

## Musical Performance and the 'Death Drive'

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### Abstract

This paper re-evaluates the trope of music as a mode of performing subjectivity from the perspective of Slavoj Žižek's critique of cognitivism and his discourse on the (post-Freudian) death drive.

I locate performance within the gap between cognitivism's emphasis on emotion within neurobiological reasoning, the foregrounding of empathy and sympathetic movement in embodied cognition, and deconstruction's privileging of the text. In this light, recent developments in consciousness studies support Lacanian insights into the "object voice" and modes of listening to offer fresh insights into performance strategies in the transition from desire to drive in the performing subject.

I propose a schema to ground the new models of subjectivity and embodiment in apparently diverse contemporary music, with a particular focus on works by Salvatore Sciarrino and Robert Ashley.

## The musical subject

'If we make music and listen to it...it is in order to silence what deserves to be called the voice as *object a*.' (Jacques-Alain Miller, 1989 cited in Dolar, 1996, p.10)

This essay is concerned with the way music is experienced as constituting subjective identity, and how the musical body exceeds and disturbs this process. Building on the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, in particular as developed by Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, I will explore the nature of the constitutive gap at the heart of subjectivity and the role of fantasy and desire in creating a short circuit, as in equating what we hear with what is heard. Relating this to the act of listening clarifies the fear of music within much musical discourse, and helps to identify the supplement created by the embodiment of music in performance. I will assess the strategies adopted by composers in negotiating this contract between performer and audience, focusing in particular on the music of Robert Ashley and Salvatore Sciarrino.

## Embodiment, subjectivity and the constitutive gap

To understand what is involved in performing music, we must separate out embodiment from subjectivity. Lacan distinguishes between the 'subject of the enunciation' and the 'subject of the enunciated' – the I who acts and speaks, and the I who is articulated through speech. In Descartes' famous formula 'I think therefore I am', the two 'I's are not equivalent: the latter, symbolic 'I' is constituted through the agency of the 'I' who thinks. The symbolic self, the 'I' of the enunciated, is – like all signifiers – purely differential; it has no substantive, positive content of its own. This is why Derrida defined the act of hearing oneself speak – the minimal basis of self awareness – as "the unique experience of the signified producing itself spontaneously, from within the self" (Derrida, 1976 cited in Dolar, 1996, p.13). This doubled nature of the subject is masked by the illusion of self-presence: we conflate these two modes of self. Music's pre-eminence in articulating identity,<sup>1</sup> of representing 'authentic' self-expression and embodying group affiliation, is central to this metaphysical conceit of a unified self.

Contemporary neuroscience confirms the autonomous self as a fiction.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on numerous studies, the philosopher of consciousness Thomas Metzinger (2009) describes our everyday experience of ourselves and the world as 'naïve realism'. Our sense of subjectivity is bound with 'the appearance of a world' in a single and unified reality – the world appears to *me* – yet this is constructed *retroactively* from the flux of 'particles and pure information' interacting with our neurological process of subjectivation. In order to own our sense perceptions, our brains create a subject – what Metzinger describes as a 'phenomenal self model' – to have them.<sup>3</sup> Crucially, this phenomenal self model is transparent: the brain's modelling work is invisible to itself.<sup>4</sup> The self is a surface illusion, a 'user effect'. Our identification with music, as we will see, is intimately tied to our naïve identification with ourselves: *I hear therefore I am*.

Yet Metzinger doesn't deny the possibility of experience beyond this cognitive closure, this self-contained model of reality; indeed, he is interested in meditation, lucid dreaming and other forms of altered consciousness. He avoids the New Age thesis of an inner homunculus, an inspired psychic unconscious that can perceive our self-model as opaque, that can 'see' itself thinking (or hear itself hearing); he argues rather that the experience of opacity of the self is built into our phenomenal self model itself, as an illusion of an illusion. As Žižek (2006, pp.219-220) points out however, these illusions – of transparency and of opacity – are not symmetrical, otherwise we would have a fiction observing itself "like a Magritean hand drawing the hand that, in its turn, draws the first hand".<sup>5</sup> He is precise in identifying the experience beyond the self, of 'being no-one', as a constitutive gap, "the proper empty core of subjectivity which...coincides with what Freud called the death drive" (Žižek, 2006, p.227). This clarifies Lacan's paradoxical formulation of Descartes' *cogito* – 'I think where I am not, therefore I am where I think not' – and his contention that the subject can only assume her fundamental fantasy (approach the Real of experience) insofar as she undergoes 'subjective destitution'. It is my contention that some composers develop musical and performative strategies to identify with this void and to enact a process of losing one's self.

The constitutive gap of experience corresponds with Lacan's designation of the Real in his tripartite framework, alongside the Symbolic (the register of language) and the Imaginary (the level of imagination).<sup>6</sup> The Real has no positive content of its own, yet both makes our unified experience possible *and* warps it.<sup>7</sup> Fantasy is the process of making a short circuit to overcome this loss and its accompanying anxiety. Through fantasy we fill the gap of the Real with positive content to make sense of and internalise what we experience but cannot comprehend, constructing a unified self through the illusion of self-presence, as when we hear ourselves speak or identify with our emotional response to music.

### ***Petit objet a*, desire and the death drive**

The void of the Real can also be marked by what Lacan called *petit objet a*, a stand in for the gap, an object with no positive content, that disturbs us and that we cannot assimilate. The voice is a privileged example: as Dolar (1996, 2006) has described, there is an 'object voice' beyond the voice as medium for language and the aestheticised or singing voice. In parallel with Lacan's differentiation of the subject of the enunciated and the subject of the enunciation, we have the voice as carrier of meaning and the voice as conveyor of emotion. The object voice marks the place of their incommensurability, the point at which the integration of meaning and emotion breaks down. As we will see, music evokes the voice and the (performing) body in ways that directly correlate with this structure.

The distinction between the object of fantasy that fills the void and *petit objet a* which holds the place of the void, also marks the difference between desire and drive in Lacanian thought and between different forms of repetition. Desire attaches itself to the replacement of the void; what Lacan calls the 'metonymy of desire' is our inclination to fixate on an aspect of the object or experience – Elvis' pelvis, Morrissey's quiff, Kylie's rear as much as a particular sonority<sup>8</sup> – that guarantees the consistency of our

emotional response with our understanding of the experience, such as the promise implicit in a particular musical performance. Objects of desire are interchangeable, and desire is repeated, duplicated in the manner of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Ultimately, what we desire is desire itself, a process of avoiding the split in our identity – or phenomenal self model – and the disintegration of our unified experience of the world. Crucially as we will see later in discussing cognitivism, it is our experience of emotions – what is pleasurable or not – that regulates and preserves this equilibrium.

In contrast with desire, drive is drawn to the placeholder of the void, the *petit objet a*. With no substance to attach to, drive circulates around the same empty space: it was this compulsion to repeat which first led Freud to propose the death drive.

'In the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the *lost object* to *loss itself as an object*. That is to say: the weird movement called 'drive' is not driven by the 'impossible' quest for the lost object; it is a *push to enact 'loss' – the gap, cut, distance – itself directly*.' (Žižek, 2006, p.62)

The death drive is our specifically *human* compulsion to exceed the bounds of the self, our ability to disturb this self-equilibrium regulated by the pleasure principle. It's precisely this equilibrium that disturbs us.<sup>9</sup> The death drive is related to our experience of those feelings of anxiety and horror which Lacan (after Freud) designates as the only affects that do not lie (and to which Žižek, after Badiou, adds the properly 'selfless' love of the Event). I would argue that it is this identification with the void that fascinates us and is the truth of musical experience.

### **Fantasy and desire in music**

Mladen Dolar's (1996, 2006) outstanding analysis of the voice follows Lacan and Freud in distinguishing between the voice in fantasy, in desire, and in drives, a schema that applies equally to music and the performance of subjectivity.

A remarkable aspect of fantasy is the privileged position of sound over vision: "the voice, the noise, things heard, are at the core of formation of fantasy; a fantasy is a confabulation built around a sonorous kernel." (Dolar, 2006, pp.135-136) The voice – and by extension music – operates as an appeal of the Other<sup>10</sup>, the Other's enigmatic desire, demanding our attention and response. We locate sound in an external source, which then resonates in us; fantasy provides an answer to what it means, what the Other – through the sensuousness of sound – wants from me. It creates a shortcut between what is heard and what we hear.

This structure is very clearly echoed, though unintentionally, by cognitivist studies of music perception.<sup>11</sup> David Huron (2007) describes how our minds operate conceptual models – underpinned by memory and expectation – that help to predict musical outcomes. These structure how we anticipate musical events; we experience through emotion (via neurochemical 'rewards' such as opiates and endorphins) the degree to which our model predicted the outcome accurately or not,

which in turn helps to train our imagination in modelling future events, creating a kind of feedback loop. In a further twist, echoing what has been called 'neural Darwinism', we seem to have multiple models of expectation running in parallel, simultaneously and at times in contradiction; what we experience as the present is the outcome rationalised *after* the event that corresponds most closely to a model we had anticipated. That is, what we experience as reality (e.g. what we hear) is that which most closely conforms to our expectations and is more likely to give us pleasure or inhibit anxiety (Huron, 2007, pp.126-127).<sup>12</sup>

A fascinating confirmation of this is the *exposure effect*, identified by the American research psychologist Robert Zajonc in the 1960s and 70s. In the simplest of terms, this explains that the more we hear something, the more we like it. More than that, the effect is more pronounced when the exposure to a stimulus is unconscious, and actually inhibited by conscious recognition.<sup>13</sup> We like something more because we can unconsciously predict how it goes, but we tend to *think* we like it for other reasons. In other words, we attribute the feeling we have in listening to a piece of music to a quality of the music itself. It should come as little surprise that music is one of the most repetitive phenomena that we experience. Huron (2007, p.229) claims that "on average, we found that 94% of all musical passages longer than a few seconds in duration are repeated at some point in the work" and that

'A person who listens to AM radio for three hours a day will hear over 330 songs a week, of which eight or ten will be unfamiliar works. .... Even for people with large record collections, it is estimated that just five albums in their collection will account for some 90 percent of their self-programmed listening.' (Huron, 2007, p.241)

No wonder tonality and pitch centrality are so popular, and that national radio airplay is so coveted by record labels (and that the Top Ten was self-reinforcing). It's a commonplace that popularity breeds popularity – music, films, celebrities that are believed to be popular then become popular.

This process of attribution underlies the voice in fantasy, closely approximating what Michel Chion (1994) terms 'causal listening': that is, listening to a sound in order to register its source. Causal listening relies on *synchresis*, the brain's default attribution of sound to a necessary visual cue. What Chion describes as 'added value', essentially the impression of depth and presence that sound adds to the image, object or body to which it's applied, is precisely our conflation of what we hear with what is heard.

Within the metonymy of desire, Dolar (2006) argues that the voice is *fixed* as a sonorous object (as a substitute for the void); meaning dissolves into aesthetic pleasure. More specifically, desire attaches itself to the sound of the voice as a supplement that endows meaning with presence: the voice in desire is not *opposed* to language, to meaning, but is the very supplement that makes it particular and contingent.

The parallels with 'reduced listening', which Chion (after Pierre Schaeffer) elaborates, are striking. Reduced listening focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning. One has to listen many times over, and "because of this the sound must be fixed, recorded" (Chion,

1994, pp.29-30). In the acousmatic situation – with the sound's source hidden from view – causal listening is at first intensified as the mind's eye seeks a physical source to the sound; reduced listening is possible only after repeated hearings. In practice, in most situations (including performance) causal and reduced listening modes overlap (or rather, like fantasy and desire, propel each other).

### **Fear of music (music as *objet a*)**

As Dolar (1996, pp.16-24) outlines, the history of music aesthetics articulates an anxiety that music might not just supplement meaning but override it, affecting us beyond our ability to understand it. Music is considered dangerous for what it adds to sense, and for its excess of pleasure. From one of the first texts on music in 2200BC, in an argument attributed to the Chinese emperor Chun, music is enjoined to convey text without supplementing it: "Let the music follow the sense of the words. Keep it simple and ingenuous. One must condemn pretentious music which is devoid of sense and effeminate." In *The Republic*, Plato regulates musical modes and instrumentation to avoid its seductive qualities (brilliantly set by Louis Andriessen in *De Staat*). Augustine likewise, in the *Confessions*, warns of music's affect exceeding the divine Word; whilst at the height of the French Revolution, François-Joseph Gossec led the creation of the Institut national de la musique to control music for the people, initiating the mass choir and prohibiting "music which mollifies the French soul by its effeminate sounds". These themes continue to recur, from Soviet Socialist Realism's promotion of worker's choruses and denunciation of formalism (attributing to musical structure music's surplus over meaning) to contemporary Iran's prohibition on music (*Wall Street Journal*, 2010). Any degree of affect, of emotion that we allow music must be rationalised, contained by the mind. As Žižek (1996, p.105) has noted, "another name for [*petit objet a*] is *plus-de-jour*, the 'surplus enjoyment' that designates the excess over the satisfaction brought about by the positive, empirical properties of the object." It is precisely music's capacity to make explicit our excessive enjoyment or horror, to invoke a response that is 'in us more than ourselves', that is dangerous and therefore illicit. Music disturbs us because it can reveal to us – and to the Other – the void remaining when we subtract our selves (Dolar, 2006, pp.130-134).

Fear of this excessive potential in music also lies behind arguments for music as an object of pleasure. For Huron (2007, p.373), one consideration trumps all others: "The idea that music making and listening are not motivated primarily by pleasure is biologically implausible"; "...those who organise concerts that fail to engage listeners are in the business of destroying not just their own audiences, but potentially the audiences for other musicians as well" (p.327).<sup>14</sup> This seems dangerously close to saying that what's popular is what's good. Feelings of pleasure or pain are conceived in evolutionary terms of reward or punishment (at least, the lack of reward), affirming behaviour that supports genetic survival. Preferences for certain types of musical characteristics are seen to correspond to positive evolutionary adaptations, whilst those characteristics that don't conform might be considered maladaptive. Yet what we experience as pleasurable and what we experience as evolutionarily useful can be contradictory. To quote Robert Wright: "we're designed to be effective animals, not happy ones" (cited in Lane, 2000, p.39).<sup>15</sup>

Huron's emphasis on pleasure in music conforms precisely to the role of the pleasure principle in fantasy. By treating emotions (physiological responses to music) as real and privileging them over our encultured conceptual models, he makes a transcendental gesture of subjectivity, a metaphysical conceit of self presence.<sup>16</sup> Where music becomes our experience of emotion, *I feel therefore I am*.

The role of music as a stand in for the void of the Real is also foreclosed by deconstructivist theory.<sup>17</sup> Following Rosalind Krauss' influential deconstructivist account of sculpture, Seth Kim-Cohen (2009) emphasises the dematerialisation of music, redefining it conceptually in the imaginations of its listeners. He defines music as signification, as code, a message that requires interpretation, to be 'read', and whose meanings are multiple. The question 'but is it art?' becomes redundant. The new question is: 'but what does it mean?'

As such, music cannot be experienced independently of memory or expectation:

'An expanded sonic practice would include the spectator, who always carries, as constituent parts of her or his subjectivity, a perspective shaped by social, political, gender, class, and racial experience. It would necessarily include consideration of the relationships to and between process and product, the space of production versus the space of reception, the time of making relative to the time of beholding. Then there are history and tradition, the conventions of the site of encounter, the context of performance and audition, the mode of presentation, amplification, recording, reproduction. Nothing is out of bounds. To paraphrase Derrida, there is no extra-music.' (Kim-Cohen, 2009, p.107)

Take the age-old philosophical question: if a tree falls in a forest with nobody there, does it make a sound? Kim-Cohen in effect re-frames this as a series of questions: 'what kind of tree?', 'which forest?', 'how did it fall?' and 'why was no-one there to hear it?'

There's a de-sanctification process in play here: from The Word made flesh to art as the flesh made Word. What is applied to art is also applied to subjects. The self is an illusion; I can only gain subjectivity by the conceit of authoring myself through language. *I signify therefore 'I' am*. In this way, Kim-Cohen also in effect denies the potential for a negative ontology of the void. Within his conceptual and contextual definition of music and sonic art, there is no place for music as *petit objet a* with its affect of the uncanny, its evocation of excessive pleasure or terror beyond the signifier.

### **Embodiment as the site of drive in music**

If we conceive music as *petit objet a*, what is the role of the performer beyond a conveyor of emotion (as in cognitivism) or actor in the play of signifiers (as in deconstruction)?

The improvising jazz pianist and composer Vijay Iyer (1997, 2008) has argued that what we attend to when we listen are less the objective characteristics of sound – melodic shape, timbre and so on – but how it's *embodied*. "The two primal sound-generating activities of rhythmic motion of the limbs and melodic outpourings of the voice form a basis for many kinds of music." (Iyer, 1997, p.6) The tactus –

the moderate-tempo pulse present in most rhythmic music – coincides with a moderate walking pace, a human heartbeat, the rate of jaw movement in chewing, and the infant sucking reflex. Non-metronymic expressive timing at the sub-tactus level is characterised by high-frequency activity, relating to speech: rhythms are frequently represented as linguistically derived mnemonics, such as Indian *bols*, whilst *quinto* players in Afro-Cuban *rumba* are said to 'speak' with their hands and fingers. Phrase lengths – especially on wind instruments naturally constrained by lung capacity – don't just breathe metaphorically.

'In this ecological framework, the source of perceived musical movement is the human performer, as is abundantly clear to the listener attending to music as a performance event. This suggests that musical perception involves an understanding of bodily motion – that is, a kind of empathetic embodied cognition.' (Iyer, 1997, p.19)

In a further twist, from the sensorimotor perspective, a perceived beat is literally an imagined movement. In other words, we sense music as an embodied action, and we are stimulated to move sympathetically.<sup>18</sup> The phenomenon of 'groove' is a prime example. We might reasonably ask: whose body do I experience?

Iyer recognises that in music, especially improvised music, "an individual's sound, rhythmic feel, and overall musical approach are seen as an indicator of who he or she 'is' as a person." (Iyer, 1997, p.26) He doesn't jump down this particular rabbit hole, though:

'Admittedly, such stereotypical characterizations beg to be broken down; rarely does a musician's offstage personality fit such conventional wisdom. Indeed, one could also view 'musical personality' as a kind of *mask* that the performer wears onstage.' (Iyer, 1997, p.27)

Music can construct imaginary bodies, and there is a wealth of literature – especially from feminist, gay and Black perspectives – that illustrates how this works culturally and politically. Yet if in listening, and especially at live performances, we identify with the music's or musician's embodied sensibility, what role might embodiment play in the listener's identification with the void? What might we mean by the subject of drive within music?

We should begin by decoupling the place of sound in fantasy and sound in desire.<sup>19</sup> I described earlier that fantasy creates a shortcut between what is heard and what we hear, as in causal listening which attributes sounds to their visual cues. Desire fixes on the particular qualities of the sound, as in reduced listening, registering its presence *for me*. Taken together, I inscribe my expectations within my hearing of a sound, which I then attach to a source; the pleasure or discomfort I take in this is returned to me as a quality of the sound and its source, as a guarantee of the consistency of my unified experience of the world. The performer is at the centre of this process, embodying both the inscribed sound *and* my response to it. The musician, or the body evoked, embodies the sensibility with which we identify.

If in causal and reduced listening I oscillate between sound and its cause, then in drive – insisting on a loss to which no sound can be fixed – I attend to a condition of *cause without a sound* (acousmatic



silence) or *sound surplus to its cause* (noise). Where sound is anticipated by gesture, a soundless body makes explicit the role of fantasy in constructing what I hear, the failure inherent in symbolising sound (as in Sciarrino's music, as we will see); exposure to this split causes anxiety. The performing body is also the site of a potential excessive enjoyment, supplementing my own pleasure which is returned to me with interest in the listening process (as with Robert Ashley's works); this *jouissance*, this surplus pleasure, sticking to the sound, is noise in the subject of drive.

In his (perhaps unhelpful) bifurcation of drive into Thanatos (death drive) and Eros (libido), Freud designated the latter the bearer of all the 'clamour of life'. There are many examples of sound surplus to its cause (or to the performer's body) within contemporary music: the interest in psychoacoustics of the drone, from La Monte Young and Tony Conrad to Phill Niblock and Sun O))) ; uncanny performers, often exhibiting an excessive enjoyment, whether Mike Patton's *Adult Themes for Voice*, Chris Newman's punk Lieder, Laurie Anderson's alter ego Fenway Bergamot, or Heiner Goebbels' performing installation *Stifter's Dinge*; and the interest in autonomism and shamanism, themes developed by Robert Ashley among others.<sup>20</sup>

### Robert Ashley robs the bank

Ashley worked on psychoacoustics and cultural speech patterns early in his career, and the relationship of speech to consciousness and subjectivity underpins much of his work. A large part of his music is characterised by a dreamily intense exploration of autonomism, expressly the concern of pieces such as *Automatic Writing* (1979), which deals with the phenomenon of involuntary speech within an aura of ambient repetition. He has produced a seminal body of work foregrounding liminal texts delivered in isomorphic, idiosyncratic or cyclical phrasing that cuts across its semantic structure or exaggerates its disjunctions, offering the prospect of finding meaning but constantly deferring closure. The voice is often enhanced electronically or shadowed by instruments, and is suspended within an ambient texture of bright parallel harmonies that cycle round, creating an effect of heightened illusion. In his Television Operas, notably *Perfect Lives*, this hyper-irreality is further enhanced by over-bright lighting, primary colours, minimal props or setting, a lurid glamour (shiny costumes, lip gloss and other make-up) and disorienting effects.

[ VIDEO FILE ] Robert Ashley; *The Sermon on the Self*, from *The Bar*; Part of *Perfect Lives*.

These day-glo works are both arresting *and* hypnotic, combining the ambient drift of minimalism with a jarring insistence of the voice.<sup>21</sup> Ashley saturates the field of experience (e.g. with steady-pulse repetition) whilst offering the prospect of a coherent frame of narrative and the surface recognition of the delivered text, creating a confusion of background and foreground that the perceiver is unable to synthesise. The voice doesn't supplement the text to make it meaningful, but coexists *despite* it, invoking meaning and revoking its closure simultaneously.

In his discussion of David Lynch, Žižek (2005, pp.113-136), describes how the director disturbs the semblance of reality by drawing attention to details that "render visible the disgusting substance of

enjoyment", over-sensuous elements that stick out (as in the famous opening sequence of *Blue Velvet*). These hyperreal moments – in particular using an uncanny dimension of the voice<sup>22</sup> – lead to a loss of reality as characters appear to lose their depth, becoming mechanical and two-dimensional. This inconsistency of reality is designated by 'feminine *jouissance*' – a pleasure beyond the chain of cause and effect that stands for the void of the subject proper: "The fundamental axis of Lynch's universe consists of the tension between the abyss of 'feminine' depth and the pure skin surface of the symbolic order: bodily depth constantly invades the surface and threatens to swallow it" (Žižek, 2005, p.122). A similar process is in play with Robert Ashley's work – it's no coincidence that *Perfect Lives* feels like a close relative to David Lynch films such as *Twin Peaks*. Ashley, nominally playing an over-the-hill entertainer accompanied by 'Blue' Gene Tyranny as Buddy ('The World's Greatest Piano Player') find themselves in a small Midwestern town playing at the Perfect Lives Lounge, telling stories about the people of the town. The plot revolves around a 'metaphysical challenge', a plan to take all the money out of the local bank for one day only, then put it back without being detected. The revelation that the money has disappeared creates a crack in reality for the five bank-tellers, resulting in a series of dream sequences.

The piece aims to warp the appearance of reality for the audience in a parallel with the story, using hyperreal presentation and especially his voicing of the text to invoke the realisation that there's no one at home, there is no positive core of subjectivity. This is made apparent in Part IV, The Bar (Differences), when Buddy gives a sermon on the nature of the self:

'We said the self is without coincidence, being singular. We said the self is without attainment, being perfect. And we said the self is ageless, being what I don't know, the word eternal is a mystery to me. I don't understand that word. I can't say the self is ageless being eternal, so I have to find another way of saying, another way of understanding that the self is ageless. And the way I've found that works for me is "shave" – imagine the self shaving for the first time. No. ...The self must be as ageless as it feels. Has your self changed? No. Do you remember when your self was other than it is? No. ... You say to me "we don't serve fine wine in half pints, buddy". That sound is just what we expect and need. We take sound so much for granted, don't we? It's the sound of God. "We don't serve fine wine in half pints, buddy" is the sound of God.' (Ashley, 1983)

When working on *Perfect Lives*, Ashley (1991, pp.181-182) was reading *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a text to be spoken into the ear of the recently deceased. According to this, the dead experience intensified experiences of their life whilst their senses fade at different rates, the hearing last of all. Ashley saw this as a metaphor for the piece:

'I was amused by the idea that if you have your mouth up to a microphone and there is an audience at the other end, that is very much like *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. That you are guiding the audience through an experience. I thought of *Perfect Lives* as being essentially like *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.'

Ashley creates a seductive, hypnotic flow through a continuous 72bpm pulse, 'Blue' Gene's 'boogie woogie' piano, Peter Gordon's cheap synth sounds, and rhythmic cycles for the text, matched by the lustre and glitz of the televisual production. At the same time, the piece builds on Ashley's interest in

involuntary speech,<sup>23</sup> revealing and accepting the limits of self consciousness by conveying the unknowable contingency of the present (Ashley, 1991, p.150). It's as if he invites the audience to come aboard with a dreamy promise of finding meaning, then cuts us gently adrift. Crucially, it's through Ashley himself, in particular the sensuous ebb and flow of his voice, that we become aware of the inconsistency of this reality. As narrator *and* multiple characters, his voice provides an almost continuous presence over the work's seven half-hour episodes, dominating the sonic field. He embodies and displays a surplus pleasure through subtle use of the microphone, especially a gentle reverb, allowing him to use the softest voice tones in a way that is both intimate *and* has a quality of public address.

At their best, Ashley's pieces cast him as his own ventriloquist: the performing body disappears within the treated voice, yet is returned as its supplement through the treatment of the voice and the texture's excessive, fantasmatic rendering. In effect, he *disembodies the sound using his own body*, described neatly by vocalist and composer Theo Bleckmann (2008, p.34): "most of all I am looking for sound that is not mine, but that is me."

### Salvatore Sciarrino finds the ghost in the machine

In contrast to Eros, Freud describes the death drive as mute. Dolar (2006, p.161) proposes that the voice, here, is like that of the (psycho)analyst: not simply the absence of sound, but a silence that *acts* within the register of speech. The analyst doesn't talk directly, but acts as the Other for symbolic registration of the analysand's thoughts: speech resonates in the Other and is returned as voice. It is the voice dispossessed. More fundamentally it is an *acousmatic silence*, a silence whose source cannot be seen but which has to be supported by the presence of the analyst.

John Cage's 4'33" might thus be seen as the zero-level of musical embodiment; the performer(s) makes the gestures of performance – opening and closing a piano lid, for example – without producing sound. It's the ultimate performance piece. A quick thought experiment can help to reinforce this crucial role of the performer: if it were performed in a transparent, sound-proof box, the effect would be completely different. The musician would be proxy for both listener and performer – we would be observing the performer's fantasy (hearing herself hearing), not our own.<sup>24</sup> We could equally imagine a performance with both performer and audience in an anechoic chamber, whereby 'what is in us more than ourselves' – the sounds of our central nervous system and heart – would be explicit.<sup>25</sup> We would see the performer and hear ourselves.

Salvatore Sciarrino also creates music close to silence for its expressive potential, but with different means. In a characteristic commentary on his percussion work *Un fruscio lungo trent'anni* (Nuevarena 2009), he asserted that "there is one thing without which no delight in sound makes sense, and that is the intensity of silence. The tension and the thoughts of the person who listens made perceptible by the person who plays." Often writing at the threshold of audibility, the sounds "preserve traces of the silence from which they come and into which they return, a silence which itself is an infinite rumbling of microscopic sonorities" as in his 'portrait in sound' of the Egyptian God of Silence, *Un' imagine di*

*Arpocrate*, where over 100 musicians produce little more than a distant murmur over a span of 45 minutes. Listening to Sciarrino's music is an intense experience – "a level of sensitivity where every perception would wound" as he remarks on *esplorazione del bianco* (Sciarrino 1996).

The presence of the body is unmistakable. Using a repertoire of extended instrumental techniques – keystrokes, breathing through instruments, mutes etc – his music evokes a vital acousmatic silence in the body with which the audience can identify: the microscopic pulsations, ticks, tremors, and quiverings. It amplifies the body's inner working in its vulnerability and delicacy; like listening for a sleeping baby's breathing, it's hardly there yet filled with wonder and anxiety. Sciarrino captures this perfectly in *Lo spazio inverso*: "Pulsating islands of sound enfold lakes of silence, and in silence we rediscover the sounds of the body, recognise them as ours, listen to them at last. We feel everything as if it were new... And gestures, emptied of their original drama, are not perceived as real, and their intrinsic representativeness wavers."

[ AUDIO FILE ] Salvatore Sciarrino; Lo Spazio Inverso; Performed by Alter Ego.

His use of silence inclines to a musical space beyond language, about which we can't speak. There are very few songs in his oeuvre; most pieces using texts are dramas. The lyrical voice as such is borrowed, as in the ghostly remnants of Mozart in the *Aspern Suite*. In 'Mormorando', the first of his *Tre Canti Senza Pietre*, the countertenor sings most of the piece while holding a handkerchief tightly between his lips, sounding as though he's suffocating interspersed with short cries. When the gag is removed, all the singer can do is produce disjointed gasps; as he gets into his stride the piece stops abruptly. The performer enacts the impossibility of identification with 'his' song, in music on the edge of hearing.

[ AUDIO FILE ] Salvatore Sciarrino - I Fuochi Oltre La Ragione - Performed by the RAI Symphony Orchestra

In Sciarrino's 1997 work *I fuochi oltre la ragione*, an orchestral body stirs on the border between sleep and wakefulness, all nervous system, with occasional breaths, starts and sighs. Shortly after the mid-point (about 19 minutes into the piece) a gun is fired, setting in motion a steady tactus pulse on claves which overlays the earlier texture and persists to the end of the work. If ever there was an evocation of the genius of dreaming and the poverty of everyday mental functions, this is it. In his note in the score, Sciarrino (1997) writes:

'The majority of human actions defy reason: they deviate towards zones that can't be fathomed. The history of humanity can be regarded, in some respects, as a dark mass of cruelty, and there are those who wish to turn a blind eye. However, we must not ignore the call of the irrational, which paradoxically casts light on man's contradictory and complex nature.

'In the past century fires which seem beyond all reason have led to combustions of appalling atrocity. Art, despite itself, bears silent and howling witness to this.'

## Conclusion

Music is *the* art of interior subjectivity, of self identification, yet this is a degraded trope. Contemporary music has often been isolated within the arts for composers' insistence on locating within sound a quality beyond subjective enjoyment or understanding. The death drive helps to define this quality as absolute negativity, an echo of the void at the core of experience. It is this that disturbs our reality, our ability to relate this music to ourselves, exposing in the body a supplement that produces excessive attachment (love), anxiety, or both.

## Footnotes

1. Examples abound. To name a few: the culture of mix tapes, the longevity of BBC Radio 4's Desert Island Discs, and the use of iPod track lists by politicians as indicators of personal sincerity and character with whom 'the public' – or at least key voting segments – can identify. [↵]
2. Having a young child and a parent with dementia, this seems self-evident to me. [↵]
3. As we will see, this perspective is echoed within cognitivism. For Antonio Damasio, 'core consciousness' emerges with "the very thought of you – the very feeling of you – as an individual being involved in the knowing of your own existence and the existence of others" (cited in Žižek, 2006, p223). [↵]
4. "Even if we believe that something is just an internal construct, we can experience it only as given and never as constructed." (Metzinger, 2009, p.44). [↵]
5. See also Zupančič (1996). [↵]
6. The framework might be likened to a coin: the Symbolic is the exchange value ascribed to it; the Imaginary is the two faces of the coin that represent the exchange value to imagination; the Real is the base metal of the object itself and its manufacture. See also Žižek (2007, pp.8-9). [↵]
7. Taking the idea of the coin, to conceive it as a manufactured metal object destroys the efficacy of its Symbolic exchange value, and makes its particular Imaginary imprint redundant. [↵]
8. Adorno (1991) makes a similar argument in his critique 'On The Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening', relating the popularity of certain singing voices and "cult of the master violins" to Marx's definition of the commodity as an object that magically inscribes our (social) relation to the object as a quality of the object itself. [↵]
9. 'The paradox of the Freudian 'death drive' is that it is Freud's name for its very opposite, ...for an uncanny excess of life.... humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things.' (Žižek, 2006, p.62). [↵]
10. The Other is the imagined perspective of a person or entity different to one's self, which Lacan raised to the level of the symbolic itself. [↵]
11. Cognitivism aims at the scientific study of mind through experiments, often in quasi-laboratory conditions, from which mental representations and reactions – brain scans, heart rate, verbal descriptions – can be measured from a controlled input (e.g. sound or music with specific characteristics, such as melodic shape, sound placement, and duration). [↵]

12. This concurs with Metzinger (2009, p.44): "What we experience as a continuous present is the past given presence through the feedback loop of expectations and anticipation." What's more, in a Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' procedure, the expectations we hold that are unsuccessful are then suppressed, the neuronal pathways de-animated. This is how we construct reality. [↵]
13. This effect underlies the potency of subliminal advertising. [↵]
14. This view is widely shared – see Taruskin (2009) and The Telegraph (2010) reporting on Philip Ball's *The Music Instinct*. [↵]
15. See also Stevens and Price (1996). [↵]
16. See also Žižek (2006, p.233). [↵]
17. "Derrida's deconstructive turn deprives the voice of its ineradicable ambiguity by reducing it to the ground of the illusory presence, while the Lacanian account tries to disentangle from its core the object as an interior obstacle to self-presence. For the object embodies...the rupture in the middle of the full presence and refers it to a void." Dolar (1996, p.16). [↵]
18. As is well known, in many societies music and dance are bound together such that, as for the Anlo-Ewe culture of southern Ghana, the term most closely approximating our 'music' has been translated as 'dance-drumming'. [↵]
19. See also Žižek (1996, p.115). [↵]
20. It's no surprise that his composer-performer son, Sam Ashley, has extensively explored 'experimental trans-mysticism', 'contemporary shamanism' and 'spirit possession' in his work. [↵]
21. It is significant that Ashley believes 'that the voice should be a part of every musician's technical skills, and...that the use of the voice is in every way as important as technical skills on an instrument'. (Ashley and MAE, 2007). [↵]
22. Žižek gives the examples of Dune – notably the hero Paul Atreid – the dwarf in the Red Lodge in *Twin Peaks* and the interior sound of the body suggested in *The Elephant Man*. [↵]
23. See his interview with Thomas Moore (2005). [↵]
24. The ambiguity of this in the recording studio can be clearly felt in the recent 'pop' release of 4'33" as *Cage Against The Machine* in December 2010, in particular the nervous cough at 1'50" and the euphoria at the end. [↵]
25. It's perhaps significant that whilst Cage had been interested in silence and conceived the idea behind 4'33" some years before, it was his experience of the anechoic chamber at Harvard University in 1951 that inspired him to compose it. [↵]

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## Author Bio

Ed McKeon works with composers and musicians to produce live performance events, is a visiting lecturer at Birmingham Conservatoire, and an occasional broadcaster on BBC Radio 3. He jointly ran the Society for the Promotion of New Music, was director of Oxford Contemporary Music, on the management team of the London Sinfonietta, and was a freelance producer for Spitalfields Music Summer Festival in 2010. He has produced over 150 unique events and commissioned over 100 new works. He now jointly runs the new music production company Third Ear. The issues in this paper arise from consideration of how meaning is produced in live performance.