason*, the means by which we come to control the world and other subjects through using/abusing them as merely a means to our own ends, rather than relating to them as ends in themselves. The ecological disasters that now plague our planet are a paradigmatic instance of the abuses of instrumental reason.

Third. Although the form of subjectivity that emerges at the end of the eighteenth century is, like both Baroque and Enlightenment subjectivity, thoroughly enmeshed in historical forces, for Steinberg it has value because it keeps open a productive space between itself and the very world that, in part, has determined it. Thus, in the first half of the book, Steinberg is exceedingly careful *not* to locate subjectivity too rigidly: "Subjectivity is...a mode of experience where self and world are difficult to distinguish. [It] resides at the borders of autonomy and integration [with the world], and must be allowed culturally, politically, and discursively to live there" (7). If anything, this form of subjectivity is a movement, since the "endless work of subjectivity involves the constant renegotiations of the boundaries between self and world, with the world and history continuously reappearing in the texture of the self in the form of language, other cultural practices, and received ideas and ideologies" (7). So if music in the long nineteenth century enacts subjectivity, music is itself neither transparent (so that one can just read culture straight through it) nor reflective (so that culture is merely read from off its surface). If anything, Steinberg intriguingly sees nineteenth-century music attaining its integrity when it is somewhere in between these two positions: neither transparent, nor reflective, but murky and nocturnal, a point that is highlighted particularly in the first and last chapters ("Staging Subjectivity in the Mozart / Da Ponte Operas," and "The Musical Unconscious"). So, for example, in the final scene of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, a "scene of darkness and shadows, emergent clarity is not coupled with metaphors of light or enlightenment." On the contrary, "[d]arkness, or, rather, invisibility works as a corrective to the Enlightenment conceit of transparency." For it is precisely when the clarity of the eye is impaired that an alternative clarity "that is neither visual nor transparent" can assert itself: "the clarity of the ear" (43-44). We hear more acutely in the dark—hence the venerable cultural trope connecting music and night—and so for Steinberg when we hear music (both literally and also metaphorically, i.e.,

⁹ Steinberg's analysis of the Baroque's Catholic systems of representations continues themes from his earlier work: for example, "Don Giovanni Against the Baroque," in James Morris, ed., *On Mozart* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Press, 1994), 187-203; and *The Meaning of the Salzburg Festival: Austria as Theatre and Ideology, 1890-1938* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

¹⁰ Much of what Steinberg has to say in this regard could be informative to those who (still) believe that the political in music is always already only meaning. For example, although the music "that argues for and as a discourse of subjectivity does so, I will argue, with specific historical and cultural contexts and contingencies in mind, it does so as well from the vantage point of a discursive practice deemed abstract rather than absolute, in other words, autonomous by reason of its distance from the world of representations. Its analytic urgency is a function at one of its inhibitions and its suspicions with regard to the world of representation and power" (12).

as a kind of ethical truth) we can more authentically understand that neither are we some kind of solid autonomous identity, in-and-of-itself, nor can the world be reduced to such static positions. To make recourse to the Adorno of Lydia Goehr, music reveals that in the ongoing condition that is Modernity, truth occurs only in the condition of suspension; hence, for example, why “Mahler’s music suggests the energy of thinking *in* the night rather than *through* it” (231—my emphasis).¹¹ As a result, music is in fact a cure for narcissism, a point that Steinberg makes explicitly in a discussion of Cheubino: “Vocality is thus matched with authenticity, and authenticity with object-desire, that is, non-narcissistic desire... The alliance of subjectivity and hearing [and music], rather than seeing [and Baroque representation], as a way into object-relations and out of narcissism follows closely the myth of Narcissus, how self-love was generated by a visual error” (46). Music, in Steinberg’s formulations here, disables the easy production of the images and representations that lead us into the dead end of narcissism; the ear, it seems, is more truthful than the eye.

The distance Steinberg upholds between his theory of subjectivity and cultural determinism is the most admirable and progressive critical move in his book. Without some kind of resistance to cultural determinism, one is left faced with the problem that haunts so much poststructuralist and postmodern theoretical work, and which contemporary musicology has still not properly addressed: i.e., the question of agency. We can capture the problem as follows. If we are fully determined by our cultural contexts then how is it that those cultural contexts change? If there is no Other to context then how is it that something else, the “new,” emerges and becomes? As the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, in full Nietzschean mode, puts it: “Becoming isn’t part of history,”¹² and so history “isn’t experimental,” isn’t that which will produce the new. Rather, history is “just the set of more or less negative preconditions [contexts] that make it possible to experiment with something beyond history.” Admittedly, without “history the experimentation would remain indeterminate, lacking any initial conditions.”¹³ However, “history amounts only to the set of preconditions... that one leaves behind in order to ‘become,’ that is, to create something new. This is precisely what Nietzsche calls the Untimely.”¹⁴ Steinberg’s model of subjectivity and music preserves the possibility of transformation, becoming, and the new. In this sense, Steinberg is at times in the orbit of important work in contemporary theory and philosophy, such as that of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, which is precisely concerned with such questions.¹⁵ As a result, in what follows, I would like to draw out further some of the theoretical resonances between Steinberg’s position and contemporary theoretical debates. In particular, I will consider some correspondences between Steinberg’s ideal subjectivity and the subject of Lacanian psychoanalysis. I do this, first, since Lacan has been so central to theorists such as Badiou and Žižek; second, because doing so helps to focus in on what political decisions Steinberg’s text has

¹¹ Lydia Goehr, “Adorno, Schoenberg, and the *Totentanz der Prinzipien*—in Thirteen Steps,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 56/iii (2003), 595-636. For the beginnings of a critique of the association of Adorno with suspension see my “Adorno—and Now the Act,” *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 3/1, 115-121

¹² Gilles Deleuze, “Control and Becoming,” in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, Martin Joughin (trans.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 171.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 171. In particular, Deleuze is here referring to Nietzsche’s “On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life.” See Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, Daniel Breazeale (ed.), R. J. Hollindale (trans.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57-123.

¹⁵ Readers unfamiliar with these thinkers might start with Badiou’s *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (trans., eds) (London and New York: Continuum, 2003) and Žižek’s *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London and New York: Verso, 2002). Excellent introductory studies are Sarah Kay’s *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, Oxford: Polity Press, 2003) and Peter Hallward, *Alain Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

taken and where it potentially becomes regressive. I am, of course, not saying that Steinberg is a Lacanian. However, I am perhaps entertaining the notion that his book would in places have been a better one if he were.

Since mirrors, reflections, and narcissism are ongoing themes of my argument, I will start this section with a discussion of Lacan's notion of the mirror stage. As Dany Nobus has put it, for Lacan, "every child is born prematurely," in that the child is so noticeably incapable of looking after itself; "it is thrown into the world too soon," a phrase with strongly Heideggerian overtones.¹⁶ As a result, early on its development, the child "becomes fascinated with its reflection in the mirror and jubilantly assumes it as its own image"; by comparison, a chimpanzee, for example, will realize that the reflection is just an artifice and lose interest.¹⁷ In effect, "the mirror image gives the child an impression of relative physical maturity long before it has reached that stage. In the mirror, the child is able to see itself as a unity before it is actually capable of acting in an independent manner." At this juncture, the child's visual control is in advance of its ability to be able to co-ordinate its own body. "For this reason, the child is eager to adopt its reflection in the mirror as an image of itself."¹⁸

Throughout the development of Lacan's thinking, the mirror stage is increasingly important not so much for what it tells us about child development, but as a structure pertaining in general to the constitution of the subject's understanding of itself as an "I" (self/ego). Triumphantly witnessing its own reflection in the mirror, the child, through this image, becomes a thing for itself, a unity that marks an incipient but defining moment in the creation of its notion of its own "I." However, according to Lacan, this moment is also one of what he calls *méconnaissance*. As is typical of Lacan's characteristically playful linguistic formulations, the term is a kind of pun. The word most literally means misrecognition. But it can also be heard as the reflexive pronoun *me* followed by *connaissance*, thus implying self-recognition as well. Lacan's point is that in recognizing itself as a unitary thing (*meconnaissance*), the child is simultaneously caught in a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*), since its unitary self image only emerges through something that, quite literally, is not the child itself (i.e., its reflection in the mirror). In order to mask the lack created by its inability to be fully autonomous, the child creates an illusion of identification between itself and something that is not it, and this drama stains the structure of all its following attempts to stabilize a unitary concept of self. Most notably, in Lacanian thought, we see this drama played out in the deathly nature of the subject's relationship to language, or what Lacan would call the Symbolic.¹⁹ For Lacan, castration refers to the process by which the subject enters into language. Castration is what he calls a "forced choice," since the alternative, to remain outside of language, is no choice at all, because it results in psychosis, which is a condition in which choice in any normal sense does not exist. Since the subject therefore *must* enter into language, it finds itself in an impossible situation: it can only get an idea of itself through that which is not itself—language being the

¹⁶ Dany Nobus, "Life and Death in the Glass: A New Look at the Mirror Stage," in Dany Nobus, ed., *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Other Press, 1998), 108.

¹⁷ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 115.

¹⁸ Nobus, "Life and Death in the Glass," 108.

¹⁹ The deathly quality of the symbolic is frequently articulated by Lacan. For example, in "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" (1953), Lacan states that "the symbol is the murder of the thing," in the sense that the symbol stands in for the thing and so on some level bars unimpeded access to it. See *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), 104.

only means that it could even understand what “being itself” means. It is for such reasons that the subject in Lacanian terminology is often symbolized by an “S” under erasure, referred to as the barred subject.

The coupling of the subject with the something else necessary for its own ability to define itself can never be fully consummated, for what makes us a subject is the fundamental lack created by the entry into language. This lack is, thus, an indifferent structural fact of what constitutes human subjectivity; it is, in a sense, beyond good and evil. Nevertheless, an anxious and guilty pressure always remains, threatening to remind us that our ego is merely a tenuous effect created from the enormous wager that we have placed on a set of essentially self-alienating identifications. Ego is not a positive term for Lacanians. Likewise, for Steinberg, subjectivity should not be concerned with “the discourse of ‘the self,’ selfhood, and the individual...[S]ubjectivity does not denote a *property* of the subject” (4-5). In effect, orientating our subjectivity around the ego results in us being represented *by* something else. In Steinberg’s terms, instead of inhabiting the kind of suspended condition of subjectivity, as I articulated earlier, we fall back into the world of Baroque subjection. Or as the Lacanian Bruce Fink writes: “The castrated subject [i.e., the subject of language] is *the subject that is represented*. The castrated subject is always presenting itself to the Other, looking to win attention and recognition from the Other, and the more it presents itself, the more inescapably castrated it becomes as it is represented by and in the Other.”²⁰ We can never fully convince ourselves that the Other is us—and that is as true when the Other is the reflective surface of a mirror as it is when it is the reflective surface of another human being. Our ego is thus endlessly prone to a fundamental “aggressivity” in its relations with the Other that help it constitute its own image of itself. The image to which we try to couple ourselves always presents us with a wholeness that remains dissonant to our own mess, evoking our fundamental alienation from, and lack of home within, the very image that we claim is us. Thus, in comparison with aggression, which refers solely to violent acts, aggressivity is also (if not most) present within more benign situations. Lacan says that it “underlies the activities of the philanthropist, the idealists, the pedagogue, and even the reformer.”²¹ In Steinberg’s dialectic, we see this aggressivity most clearly in the transparent subject of the Enlightenment whose seemingly benign acts of understanding constantly threaten to dialectically transform into domination of those objects, even if those objects happen to be other humans.

What Lacanian psychoanalysis helps us to articulate about the kind of subjectivity that Steinberg, in part, propounds is that there is nothing easy about it and that terribly important things (both politically and individually) are at stake should we fail to sustain it. The two alluring hazards that hem it in—autonomy from and reconciliation with representation; or, Enlightened transparency and Baroque subjection—are in essence two kinds of death. They capture the subject in the deadlock of cyclical structures in which it chases after symbiotic union with the content of some impossible position but is never able to reach it, since what keeps it endlessly chasing is the fact that the position it is chasing is essentially lacking and void too.²² As a result, our chasing goes nowhere, leaving us without agency. Agency, after all, is marked by our ability to move and so make other things move—into transformation and the new. Like Steinberg, for Lacan the subject is primarily a movement. Since,

²⁰ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 73, my emphasis.

²¹ Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002), 9.

²² This lack, by which we come to desire something, is in Lacan the famous object cause of desire, *objet petit a* (the little object of the other [*autre*]).

the very attempt to identify with something is what robs the subject of its agency, the subject, in most Lacanian theorizations, preserves its agency and ability to move by means of its ability to refuse identification with other things.

Contrary to glib dismissals, this refusal of identification does not lead Lacan into reveling in some sense of the subject as tragically homeless, or lacking in any place in which to belong. In fact, Lacan is attempting to resist such a position too. As Alenka Zupančič summarizes: “the positing of the pathetic *grandeur* of human existence as resulting from this wound at its core, is seen by Lacan as the ideological counterpart of every existing (political) order,” and thus as a highly negative position for the human subject to assume. The pseudo-tragic message of such a position is that “rather than pursue your desires, you should renounce them, accept the tragic impossibility that lies at their core, and join the path of the common good.”²³ What Lacanian psychoanalysis offers instead is a call to identify with the irrepressible movement towards the thing to which one is attempting to identify, rather than with either identifying with the thing per se, or seeking to give up on the movement of desire altogether. One identifies with the *jouissance* of desire’s movement, rather than with the object that is desire’s goal; this is what is implied in the late Lacanian injunction to “identify with your symptom.”²⁴ Identifying with desire’s movement is what allows for subjectivity as a productive activity. “[T]he realization of desire can only mean one thing: to make an ‘independent,’ ‘self-standing’ object out of this very lack. It means, strictly speaking, the production or ‘creation’ of the object of desire.”²⁵ Or in Lacan’s terms, it means the production or creation of the so-called *objet petit a*, the little object of the other (*autre*).²⁶ “The object of desire, as object, is the result of this act (of realizing the desire). Producing the object of desire means making an object out of the infinite measure that is at work in desire in the form of lack or void.”²⁷ However, since the object of desire is “in(de)finite, [its] potential can only be realized (constituted as an accomplished, ‘whole’ entity) *as lost*, that is, cast in the negative form.”²⁸

In Lacan’s work, *the* example of an object being forged from the object cause of desire is found in a work of art, in the character Antigone in Sophocles’ eponymous play. For Lacan, Antigone is a paradox.²⁹ She stands in the ethical and political void that is created by the antagonism that she finds herself caught within. On the one hand, she should fulfill her familial duty towards the burial of the body of her dead brother, Polynices; on the other hand, she should comply with the public law of Creon, who has pronounced it illegal for Polynices to be buried. To perform the former would be a political death, for she would be executed for committing a crime; to perform the latter would constitute an ethical death, since she would then bear the impossible guilt of having disrespected her brother, and so would have to commit suicide. During the play she inhabits the space between these two deaths. She stands in a void and says “No” to Creon. And yet, for Lacan, it is precisely for this reason that she has such remarkable presence. Lacan’s famously characterizes her as having “sublime splendor,” a magnificence that defies conceptualization and so exceeds representation and cannot be

²³ Alenka Zupančič, “Ethics and Tragedy in Lacan,” in Jean-Michel Rabaté (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 175.

²⁴ See Žižek, “From Symptom to *Sinthome*,” chapter 2 of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 55-84.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

²⁶ See note 27.

²⁷ Zupančič, “Ethics and Tragedy in Lacan,” 184.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

²⁹ In particular, see “The Essence of Tragedy: A Commentary on Sophocles’s *Antigone*,” in Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (1959-1970)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992), 243-287.

represented itself. In the third chapter of *Listening to Reason*, Steinberg talks extensively about the celebrated Ludwig Tieck-Felix Mendelssohn staging of Sophocles' *Antigone* on October 28, 1841. He mentions a number of important theoretical commentaries on it (for example, Hegel's, George Steiner's, Judith Butler's), but not Lacan's. Steinberg is far too bibliographically savvy for this just to be an oversight. And yet, it is likewise telling (speaking madly) that Lacan fails to mention Steinberg. For Steinberg gives us some deeply compelling instances of an object representing the unrepresentable object cause of desire. That object is music, and in the nineteenth century it is also often imagined to be in possession of "sublime splendor," and of attaining a magnificence that defies conceptualization and so exceeds representation.

Except for the chapter on Mendelssohn and Schumann, the first part of Steinberg's book regularly scripts music as being like the Lacanian object that stands in for the object cause of desire. In these instances, music is a kind of paradox: a representation of the lack within representation, and so ultimately existing in excess of, or beyond representation. Most obviously we find such formulations in the reading of the Don Giovanni character. In Steinberg's strongly Kierkegaardian interpretation, Don Giovanni confronts the representational authority of the Baroque "with the energies of dissolution and movement, with those qualities of transience, flux, and contingency (*le transitoire, le fugitif, et le contingent*) that for Baudelaire formed the defining principles of modernity."³⁰(27) In Lacanian terms, Don Giovanni has exchanged the endless failure of attaining a stable identity for himself with the intense *jouissance* produced from the movement of desire itself. Don Giovanni, like Antigone, does not just say "No!" (in Don Giovanni's case, six times to the avenging statue), he is also an embodiment of "No": "Don Giovanni is possessed of an essential negativity—some might call it a death wish." Nevertheless, it is "a force that is not seen again on the operatic stage until Carmen." (29) "Don Giovanni's energy is focused on the erotic whose energies are presumably not historically specific," (25) and so not so easily tamed into representation. He is the terrifying and fascinating embodiment of nothing—a fact that is accentuated by the oft-made observation that, unlike all other characters in the opera, he has no style of his own.³¹ For Steinberg, then, Don Giovanni is an embodiment of the musical subjectivity of modernity. Not only is he the bearer of the "Mozartean energy of Modernity" (35), he is also a kind of impossible force that cannot (at least initially) be appropriated. Thus, the opening chords of *Don Giovanni* are not, à-la Gluck's famous 1769 dedication for *Alceste*, just a means of apprising "the spectators of the nature of the action that is to be represented, and to form, so to speak its argument."³² Admittedly, "[t]he avenging statue is allowed, in his second appearance, to inhabit [their] external fury," thus bringing them into the realm of representation; but even then "he is not identical [and so does not identify] with it," neither the fury nor the music (28). Rather, "[t]he chords have the status of *divine force*, which is foreign and innappropriate, as opposed to mythic force, which

³⁰ Steinberg is referring to Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life" (1859), an essay which Foucault famously also privileges as a key statement of modernity: "What is Enlightenment?," in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32-50.

³¹ For a recent revisiting of this theme in *Don Giovanni* from a relatively relaxed Lacanian position, see Mladen Dolar's similarly Kierkegaardian account in Dolar and Slavoj Žižek, *Opera's Second Death* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 45-58.

³² Leo Treitler, general editor, *Strunk's Source Readings in Music History*, revised edition (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998), 933.

is, dangerously, appropriable by human agency.” (28—my emphasis) Like Antigone, they have “sublime splendor.”

Such themes continue in the following chapter on Beethoven, first with Leonora from *Fidelio*. She is another Antigone candidate, who likewise inhabits music as a means of surviving the space between various representational deaths—in Leonora’s case, between being a man or a woman, *Fidelio* or Leonora, political activist or wife. She negates oppression, particularly in the second act, not through positing an alternative position or a different form of identification, but rather “through the regaining of voice: the ability and courage to sing out loud.” (77) We should note that for Steinberg, her triumph does not come by singing out loud *about* something. That would merely be another form of representation, and so prone to all the dangerous narcissistic traps that I discussed earlier. Rather, she triumphs just from singing out loud; her music is music first, rather than being music that is merely a means to another form of representational stability. After Leonora, Steinberg turns to the Ninth Symphony, whose finale “points to a realm of transcendence and resolution that it cannot represent.” Once more, we are dealing here with music’s ability to exist in excess of representation, which Steinberg’s commentary then equates with what amounts to an almost perfect description of *jouissance*: “Beethoven points to an extrahuman plane of representation and allows his material to spin out of control and, rather than ending, bursts” (91). The excessive pleasure that Lacan terms *jouissance* shatters boundaries and confuses the distinction between what is pleasurable and pain. It bursts things. We access our *jouissance* most specifically when we give up on our endlessly failed attempts at identification and self-representation, and attach ourselves instead to the movement of desire itself, rather than to the object of desire.

Chapter four concerns Wagner, and particularly the characters of Siegmund and Brünnhilde. Like Leonora, Siegmund is a kind of cross-dresser: “Siegmund’s refusal to part with Sieglinda is...a transgressive refusal to shed a feminine alter ego—a refusal to become a conventional hero.” (153) It is as if Siegmund were aware of the dangers of the *méconnaissance* that I discussed earlier in relationship to the Lacanian mirror stage. As a result, he rejects the impossible chase after heroic identifications. But Siegmund’s refusal of the illusions offered by seemingly stable forms of representation leads to his annihilation: “The entrapment of Siegmund as middle generation, caught between Wotan and Siegfried—between founding and decadence—seals his own destruction. Moreover, Siegmund’s destruction lies in his refusal to make the choice between [or form any identifications with] obedience and rebellion, in his drive to hold to a middle ground that his culture in turn withholds from him” (151). Brünnhilde’s major act of negation occurs in *Götterdämmerung*, by “reinvigorating the beer-hall fraternity that surrounds her with Nietzsche’s beloved lifeblood of the south: the transgressive subjectivity of pure voice” (158). Once more, we are with Leonore and the sheer presence of voice; being in excess of representation, Brünnhilde’s voice assaults the space marked by oppressive representation: “Brünnhilde’s life-force of history, her assertion of modernity, of the fleeting, the contingent, and the transitory, is the death-wish of music drama” (158). But whilst, on the one hand, she redemptively immolates herself, on the other hand, Wagner punishes her for her Antigone-like “sublime splendor.” In the infamously conflicted final moments of the *Ring*, he drowns out her voice with a deluge of leitmotifs. If her voice is *in* excess of representation, these leitmotifs *are* an excess of representation.

Drowned, stabbed, split open, dragged down to hell; Brünnhilde, Siegmund, Beethoven’s Ninth, Don Giovanni. Only Leonora survives—and then in a far from unambiguous fashion. As quickly as it flares up, the radical moment of musical subjectivity fizzles out. For a thinker like

Berthold Hoeckner, the fleetingness of the momentary is paradoxical, for “[h]owever short the instant, it may touch eternity; and however minute the detail, it may encompass all.”³³ Moreover, for Hoeckner it is an authentic acknowledgment of the real brokenness of Modernity that its moments of resolution or hope do not sustain themselves more than momentarily. As Hoeckner states, in parallel with Benjamin, within distorted historical conditions “[a] star shines brightest [only] at the moment of its fall. At the moment of its fall it holds the greatest promise.”³⁴ Lacanians would in part agree. First, this is because the subject “has no other being than as a breach in discourse. [It] manifests itself in daily life as a fleeting irruption of something foreign or extraneous...[appearing] only as a pulsation, an occasional impulse or interruption that immediately dies away or is extinguished.”³⁵ Second, if this radically void subject were to sustain its position, it would make itself vulnerable to what I have already articulated as dangerous about positions in general: that they might become the lure for our false and static identifications. Steinberg, however, seems to feel that there must be more for subjectivity than the transitory.³⁶

Broadly, an interesting inversion between style and idea occurs in Steinberg’s text following subjectivity’s traumatic encounter with Wagner in chapter four. In the first part of the book, Steinberg is both able to accommodate his characteristic and virtuosic range of cultural reference within a more measured prose style, and to couple that periodically to a validation of subjectivity’s/music’s tendencies towards a kind of Lacanian restlessness. But after Wagner, the prose of Steinberg’s text starts to strain somewhat as it tries to cover what at times seems like too much ground: Brahms’s *German Requiem*, and Verdi’s and Dvořák’s requiems in chapter five; Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Bartók’s *Bluebeard’s Castle*, and Jánáček’s *Makropoulos Case* in chapter six; an overview of Mahler’s oeuvre coupled to an appreciation of Freud’s notion of the unconscious in chapter seven. Whereas the earlier chapters (particularly on Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner) had truly been dialectical masterpieces of big ideas and telling details, there is now the distinct sense that connections between the local and global have been glued together by means of the force of assertion and a somewhat desperate desire to believe. For example, in Brahms’s *German Requiem*, the “consolation no longer available from the mother resides now in music alone, and musical understanding and pleasure derive from a functioning subjectivity that knows the difference between memory and delusion” (176). Whereas subjectivity in the first part of the book had been characterized by restless shifting, constant negation, excess and sublimity, in passages such as this, it seems to have capitulated to a kind of Bourgeois smugness. Eminently sensible, it now knows “the difference between memory and delusion.” But surely, if there is any figure about which the subject could be confused about, it must be the figure of the mother. It is as if Steinberg all of a sudden dismisses the traumatic drama of Oedipalization and all that it means for subjectivity, and opts instead for a somewhat offensive kind of no-nonsense attitude. It is as if we have

³³ Berthold Hoeckner, *Programming the Absolute: Nineteenth-Century German Music and the Hermeneutics of the Moment* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁵ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 41. Admittedly, Fink is describing the so-called “subject of the unconscious.” Ultimately, through figures such as Antigone, Lacan does assert that something more can be sustained. But it is always, nevertheless, threatened with dissolution.

³⁶ And elsewhere I have to a degree concurred: “[C]an the hopeless only survive on the sustenance of a shooting star? Is that enough to keep them treading water, or is it so little as to make drowning seem preferable?” (“Adorno—and Now the Act,” 120).

got rid of the unconscious, as if it were just the folly of youth: now we know where we are, and so we now know how to represent ourselves. Admittedly, one could argue that a shift from subjectivity conceived as beyond representation to subjectivity conceived of pragmatically, resonates with various broad historical shifts between the first and second halves of the nineteenth century: for example, the shift from romanticism to realism, or idealism to positivism, or the transformation of the bourgeoisie from a revolutionary class into a thoroughly conservative one. But those shifts were far from unambiguous. An enormous amount was lost politically, culturally, and socially after the failure of the 1848 revolutions, and so a high degree of critical vigilance is needed when considering the cultural productions and values of the second half of the nineteenth century. Such vigilance is lacking in the later chapters of Steinberg's book, begging the question as to why this is so.

A standard criticism would be to say that the concluding chapters seem rushed. But there is always something rather inane when critical reviews conclude by castigating the author for not doing enough homework. After all, there is nothing straightforward about the relationship between the amount of hours spent in the factory and the quality of the product.³⁷ As an alternative, I would like to suggest that the final chapters are, in fact, anxious, and that they compensate for this with an incipient mania. It is as if in the book's second half, the excesses that had initially been associated with content get redirected into the book's style, whereas the stability that had been initial the marker of the book's tone, becomes the organizing force behind its ideas. Whereas initially the text had worked to keep subjectivity within an open space of endless negotiations, it now veers elsewhere. On the one hand, the space of subjectivity becomes decidedly more pleasant and this can add the distinct quality of neutralization to Steinberg's pronouncements. Mahler's Ninth Symphony, to my ear a work that becomes more unbearably upsetting the quieter and more gentle it gets, is laid to rest by Steinberg with the kind of benign violence that one finds in a mediocre speech at a memorial service: Mahler's Ninth is "a metaphor of a generous and coherent life than can be honored for an integrity that courts neither representation nor resolution" (228). On the other hand, Steinberg increasingly values the music he is discussing because of the way in which it offers us reconciliations that are, essentially, not possible in the world itself. For example, by the time "the largest structural arc of [Brahms's] Requiem has been traversed...a reconciliation of these maternal and paternal voices has been achieved. Invoked at some level here is the reconciliation of his parents that Brahms could not literally achieve; they had separated in 1864 and he had vainly tried to reunite them" (176). If this is the case then Brahms's requiem is a piece of utter delusion and so one wonders exactly what is to be celebrated about it. Of course, one might argue that the delusions created by music are not to be judged in the same way as the delusions created in non-musical life. But as we saw at the beginning, Steinberg's agenda is precisely to bring musical life more fully into the contestations and difficulties of life itself. In Steinberg's formulation, Brahms's requiem reflects back to us an image of the world as we would like it to be, and we struggle to make our identification with that image stable. But like Narcissus with his reflection, there are ripples on the surface of the water, and if we cannot give up our delusions then they will eventually kill us.

It is a given of psychoanalysis that neurotics will do almost anything, however *unreasonable*, to keep themselves incarcerated in the cyclical structure of their own failings. But if, as Steinberg's title proclaims, music performatively "listens to *reason*," encouraging us to do likewise, then how is it that Steinberg's text is on the verge of condemning itself to this very fate? Here we need to ask Foucault's basic questions: "What is this Reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits,

³⁷ For example, see Žižek, "Schlagend, aber nicht Treffend," *Critical Inquiry*, volume 33, no. 1 (Fall 2006).

and what are its dangers?”³⁸ Within Kant’s realm, for example, ideas of reason are close to the sublime splendor of Antigone. As Žižek writes: “the impossible idealized states—total realization of the good, the total overcoming of material inertia, total justice in the world, total peace and so on—are all ideas of reason: global realizations of reason that serve as regulative ideas but which cannot ever be realized. The point is that these ideas of reason function as an infinite dimension that exists beyond our empirical limitations.”³⁹ For Steinberg, by comparison, reason is something that is put into tangible practice between subjects and their contexts. In many ways, it is closer to the notion of common sense (as in “why don’t you just listen to reason?”), and thus his closest theoretical ally would be someone like Jürgen Habermas, who valorizes the intersubjective communicative action that subjects of Modernity take part in through reference to the context of their “lifeworld” (*Lebenswelt*).⁴⁰ My problem with this is that in its tendency towards relativization it simultaneously makes itself (contrary to Steinberg’s belief) more, not less, vulnerable to uncritical identification with the ideological positions of its own context, and thus prone to irrationality. As Adorno writes: “the immediate proviso of relativity, the modesty that remains within whatever conceptual area has been marked off for it, denies itself by its very caution the experience of its limit, to think which is, according to Hegel’s superb insight, the same thing as to cross it.” By the immanent twist of a double negation, “the relativists are the real—the bad—absolutists.”⁴¹ It is interesting to note that although Steinberg respectfully “acknowledges Adorno’s work as [the] indispensable foundation” of his own, he rejects him precisely for what Adorno rejects in relativism, i.e., his absolutism: “Adorno...valorized music that he identified with...[He] too quickly dismissed musical subjects that were also musical “others” to himself and his identifications” (10).⁴² And yet in its increasing tendencies towards wanting a more or less comfortable condition of belonging for the subject—whose “function and integrity [nevertheless] derive from a freedom from or resistance to ideology and coercion”(184) (*how* is never made clear)—Steinberg’s text merely does the same thing. Context is an ideological notion. You can only get the critical function of the subject’s dignified resistance to it—that which would regulate its ever-ready tendencies towards Baroque representation and subjection—exactly by shooting madly beyond its boundaries. As it draws towards its conclusion, what Steinberg’s text needs, in order to preserve its own subjectivity, is the very thing that he has left behind in the discarded, staked body of Siegmund and the now bloated corpse of the dead, drowned Brünnhilde. No wonder the ending seems anxious. It is supporting a belief that for the purposes of its own survival it absolutely should not hold.

³⁸ Foucault, “Space, Knowledge, and Power: An Interview with Michel Foucault by Paul Rabinow,” *Skyline* (March 1982), 19.

³⁹ Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 62.

⁴⁰ The key texts here would be *Theory of Communicative Action I: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, tr. Thomas McCarthy (London: Heineman, 1981), and *Theory of Communicative Action II: Lifeworld and Style*, tr. McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987). Steinberg doesn’t actually mention Habermas. Habermas’s potential for musicology and the understanding of music has been examined by Giles Hooper, *The Discourse of Musicology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

⁴¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, tr. E. F. N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 1974), 128.

⁴² This kind of skewed criticism of Adorno is utterly pro-forma in the postmodern academy. On this point, see Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Right Listening and a New Type of Human Being,” in ed. Tom Huhn, *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 181f. I have also made a similar criticism in my review of Andrew Bowie’s *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (online journal—<http://ndpr.nd.edu>.)

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