

The Object of *Jouissance* in Music

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Denn das Schöne ist nichts
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch gerade ertragen,
und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht,
uns zu zerstören.

For beauty is nothing
but the beginning of terror, which we are just able to bear,
and we admire it so because it serenely disdains
to destroy us.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duineser Elegien*, “Erste Elegie”

I

The brilliant labyrinth of music is one of the last psychic strongholds that have remained closed off to us and that have evaded the comprehensive grasp of psychoanalysis. Despite a tradition of psychoanalytic texts attempting to do so, not one of them has yet managed to reveal the concealed meaning of music. Is it not possible that the reason for this is that it is fundamentally wrongheaded to attempt to approach the discourse of music from the vantage point of meaning—that is, the register of neurosis? Isn't the single and most penetrating aim of music to produce *jouissance*—which belongs to the register of perversion whose polymorphously oscillating willfulness refuses to let itself be bound to the imaginary destination of univocal meaning?

The concept of perversion does not, in this context, imply an obscure erogenous zone in the eardrum; it refers, instead, to a use of the signifier, which, sublimated to a greater or lesser degree,¹ leads into a praxis of pleasure.

Conceiving of music as perversion enables one to avoid the pitfall of attempting to assign to it a meaning it does not possess, while it still forces one

to accept the challenge to reveal within it those structures that mark the vicissitudes of the drive uncovered by Freud in 1915. In his commentary on this text Lacan accentuates the role of the object: the signifier in this context is a mere “envelope . . . something other than what it dresses in. What is fundamental at the level of each drive is the movement outwards and back in which it is structured.”² The drive cycle enfolds an object; for this reason it is easy to understand why the object lies at the center of interest of those Lacanian texts that treat the problem of music and that are of interest to us here.

II

This essay will carry a similar accent, and we will, therefore, confine ourselves to just a minimal definition as far as the musical signifier is concerned. We are in this context only interested in the fact that the musical signifier articulates; how it does so, or in what way this articulation is different from the articulation of speech, will not concern us. Somewhat reductively, perhaps, we presuppose the identity of the signifier in music and musical notation, that is, the actual musical score.

Well, now one could ask, what could there possibly be aside from the score? After all, the score is everything; we have nothing but the score. The entire (musical) “canon,” music historical literature—the symphonies of Beethoven, the operas of Mozart, and so forth—has been handed down to us solely in the form of scores, and it would be impossible to claim that in themselves these scores are in any way lacking. And, in fact, they are lacking in nothing—nothing except *jouissance*, that is: as long as the Real of the notation is not infected with the other Real, the bodily Real of the voice, music remains dead as far as the subject’s enjoyment is concerned.

Music produces *jouissance* only when it sounds.³ Only when a singer lends it his voice, or when a musician lends it the voice of his instrument, is it actualized. Only when the musician *sacrifices* his body to the musical signifier, only by *losing* his body to it, does music become real. And it makes no difference whether one actively plays it oneself or just listens to it; the voice is the object of the signifier in the sense that the former is articulated by the latter. The voice is the signifier’s material, is subjugated to it; as soon as music sounds, the voice disappears under the despotism of the signifier.

This fundamental opposition between the musical signifier, which can be recorded simply and unambiguously, and its material aspect—the sound, the timbre, the “life” of music—requires no further elaboration. What is surprising is that the latter is referred to as the “object” of music even as it evades, in its vagueness and amorphousness, all objectlike consistency. And yet it is this *objet sonore*⁴ that the French authors always come back to when discussing that element in music that is of interest to psychoanalysis.

This seeming contradiction is resolved, however, when one remembers that the object in psychoanalysis is always thought of as a *lost* object. Only as a lost object does it become the object of the drive. It is unnecessary to trace again the conceptual paradigm [*das Denkbild*] of the lost object—primary experience of satisfaction, secondary tension produced by the pressure of the drive, cathexis of the memory trace, and so on; rather, let us point out that Lacan adds two more objects to Freud's original list of the objects of the drive: to the "classics"—*the breast, the faeces, and the phallus*—Lacan adds *the gaze and the voice*. In Lacanian terminology these objects—with the exception of the phallus, which, after all, for Lacan, has the status of an imaginary signifier—are referred to as *objet a*.

J.-A. Miller⁵ points out that the last two objects owe their discovery to Lacan's psychiatric practice and, in fact, it is almost incomprehensible—when one recalls that the psychotic subject, for example, is confronted by "the voices" as object in the course of an "episode"—how this particular object could have evaded the attention of other psychoanalysts.

In relation to music, now, it will be propitious to clear up two potential fallacies concerning the voice as object. It is surely incorrect to bring this object into too close a proximity with the psychoses; this object plays a role in neurosis as well—for example, in the "voice of conscience" of the superego. But the "historical fallacy" must be avoided as well: the voice as object is not the voice of a historical person in the subject's life, as, for example, the voice of the father, which the subject then looks for again in music. To approach our subject matter, it is necessary to review the general concept of the *objet a* in order then to analyze methodically the concrete condition of music.

The *objet a* is the object of *jouissance*, the object of the "primary experience of satisfaction," where the word "primary" must be understood in its logical, not in its historical, sense. This object is then, in Freud's terminology, represented by a memory trace, that is, it is symbolized, recorded into the register of signifiers. This representation, however, does not take place without a loss of some kind. The signifier, which is supposed to bind the experience of *jouissance*, covers it up, makes it disappear. Precisely by re-presenting it, the signifier leaves it behind; the prefix *re* is clear on this always unsuccessful attempt to repeat the original *jouissance*—the result is always a merely dull imitation, an insipid substitute.

Within this relation between *jouissance* as the full presence of the Real and the representation of pleasure through the agency of the signifier we can already see the foundations for the structure of the oedipal complex: the prohibition of pleasure by the law of the signifier; "Mommy and Daddy" are, from this point of view, merely the contingent figures of a necessary structure.

This prohibition modifies the subject's relation to *jouissance* in a fundamental way: the *objet a* is no longer the *object of jouissance*, but becomes, as a

lost object, *the origin of desire*. The *objet a* becomes the aim of a search which from the start has been condemned to failure insofar as the subject has been surrendered to the law of the signifier.

III

The figure of the castrato is surely an example of how far this search for the lost object can go in music. The tradition of the castrato, which became extinct only in the middle of the last century, exemplifies this mission with irreproachable clarity: what is at stake is the *jouissance* of the absolute voice. Between the worship and the horrified revulsion that the voice of the castrato has aroused, it is clear that, as a phenomenon, it has not left anyone cold; it has prompted that split in the listener that is characteristic of the encounter with the object of *jouissance*.

Apparently, no sacrifice is too great in this search for the voice as such in music: before his voice breaks, the singer's scrotal genital glands are split apart in order to retain the high vocal register; consequently, the secondary marks of sexual identity, and, of course, male potency as well, are completely lacking. Because of a fuller resonance within the chest as well as greater technical and expressive maturity, the voice of this "adult child" then develops that characteristic power and suppleness the fascination with which is obvious in all its historical descriptions.

The logic of this sacrifice must, however, not be understood as a logic of oppression or degradation, but rather, as G. Wajeman⁶ shows in his brilliant historical study of the Neapolitan opera in the sixteenth century, as a necessary evil to endure within the context of a much greater gain. After all, the astonishing thing about the castrato is not that he is castrated, but rather that he has chosen castration as actual castration.⁷

The gain of this choice is easy to understand considering the condition of things we sketched out above: the castrato reverses the loss which the signifier causes the [ordinary, that is, noncastrated] subject; *he does not constitute himself as the subject of the signifier, but rather identifies himself with the object of jouissance*. "The castrato," says Wajeman, "demonstrates the truth of the object which is at stake in the opera; as he alternately conceals and reveals it, the object exhibits the opera's sublime fetish around which every singer—be it man, woman or castrato—circulates. In this sense, the opera was not made for the castrato, but rather he himself is the opera."⁸ "The castrato presents himself as the exact formula of the fetish, as the object of *jouissance*, which can establish itself only on the basis of lack."⁹

To recognize the castrato as the *fetish* of music means to inscribe music into the register of *perversion*, in other words, into that register, among the three possible existential structures as they have been outlined by Freud, which has

a direct relation to *jouisance*. While *jouisance* is prohibited in neurosis (which exhibits no structural difference with “normality”), in psychosis it enforces itself delusionally and in paranoid fashion as the *jouisance* of the absolute Other—in Schreber’s central delusional idea, for example, of being the woman or wife of God [*das Weib Gottes*]. But even perversion, even though it denies the fact of castration, stands in a given relationship to castration; the figure of the castrato provides almost comically concrete evidence for this.

This relationship transcends the historical and the anatomical; even though the castrato tradition no longer in fact exists, it continues to exist virtually, in structure, and the position of the castrato is even today still attractive. It is surely no accident that the fetish of today’s music industry—Michael Jackson, the best-paid singer worldwide—situates the image of himself on the far side of sexual difference, on the other side of castration. In addition, Jackson’s cut-up face demonstrates how here, too, in a manner that coincides uncannily with the castrato, the fantasm of the Other’s law of castration is inscribed into the bodily Real. The surgeons’ knives, which have continually and over years transformed Jackson’s own features into their pale angelic monstrosity that today adorns the music industry’s storehouse of images, have left scars which can be concealed only by heavy layers of make-up.

This is the price of beauty, of prestige, of being the cause and object of desire. The absolute prestige of this position, which in the case of Michael Jackson translates literally into ready money, can be found also, in a slightly different form, in Neapolitan opera, where paradoxically precisely the roles of the holders of unlimited power, the roles of the sovereign, of the emperor, were played by castrati. “The only form of agreement that played a role here was that between the power of the role and the power that the voice exerted over the audience’s desire,”¹⁰ says M. Poizat in this connection in his book on opera.

IV

The figure of the castrato leads us into the structure of music without allowing us to refer to its concrete and material elements. This figure offers us something like a condensed, summary image of one aspect of music. The subjective position which the castrato realizes in his very being also appears at a certain point in the development [*Ablauf*] of a piece of music. Two other authors, who support our thesis, share this point of view: in his book, *L’opéra ou le cri de l’ange*, Poizat interprets the history of opera within this perspective. According to Poizat, both the development of the genre as such and the development of each individual opera is geared towards isolating this “object of *jouisance*.”¹¹ This “cry of the angel” is the culmination of what drives, obsesses even, the lover of opera; this moment, in which the voice as such peels away, detaches itself, and with the cry almost frees itself from the chain of signifiers, is the point of extreme *jouisance*

for which the opera goer pays his money. It is this culture of the voice that drives him to follow his operatic star in the star's travels.

It is not possible, in the context of this short article, to gloss one or the other of the works Poizat discusses; we will attempt to show below, in terms of another musical form, where this object inscribes itself. Important for us is that, according to Poizat, it is in this cry that the opera reaches its goal.

Let us for a moment examine this cry from a theoretical viewpoint: we have been prepared for its structure by the figure of the castrato. It is the attempt to bind *jouissance* beyond the signifier by giving the Real—what has been covered up and excluded by the signifier—a graspable presence. And it is precisely the difference with the articulating function of the signifier that this “moment of the voice” throws into relief: this cry consists of a single held note, usually in a high register. Poizat speaks in this context of “the other silence, that which results from destruction, petrifying silence, absolute presence, unbroken by the pulsation of the rhythm of presence and absence.”¹² The beat of the signifier is abandoned here; the object voice, which in itself is not binarily organized, contradicts the articulative logic of the signifier, opposes it with the pure presence of sound.

That this is a general phenomenon is made clear by the fact that in his text, “De quatre temps subjectivants dans la musique,”¹³ Didier-Weill offers a completely parallel analysis of the execution of a jazz improvisation. He applies to the object voice the term that Chopin gave it; he speaks of the “blue note”: “Should you hear, for example, a truly inspired jazz improvisation, you will surely be astonished by the fact that the web of notes, by which you will allow yourself to be carried, will unfailingly lead you to a certain point of which one can certainly say that it—the blue note and its concomitant explosion of sense, where a temporal rupture takes place—already announces itself in the preceding notes. . . . In this sense it is the fulfillment of a promise, the vehicle of which had been the preceding musical discourse.”¹⁴

The temporal rupture of which Didier-Weill speaks is yet another sign for the opposition between object and signifier: the order of time which, as a relational construction of presence and absence, is the work of the signifier, goes out of service at the moment of *jouissance*. Just as in delirium—which, of course, is also a breaking-in of *jouissance*—the coordinates of time and space get lost, so here, too, the order of the signifier is momentarily suspended.

Again it is the binary logic of the signifier, that is, a logic that constantly refers to an Other—in this case it refers to and thereby articulates another moment in time—that the object contradicts. The unmodulated roughness of the *objet sonore*, which seems to stretch out into the limitlessness of silence without referring to anything else, precludes the dismembering cuts and splits of the signifier.

V

The battle carried out in musical works consists in bringing the contradiction between the signifier and the object of music into an appreciable form. The central European tradition of instrumental concerts since the Baroque has found an especially clear way of retrieving from the ornament of the signifying web the object voice: namely, in the cadenza. In the classical violin concerto the virtuoso is here given a space in which he can drive the work to its climax. Simply the circumstance that here the only sounding voice is the violin allows the object to separate off from the other voices in brilliance and prestige. Originally this part of the work had been improvised; that is, it had situated itself, in a sense, outside of the sphere of the signifier of the Other, whose “slave”¹⁵ the soloist had been up until this moment. The relationship to time changes as well, and does so doubly: on the one hand, the cadenza, insofar as it is improvised, is produced directly by this moment, and is not bound in duty to the fixed letter of the score; on the other hand, it is played as a rubato—the ordering time of the signifier is loosened towards the reality that lies on the other side of it.

At first, it is true, it is the soloist’s virtuosity, his mastery over the musical signifier, that stands in the foreground; but the space given to sonorous materiality increases in size during the course of the cadenza, until, finally, a single, stretched-out trill in an extremely high register concludes the cadenza in a condensed climax before the orchestra joins in again. Here all the features that play a role in the moment of the voice converge: the showing, the exhibiting of the object of pleasure beyond the signifying articulation, the accentuation of its material character in the flickering of the trill and the rupture of the temporal flow at the culminating point of the work.

VI

The instant of the voice is situated, as the moment of pure *jouissance*, outside of the signifier and is in that sense to be understood as the latter’s central lack [*vide*]. In his Seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan writes, “*Tout l’art se caractérise par un certain mode d’organisation autour de ce vide*” [All art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness].¹⁶ Music corresponds to this program insofar as it deploys its art in order to close in on this instant and to frame it. In the same Seminar Lacan applies to the encounter with this lack the term “the beautiful,” the function of which is—and this corresponds entirely to the quotation from Rilke above—to bind and cover up the horror of castration, which is coterminous with the encounter with the unbearable.

This is a paraphrase of the comprehensive topological schema which Lacan outlines in “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious.”¹⁷ The central lack corresponds to $S(\mathcal{A})$, the signifier of the lack of the Other which he identifies with *jouissance*. From there we move into the formula for the fantasm— $(\mathcal{S} \diamond a)$ —where the split subject determines its place in reference to the object, which covers up the lack of the Other. This manner of notation accentuates the split subject by putting the element \mathcal{S} in first position. It describes thereby the neurotic subject which evades *jouissance*, bars itself against it. Since we understand music from the viewpoint of perversion, we suggest now to lay the accent on the object, that is, to reverse the formula of fantasy: $S(\mathcal{A}) \rightarrow (a \diamond \mathcal{S})$. This manner of notation is accountable to the fact that in music the subject does not understand itself merely as the subject of the signifier, as \mathcal{S} , but that it subjugates itself to the signifier only to the extent that it itself— $S(\mathcal{A})$ —closes in on its own lack. *At the instant of jouissance the subject separates itself off from the order of the signifier in order to become itself the object of jouissance of the Other.*

VII

In conclusion, a question we sidestepped earlier needs to be addressed: that is, the question concerning the nature of the *objet a*. At first we set it up in opposition to the signifier insofar as the latter articulates, and later on we added that this articulation is binary in nature. This structure corresponds essentially to the signifying pair operative in music: the elementary opposition of note and pause. In opposition to this signifier, which is always articulated in dialectical oppositions, we submit the Real of sound which is essentially limitless and therefore lacks all objectlike consistency. The Real, however, is not simply the formless and chaotic; for the subject, the Real is always the unbearable. This becomes clear in the context of delirium in which the psychotic subject loses its status as subject. The destructive force of *jouissance* robs the subject of all splitting, that is, all relationship to the encounterable; no delirious subject is in the position to doubt his or her delusional experiences—their power is completely real.

In order to be bearable, the Real has to be bound, represented, and dialecticized; the terms Lacan has introduced into psychoanalysis—the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary—are capable of representing the different constellations of this knot. The *objet a*, as an element of the fantasm, is an imaginary moment. In terms of enjoyment, it is that element which, as one last screen before the unbearable, binds the Real and disguises it. What is at stake, then, in the moment we have described in which the *objet a* frees itself and for an instant lends presence and form to destructive and overflowing *jouissance*, is by no means the presence of the Real. On the contrary, exactly

where it could emerge, the voice as object closes off the passageway. And still: within that monolithic opacity of the cry lies a liminal act of binding which allows for the Real to shine forth in its fascinating force; in this way, the cry manages to trace the impossible.

Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire VII: L'éthique de la psychanalyse* (Paris, 1986), 131. In his "Seminar on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis" Lacan points out that perversion and sublimation are identical insofar as both go beyond the pleasure principle's relationship to the object.

2. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 177.

3. The special case of Beethoven's deafness, or of the pianist who studies the score on the train, does not really work as a counterargument, as music is represented corporeally even in these cases: here, too, music is experienced only insofar as it reaches into the bodily Real.

4. Anonymous, "De l'objet musical dans le champ de la psychanalyse," *Scilicet* 6/7 (1974), 330ff.

5. Jacques-Alain Miller, "Lacan et la voix," in *Colloques d'Yvry* (Paris: Lysiaques, 1989), 180.

6. G. Wajeman, *Voix-le, face à la chute des sons mus* (Lausanne: Argo, 1979).

7. Of course, one could argue that this has nothing to do with an "actual" choice; the poor singer was surely "too young" [to make an informed decision], or "society" forced him to make this choice. . . . While these arguments are valid, they can, however, be applied to any and every choice; never is a subject aware—when making any sort of decision—of all conditions or consequences. In terms of our argument, there really is no logical difference between the decision at stake here and other potential decisions.

8. Wajeman, 17.

9. *Ibid.*, 16.

10. A Poizat, *L'opéra ou le cri de l'ange. Essai sur la jouissance de l'amateur de l'opéra* (Paris: Bataillé, 1986), 57.

11. We should note here, by the way, that personally we stand critically opposed to this conception of development—or even, progress—and agree, rather, with Wajeman, according to whom the bourgeois opera of the nineteenth

century tends to stand in a regressive position in terms of *jouissance* vis-à-vis Neapolitan opera, because of its exclusion of the castrato and its glorification of the Enlightenment.

12. Poizat, 247.

13. A. Didier-Weill, in *Ornicar?* 41: 42–55.

14. *Ibid.*, 43.

15. We understand “slave” here in the sense of Roman Antiquity, where the actor was designated a slave because he was not master of what he said; he was a slave insofar as he was subjugated to the text of the Other.

16. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 130.

17. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 315.