

# **Musica incognita: seven impractical arguments**

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*The term ‘impossible music’ is implying an unattainable poetry. In this paper I choose to argue that poetry is itself a quest of the unattainable. The seven points made are, successively, that impossible music never had a point, that music is to do with the manner in which we invent sounds and not the invention itself, that mechanical sounds are not musical because they can be ‘known’, that music is not necessarily produced, pronounced and heard, that music cannot be an experiment because it is a ritual, that music is a myth, not an allegory and finally that music can only be impossible.*

*keywords: impossible music; Narrenschiff; free ritual; music and language; inconceivable music; unknown music;*

## **1. Ad fontes**

*προαιρεῖσθαί τε δεῖ ἀδύνατα εἰκότα μᾶλλον ἢ δυνατὰ ἀπίθανα.*

(probable impossibilities are to be preferred to improbable possibilities)

Aristotle, *Poetics* 1460a28f.<sup>1</sup>

Impossible music is nothing to be achieved. Before music sounds we already countenance its core element: impossibility. After the music has been heard, the impossibility of hearing it in the present is further revealed to us. What remains is a memory and an expectation, both in temporal distance. This is reminiscent of Dante’s condemnation of the Epicureans ‘whose knowledge of the present was not clear’<sup>2</sup>. If such harsh punishment as being sentenced to knowing only of the future and past was reserved for the repugnant heretic in the literature of past times, historicism today continues to shape a similar condition of poetic suicide. Now that the history of sound has been placed firmly on a definitive chronological table, we have ‘turned our home into our hanging place’<sup>3</sup> indeed.

Making impossible music is not an inactive course, nor an unintentionally absurd one. It uses no tricks or illusions but is in itself a miracle. This strife as a necessity to itself has been discussed before, more often than not in a heroic light – according to Miguel de Unamuno for instance ‘unless a man aspires to the impossible, the possible that he achieves will be scarcely the trouble worth achieving.’<sup>4</sup> For all that it is worth, this is certainly the quixotic impetus that is so characteristic of human discovery. Invention, on the other hand, was never worth more than the magnitude of its absence. We have – at any given opportunity and as a matter of traditional course – proceeded to celebrate our indulgence in both invention and discovery following what triumphs of knowledge they have produced: if attempting the absurd does not guarantee an improbable attainment, it is still a key requisite of enterprising progress. That much appears to be universally discernible.

However, neither rational thought nor absurdity<sup>5</sup> are the central themes of impossible music; its fundamental concern is to do with inconceivable syllogisms. All the same, this is an affirmative (and creative) way to think about sounds, forming a cogent argument for emancipation from the constraining notions of historicism and scientific discipline, whilst leading on a path which allows our instincts to observe sounds as incomprehensible, impossible to understand, correct but hypothetical experiences. In short, impossible music is a music without the station and delusion of utilitarian fact.

## **2. Husserl’s *Lebenswelt* and Pirandello’s nose: contemporary music for no one in particular**

When Husserl challenged historicity and the – admittedly questionable – ‘matters of fact’ which permeate it by searching for truths whose denial would be inconceivable, he was – as a matter of fact notwithstanding – returning to the intellectual drama of the pre-Socratics, formulating a method, a system of factually and rationally related and replicated ideas.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this venture leading back to the linear narrative of reasoning could have been avoided, had the ambitious aim of Husserl’s discourse, namely to reinvent the premise of knowledge, been absent, for to aim is to define an end and with it a middle and a beginning. Teleological historiographies aside, the drama of perception and awareness has always concerned creative people: famously, Pirandello’s existential agony grew exponentially after his wife pointed out that his nose tilted to the right slightly<sup>7</sup>. He never

knew or meant it to do so, but as soon as the discovery was made, it took the proportions of a central theme. We shall return to this point later.

For the purposes of discussion alone, let us concede that Husserl's intentional objects are a result of 'noesis' (cognition) and that they somehow reflect the distant shades of their respective 'noema' (meaning).<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, intersubjectivity, i.e. the notion that one may deduce external states of mind judging from one's own perception, is an error in rational terms, even a form of philosophical vandalism as its sole premise is arbitrary identification and determination. In musical terms, a similar adherence to universal values implies an inherent uniformity of criteria in all individuals. Not astonishingly, it imposes ideals and standards. In music making, this translates into pertinent theoretical and aesthetic axioms. However practical and welcome by musicians, common practice apparatus is essentially forged by necessity and its operative truths are debatable, even if they are not always open to debate. The truth that much fine music has been made on account of common practice theory, does not negate the inconsistencies that music theory is infused with; one need look no further than the manner in which music theories obfuscate the temporal incongruity of the triplet instead of illuminating it. What is disquieting is that in the collective conscience of musicians, these inconsistencies are rarely recognisable or dealt with creatively. It is as if the rationality which practice codes purport to serve has been supplanted by a deep-rooted obedience to irrationality.

A central axiomatic principle shared by most musicians is the value of musical inscription, encoding, that is, of what appears to be common knowledge for all musicians. Musical notation developed from its vague semiotic foundations to a full system of prescription and compact hermeneutics. Still, all along the way, composers have cast doubt on its function whenever their poetic impulses outshined their practical contemplations – in the case of the more profound composers this has been quite often the case. Whether doubt is expressed by ambiguous instruction, impractical complexity or indeterminacy is of some analytical interest. But what seems more significant is the wish of composers to cross the functional boundaries of notation by developing its more undecided attributes.

Why else should Chopin ask a pianist to play 'cantabile' when he knew the voiceless, percussive physiology of the piano sound so well, why should Satie make his scores so impossibly philological and why would Kurtág riddle his scores with so many conventional

antinomies? It may be argued that Chopin sought ‘naturalist’ imitation, that Satie demanded anthropocentric interpretations and that Kurtág is a writer of gestural rhetoric. Such an argument would be as incorrect as it would be disorientating; conformity to such historical concision<sup>9</sup> only restricts the more explosive, graceful creative flight within the boundaries of social function and utility. As a result of this, music is reified. Whenever, in the history of music notation, a musician found creative nourishment in script, the composer had established a context of limitations but had also achieved a simultaneous exodus from that context. In other words, the composer-poet presents a number of possibilities to the performer and then punctuates, highlights and structures his directions by way of providing critical impossibilities. To the contrary, when only the limits are imposed, the composer is merely an arranger of prefabricated musical stipulation and reiterant formulas. Not unlike a philosopher answering questions with questions, the composer’s prerogative and ethical imperative is to promote novelty from the category of result or cause to the status of *modus operandi*; to search not for new sounds, as if sounds were objects of discovery and exploitation, but for impossible, new *ways* of inventing and imagining sounds.

To conclude in near polemical excess: it is true that the proudly amoral, mercantile faction of our contemporary audience – or theatre – stands uninterested in this quest, or in Pirandello’s nose for that matter, but the lack of interest must grow mutual in the beginning of this century – this is hardly the time to appease customer-audiences. No compensation or apology is offered here for the messianic tone and delivery of unsubstantiated opinion: creativity recommends to itself readily substantial opinion and some gentle measure of self-importance if only to defend its right to a freer, truly authentic music.

### **3. Intonarumori (the present)**

The notion that a certain musical sound is conceived, transmitted and perceived is based on the principle that musical sound may fluctuate in its objective form in all stages of its travel. On the other hand, in improvisation, musical moments are meant to be continua in the duration of which the conception of music is altered. Similarly, during the transmission of a musical sound, a number of external events may cause the modification of sound; such is the intention of interpretation and concert performance for instance. Finally, the perception of sound differs from receiver to receiver, it varies from moment to moment. All this is obvious,

but it goes to refute the fallacy of objectification and proves that the episodic standardisation of musical continuity is in itself an impossibility. Only this impossibility is not a pursued affair, but a disappointment of probabilities.

It seems that one of the unspoken efforts of much contemporary music is to eliminate the first two stages – and maybe finally the third – by the introduction of machinery which is specifically designed to crystallise the musical process. One of the key functions which electronic musical instruments capacitate is formations of particulars, or extensions of musical notation. What is especially striking here is the concept of concrete sources, origins and standard transmission. There is nothing mistaken about attempting to capture a moment of conception, eliminating the breathing pulse of a transmitter and even procuring for minimal space interference during transmission in the name of ‘high fidelity’ to a sampled or filtered ideal. Following this through, there would be nothing inherently wrong with sedating the receiver perhaps – upon agreement for instance – so that the process becomes almost totally void of fluctuation and transforms into a case of automated musical hypnosis. When one looks at the greater picture of music today, it certainly seems to be the case that common practice and popular demand promote these inclinations and it would be interesting to explore whether these inclinations are new or old.

No more will be discussed here about the degree to which human involvement qualifies a sound as music or noise and how these two ‘categories’ of sound are associated. Many readers may even find such a discussion of terminology uninteresting, obsolescent and irrelevant. It is without doubt a crucial discussion of definitions and preferences, which might reveal the political quintessence of music history and contemporary practice. It may also allow us to appreciate why some are not choosing to listen to sounds carefully, even though they hear them or even make them. Much has already been written on the subject to modest global consequence and most of it has an inescapable air of indoctrination about it; the issue was inevitably brought up but will also be deflected here for the sake of minimum academic propriety. Over the next three chapters, a pervading (if secondary, veiled and epigrammatic) discussion will focus on the more general relationships between the veneration of novelty and the medieval idiosyncrasy of myth.

#### **4. Trivia (the past)**

The question to be addressed at this point is whether the triptych of sound generation, sound travel and sound perception is the categorical absolute. I will consider the rhetorical, grammatical and dialectical alternatives by adding to, varying and eliminating from the succession of stages respectively.

To add a stage in the auditory process would mean to transform the echo of a sound into an autonomous event, or in other words to allow the initial medium an active role of intercession, to give rhetorical life to an object. It may be argued that this has been one of the core concerns of live electronics in music. The sole counter argument (see §3) is that in order to concede an equally important role<sup>10</sup> played by animate and inanimate producers of sound, their intelligence ought to be equally natural or artificial. Filtering the auditory process through self-motorised, programmed mechanisms and hearing a transposing, self-governing component are two distinctly different things. Still, beyond this anthropocentric, almost Romantic objection, live electronics have proven to be a case of adding a communication constituent to the equation. This is an impossible route which is already explored by fervently ecstatic shamans as well as scientifically uninvolved researchers: both seem to agree that air particles and media should be active and hybrid composers, even if this arrangement is verging on the Nietzschean hyperbole. To add a stage in the auditory process would be as impossible as to create life through sound; the question itself is not inconceivable. For Xenakis it is a ‘constant companion of the human intellectual spiral’,<sup>11</sup> but the implementation technique and the question of procedure here exceeds the analogies of the probabilities and possibilities of the initial, three-part conception.

What then of subtracting a phase? Eliminating one of the stages, i.e. the production of sound, the interference of medium or the reception by an audience (even if receiver and producer identify) would constitute a communicative and expressive impossibility. Practically, it would be perfectly possible to perform music which is not heard by others (in relative terms), so it is not the practicality which prohibits the action from the region of music, but rather the incompatibility with norms derived from centuries if not millenia of societal conditioning. It must be observed that ‘eliminating the medium of sound’ is perfectly vague and that ‘eliminating the perception of sound’ is inconceivable; still, neither is impractical. To ‘legalise the argument’, it stands ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ that we might be able to produce

and perceive a sound in absolute immediacy, i.e. internally and it stands ‘beyond doubt’ generally, that the conditions do exist for sounds to be produced and never be perceived by living organisms, given that the sound projectile is aimed suitably for these purposes. This is as impossible as it is probable and as we are ignorant of it happening at all times. What would be the point of imagining its existence? Music never really had a point.

Furthermore, the tripartite model may be conceived in its altered form. The alteration may be in terms of temporal hierarchy and significance, i.e. the production of sound may be inconceivably involuntary, stochastic, unwanted – the medium may be accidental or incidental and the perception may be undesired. This does happen in everyday life and is always impossible to conceive of as a musical event in its given environment until it is: this music is composed by the listener, as it is solely dependent on the responsiveness of the receiver. Varèse’s definition of musical form as the result and not the framework of music is of particular interest in this respect;<sup>12</sup> it is one thing to record sound and another to organise it, but also quite another to experience it. Can the deliberate organisation of sounds also be involuntary, indeterminate, undesired, lacking in confirmation and assertion? Can this be designed *a priori* or can it only be a case of improvisation or extemporisation? The answer is ‘probably not’, but we may still wish to make the attempt and observe the resulting form.

Nonetheless, however credible the above may be and however incredulous we may insist on being, it is unbecoming to describe a three-part context of music perception as the absolute frame-structure of our cognition of sounds. These are mere examples of divergence from a prototype: the more *bona fide* territory of archetypes is to be discussed subsequently.

## **5. Quadrivia: some incidental impossible music - (rendition)**

Musical notation was not invented to list practical considerations and result-driven directives with the blessings of IT oecumenism. But it appears to have become predominantly such a functional cipher code. The consensus is that scores are to be clear and tidy above all, devoid of unusable or functionally superfluous information; the level of reading difficulty must be kept at a minimum to facilitate a speedy reading of the score and a financially viable rehearsal schedule; such is the general collegiate compromise expected of professional composers.

I wish to argue that this condition is not poetic. Poetry is a creative reflection, not a mechanical arrangement, much less so a financial one. In historical support of such blatant declaration, let it be reminded that many creative minds of the past also allowed themselves the priority of poetry as a matter of natural course. There is no need for post-romantic regression or any other form of archaic ratification, but we ought to be able to recognise an independent music as a timeless interest of our heritage and not as a capricious political attitude. The music we want and the music that is required or valued refer to distinct, dissimilar music scores.

More than anything else, music notation is a psychography chart or double mirror shared by writer and reader; it cannot afford to be prosaic unless commonplace music can be afforded. To illustrate, we will revert, at this point, to a more linguistic model of communication between reader and writer. Wittgenstein makes a very good case for the obviously metaphorical semantics of communication in his *Philosophical Investigations*:

‘When I say that the orders ‘Bring me sugar’ and ‘bring me milk’ make sense, but not the combination ‘Milk me sugar’, that does not mean that the utterance of this combination of words has no effect. And if its effect is that the other person stares at me and gapes, I don’t on that account call it the order ‘to stare and gape’, even if that was precisely the effect that I wanted to produce.’<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, if a composer wishes to challenge the imagination of the performer, the audience, or the reader, then the composer may prescribe impossible actions, incompatible signals and seemingly unorthodox and paradoxical syllogisms to produce a psychological, non-literal effect.<sup>14</sup> This refutes the argument made in the beginning of this essay about individuality on one level; nonetheless, this inconsistency is more ambiguity than it is contradiction.

Further to this, when Wittgenstein mentions music earlier on in the *Philosophical Investigations*, he appears to be fairly sceptical about musical performance being anything other than the assignment of truth-value to notational objects (*Wahrheitswerts*) and he points out that the ‘meaning’ inherent in reading a literary proposition may be absent from singing a musical line.<sup>15</sup> The extent to which meaningful language reigns supreme over all forms of communication is controversial. Notoriously, Graham Bell expressed a more pronounced

contempt for non-linguistic models of communication and banned his deaf wife from learning sign language! One would suspect that Igor Stravinsky or Meredith Monk might disagree with him. Whether music is a proto-language, whether language is a part of a greater Music, whether the two are related and to what extent, are questions which depend largely on who is speaking, singing, writing and reading and what connotation they apply to the words, word-painting, emotive gestures and so on. What also plays a role in establishing the importance of *Wahrheitswerts* in interpreting, other than contextual circumstances, is the essential content of the text. Both externally and internally then, a musical text is defined by its ability to become meaning to the reader and meaning to the voice of the reader, two distinct periods in its cognition and utterance.

Ultimately, sounds become music when they bear and sustain an intention, not when they hold an aim at ransom. If their intention is to attempt interpreting a score regardless of the inevitability of failure, then this is an inherently dramatic intentionality and an accurate reading of a prescription. It follows that the only error for a poet is to read errors in what is impractical.<sup>16</sup>

This error is not uncommon. Some 25 centuries ago the poet Theognis wrote: 'Never give thou thy mind to the impracticable, nor desire things whereof cometh no accomplishment.'<sup>17</sup> The word translated here as 'impracticable' means 'that which is not and cannot be done', 'impossible, and also 'not taking part in action, idle'.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps it seems boorish to dispute the wisdom of the ancients directly, especially when we cannot be entirely sure of their social circumstances, the purpose of their writings and sayings and the semantic implication of their words. At the same time, the author of this article is entirely disagreed with the obvious directive of the poet; so much so that four vocal sentences were composed for the purposes of argument (fig.1). Lending our mind to the impractical and desiring no accomplishment, we could still hear a result and what is more we could allow ourselves an independent musical intention and a hearing distance.

Quadrivium for failing voice  
to those who attempt

I *sing so that only you can hear your voice*

? you are not a slave.

II *sing without hearing your voice - do not hum*

Hm

III *sing the exact opposite of what you read*

\$

IV *sing with 'aplomb'*

audience tactus *fp* *fffff* *ppp* own tactus *ppp* one breath

You are not a slave.

If the first sentence is impossible to perform, it may still be attempted.

If the second sentence is impossible to even rehearse, it may still be attempted.

If the third sentence is impossible to contemplate, it may still be attempted.

Finally, if the fourth sentence is impossible to sing with regards to tempo, pulse, duration, register, dynamics, breathing and timbre, it may still be attempted.

Whether there is a resulting music from this page or not depends entirely on whether the attempt is made. Does the lack of control over the resulting sounds mean that this is an experiment? It is true that this text and a text of experimental music share an equal degree of unfamiliarity with the end result of a performance, but the operative difference is that in the case of impossible music, the result is not to confirm or deny the importance of the text. There is no proof sought, nor is the 'performance' of this music essential. The task of

musical formulation is carried out in full in the process of the poetic conception and offers no accomplishment outside it. There is nothing new in this, of course. Roland Barthes's comments on Beethoven and interpretation are revealing:

‘Who can play Beethoven well? It is as though this music offers only the choice between a ‘role’ and its absence, the illusion of demiurgy and the prudence of platitude, sublimated as ‘renunciation’. The truth is perhaps that Beethoven’s music has in it something inaudible...To compose, at least by propensity, is to give to do, not to give to hear but to give to write.’<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, impossible music is impossible to assess in terms of physical merit of conduct and result and in relation to established, corporeal criteria precisely because it cannot be an experiment. Writing impossible music is a free ritual in itself, independent of interpretation and result.

## **6. Kaleidoscopes**

Impossible music is also an allegory, signifying little or no attention to the detail of practical application; in this way it can be viewed as an antinomy in itself. Allegories are not necessarily symbolic but they are always mythopoeic and often hard to decipher. In truth, in the case of a musical allegory, the representational element is a formal and hermeneutic obstacle, a medieval neurosis.<sup>20</sup> Barthes asks the question:

‘if one wishes to connect a mythical schema to a general history, to explain how it corresponds to the interests of a definite society – in short to pass from semiology to ideology...how does he receive this particular myth today?’<sup>21</sup>

The composer faces the dilemma between receiving the myth in its contemporary context and devising it to hold no historical symbolism. Of course this predicament can be the very provider of creative momentum.

Barthes argues the point that in terms of perception, a myth is only legible in its immediate currency, that its history is necessarily illuminated by contemporary relevance. This is the

prerogative of myths; they are either inconsequential fables which fail to come across as anything other than absurd and superstitious folklore, or they become messages which bear no external, objective translation, but which demand a private interpretation from the receiver. Impossible music is mythopeic and can be either irrelevant or relevant to the listener depending on both its and his propensity for intramural cognition.

Musical practice has grown to be emblematic, or somewhat complementary to the development of political systems, at least in the past few centuries. However unsurprising, this is a constancy which bears an overwhelming influence on music making and renders it dependent on hierarchal patterns and power structures, alien to its substance. Where music might boast an almost self-contained logic as its cause and purpose, it has on occasion come to be the utility of politics, a praxis and theory modelled on a governmental species of regulation, often standing bereft of abstract denotation.

Michel Foucault makes a convincing point of how ‘the King’ remained the central point in political structures in the modern world. In *Religion and Culture* he describes the pastorate as the principle prototype which defines social and legal relationships in post-monarchy, post-pastoral societies and goes as far as to argue that, in reality, political authority is not a demand of royalty, but a control of social processes. In other words, rule is not a matter of given supremacy, but of dominating the *modi operandi* of society. In this light, it is obvious that the commodification of sounds is a social reality. The autopsy indicates that music’s new legalistic identity may be the direct result of a more generally accepted social Darwinism or the consequence of music’s transformation from abstraction into mercantile tool. They who hold the copyrights of sound also hold the ‘genetic’ secrets of musical progress and evolution as it were. And, to go back to Foucault, all who refuse to abide by the dogma of music economics indubitably find themselves aboard a musical *Narrenschiff*.<sup>22</sup>

Foucault himself expressed some radical faith in the iconoclastic concert hall music of his time by claiming that ‘Boulez and Barraque...represented the first breach in that dialectical world I had been living in’<sup>23</sup>, thus insinuating that the avant-garde of his time was capable of non-conformity. We have since – if not since long before – witnessed the complete objectification of both eccentricity and innovation and their relegation to the plateau of valued historical curiosity, at least in commercial terms.

The problem which arises from examining the axis of politics and its social function is very basic: if political rationality, and – by unfortunate consequence – musical understanding stem from clerical structures as Foucault asserts, can it be possible for music to engage a purely theoretical and conceptual sphere? Or to put it more specifically, can music have its own purpose, when it is serving a purpose? The long-standing debate on ‘purposeful purposelessness’, ever wise and unsullied, is still, in its essence, a common play of words not unlike ‘pre-emptive strike’ and ‘the war on terrorism’, wherein a *reductio ad absurdum* is assigned a remedial air in its negation of accurate meaning. No, when sounds serve extra-musical notions, be they literary allusion or any fashionable form of *Affektenlehre*, they can only be political instruments in the service of societal and aesthetic coercion, a soundtrack to musical silence. All other designation is falsely attributed to them.

Xenakis was very much pre-occupied with the subject of archetypes as opposed to modelling prototypes and replicating stereotypes. In his essay *Music and originality* he showed to possess a Pythagorean enthusiasm about the *ex/ab nihilo* cycle of creation and went as far as to say that:

‘It is necessary to remain with the conclusion of a universe which is open to the unspoken, which would shape or disappear incessantly in a coil of *ex nihilo* creation and which would be reduced to nothing. This is what the foundation of Art and human fate depend on.’<sup>24</sup>

Xenakis wrote in mercurial prose and his inclusion of stasis and cataclysm in the same point of contention over the unknown was more philological than dialectical. But he did raise the sharp point that archetypes are born of a belief in the unknown and of human zeal; all in all, he was quite idealistic and defined the notion of impossibility as his human privilege and challenge, not as an unusable blemish to be removed from his creative horizon.

To the contrary, most Neoplatonic arguments<sup>25</sup> often suggest that the mimesis of a reflection of another reflection et seq. is the source of archetypes, much like a transitive action becomes part of the object[ive]. This mimetic chain of reflections, goes the argument, is so distant from the mimicry of empirical and scientific spectacle that the subject gives birth to a new object which bears little resemblance to its parent, other than the cause of its being. This is a

logical structure which presupposes a hierarchal association between creator and creation and which is in part untenable within the very Platonic reason it originates in.

Conceivably, musical archetypes are more the esoteric want of ‘human fate’, a *parthenogenesis* or *immaculate conception* of order, as Xenakis seems to maintain<sup>26</sup>, rather than objects which may belong to a chain of order. More importantly, musicians cannot afford to fail to discern the frequent absence of archetypes: confusing causality with hierarchy is to account for the glaring lack of original music, where and when this transpires. In the music of our dreams – the music we may invent in our sleep, and then vaguely recall but not remember once we are awake – we may yet perceive ourselves as part of a poetry or impossible reverie which has nothing to do with control, direction or influence.

## **7. The distance and dislocation of anonymous music (a future)**

*Κύκλωψ, εἰρωτᾷς μ' ὄνομα κλητόν, ἀντὰρ ἐγὼ τοι ἐξερέω: [...] Οὔτις ἐμοί γ' ὄνομα:  
Οὔτιν δέ με κικλήσκουσι μήτηρ ἠδὲ πατήρ ἠδ' ἄλλοι πάντες ἑταῖροι.*

*(Cyclops, you ask my name and I will tell it you...my name is Noman;  
this is what my father and mother and my friends have always called me.)*

Homer, *Od.* ix 364-67

Much of today's music, and concert music at that, is a peripheral constituent of a ‘servant’ culture. Certain characteristic, stylistic features are parachuted on it by centralities outside music which enforce the caveat that sound is only legible when relevant to extraneous but crucial aesthetic requirements. The composer of music, identifiable as the (now agonising) sound accessory, is under pressure to comply and produce monuments of acceptable elegance. Anonymity and social hiatus emerge as the only dependable passages of exit from this state of affairs.

Anonymity is the sole identity which cannot be hijacked by infomercial practice. It is impossible to accredit anonymous music without altering its initial, anonymous identity and so it follows that once the creative result has been ascribed to an anonymous source, it is no

longer categorisable in any other meaningful way; to paraphrase a popular motto of the music industry, ‘this revolution will not be televised’.<sup>27</sup>

With all its constraints and injustices, the past teaches us that the difference between a legitimate course of action and a subversive disturbance is a matter of conviction. Inducing docile novelty by means of academic activism and aesthetic usurpation is still possible, even if we are now entering a 4<sup>th</sup> century of progressive ‘relay prophecy racing’. But impossible music is rather a case of restoring musical praxis into the domain of unfounded, unsubstantiated knowledge. This restoration of communication stems from a clarity and flexibility of intention rather than drastic contributions and thunderous presence. Anton von Webern, an unlikely mystic, wrote of this unprescribed intention:

‘I go out into the hall to knock a nail. On my way there I decide I’d rather stay out. I act on an impulse, get into a tram, come to a railway station, go on travelling and finally end up in America. That’s modulation!’<sup>28</sup>

To arrive at a distance from music is not the same as to dislocate it, just as to displace a musical argument does not stand for misplacing it; these variations are understood and written as value judgements. Occasionally, we have to concede that our systematic inspection of music is flawed: wisdom is not a matter of close distance examination or nomination.

Furthermore, musicological certainties about the way sound is organised are second only to musicological misapprehension (not to mention, at least not outside a parenthesis, that musicological superciliousness – often in the name of research – is second to nothing).

We need no anthropological evidence, no identifiable traits to be sure of what is impossible to know. Mothers sang lullabies to their children and hermits have sung in solitude; we know these unknown truths before they are proven. This goes for composed music too. In the – humorous yet astute – words of Erik Satie: ‘Of all the works of this grandiose composer [Beethoven], his 10<sup>th</sup> symphony, which nobody knows of, is one of the most sumptuous.’<sup>29</sup>

If identity is the study of persuasive fact, then music is a practice of convinced intuition. It is perfectly impossible to sing or hear those lost lullabies and songs now, but the central unanswered and unanswerable question is whether we wish to try to imagine them and

make up new ones. To conclude and construe the simplest, most concise narrative: the phrase ‘impossible music’ is forged coinage and can be nothing other than a tautology.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See I. Sykoutris ad loc. in Menardos (1936): ‘It is best that poetry contains what is naturally possible. Inferior forms of composition are possible improbabilities (what is empirically and rationally in order but not necessarily psychologically so, i.e. it does not provide a natural impression for the viewer) and natural impossibilities (what is, after much investigation, impossible to be right, but appears natural and believable). Of the two the latter is preferable for poetry, because poetry is not in pursuit of the objective but the subjective truth (doxa) and because otherwise the pleasure of art may not be achieved.’ (Το ἄριστον εἶναι τὰ ποιήματα νὰ περιέχουν τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον, 9.1. Κατόπιν ἔρχονται ὡς υποδεέστεραι μορφαὶ συνθέσεων, τὰ δυνατὰ ἀπίθανα (ὅσα εἶναι μὲν ἐμπειρικῶς καὶ λογικῶς ἐν τάξει, ἀλλὰ δὲν εἶναι καὶ ψυχολογικῶς, δὲν παρέχουν δηλαδὴ εἰς τὸν θεατὴν τὴν ἐντύπωσιν φυσικότητος καὶ ἐσωτερικῆς ἀναγκαιότητος) καὶ τὰ ἀδύνατα εἰκότα (ὅσα, ἀν τὰ πολυεξετάσεις, δὲν εἶναι δυνατόν νὰ εἶναι σωστά, ἐν τούτοις φαίνονται πολὺ φυσικὰ καὶ πολὺ πιστευτά). Ἐκ τούτων δια τὴν ποίησιν, ἡ ὁποία δὲν ἀποβλέπει εἰς τὴν ἀντικειμενικὴν, ἀλλ’ εἰς τὴν υποκειμενικὴν ἀλήθειαν (εἰς τὴν δόξαν 1461a32-35), εἶναι προτιμότερα τὰ δευτέρα, διότι ἄλλως δὲν ἐπιτυγχάνεται ἡ ἐκ τῆς τέχνης ἡδονή· ἐφ’ οἷς δ’ ἀπιστοῦμεν οὐχ ἡδόμεθα, πρβλ. 917b15.).

<sup>2</sup> Canto X, 99.

<sup>3</sup> Canto XIII 151.

<sup>4</sup> Unamuno (1954) 294; see also the novel *El Quijote* by Miguel de Cervantes (1615).

<sup>5</sup> Note that absurdity is meant as distinct from absurdism. Its meaning here is the conglomeration of incongruous thoughts and actions.

<sup>6</sup> Husserl (1970) *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> In his *One, No one and One hundred thousand (Uno, nessuno e centomila)* novel written over 16 years and published in 1925.

<sup>8</sup> Words in parentheses are not entirely accurate. For more on *noesis* and *noema*, see Husserl (1970) *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Or one might even use the Gestalt term *prägnanz* to describe the type of holistic historical perception.

<sup>10</sup> A role being a conscious act.

<sup>11</sup> Xenakis (2001) 209.

<sup>12</sup> See Russcol (1972) ch. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein (1998) § 498.

<sup>14</sup> Such presumption appears to contradict the comments made before on Husserl and intersubjectivity. It does not.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* § 22.

<sup>16</sup> Or, as Meredith Monk put it in an even more assertive tone, ‘it is the conscious effort at inconsistency, which is consistency’: Jowitt (1997) 30.

<sup>17</sup> *Thgn*d. 461-462: μήποτ’ ἐπ’ ἀπρήκτοισι νόον ἔχε μηδὲ μενοίνα / χρήμασι· τῶν ἄνυσι γίνεται οὐδεμία (engl. transl. by J. M. Edmonds).

<sup>18</sup> ἄπρακτον, (same root as the word praxis). For more uses see H. G. Liddell – R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v.

<sup>19</sup> Barthes (1978) 153-54.

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- <sup>20</sup> More on this in Mumford (1944) 138f.
- <sup>21</sup> Barthes (1973) 139.
- <sup>22</sup> See Foucault (1988) ch. 1.
- <sup>23</sup> Foucault (1999) 97.
- <sup>24</sup> Xenakis (2001) 214.
- <sup>25</sup> Most notably see Gottlob Frege (2007) 47-60: Über Begriff und Gegenstand.
- <sup>26</sup> I have elsewhere exclaimed that ‘parthenogenesis is not a myth but a lie’. That statement is essentially revoked here.
- <sup>27</sup> See Scot-Heron, Gil, ‘The revolution will not be televised’ in *Pieces of a Man*, 1971, Flying Dutchman Records.
- <sup>28</sup> Webern (1975) § 4.
- <sup>29</sup> Satie in Wilkins (1980) 62– Jerry Wiggins discusses this aspect of impossibility more extensively later on in this tome.

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