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Gesture, Pulsion, Grain: Barthes' Musical Semiology

Michael David Szekely

Abstract

Although Barthes is perhaps best known as a semiotician, he is paradoxically always in search of precisely that which defies the constraints of language, whether art, signs or, in fact, language itself. Enter the relevance of music for Barthesian aesthetics. Barthes called for a "second semiology," in contrast to the classical semiology, which would explore "the body in a state of music." In this essay, I explore Barthes' musical semiology in terms of key concepts, including *gesture*, *pulsion*, *grain*, and *jouissance*. I extend the relevancy of Barthes' concepts, often articulated within the context of the Western classical musical tradition, to more contemporary examples from popular music and jazz. Here, free jazz drumming shows the way to the pulsion so integral to Barthes' emphasis on the bodily in music, and Tom Waits and Bjork demonstrate the gritty materiality of *geno-song*.

Key Words

Barthes, erotics of music, gesture, grain, Kristeva, pulsion, music, semiology, significance

1. Introduction

It could be argued that the basic thrust of the collected writings of Roland Barthes revolves around the constant illumination of gesture. Moreover, in my view, although Barthes is perhaps best known as a semiotician, as something of a philosopher of language and, more specifically, of signs, he is paradoxically always in search of precisely that which defies the constraints of language, -whether art, signs or, in fact, language itself. As Martin Grisel suggests: "Barthes is, paradoxically, a writer who, in a very rational manner, writes 'against' meaning."^[1] Barthes does utilize the concept of the signifier and other like concepts, but he was never quite satisfied with apprehending things this way: "Let us distinguish the *message*, which seeks to produce information, and the *sign*, which seeks to produce an intellection, from the *gesture*, which produces all the rest. . . without necessarily seeking to produce anything."^[2] In other words, we can only elucidate the markings or absences of gesture, like the way in which one might track a scent -- and this metaphor is not arbitrary, for Barthes' engagement with language is, as we shall see, resolutely bodily -- and yet, gesture is nevertheless pervasive.

In this essay, I wish to explore Barthes' ideas on music in particular, which he often seems to suggest as, arguably, *the* art form that exemplifies some of the most precious links to his semiology in general, namely, gesture and the body. Here, gesture approaches a kind of liminality, i.e., a not-quite-settled state, an in-between, an affecter without any necessary effect. Meanwhile, we see the emergence of the body as the crucial site through which the very workings of gesture must pass. Barthes is, in fact, often noted, and notably criticized, for suggesting that there might be a "second semiology," in contrast to the classical semiology in which "in the articulated text there is always the screen of the signified."^[3] Rather, this second semiology is, in fact, "the body in a state of music."^[4] Barthes' concern is with how the body and music, as a

result of the commingling of their particular rhythms and affects, create something anew. The body inscribed in music. Music written on the body.

So it is that only through this articulation of gesture via the body can we then trace how Barthes makes the connection between gesture and the body via music. In particular, we can more firmly contextualize some key concepts that inform Barthes' writings on music. These include: *pulsion*, which recurs in several writings; *grain*, which is the main theme of an important essay on the musical voice; and *jouissance*.

2. Gesture

"What is a gesture?" asks Barthes. "Something like the surplus of an action. The action is transitive, it seeks only to provoke an object, a result; the gesture is the indeterminate and inexhaustible total of reasons, pulsions, indolences which surround the action with an *atmosphere*."^[5] Is gesture a kind of communication? Perhaps, but in what we might call a weak sense of the term. In linking gesture to notions of indeterminacy and inexhaustibility, Barthes wishes to, in turn, avoid linking gesture initially to a notion of communication whereby meaning is isolatable as a one-directional -- perhaps also one-dimensional? -- relation. This does not so much imply a disavowal of even our fairly commonplace way of talking about art in terms of how and what it communicates. But this common usage is not so much at issue here. On the contrary, our preoccupation with language and language systems in general is, to a great extent, quite natural and purposeful. "Language's power," as John Shepherd and Peter Wicke state, lies in its "embeddedness in states of awareness, its consequent embeddedness in the external world of forces and actions, and so of its embeddedness more generally in the fluid and dynamic contexts of the human world."^[6]

Barthes knows this better than anyone. However, beyond this general observation, the apprehension of art as more specifically something that gestures is also meant to highlight art's ephemerality, its production, its blood, sweat and tears. Here, we cannot help but see an obvious resemblance to the Barthesian "Text," where "the Text is experienced only in the activity of production. . . its constitutive movement is that of a cutting across. . ."^[7] A Text, in other words, is not static, but active.

For example, in an essay on the surrealist André Masson's "semiograms" (i.e., works drawing equally from Masson's own individual painting style and Chinese ideography), Barthes credits Masson with at least two key illuminations.



Andre Masson, *Message*, 1957.

First, Masson shows us "that writing cannot be reduced to a pure function of communication, as is claimed by the historians of language." In other words, Masson's pieces show us gesture at work. Second, Masson "helps us understand that writing's truth is. . .in the hand which presses down and traces a line, i.e., in *the body which throbs* (which takes pleasure). This is why color must not be understood as a background against which certain characteristics 'stand out' but rather as pulsion's entire space (we know the pulsional nature of color: witness the scandal caused by the Fauve liberation). . . "[8] Now, this idea of "pulsion" is something I will discuss in more detail later in this piece, but we should nevertheless note here both the suggestion of gesture's link to the body and a kind of immediacy of affect to which Barthes ascribes, in this case, color. Barthes is not saying that color exists apart from whatever style, context or approach at hand, whether it be painting of a more or less representational or abstract quality. However, he *is* suggesting that color can, on some level, be taken as having its own affect, force. But again, such an affect or force is significant for Barthes because of the sensuous, material engagement it engenders, and less so merely for its appeal to intellection.

Barthes reiterates this idea when he writes about the "displaced" canvases of the artist Cy Twombly, whose somewhat jagged and sparse paintings often feature faintly written words or phrases—chicken-scratch traces of some absent or forgotten meaning.[9]



Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1960.

Like Masson's, Twombly's art is also, in Barthes' discourse, an art of writing, an "allusive field of writing,"[10] which, in turn, suggests gesture. But Twombly's "gesture" is also the way he manipulates the raw materials of his medium. Ultimately, this points to Barthes' ideas about aesthetics in general: "Before anything else, there occur. .

.paper, canvas, pencil, crayon, oil paint. The instrument of painting is not an instrument. It is a fact. Twombly imposes his materials not as something which will serve some purpose but as an absolute substance, manifested in its glory. . . " Revealing yet another key to his aesthetics, not to mention his semiotics, Barthes goes on to say that "the materials are what the Alchemists called *materia prima*-what exists prior to the division of meaning. . ." [11] So, in tying these ideas about Twombly's art to gesture, the suggestion is that art's materials are, in fact, a huge part of its gestural quality, the materials as a glimpse, or even manifestation, of the rawness, the primality, of art. Again, for Barthes, this "return" to the materials of art is not so much a move toward aestheticism as it is precisely a move toward the dislocation of meaning, an opening of possibility. In fact, the fairly conventional wisdom of traditional aesthetics between an *autonomist* art, which suggests that meaning in/of art rests solely in art's own tools and processes, and *heteronomist* art, which suggests that meaning in/of art rests in its social, cultural or political contextualization, would seem a bit misguided to Barthes. If we are no longer as dependent upon particular claims as to the origins of meaning behind art, or even with respect the project of defining art-authorial intention being one crucial example for Barthes-then our engagement with any art can potentially allow for a much more creative reception.

Music, too, exemplifies this gestural quality. Though linked to signification, music presupposes a certain natural resistance, or antagonism, to language. On this score, it would seem that Barthes would agree with Jacques Attali that "listening to music is to receive a message. Nevertheless, music cannot be equated with a language. Quite unlike the words of a language-which refer to a signified-music, though it has a precise operationality, never has a stable reference to a code of the linguistic type." [12] Along these lines, Barthes would also be a kindred thinker to Christopher Small, who, with his concept of "musicking" (and book by the same name), not only concurs with Attali, but really seeks to make good on this "unstable" quality of music with his own positive, vital spin, whereby "music can articulate many kinds of relationship at once," whereas "words. . .can deal with things only one at a time, and there is no way they can be made to bear the cargo of multiple simultaneous meanings that the gestures of musicking can do." [13]

Again, the Barthesian Text, tethered as it is to gesture, comes to mind. But here, if we at least for the moment take music to be exemplary of a Text, we can discern a slight variation on, or extension of, Small's account, whereas for Barthes, music too is "plural. . .which is not simply to say that it has several meanings, but that it accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an *irreducible* (and not merely acceptable) plural. . .not a co-existence of meanings, but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination." [14] Or elsewhere, when Barthes says that "the musical text *does not follow*. . .it explodes: it is a continuous *big bang*," [15] he is both articulating his basic contention that music enters certain realms that language does (or dares) not enter and suggesting a preoccupation with *jouissance*, which I will discuss later in this essay. This kind of discussion is indicative of why issues concerning both spatiality and temporality are of increasing interest to philosophers of music.

Notably, in both the essays on Masson and Twombly, Barthes emphasizes the affects of and on the body, returning in the latter

essay to the idea of pulsion and to its proper connection to the body: "pulsion. . . a certain demand of the body itself."[\[16\]](#) Thus, although it is articulated here in the context of the non-musical example of Twombly's art, it soon becomes quite apparent that Barthes is pointing us toward music as the most exemplary art with respect to these attributes. Of course, my claim here presupposes that pulsion is a notion somewhat intuitively linked to musical phenomena. But this should not seem such a great stretch. We can note how the theme of pulsion takes a certain heightened currency in Barthes' writings on music. Alas, in an essay on Schumann (undoubtedly a favorite of Barthes), Barthes writes of the "Schumannian body" that it is "a pulsional body, one which pushes itself back and forth, turns to something else-thinks of something else; this is a stunned body (intoxicated, distracted, and at the same time ardent)."[\[17\]](#)

3. Pulsion

By 'pulsion,' Barthes seems to imply a kind of underlying impact of music on the body—a "stunned body." But perhaps we can deduce this concept further. Initially, I believe we can rule out apprehending pulsion as something like musical meter, for the simple reason that meter is basically a notational device, an instruction. Although it is an interesting prospect to consider how different meters, e.g., 3/4, 4/4, 7/4, etc., might feel differently in different musical contexts, this "feel" (as noun now!), I would argue, is nevertheless largely the result of precisely how the meter is played and delivered: its nuance and the context in which it appears. It would seem rather counterintuitive to talk about meter itself in conjunction with any sort of significant musical affect.

What about defining pulsion in terms of its link to rhythm, the affect of rhythm, or the accents of rhythm? Barthes does, in fact, say that "the accent is the music's truth, in relation to which all interpretation declares itself."[\[18\]](#) However, accent and rhythm still fall short, precisely because they are still part of something else, something. . . . How could we put it? Deeper? Greater? More bodily, perhaps. Pulsion, then, must encompass more than accent and rhythm.

Barthes also often uses the notion of beating interchangeably with pulsion, and perhaps we are on the right track if the very term brings to mind a drum beat, or even a heart beat. Of Schumann's *Kreislariana*, Barthes comments: ". . . what I hear are blows: I hear what beats in the body, what beats the body, or better: I hear this body that beats."[\[19\]](#) [\[Listen to sound clip.\(Click on 'Preview'.\)\]](#) Indeed, Barthes' complaint with respect to another, poorer interpretation of Schumann is that "the beats are played too timidly; the body which takes possession of them is almost always a mediocre body, trained, streamlined by years of Conservatory or career. . . he plays the accent (the beat) like a simple rhetorical mark; what the virtuoso then displays is the platitude of his own body, incapable of 'beating'. . . It is not a question of strength, but of rage: the body must pound—not the pianist."[\[20\]](#) Here, it is not so surprising, then, that pulsion has also been defined as "drive" in some contexts, in others as "force." But even then, I agree with the respective criticisms; "drive" seems somehow too mechanical for what Barthes is seeking here, but also a bit limited, while "force," though closer to pulsion, might be too heavy, and also rather vague. Perhaps a more apt model would be the primal, ecstatic, intoxicated rhythms of Nietzsche's Dionysian. Or maybe the music/musician analogue to Deleuze and Guattari's "schizo," where one finds the notion of *intensity* as occupying a key role.[\[21\]](#)

We might also think of pulsion in terms of looking at the word itself; that is, within pulsion there is 'pulse,' and beyond pulse there is 'pulsation.' And, of course, pulse and pulsation imply something both broader and yet also subtler than accent and rhythm. Something that pulsates is not so much metered as it is affective in a rhythmic and bodily sense—think of a pulsating headache!

Meanwhile, although Barthes looks mostly to what would appear to be his favorite kind of music, Western classical music, for examples in order to demonstrate most of these ideas about music, I suspect that some of his claims might be further articulated by, for instance, a look at more improvisational musical practices. Particularly useful here is John Corbett's discussion of the drumming of free jazz master Milford Graves. Graves' independent limbs, Corbett observes, behave like "isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers." They create a "multivoiced percussion," a "centerless rhythmism," a "positing of the body as an ensemble in itself."^[22] Graves' drumming is a musical analogue to Barthes' writing, and ultimately, to his Text. It is free (often a rather poor and ill-fitting term) not so much because of what it disregards, but because of how it disrupts and then reassembles. [[Listen to sound clip.](#)] True, the kind of playing, the kind of musical signification, that Graves exemplifies often does, in fact, disregard meter, or specific rhythmic feels (e.g., a rock feel, a swing feel, a pop feel, etc.) that imply a basically firm beat structure throughout. Of course, Graves' drumming obviously influences, and is influenced by, the given musical situations in which he finds himself, which, in free improvisation, are themselves usually not structured around a certain way of organizing time and other musical materials.

Still, it would be a mistake to say that Graves disregards time, and it would definitely miss the mark to say that he disregards rhythm. On the contrary, if there is, arguably, a kind of negative atemporality to Graves' drumming, it is equally infused with a positive *multitemporality*, in which different levels and intensities of musical time flow in and out of one another; in a great sense, an overflowing of temporality and of musical signification. Moreover, calling Graves' drumming "arhythmic" merely because it does not imply meter or emphasize more recognizable rhythms and feels is clearly shortsighted. On the contrary, this playing is unabashedly *polyrhythmic*, infused with different rhythms, which weave in and out of one another, even pointing to and anticipating one another, in no definitive pattern. Rather than lacking pulse and direction, this playing is, in fact, both *propulsive* and demonstrating a *layering of pulses*—a saturation of rhythm and pulse, of musical signification, rooted deeply in the body: pulsion.^[23]

4. Grain

In an important essay, "The Grain of the Voice," Barthes states that, "rather than change directly the language on music, it would be better to change the musical object itself, as it presents itself to discourse, better to alter its level of perception or intellection, to displace the fringe of contact between language and music. It is this displacement that I want to outline. . . "^[24] The grain of the voice is one key example of this "fringe of this contact." Barthes focuses on two sets of pairings with respect to the musical voice: the "theoretical" pairing of *phenotext* and *genotext*, which Barthes borrows from Julia Kristeva, and the respective paradigmatic pairing of two rather different singers, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Charles Panzera.

Kristeva defines the phenotext as that which denotes "language that serves to communicate, which linguistics describes in terms of 'competence' or 'performance.'" And further: "The phenotext is a structure. . . it obeys rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee."[\[25\]](#) Thus, Barthes' extension concerning the phenotext of music, or the "pheno-song," is marked by a preoccupation with the accepted rules of singing, the codification of certain styles, the prowess of technique, etc., "-in short, everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression, everything which it is customary to talk about. . ."[\[26\]](#)

In Barthes' view, Fischer-Dieskau represents the ideal model of the phenotext at work: "From the point of view of the pheno-song, Fischer-Dieskau is assuredly an artist beyond reproach: everything in the (semantic and lyrical) structure is respected. . ." One hears with Fischer-Dieskau "perfection," as Barthes says, or at near perfection, concerning the technical and formal delivery of the music. This is not to say, of course, that Fischer-Dieskau is lacking a kind of individual style. On the contrary, Barthes clarifies, "his art is inordinately expressive (the diction is dramatic, the pauses, the checkings and releases of breath, occur like shudders of passion. . ."[\[27\]](#) [[Listen to sound clip.](#)] In seeking more contemporary examples of pheno-song, pop singing groups like *NSync or 98 Degrees come to mind, where the vocal delivery is flawless, the technique impeccable, the melodic and harmonic shifts imperceptible, and the affect (heightened, of course, by their glamorously good looks and choreographed movements), very expressive. [[Listen to sound clip.](#)] But perhaps fairer present-day comparisons for Barthes' discussion of Fischer-Dieskau would be those singers associated with what has been dubbed "popera" (a literal combining of "pop" and "opera"), such as Josh Groban and Andrea Bocelli.

Although coming loosely from a more operatic sensibility than Fischer-Dieskau's art song background, singers like Groban and Bocelli share with Fischer-Dieskau those key qualities that Barthes attributes to pheno-song: the "perfection" of singing in terms of technical and formal delivery, including diction and breaths, but also the "inordinate" expressivity, the drama of the diction, the "shudders of passion." [[Listen to sound clip.](#)] But it becomes clear that, for Barthes, something is missing in this style of singing, something that, in a way, seems to neglect what Barthes would consider certain aspects of music-here, singing in particular-that make music what it is, so to speak. Such aspects, we can initially say, seem to roughly demonstrate, in one sense, the material/corporeal/bodily affect of music, which we have already seen with the notion of pulsion, and in another sense, the idea of a kind of liminal aesthetic reception-a reception between the nonlinguistic and linguistic, between signification and meaning, which, again, Barthes calls gesture-for which music seems to be particularly well-suited. Enter the genotext.

"Even though it can be seen in language," writes Kristeva, "the genotext is not linguistic. . .it is, rather, a *process*, which tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral. . .and nonsignifying."[\[28\]](#) Thus, the genotext of music, or the "geno-song," is how Barthes wishes to account for this process, deeply imbued as it is in the "materiality" of the singing, i.e., the affect and reception of the bodily and gestural basis of, and manipulations happening within, singing.

The *geno-song* is the singing and the speaking voice,

the space where significations germinate 'from within language and in its very materiality'; it forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression; it is that apex (or that depth) of production where the melody really works at the language-not at what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sounds-signifiers. . .[29]

Barthes also suggests framing the issue of grain in terms a soul/body dichotomy, where we might take the soul of the pheno-song to exhibit a preoccupation with the general presentation of technical prowess and expressive force in the singing, while the body of the geno-song reveals the particular workings of the physicality in the singing. Thus, in Barthes' view, Panzera represents the ideal model of the genotext at work. Panzera is not of the technical and stylistic caliber of Fischer-Dieskau, but his impact is, Barthes would argue, more felt, precisely because its affect is more bodily, i.e., more revealing of the body. For instance, "with FD [Fischer-Dieskau]," Barthes explains, "I seem only to hear the lungs, never the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose. All of Panzera's art, on the contrary, was in the letters, not in the bellows. . ."[30]

But is there more to this? As Leon S. Roudiez writes, for Kristeva, "it is often the physical, material aspects of language (certain combinations of letters, certain sounds-regardless of the meaning of words in which they occur) that signals the presence of a genotext." [31] And so it is for Barthes as well, for whom "in the letters" marks not so much an emphasis on the linguistic, but precisely that realm whereby Panzera's singing unabashedly betrays the "grittiness" of singing-which is to say, the grain of the voice.

To entertain a more contemporary example of geno-song, the evocativeness of the Beat-like musical poetics of Tom Waits is driven home by the gritty, strained, smoke-spattered and irreverent growl of his vocal delivery. [[Listen to sound clip.](#)] In much of Waits' music, one has the feeling of stumbling upon these stories, these experiences, previously tucked away in the underbelly of the world, after some of the smoke clears. Notably, in Waits, the voice creates an atmosphere with the other instruments: a piano right out of the saloon, the rickety thumps and clangs of percussion, the twangs of ruddy guitars, etc. This soundscape beckons, intrigues and lures us-a traveling troupe that seems to stumble itself, giving us the sense of having lived the story that is being told.

Meanwhile, in another example, the ecstatic moans, growls and "pagan poetry"[32] of Bjork display their own sense of the grain, generating their own genotext that is, of course, the act of generation itself. The body at work-the convulsions that move through gut, throat, tongue, mouth, and lips-is quite palpable in Bjork's singing. In fact, hearing her singing often yields somewhat unsettled reactions, especially to the uninitiated: "How on earth is she doing that?" "Isn't that bad for her voice?" "Doesn't it hurt?" Why these reactions? One explanation is because the palpability of the body in Bjork's singing seems to immediately register with/in our own bodies.

One can only think that Barthes would have delighted in Bjork's recent ode to corporeal music, *Medulla*[33], a recording comprised entirely of voices (a rather amazing feat in itself) that pound, beat, snarl, growl, whimper, sigh and convulse to a musical Text that is infinitely plural. [[Listen to sound clip.](#)] On one level, this plurality is

shown through these voices that, by the sheer fact of belonging to different individuals, exhibit a variety of natural textures, timbres and affects. But then, on another level, this plurality is shown through these voices that do different things: one performer, whose background is in painting, releases washes of gasps and sighs; another "beat box" performer provides the backdrops, rumbles and beats; and yet another performer swirls and swishes with overdriven melodies and rhythms that seem to go everywhere at once, and so on. Now, despite what might be considered the overwhelming presence of grain on *Medulla*, one might argue that it is precisely this overwhelming presence, this density of voices, which causes grain to be lost somehow, where the saturation of the sonic world becomes itself the overriding affect. However, as if to anticipate such a concern, much of the production on *Medulla* is raw, dry and untampered, utilizing close-miking techniques that make the music seem that much more proximal to the listener.

In the documentary *The Making of Medulla: The Inner of Deep Part of an Animal or Plant Structure*, Bjork states: "I wanted to do a vocal album and I wanted it to have a strong feeling of heart, blood, and meat. And at the same time I wanted the lower half of the body to merge into the music, but not some doobie doobie something that you have heard so many times...a kind of muesli jazz. So I wanted to start out by proving that a vocal album didn't have to be a vegetarian meal. That it can indeed be a steak, a raw steak on the table. And I think we managed to prove that point, we haven't got a veggie burger in our hands."^[34] On this account, we would have to say, following Barthes, that *Medulla* succeeds. But more than this, it is clear to us that a creative process is being undertaken, a trying, a struggle, a journey, which further heightens and stirs, literally, if not our complete identification with Bjork, at least our human curiosity.

But wait. Are not Fischer-Dieskau, Groban, or Bocelli engaged in creative expression? Is it not the case that many who listen to Bocelli, technical prowess and all, are awestruck, impacted, lifted? What about those for whom the singing of Bocelli really *gets* them?

Here, though with clear evaluative implications, we might nevertheless acknowledge Barthes' project as largely *descriptive*. For instance, when Barthes says that he wants to "correct the ideological reading" of the romantic text, which emphasizes the "soul," he does not wish to dismantle it completely, but rather to materialize it, to restore it to its bodily and gestural basis: "Soul is merely a romantic name for 'body.'"^[35] And further: "Everything is clearer, in the romantic text, if we translate the effusive moral term by a pulsional corporeal one-whereby no harm is done: romantic music is saved, once the body returns to it-as soon as, through music, in fact, the body returns to music."^[36] Thus, following Barthes, as an exemplar of what we could call a contemporary popular Romanticism, Andrea Bocelli has a nearly untouchable, angelic voice, with a lot of soul. .but no body.

Of course, again, the target of Barthes' criticism here, what motivates his need to emphasize and articulate the bodily in music, is the Romantic tradition in classical music. Unfortunately, Barthes did not, however, engage other non-classical examples, whether in terms of genre itself or style, be it popular, avant-garde, experimental, jazz, etc. But we heard, perhaps surprisingly, in the drumming of Milford Graves a contemporary analogue to the pulsion in, of all people, Schumann that so delighted Barthes, where a kind of explosive, rhythmic affect is felt above and beyond meter and neat

organization. Moreover, Waits and Bjork, both occupying their own spaces at the fringe of popular music, demonstrated that our more apparent measures of technique, virtuosity, expressivity, may, if nothing else, fail to acknowledge a certain material element of music that cannot be processed or formalized: grain. Thus, Barthes' criticism, perhaps in spite of himself, can be shown to retain its relevance across styles and genres.

5. Conclusion: An Erotics of Music

It is true that although I wish to push Barthes' formulations about Romantic classical music into other musical realms and genre distinctions, beyond the merely Western classical paradigm, I have basically followed Barthes in utilizing solely instrumental examples in my discussion of pulsion and vocal examples in my discussion of grain. To a great extent, I can understand why Barthes proceeded this way. Even among both the edgiest practitioners and listeners of music, it would nevertheless seem more initially palatable to talk about pulsion, something so intimately linked to notions of rhythm, pulse, temporality and spatiality, in terms of instrumental music. Meanwhile, it would also seem more suitable to talk about grain, something which Barthes articulates in terms of touch, texture, but also even in terms of direct bodily reference-the skin, glottis, etc.-in terms of the voice. However, such articulations might risk leaving the reader with an overly simplistic picture of things. A kind of built-in prejudice might be revealed, depending, of course, on what we choose to value more in music. Barthes at least puts us on the right path here. He gives shape and expression to a variety of musical aspects, broadening the horizon of our aesthetic reception of music in general. Moreover, as a clear follower of Nietzsche here, Barthes emphasizes aspects of music that, let us say, lay stirring, waiting to explode, underneath the belly of music. Apollonian communication meets Dionysian gesture. Apollonian meter meets Dionysian pulsion. Apollonian perfection meets Dionysian grain.

But we can take Barthes further here. Graves' drums are also (literally!) skins, textures. There are rattles and resonances to these rhythms, too: clicks of stick against rims, scratches of brush against cymbal. This is no different from Bjork's "raw steak on the table." Even more direct examples might be heard in the numerous free jazz saxophonists, saxophone being closer to the voice in many respects, who produce hisses, squawks, snarls, rasps and other rather textural sounds from their horns by different fingerings, extended breathing techniques or preparing their instruments with a variety of cloths, plungers and other implements, in a similar way to how John Cage created his "prepared piano" with nuts, bolts, and screws. Clearly, there is as much a grain, a materiality, to the instrumental "voice" as there is to the actual voice, if we can put it this way. The same principles are at stake.

Meanwhile, although it strikes me as less frequent than our examples of instrumental grain, there is still a sense in which, similar to its more obviously rhythmic (drums, percussion), or even melodic and harmonic (piano, saxophone) counterparts, the voice, too, can display pulsion. In the same way that Barthes hears in Schumann "blows," not simply meter or rhythm, we hear in some of Bjork's music, particularly on the *Medulla* recording, washes, explosions and vocalizations that perhaps have the effect of displacement, intensity and timelessness, but precisely because of the way in which they multiply and cross rhythms, abruptly shift dynamics and overflow with melodies and harmonies.

Finally, we might wonder as to how we might discern gesture, pulsion and grain in music and, more specifically, whether we should look for it in certain music and not others. Perhaps even with my more contemporary improvisational and popular music examples, which seek a broader application of these concepts of pulsion and grain, it would nevertheless seem shortsighted to say that music for Barthes is merely the noises, breaths, pulsion and grain that "seduce" us and bring us to *jouissance*, or bliss. One might be persuaded by Barthes' articulation of pulsion in Schumann and his distinction between the pheno-song of Fischer-Dieskau and the geno-song of Panzera, as well as my own articulation of pulsion in Milford Graves and the distinction between the pheno-song of Josh Groban and the geno-song of Bjork. But what does this say about composers and musics for which pulsion or grain do not seem as much at stake. In other words, does certain music require pulsion or grain?

Not surprisingly, the merits of such a question notwithstanding, we would imagine Barthes to find the question somewhat misguided. Although it is true that some music would seem to exhibit these more material aspects more readily, with the result being their greater affect for our aesthetic reception, for Barthes, the author of "Death of the Author," to focus on what the composer might have *intended* with a certain piece, or how the music is *supposed to* sound, risks detracting from our experience of music. There is something of a phenomenological sensibility at play here, where we entertain a kind of pragmatic bracketing of our expectations concerning the music. After all, if we are already listening for something in particular in the music, we might attain it as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, but then risk missing something. For Barthes—again, following Nietzsche—music *affects* first and foremost. Perhaps Barthes' extension and application of this idea can be seen in his echoing another concept of Kristeva's in describing music as *signifiante*, what she defines as the "unlimited and unbound generating process, this unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language,"^[37] and what is for Barthes "meaning in its potential voluptuousness."^[38] In other words, music, perhaps with dance, reveals, while simultaneously abstracting--(not necessarily in the sense of moving toward incomprehensibility, but, on the contrary, precisely in its seduction--the process of its very making, of its very producing, of its very creating, of its very possibility. The grain of the voice, again, "is not-or is not merely-its timbre; the *signifiante* it opens cannot better be defined, indeed, by the very friction between the music and something else, which something else is the particular language (and nowise the message)."^[39] For Barthes, it is not just important that we hear and feel the voice, but that we hear and feel the materiality of the voice. Barthes' erotics of music: "the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs."^[40] The wager is that this will heighten our experience, charge us, and enhance our investment in the music. It is, after all, *we* who hear and *we* who feel the music.

If there is one thing to be gotten from Barthes' preoccupation with the musical Text, it is that we are also the writers of what we read, the players of the music we hear. In his essay "Musica Practica,"^[41] Barthes distinguishes between two musics, "the music one listens to, the music one plays,"^[42] where, similar to his readerly/writerly distinction,^[43] what is at stake is our very engagement with music, or literature or the arts in general. This is quite in line with a certain theoretical sensibility in Barthes, and there are numerous occasions in which a certain blurring of activity and reception is shown to be so essential to Barthes' general *oeuvre*. Is our reception passive

(readerly/listening) or active (writerly/playing)? This very question might have something to do with how certain aspects of the phenomena at hand—e.g., gesture, pulsion, grain—lend themselves to a more active engagement. Thus, we ask of literature, how is this text writerly? But how might we ask a similar question with respect to music? After all, Barthes' listening/playing distinction refers neither to a choice between actually listening to or actually playing music, respectively, nor to specific music, which are said to be more suitable for listening than for playing, or vice-versa. Rather, yet again, a blurring of roles is suggested, whereby we might ask of music, "How do we, as listeners, become players of the music?" Collective improvisation comes to mind here, not so much as a preference concerning a particular music genre, but rather because of the dynamics it engenders, for both performer and listener. The ideal, at least, in this kind of music emphasizes active, spontaneous engagement, the shifting of attention, constructive meaning-creation and the blurring of individual and collective roles. But again, far from marking a preference for a particular genre, a more fruitful project seeks out the ways in which other music stimulate the kind of expanded activity and reception sought in improvisation, where we might envision an "experiencing-improvising music," which is constituted by a spectrum of, at once, playing, listening, composing, thinking, reading, etc.^[44] In his discussion of what he calls the "second Beethoven," Barthes remarks that "with respect to this music one must put oneself in the position or, better, in the activity of an operator, who knows how to displace, assemble, combine, fit together. . ."^[45] Music, in other words, compels us, collects us, to compose life.

To compose, at least by propensity, is *to give to do*, not to give to hear but to give to write. The modern location for music is not the concert hall, but the stage on which the musicians pass, in what is often a dazzling display, from one source to another. It is we who are playing, though still it is true by proxy; but one can imagine the concert—later on?—as exclusively a workshop, from which nothing spills over—no dream, no imaginary, in short, no 'soul' and where all the musical art is absorbed in a praxis *with no remainder*.^[46]

Endnotes

^[1] Martin Grisel, "Writing the Imaginary: Remarks on Music According to Roland Barthes," in *Critical Writings on Roland Barthes*, ed. Diana Knight (New York: G.K. Hall, 2000), p. 264.

^[2] Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper," in *The Responsibility of Forms*, tr. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985),: p. 160.

^[3] Barthes, "Rasch," in *The Responsibility of Forms*, p. 308.

^[4] Barthes, "Rasch," p. 312.

^[5] "Twombly," p. 160. Also, although I did not want to give particular attention to it in this essay, Barthes, referring to Nietzsche (and, implicitly, Nietzsche's eventual disinclination toward the heaviness of Wagner's music), suggests the like comparison between gesture and "lightness": "If we were to philosophize (a little), we might say that the being of things is not in their heaviness but in their lightness" ("The Wisdom of Art," p. 178). Along these lines, the reader might also be interested in Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the*

Next Millennium (Vintage, 1993), which, in fact, highlights six themes Calvino wishes to suggest as having great significance for the future of literature (the book was published in the 1980s), and perhaps the arts in general. In addition to *quickness*, *exactitude*, *visibility*, *multiplicity*, and the unfinished *consistency*, Calvino adds *lightness*.

[6] John Shepherd and Peter Wicke, *Music and Cultural Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), p. 214.

[7] Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Image, Music, Text*, tr. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 157.

[8] Barthes, "Masson's Semiography," in *Responsibility of Forms*, p. 154. Also, in this and other passages, the reader might interpret Barthes' use of the term 'writing' to mean both the process of the art at work, or the artistic act, and the ways in which we engage that process or act (just as the 'Text' might be interpreted as that shifting and, in a sense, virtual space, context, or forum through which the writing takes place, which is not exclusive to a book, for instance).

[9] Works by Twombly that seem to provide something of a backdrop to Barthes' essay on the artist include *Virgil, Mars and the Artist*, and *24 Short Pieces*.

[10] Barthes, "Twombly," p. 158.

[11] Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art," in *The Responsibility of Forms*, p. 178.

[12] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, tr. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 25. (In my version of *Noise*, Attali gives no reference for the Derrida quote, nor is there a bibliography given. Thus, not only am I unsure from what Derrida work, or works, he is drawing, but I am also unsure as to whether this is a full-fledged quote or a paraphrasing of some general thought Attali attributes to Derrida.)

[13] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), p. 18.

[14] Barthes, "From Work to Text," p. 159.

[15] Barthes, "Rasch," p. 302.

[16] Barthes, "Twombly," p. 175

[17] Barthes, "Rasch," p. 300.

[18] Barthes, "Rasch," p. 303.

[19] Barthes, "Rasch," p. 299.

[20] Barthes, "Rasch," p. 303.

[21] This is precisely what I attempted to do in "Becoming-Still: Perspectives on Musical Ontology after Deleuze and Guattari," *Social Semiotics* 13 (2), 2003, pp. 113-128.

[22] John Corbett, *Extended Play: Sounding Off From John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Durham and London: Duke University Press), pp. 78-80. I also agree with Corbett that, although Graves is tragically underrecorded, the recordings that do exist are gems. A particular favorite of mine is Albert Ayler's *Love Cry* (GRP, 1967/1991). The earlier, self-titled *New York Art Quartet* (ESP, 1964) is also excellent. There is also a slightly more recent duo project with saxophonist

David Murray entitled *The Real Deal* (DIW, 1991), as well as a solo effort from 1997 called *Grand Unification* (Tzadik).

[23] Notably, during the time in which I had the pleasure of studying with him at Bennington College in 1996, Graves, also an herbologist and acupuncturist, was, as I recall, fond of saying that the body's own rhythms, right down to the heart, were actually naturally irregular and layered.

[24] Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, pp. 180-181.

[25] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, tr. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 87.

[26] Barthes, "Grain of the Voice," p. 182.

[27] Barthes, "Grain of the Voice," p. 183.

[28] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 86.

[29] Barthes, "Grain of the Voice," p. 182.

[30] Barthes, "Grain of the Voice," p. 183.

For Panzera sound clip: Due to the fact that I could not find an isolated sound clip for purchase for Panzera, I recommend readers do the following:

a) Go to: www.cduniverse.com

b) Search "Panzera"

c) Click on: "Singers to Remember - The Master of French Song / C. Panzéra"

d) Scroll down to Track #2 - "Au cimetière, Op. 51 no 2" (Faure)

e) Listen to clip in either Real Audio or Windows Media.

[31] Leon S. Roudiez, Introduction to Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*, pp. 5-6.

[32] The title of a track from Bjork's *Vespertine* (Elektra, 2001).

[33] Bjork, *Medulla* (Elektra, 2004).

[34] "The Making of Medulla: The Inner of Deep Part of an Animal or Plant Structure" (Warner Bros., 2001).

[35] Barthes, "Rasch," p. 308.

[36] Barthes, "Rasch," p. 308.

[37] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 17.

[38] Barthes, "Grain of the Voice," p. 184. *Signifiante* has, as Stephen Heath states, been translated as "significance." However, unlike significance, or more specifically, signification, *signifiante* "is a process in the course of which the 'subject'. . .struggles with meaning and is deconstructed ('lost'). . .*Signifiante* cannot be reduced, therefore, to communication, representation, expression" ("Translator's Note," from Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, p. 10).

[39] Barthes, "Grain of the Voice," p. 185.

[40] Barthes, "Grain of the Voice," p. 185.

[41] Barthes, "Musica Practica," in *Image, Music, Text*, pp. 149-154.

[42] Barthes, "Musica Practica," p. 149.

[43] Barthes, *S/Z*, tr. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

[44] Michael Szekely, "Becoming-Still: Perspectives on Musical Ontology after Deleuze and Guattari," *Social Semiotics* 13 (2), 2003 (especially the section on "Intensities, Improvisation," pp. 116-119.

[45] Barthes, "Musica Practica," p. 153.

[46] Barthes, "Musica Practica," pp. 153-154.

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