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Introduction: How Knowable is Music?

Cindy Zeiher and Mike Grimshaw

Music's not a plaything; it's as serious as your life.
Val Wilmer¹

Music has its existence on the borderline between meaning
and nonsense.

That is why most attempts to attribute a specific meaning to a
piece of music seem to be beside the point—
even when the attribution is authoritative,
even when it is made by the composer himself.

Charles Rosen²

'Music can be such a revelation', sang Madonna in the eighties. She is not wrong. While this issue contemplates such revelations, it does at the same time puts this claim to work – what can music, if anything, reveal to us, about us and the world we inhabit? Moreover, is the function of music to reveal anything at all? If we are to take the work of Cage seriously, we could say that music reveals nothing in particular, and yet it still fully engages our senses all of the time. Certainly, Cage is the forerunner as prioritising sound as musical sensibility, one which he says, we should not really have a desire to traverse but rather be fully interpellated within. Considering his claim, Cage still went against the grain and resisted falling into the sometimes too easy 'music is good for something/nothing' dialectic which tends to contour musical taste and sensibilities. And by no means was he a relativist. Rather, Cage's

oeuvre of compositional work constantly and unrepentantly asks, what makes music, *music*? There are many before and in the wake of Cage who ask similarly. For example, experimental sound makers challenge accepted knowledge discourses of music while at the same time drawing upon the plethora of insights and techniques from some of the world's renowned composers and musicians. The singular attention to detail performance, composition and listening demand all require some insight into music to varying degrees. One does not necessarily need to know the difference between chamber or orchestral music (although it doesn't hurt to find out), after all, many thinkers and lovers of music have not grasped the nomenclature of music composition to talk about what might move them about a piece of music. Music is for everyone, anytime, anywhere – and as peace, love and tofu this might sound, it is this universalist uptake of music which precisely puts it under scrutiny. Here we can turn to our favourite Frankfurt school frenemy, Theodor Adorno. Adorno was an accomplished musician who held vast knowledge about music composition and history, having been a student at the conservatorium. But what gives Adorno such a bad reputation among music lovers is his draconian views not on what music consists of, but what it *should* consist of and for whom. For him, everything else is pure noise, not always worthy of the title, 'music'. For Adorno what makes music, *music* is a matter of taste, preference, and sensibility. Contra Adorno – and it is no laughing matter - improviser, Derek Bailey said that sometimes his favourite part of an orchestral piece is when musicians tune up at the beginning.³ Sure, everyone is tuning up to an A as usually signalled by the oboe – but it is an A in all its glory, played for that one moment to its full extent by every musician regardless of their instrument. Perhaps Adorno might appreciate the orchestral tune up as a technical necessity as well as a signal for the concertgoer to be mindful of etiquette. But for those who listen to the A for simply what it is – a resounding, all encompassing, atonal A in a concert hall against the background of hushen audience chatter – we can think of it a fully interpellative moment where the orchestra is truly together in the proliferation of performing highly composed western art music. Here we could say that Adornian listening is insisted as fully realised in the moment of tuning up, right now.

Thinking and music do have a fractured relationship. It is not easy to think music, although perhaps easier to think musically. This supposed impasse has not dissuaded thinkers, music lovers and music makers. Here again though, we contend with the problem of what makes music, *music*? We could approach this difficult question by asking perhaps a simpler one: how can music and music-making be knowable? This question was core to French musicologist and philosopher, Vladimir Jankélévitch who could not imagine life without music. Also a

trained musician and composer, music for him was an ineffable form. It operated in the same way as thinking: one must have a desire to grapple with complexities of music and be willing to struggle with its potential to enliven and disorient one's senses. Here we have the interesting conundrum music provokes: musical sense can be distinguished from musical sensibility. Jankélévitch acutely knew this and was not afraid to wrestle with cutting against the grain in the name of cultivating musical 'sense', an appreciation and love, distinctive from Adorno's plea for taking up reasoned musical 'sensibility'.

Music can also find itself in the most unlikely of journeys. Mike Grimshaw recounts Aotearoa/New Zealand musician Riki Gooch as providing a musical 'sense' to his reflections on how thinking can be thought and expressed:

Eru Dangerspeil's Great News for the Modern Man [by Riki Gooch] was my soundtrack as I read and annotated Vattimo's *Not Being God* (2009) on two flights: from Los Angeles to Auckland, New Zealand, and from Christchurch, New Zealand to Melbourne, Australia. In both cases there was a movement, a voyaging between a continent and an island in a world where technology seeks to overcome time, time is fractured and re-assigned, and texts are translated, annotated and weakened in hermeneutics...

Weak Thought was re-read in transit between what Auge (1995) terms non-places, those late modern transit points that Iyer (2000) names as part of the transitory location for the 'global soul'. *Eru Dangerspeil*, a bricolage of multi-ethnic musicians, taking Northern hemisphere forms and remaking them, stretching, deconstructing and reconstructing them in an antipodean context, under the consciously gospel nod of 'great news for the modern man' provided a deconstructive soundtrack expressing a regional reworking to what, in popular music always threatens to become a new provincialism. This threat is also present in Continental Philosophy, unless it is open to the possibility of exchange and remaking. Of course, 'Continental Philosophy' is itself a type of provincial regionalism, named by the outsider, by the receptors, yet still in thrall to an idea of the original continent, for thought in Western consciousness is a European continent that has its thought remade, received, approved, and restated in a new continent of North America.⁴

The contributors in this issue deal with the question of what makes music, *music* via a number of categories for thinking: listening, music-making and subjectivities whether they be collectivised or singular encounters. But as many contributors point out, the category of music also puts our other senses to the test – we go about life

always hearing, reading, talking about this and that, being discerning about what we take up, what we choose not to. In order to undertake these tasks and repetitions of daily life, we need to organise and synthesise our senses. It would seem, according to Adorno at least, that we often put listening proper on the backburner. And it is here for Adorno that music suffers.

But maybe not for everyone in the same way as Slovenian musician, Boris Benko points out in his contribution on political music-making. Music in former Yugoslavia was not a distraction to the political milieu of the time but rather an important counterpoint, reflection and a force to be reckoned with. Benko asks why this is no longer the case. Specifically, he interrogates the changing place of music in politics. Benko, an active musician during much political turbulence, past and present, reflects on working with *Silence* and *Laibach* and how music provided an important political and politicised function during turbulent political crises as former Yugoslavia transitioned.

James Martell continues this theme of 'degenerate music' offering that music can offer a topology of 'ugly thoughts'. Such a mapping of thoughts is both captured and propagated musically – here he draws upon Wagner as being an exemplary example. Martell goes on to offer various examples which intersect with contemporary thought, literature, historical and political events, and contemporary social phenomena such as #MeToo. The provocation Martell offers is compelling: music allows a permissibility to indulge excessive pleasure of what is otherwise, 'ugly'.

Music however cannot occur without initially at least the uptake of imagination and fantasy. Composer, Caitlin Smith stunningly offers how composition can be thought of as a form of daydreaming about listening and the potential of what be heard. Employing Bergson and Henry James, Caitlin Smith draws upon the ineffable nature of music, its ability to draw one into a state of reverie which seeks the repetition of the daydream state one finds themselves in from time to time. She explores the possibility of music as a language from which one can express that which is experienced as wholly affective but which can only ever be half said.

Critical theorist and experimental drummer, Andrew Cole offers a witty and insightful composition on suburban rock music, fused with pop cultural television and radio references as he tackles Adorno's category of audience. Much like Frampton gives the talk-box a 'voice', Cole gives Adorno's voice a certain timeless instrumentality. Here Cole argues that Adorno didn't get to see – or more precisely, hear – the fruits of his labour regarding his writings on music, more poignantly the effects of his critique of 'everyday' music. While he draws upon well-known popular music which Adorno was critical of, Cole remains sympathetic, insisting that

postmodernity allowed Adorno's writings on music to fully eclipse in an unexpected crescendo. In this way, Cole offers an engaging provocation: we ought not to dismiss Adorno's critique of 'half-listening' to music, but rather take it seriously for every genre -- including (and especially) popular music (and arguably even elevator music!): the very kind of music Adorno is noted for loathing.

Composer and scholar of religious music, Gerald Liu offers how music can be a singular transformative potentiality for the subject. The abstraction of music, or rather how the subject willingly abstracts music is where Liu begins in his exploration of sound and subjectivity. He speaks of how music is both a background and foreground to one's life, allowing a space for reflection and the possibility of transformation.

Brazilian-Chilean philosopher and composer, Vladimir Safatle engages Hegel's theory of listening, *sich-fuhlen* as a specific composition form. Safatle allows us to engage with this obscurity in Hegel's writings on aesthetics – after all, Hegel knew very little about music, although he was a keen music-lover, particularly of the opera. Safatle asks, how can we think musical-feeling as pure feeling without falling into the giddy romanticism Hegel was so critical of?

Composer and music educator, Leila Adu-Gilmore puts knowledge of music on the table and under scrutiny by offering how western art music and its production has been prioritised to the detriment of black women's voices. The important seminal text by Val Wilmer, 'As Serious as Your Life' – who Adu-Gilmore referenced – is crucial to understanding Adu-Gilmore's important and unapologetic plea for awareness, at the very least, of sexual politics in music-making. Adu-Gilmore brings sexual politics into the contemporary music world as she critiques musical hierarchies of knowledge, those unquestioned industry roles which perpetuate gender and racial inequalities, and the role music can play in decolonisation.

Lacanian cultural theorist, Rosemary Overell offers a way into listening to the uniqueness of the metal voice by offering that its atonal opaqueness uncannily gives it distinctive clarity. It is the voice, Overell claims, which makes metal, *metal*. In her contribution, Overell suggests that metal is an 'instrumental voice' which touches on the Lacanian category of the Real. But more than this, Overell allows us to think about the metal voice as gendered in unexpected way and which provoke us to think the category of voice as transformative, political, and subversive; that is, the flip side to some of the more taken-for-granted assumptions which circulate metal music and the ways in which it is enjoyed.

Composer and scholar of mediæval music, Silvan Wagner's contribution considers the problem of categorising 'good' and 'bad' music. Wagner tracks how such categorisation has been historically produced and perpetuated. Thinking

intertextually, Wagner troubles the notion of what can be considered desirable musically by tracing how religious morals and sensibilities have historically influenced how we take up particular 'musics'.

Critical theorist, Christopher Breu asks, 'how is the encounter between human and post-human a sonic/sound encounter?' Here he draws upon Meillassoux and Basinski, particularly *On Time, Out of Time*, to posit the post/human as a distinctive phenomenon and trajectory of sound. Here he tackles how sound is socially and culturally produced through the organisation of time, allowing us to think of sound as an ontological meditation.

Aotearoa/New Zealand composer and visual artist, Eve de Castro-Robinson gives us a glimpse into her unique process of bringing artforms together. What might happen, de Castro-Robinson asks, if music-makers were to engage visual art as specific musical markers instead of or in addition to traditional composed notation? de Castro-Robinson undertakes this compositional experiment by subverting traditional notation compositional processes and intentions and generously offers that such interdisciplinary approaches to aesthetics can act in ways to inform each other in unending continuous creative dialogue.

Greek musicologist and composer, Panayiotis Kokoras offers a deliberation of shamanist music as manifesting from the necessity of the invisibility of force. Such force Kokoras maintains must manifest as an energy from material objects and bodies in the very first instance. Whilst the transcendent and transformational function of music in shamanist ritual is foregrounded, Kokoras invites us to take a step back and consider those forces which we can't always see but can hear: the energies emanating from objects, bodies and electricity are pure sound. Here we consider the fusion of the transcendental with sound as having a necessary foundation in materiality.

Philosopher, Slavoj Žižek makes a case for materialist music when he focuses on French-Slovenian avant-garde contemporary composer, Vinko Globokar. Weaving in and out of various social sensibilities which concern sex, language, class, as well as the role of music in such categories of life, Žižek claims that Globokar's 'materialist' music, is a specific musical form provoking us to take up a materialist position. Here Žižek tracks music's ideological function as simultaneously producing and reflecting how we can think the materiality of politics via the collectivisation of music.

We learn more about Slovenian music and its connection to political life from composer and musicologist, Martin Pogačar when he considers the romantic love song as a form of singular subjectivity which allows a universalist vision, especially in the unromantic realm of the political. We all desire to fall in love – it is an experience

which opens the world rendered as a singular encounter with something else, usually another, and at the same time feels so uniquely internal. For Pogačar the love song extends beyond the subject and towards some sort of political or social potential and yet at the same time is imbued with limitations. Pogačar's contribution is reminiscent of those great composers such as Shostakovich whose compositions were influenced by neo-classicalism, bringing attention to the guises of political terror and uncertainty. It is crucial as Podocar's text reminds us that music needs to be read both to the letter and in between the lines.

We continue this thinking of collectivist provocative music-making with musicologist, Gregory Camp who focuses on *Orfeo* as a way into thinking about the function of the chorus as a specific community of not only voices but also one which is representative of class, gender and interpersonal relations. In this text Camp puts to work the historicised Marxist readings of *Orfeo*, insisting that community and opera are inseparable musically especially when it comes to its more melodramatic and affective representations.

We are honoured that Jean-Luc Nancy offered us two texts before his death earlier this year. While Nancy claims that he knew little about music, it is clear from his two contributions that this was far from the case. His texts complement each other so nicely – the first being about Hungarian classical composer György Kurtág. Here Nancy generously takes us by the hand through a particular performance of Kurtág's Quartet No 1 (which is embedded as a hyperlink in his text). We encourage you to listen to the performance as you read Nancy's text as certain sections are punctuated to interrogate how this composition invites the listener into the silences, layers and textures which are performed by the Keller Quartet. This listening exercise Nancy offers us sits alongside his interrogation of listening to/for the voice. Specifically, Nancy is referring to the philosopher's voice and draws upon Günther Anders as a specific voice both resonating with and distinctive from Adorno's. Nancy offers us a caution in his text: not to always fall into giddy astonishment when thinking about music but rather accept music as a distinctive universal mode of existence.

We sincerely thank Steve Corcoran for his time and meticulous care in translating Nancy's important contributions to music and listening.

It is with delight that we include in this issue, three conversations about music with Aotearoa/New Zealand composer and performer, Reuben Derrick. Derrick has shared musical encounters with all three musicians, and we are grateful for his willingness to 'talk' music with these compelling and provocative music-makers, all of whom represent different times and spaces as well as approaches to listening and composition. Riki Gooch, Aotearoa/New Zealand performer discusses how music is

a materiality which necessarily needs to manifest from nothing. Much like Nancy, Gooch provokes us to defer what we think we know about music so are not rushing into taken-for-granted ideas and structures which are comfortable and unchallenging.

American experimental guitarist, Susan Alcorn discusses her own approach to music-making, where she blends notes with noise. Alcorn talks of how the struggle of such a mixture is important for music-makers and music-lovers equally. For Alcorn, categories for listening need to be problematised against the more typified collectives of audience and performer. Here Alcorn urges us to blend notes and noise regardless of how we position our desire for music-making and listening.

The issue concludes with an interview with legendary German reed player, Peter Brötzmann. Brötzmann offers his thoughts on 'instant composing' – that is, composing improvisation on the spot, in the here-and-now. For Brötzmann music is a lived experience one must commit to with all its joys and struggles. Moreover, music is a specific exploration of how one takes up a position of being curious about the world: music-making and curiosity go hand in hand.

As in every issue, we have our dossier and review section. We are grateful to our contributors in these sections: Ryan Engley, Sigi Jöttkandt, Andreas Beyer Gregersen and Brett Nicholls. It is within the spirit of CT&T that we are committed to making available those contributions which might fall outside the scope of more conventional journals without compromising intellectual integrity and serious dedication to ideas.

We would like to thank all our contributors and those who worked tirelessly to make this issue an actuality which can be shared – they all certainly invite musical revelations! It has been a pleasure to edit this issue on music.

Cindy Zeiher and Mike Grimshaw, December 2021
New Zealand

Notes

¹ 1977, *As Serious as Your Life: The Story of the New Jazz*. London: Allison & Busby, 1977

² *The Frontiers of Meaning: Three Informal Lectures on Music* (1994), Ch. 3: Explaining the Obvious Music

³ Derek Bailey, *On the Edge. Documentary about Improvisation*. BBC, 1992.

⁴ Mike Grimshaw, 'What does an up-to-30-piece dub-soul-funk-soul-jazz ensemble from New Zealand have to do with Vattimo's 'weak thought' and the future of Continental Philosophy of Religion?' [draft paper]