

On the Protomusical, and the Various Meanings and Horizons of Music, Considered.

Prologue and Errata

I am not a musician— nor am I a *musical theorist*, really. Everything in this media kit is just the product of a highly-developed, cart-before-the-horse-kind of amateurism. Up until recently, I had even been strangely proud that, despite so many years running alongside Orpheic cults, I had never really produced much musical output myself, and had never been in a *band* to speak of. In these circles— as in the Orpheic cult which is the United States of America— music always seemed to drown out all other forms of culture. You were nobody until you had a *cd* presence— or at least a *cdr* presence. So I lent my powers to nearly every category *but* music, purely for the sake of equilibrium.

However, because of my fucked-up sensibilities and one memorable conversation with my mom, I started having a number of musical, protomusical, and *metamusical* ideas without ever seeing much of it corroborated in print or smalltalk, except for a few offhanded comments. I eventually— more recently, some in writing this— found some real goldmines. In Ferrocio Busoni, Pierres Shaeffer and Henry, Varèse, and all those acoustinauts like Perry Cook, working the cognitive science frontier.

But if some of these ideas turn out to be *old news*, they still don't seem to be popularly understood. So I'm just making it more accessible for the whole family. Besides, I sure as hell don't have the patience— or the talent— to actually give form to all these ideas myself. So I freely pass them along as a possible programme for all the talents and primemovers in the Orpheic cults I spoke of earlier; many of whom passed through my previous home in the forcefully-disbanded South Philadelphia Athenæum.

What we have here in this booklet is one magic compact disc with my "*protomusic*," followed by about about forty mp3 illustrations that accompany the more dubious ideas appearing in the text. Sounds, samples, and song fragments; some from me, some from real life, and some from real musicians... I humbly submit this offering for your

consideration.

Lastly, many of these ideas would have never come into being without some musico-philosophical back-and-forth with Willie Hoffman and Tyree Joyce... Many thanks to them.

I.

This essay originates, in me, from a steady-footed adherence to aesthetic anti-essentialism. That is, the idea that *the aesthetic*— including “the musical” — has no essence. No anchor to any particular core, principles, or necessary and sufficient conditions. It is incapturably dynamic, definable only in terms of relative acculturation and living meanings.

It’s critical to understand how slippery our aesthetic ideas and sensibilities truly are. They *shift*— piecemeal and amoebically— until they are no longer recognizable by any previous marker, however loose and Hegelian you might get with your definitions. These shifts happen by teeny-tiny, incremental movements in our field of likes and dislikes, attachments and associations— movement that is occasionally accelerated or overturned by geniuses, irony, terrible memories, dance parties, Lou Reed, soundtracks, and measured explanations. That is to say, *by experience*. It’s all a part of the process. And far from being a bleak prognosis, it is the guarantor of cultural renewal. The promise of an illimitable aesthetic horizon, into which we may always escape from cultural Boredom and cheesy, parental, conservative sensibilities.

Accordingly, I stand by the idea that *music* has no essence; nothing that it must forever be or not be. Even its most defining elements could be replaced, phased out, or summarily lopped off. Just not all at once; and not without replacing them with something else; another scale or criterion in which to tangle our likes and dislikes. With the exception of a few scattered mavericks, the greatest bulk of Western musical history has been devoted to the mastery of a few central, load-bearing pillars— melody, harmony, and rhythm— rather than to the discovery of *novel* principles of noise arrangement. But just as, a hundred-odd years ago, the invention and mimetic powers of photography cut to the very core of the visual arts, I am convinced that correspondent plate-tectonic shifts have occurred in our understanding of sound and of “the musical.”

First, was the Edisonian revolution of recording sound; the *capture* of sound. Then, its

electronic synthesis. And now the kicker: the advent of a computerized production and reproduction of sound that is mimetic enough, manipulable enough, and well-near as instantaneous as human speech. This final nudge happened not only in the arena of “the musical,” but just as much in the control and ubiquity of sounds in our immediate surroundings: cellphone rings, Nintendo, playschool toys, bandsaws, television commercials, Looney Tunes, metropolitan backdrops, ambulances, and the whole floating universe of as-yet unmusical sounds and noises.

This faithful and reliable manipulation of sound marks such a faultline in our aesthetic sensibilities because it has put *all* sounds and all *aspects of sound* at the service of human expression. This is the flashpoint. Until relatively recently, we had the capture and imitation of sound, but we did not completely have what Benedetto Croce has called “the unification of intuition and expression.” At least not fully enough for the aestheticization— or *musicalization*— of any aspect or arrangement of sound. Sound, as opposed to music, could for the longest time only be recorded, documented, taped— at best clumsily edited. It could not be *fully expressive* until it was hardwired into human power, like language, muscle memory, and musical instruments such as the drums and saxophone.

Of course, you had some tortured souls haplessly born into the wrong century— fellows like Russolo and Henry, jerryrigging the clunky means available. However, my guess is that even if God had granted them the machines they needed, they wouldn’t have had much of an audience in their day. A new *understanding* of sound would first have to soak in thoroughly. The public would first need a new set of ears.

Though bound to the means of the day, the cleverest tinkerers can still busy themselves working out the ultimate logic and meanings of the toys that *are* available. To this, many of our brightest 20th-century visionaries, working out the logic of the Edisonian innovation, created a music in which the expressive musical subject and musical agent ceded to landscape, chance, process, and environment. This lineage— that famously began with Mahler and ran through Cage, Stockhausen, and Eno— never tried to formulate a new humanist expression. In fact, they tried to break us of our need for such a thing. An expansive move away from will and toward environment. We could appreciate the world of sound with other senses of beauty. The way we appreciate natural beauty, for instance— or with a *musique d'ameublement* that we appreciate atmospherically rather than attentively. I don't think it would be too risky to say that ambient music “*reflects and perfects the logic of captured sound.*” Or, that Eno was “*shifting from the corporeal to the ethereal.*”

If these maestros *had* wanted quickfooted humanist expression, they would've been out of luck. Captured sound, in such unmanageable chunks and strips, couldn't have been manipulated as we manipulate sound with our musical instruments. In order to musicalize these sounds, it was just easier— and wiser— to create a *new form of listening*.

Things are different nowadays. We no longer merely *record* sound while *producing* music. Every noise in downtown Tokyo can be tapped out like the keys of a clavichord. The production of sound has caught up to— maybe surpassed— the means of recording it. Music can now ask for a new logic: something human-shaped. Something with which we can *identify*. Real rock-and-rollish ego-identification; something that makes the listener inwardly sense “*I’m making those sounds*” or “*Man, I wish I were making those sounds*” ...Sufficiently *willful* music.

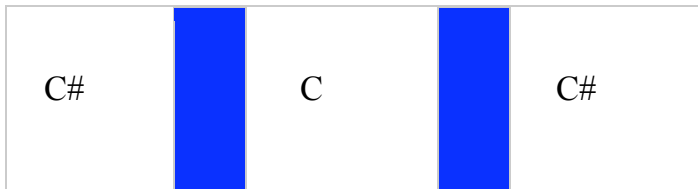
II.

In order to flesh out this theory, that our conception of the musical depends on the means of reproduction, we'll fancifully time-travel back to the primordial beginnings of music itself. Once upon a time... *in the beginning*... we had only two means for the faithful reproduction of sound: our voices and our bodies. We could yelp and we could fidget. Everything else was either static, incapturable, or unknown. Accordingly, the only two aspects of sound we could control were *pitch* and *percussion*— yelping and fidgeting. Or, as I'll more later generalize, the “*principle of voice*” and the “*principle of action*.” From these, I imagine, arose the two pillars of modern music: melody and rhythm— the relationships built in pitch and in percussion. These expanded a little along the way. We learned to coordinate them with other people. And, in the parlance of primordial myths, from this sprang harmony and dance.

This progression, from individual yelpers and drummers to social harmonizers and dancers, is of course a mythic one. I think musical expression— because it is expression— is deeply social. As Pierre Schaeffer said, it is “*made to be heard*.” So the genesis of melody and rhythm may just as easily have been from dance and harmony, as the other way around; created within little circles of mutual identification. This *identification* aspect runs deeper than most suspect, I think. It's a very palpable component of expression. Dance is, I'm convinced, the body's attempt to *reproduce* the

percussive patterns it hears, not just *react* to them. Dad’s air guitar is another manifestation of this. He is not just appreciating Slash’s fretwork; he is wishfully incorporating them into his own power of expression... But enough on this for the moment...

...As I was saying, until recently, everything aside from pitch and percussion were static and unharnessed; thus unfit for the service of expression. But sound has many other characteristics and possibilities. Zillions of principles and axes around which it can be organized— in the same way that the visual field is a zillion times more sophisticated than the mere quantifiable relation of color-to-color. To illustrate my point, consider the following comparison of sounds, played of an instrument of your choice:



Between just these three sounds, an undeniable relationship exists; an emotive significance coded in the tensions of resonance and dissonance. It *means* something to us, even if the meaning is too fluid to form into words. But whether innate or historical, this emotive significance, as nuanced as it becomes in our melodies, ultimately derives from the birth and resolution of harmonic dissonance. Melody, harmony, the circle-of-fifths, the psychology of scales— even Chopin’s nocturnes— are all built on our antagonism to dissonance... the quantifiable clash of soundwave frequencies. This is not to knock 3,000 years of musical research, but rather to say “*look how much yield and meaning we got out of something otherwise so neutral*”... But now consider this triad of sounds:



How would you even go about explaining the relationship between these three sounds? Even assuming that the sounds shared the same length and pitch, the relationship belongs to a deliciously richer musical diction, acoustically and semantically. And lucky for us, this is the catalogue and vocabulary we now have at our disposal, to create a *new musical expressiveness*. All sounds, all aspects of sound, all possible arrangements of sound that were once secondary, incidental, or impossible can proudly step into a central, protagonistic role.

Just to be clear: this conceptual clearing is very different, and far more momentous, than the realization that every sound, real-world or synthetic, has a pitch (and thus can be incorporated into melody). Every 11-year-old sampling fart sounds with his Casio SK-1 already understands this. He also understands that any sound, real-world or synthetic, regardless of pitch, can be incorporated a rhythm. This thought is only revolutionary if you consider the *Blue Man Group* or *Pringles* commercials to be particularly groundbreaking.

In times past, without a legion of musically-literate slaves, you could not easily change instruments every note. Timbre was assumed to be static. Outside of librettos or quotation, composers could not directly refer or signify. He couldn't write a 1/23,939 note... He couldn't slowly transform a mandolin sound into a flock of geese. He could not squeak out little ditties in *attack* and *release*. And he couldn't do much of anything without a pretty heavy name among the moneyed and musical institutions of his day. In the epoch of computerized sound, we no longer have any visible limitations, as Thaddeus Cahill or Pierre Henry had in their time. Music is now ready to assume a previously unrecognizable form.

III.

Time for specifics... *How do we go about doing this?* Like I said previously, I think much of the work has already been done for us, inadvertently, by the inundation of weird, protomusical phenomena everywhere we turn our head. We merely need to find our likes and dislikes among these phenomena and run with them, tweak them, hone them— sense the musical in the “protomusical.”

In one crisp memory to this effect, Rich and I were once sitting curbside at a supermarket in Charlottesville, Virginia; screwing around as usual. We noticed, at some point, a monster-sized SUV parked nearby, with sorority girl sitting behind the wheel. It

was more the sounds than the sight that caught our attention, though. From inside the cabin, though a little muffled, we could hear this *amazing*, supererratic, overdriven music— ten times as wily as anything coming out of Japan at the time. We were struck dumb; half by the music, half by our snobbish disbelief that it was coming out of this girl's stereo.

But just as were we gearing up to badger the girl about this *masterpiece*, her dufus boyfriend emerges, barely managing an armful of groceries. In was then that she put the car in park and *the noise ceased*.... Could it be true?....The divinely-wrought, ultra-Japanese masterpiece we had been admiring was just the play of an internal combustion engine. I'd be less inclined to characterize this as a “glimpse” of protomusical phenomena. “Defibrillation” would be more accurate. How far had our sensibilities strayed over the wilderness— and was there any territory out of reach?

My answer is, of course, *no*. Sounds, of any size or color, can be “musicalized” by a process of acculturation, be it a supertiny microblip or an entire genre of music. It all undergoes an *aestheticization* in which the liked is parsed from the disliked, and the new and the expressive are slowly created out of the old and the assumed... Which is why I want to talk about another dialectic, more important than resonance versus dissonance, or even sound versus silence: the dialectic between familiarity and unfamiliarity.

When I was younger, I used to make these notoriously sloppy mixed tapes for myself, my brother, and my friends. Full of beeps, scratches and skips, accidental overdubs, truncated songs, senseless crap, and other blemishes that were really discouraging on the first playthrough. Upon further listening, however, I always noticed that I gradually came to expect, then tolerate, then like, then *prefer* these blemishes to the original. The mistakes started to feel right. Even the incomprehensible stammers were eventually musicalized; imbued with musical sense.

This love of corruption is not peculiar to me. A more universal example would be the slicker mixed-tapes of our middle and high school years. At first, when *Mr. Brownstone* was *not* followed by *Paradise City* on your “Metal Rules” mixed-tape, you were just a teeny-tiny bit disappointed... Admit it... From months and months of *Appetite for Destruction*, your ears craved its opening strums in the 3 second silence following *Mr. Brownstone*. Eventually though, after countless hours in the car's tapedeck, you learned first to accept and then to love *Eruption* coming in its stead— only this time after a 2.3 second interval. You now craved for *Eruption*, as you once did *Mister*

Brownstone, and just as the key or tonic is craved for at the end of a melody. It's my contention that this is a musical phenomenon— or maybe at present, a *protomusical* phenomenon— to be exploited. Naturally, it is; though usually at the service of melody, as when Wynton Marsalis famously quipped that if you play the wrong note, the best recovery is to “*play it again.*”

Any time spent fiddling with loops quickly reveals this process of familiarization at work. The longer a randomly sampled loop plays, the more it begins to make musical sense. Even if it initially sounded crappy and lopsided; or even if after a minute or so, you decide that it *really is* crappy or unappealing. Aesthetic decisions have been made. But familiarization does not need the framework of melody or temporal regularity in order to create sense. In the intro to *Where is my Mind?* by the *Pixies*, to take a popular example, there is a brief patch of sound collage punctuated by the word *stop*. This patch pays no regard to pitch or rhythm, as much as fans might swear otherwise. Nevertheless, they appreciate it as much as any other segment of the song, sometimes more. It has become a thing of beauty, of aesthetic worth in itself. The same goes for kung-fu-laden Rza intros, which kick and chop far into the beginnings of songs. Whole musical landscapes work in this way, as well— this *learning to love*— partially explaining the evergrowing crowds at noise shows in the Northeastern United States. Even for hernia-inducing acts like *Sickness* and *Whitehouse*...

Familiarization is the first step— and the first *stop*— in the musicalization of sound and sound structures. We learn to distinguish shapes and structures. We learn to distinguish our likes from our dislikes. We mend our opinions. In the modern world, half of this musicalization is already being done for us. There is an ongoing acculturation to *soundstuff* which previously only skirted the margins of the musical. The world also has more and more controlled sounds, with as many more controlled aspects, than it did in previous times. Ambulance sirens wail in accordance with a very precise and scientific echo and reach. Stopwalks chirp. Cellphones ring in increasingly ticklish ways— enchanting or annoying whole traincars in seconds... Since these sounds are ever-more purposive, too, we can hold some other will accountable and make aesthetic judgment calls, no matter how faceless or corporate the source of expression is.

But even within the music industry, this familiarization takes place. We have sound-shapes that are not within the music as such, but musicalized by their adjacency alone. Lightning-quick station IDs, intros, outros, vinyl fuzz, commercials, things of that sort— literally the *margins of music*. What's nice about all this marginal soundstuff, is that the aestheticization happens in such a sneaky way, when the listener assumes he has

already taken his ears off. When, in reality, they are fundamentally re-working and re-threading our aesthetic sensibilities (usually through an aesthetics of *excitement*, rather than the aesthetics of love and loss you find in melody). If nothing else, we know that station managers must pick through various samples, composed by professional sound-engineers, in order to choose these little jingles. Therefore, there is already in place some way to sieve the Good from the Bad, an extant sensibility behind the scenes. But this sensibility has and will spread, and the listeners— *We, the public*— will implicitly begin to understand what separates a good, exciting, station id from a shitty, weak, and unconvincing one. Eventually, geeks like Rich Davis and I start *preferring* the ids to the songs themselves; and all the hippopish chrome car commercials to the new *Missy Elliot*. The margins— and their criteria— continually invade and overtake the strictly musical.

Then *within* the sounds themselves, we have all the recognized acoustic aspects and structures that have been long marginalized by melody and rhythm: timbre, texture, spectra, equalization, direction, reverb and delay, distortion, waveform geometry, dynamics, acoustic extrema, content, arpeggiation— just to name a handful of previously secondary phenomena. I shouldn't say they were *marginalized by* melody and rhythm, in a tyrannical or prejudicial way. Their time had not arrived; they were inherently secondary in that they had not been tamed by technological innovation. Now, it would be perfectly reasonable— or at least, possible— to do something like assigning the chromatic characteristics to the quantized keys of a keyboard and playing “quasi-melodies” in attack or arpeggiation. The more strict the quantization, the better. As long as these aspects remain relegated to the vagueness of dials, the relationships will remain accordingly indifferent. Once they are fixed— *well-tempered*— if only for the length of the song, familiarization is possible and sharper aesthetic decisions can be made.

IV.

One critical strategy for creating a more pluralist music— where the central pillars of melody and rhythm share stagespace equally with every other aspect— is creating music where melody and rhythm have been rendered negligible and uninteresting. A time-tested method, used liberally by experimental types this century, is the *drone*. The drone is an unbroken tone which has neither melody nor rhythm to speak of (unless you count the play of partials). The interesting part is that by listening or, even better, *playing* with drones and drony sounds, you slowly cultivate an appreciation for the whole ark of other acoustical aspects. The ears quickly differentiate a range of moods

and intensities; appreciating both vacuum cleaners and *Metal Machine Music* for their own distinctive virtues.

Drones— because of their negligible presence of rhythm— best isolate that aspect of music we might call “*the principle of voice*,” the category that represents a supplement to the human voice, under which we normally shelve melody. The majority of our musical instruments are really just magnificent supplements to the human voicebox... Nowhere is this clearer than with brass instruments. Horns are so obviously amplifications of a yelling human animal. A quick inward reckoning bears this out, I think, in which by listening to a melody, we *identify* with these instruments; almost in a specific area of the body, lodged somewhere between the heart and the voicebox.

Historically, though, drones have usually only been used *monotonously*. Not only does the pitch remain unaltered; all other acoustical aspects change very little, very slowly or not at all. But once someone becomes antsy, eager to get nimble and expressive with the play of differences, we can begin to build relationships *within or across* these new aspects; using other principles of voice beside melodies and harmonies.

I'll offer an easy-breezy experiment, executable at home or at your nearest convenient Salvation Army thriftstore location. The only necessary materials are: a Yamaha keyboard and a strip of scotch tape. Ideally, you want an older keyboard, with an *array* of buttons, rather than a dial or number pad, for rapidly switching between the tones... Turn the keyboard on, beginning with the tone on *organ* or *viola*, and then tape down middle C... Sit back and listen to this tone for a while, absorbing it. This will serve as a tonic or conceptual homebase... Then start playing around with the tone buttons, switching and flopping around at will, maybe in rhythm, maybe not.

Eventually, you will have little creations— recognizable patterns— that you'll be inclined to call “*melodies*,” especially if you habitually return to the “*tonic*” instrument. But these patterns, in the strict sense, are not melodies— the pitch is constant. Moreover, they are not even relations in just one aspect of sound like *attack* or *delay*, but all aspects at once. Relations between the entire texture of various instruments. They are relations nearly as complex and ineffable as our tricky little triad in diagram 2. Relations that, if developed, could step in as a more generalized *principle of voice*... A way of making other aspects of sound “sing.” Again, we could reassign each line on the musical staff to a variable other than pitch, and create relations—*quasi-melodies*— in

volume, overload, spectral distribution, whatever our little hearts desire.

Unfortunately, our musical technology rarely reflects this possibility. Rarely can we easily sequence *timbre* as we'd like, or play *attack* in a well-tempered way. And until this lag is overcome, our sensitivities to these relations are not likely to catch up to the well-worn sensitivities to pitch and melody. They will just feel vague and secondary. They will feel like "effects."

But they are not inherently secondary. We humans have already shown great success in the differentiation of other aspects of timbre—namely, in distinguishing our vowel spectrum. The differences between *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*—long and short—are not differences in pitch. They are differences in timbre, in spectral make-up. What's more, I'd bet that most people were *better* at separating an *i* from an *o*, than a *C* from a *C#*. This goes to show that the ears can certainly be sensitized to aspects of sound currently presumed too wispy or wordless to put a handle on.

I imagine pitch will still play a big part in future musics, but it will be considered along with many other things, and often in new relations with those other things. Pitch might also be used in *non-melodic* ways; by which I don't just mean atonal or chromatic melodies. Pitch can come in other meaningful shapes; envelopes that shape sound by ascent and descent in pitch rather than by hitting any particular frequencies at any particular times. An oversimple case is the trope of the "*falling bomb*." A steady, linear descent in pitch—signifying the falling of the bomb—then a sudden, discontinuous jump into the flat bass tone of "*the explosion*." In this case, it doesn't matter which specific frequencies are hit, so long as the pitch envelope roughly holds the same basic shape. Another trope would be *the siren*: police sirens, fire engines, and ambulances. Sirens fit neatly on top of *any* melody, which you've probably noticed when emergency vehicles pass you and blend smoothly into the music on your car stereo. It is a trope, a shape, whose character is determined by unbroken ascent and descent, rather than notes and rests. Such shapes—pitch plays of ascent, descent, leaps, and angles—are effortlessly atonal and chromatic, as would be any musical vocabulary that was built from them.

V.

Twentieth-century music did much, by its own intuitions, to undermine the predominance of melody. Electronic music, hiphop, and a few weirder genres gained a lot of ground and liberty by shifting the onus onto rhythm or a rhythmic lattice—fucking with the *principle-of-voice* as the *principle-of-action* remained more or less easily understood. But the pertinent question here is: can we produce a music that cast offs or underplays both melody *and* rhythm? A music that, by sensitizing its listeners to novel structures, can fuck with both the traditional action-principles and the traditional voice-principles at the same time. Well, perhaps while you and I are working out new-fangled voice-principles, we can also search out suitable replacements for traditional rhythm, a maneuver that often raises more skepticism and eyebrows in the general public.

Just as the *voice-principle* indicates aspects of music that are analogues or expansions of the human voice, the *action-principle* represents the broad category of sound organization with which *the body* can identify—or by extension, sounds that can be located in the very tangible movements of objects. To replace traditional rhythm, we can first search out experiences and actions which the body readily identifies with. When we loosely speak of something as having “a rhythm,” we normally intend it figuratively. War has a rhythm. Skateboarding has a rhythm. Comedic timing. Ping pong and tennis. Construction and destruction. Rollercoasters. Racing. The leaps, slides, and boops of Supermarioland. The sound composition of cartoons. All of these, when merely listened to, arouse an identification in the body; an impulse however vague of *how* to produce or reproduce those sounds.

In normal music, this identification— this impulse— customarily manifests itself in dance, as I’ve said. Admittedly, veering from traditional rhythm does imply a loss of the predictability that allows for the unplanned social synchronization of dance. But, one of my more outrageous contentions is that the predictability and repetitiveness of rhythm are only there principally to make its mimicked and real reproduction easier and all the more social. The appeal and meaning of rhythm is not, inherently, a matter of repetitiousness. It’s simply the least fuss. With respect to melody, it’s also easiest to orchestrate harmony and live, hung-over musicians on top of a fixed, snappable tempo.

Other temporal organizations can be learned, just as the timing of our favorite Wes Anderson lines are learned and mouthed so gleefully— *and in unison*. In fact, if we were to replace traditional rhythm with another action-principle, these new methods would have to either borrow from previously learned and understood time schemes, or be willing to teach the listeners new ones then and there. By borrowing from

“understood time schemes,” I mean those quasi-rhythmic structures I spoke of before, that already arouse identification in the body.

Take the rhythm of war, for instance, or the war-rhythms we learn hyperreally via movies and videogames. The *Robotron* videogame soundtrack serves as an almost archetypally pared down example of this. Springy atari sounds and blips. The *pum-pum-pum* of photon cannons. Lo-fi fuzz-explosions. The sound procession is pleasing, as much for irremediably-warped fans of Japanese noise as for irremediably-warped fans of videogames— and for almost anyone, really. We immediately sense a quasi-rhythm keeping the whole mess together.

But the action-principle in *Robotron* succeeds, not because the springs and *pum-pum-pums* fall into any temporal regularity, but because we sense that each sound *corresponds to some action*, real or imagined. Despite its minimal, sinewavy sounds, the result is still something very human-shaped and figurative. Something very easily musicalized. We even tried to elevate this war-rhythm to a more epic, symphonic level with a Hallowe'en *Awesome Party* radio show some years back; employing not only electronic warfare as an action-principle, but a number of other far-fetched theories we were tinkering with at the time, such as the organizing principles of *simultaneity*, the *cinematic*, and *Dunkin Donuts* coffee.

If, in replacing traditional rhythm, we do not borrow forms from the outside world, we must patiently teach the ears new forms within the length of the music itself. One surefire method for doing this— a method that is not all that radical, but the more general category to which traditional rhythm belongs— is *sequence*. The simple ordering of sound events, regardless of the time between them. Traditional rhythm is usually bound to respect a regular tempo. It can vary, but only when it varies predictably, as in gradual accelerations or decelerations, or in distinct parts of a song. But if the brain learns— and learns to love— a certain order, it is surprisingly forgiving about the temporal regularity of the events within it. We can listen to Marilyn Monroe sing *Happy Birthday* to J.F. Kennedy without even noticing that the song's tempo halts, teases, and dallies before delivery. In fact, it *uses* this irregularity to a successfully expressive effect. She is employing the rhythm of sex, of delay and gratification, to reshape the meaning of the song. Really, the only thing holding the whole song together is the universally familiarized form of *Happy Birthday's* word order... I'm not even sure that it's sung in key.

The second song on the album, *Fizzle Pop Organism*, is another lovely illustration of

this. The song opens with some small degree of temporal regularity, occasionally serrated by quick balloon-animal hops and squiggles. That regularity soon loses out however... Actually, the tempo is not really lost— it's in *continual flux*. That's how the song was made: by expressive variances in tempo and other variables rather than just expressive variances in pitch. It is demonstrably impossible to beat-match or tap out on your desk, if you care to test for yourself. The reason I consider *Fizzle Pop Organism* successful is because its lack of traditional rhythm is not immediately missed, or even noticed. The fundamental sequence of sounds, though tweaked and twisted into loops and knots, stays unchanged throughout the song... and the ears consider this rhythm enough.

Sequence does not necessarily have to remain totally fixed, though. Once a sequence is learned and loved, it can be given over to the play of variations. For fugues... Three-part inventions... and earpuzzles... Even if the sequence is wholly novel to the listener, the “composer” can first familiarize its listeners with the form in the beginning of the song, then spend the rest of his time torturing it to the very limits of cognition and recognition. A semi-popular example would be the third song from Nobukazu Takemura's *Scope*, which opens with the play of a cuddly little sound-creature. It introduces itself a few times, at irregular intervals, much the way a spider monkey might approach his cage bars at the zoo. Soon, the little creature begins to morph and transmogrify, like a mogwai turning into a gremlin. Takemura does it patiently, though, never losing the locus of his sound-pet, no matter how spazzy it eventually starts to behave. Our hero Takemura also sidesteps rhythmic considerations on the first song as well, when he builds a song from scratched cd passages (a musical zeitgeist-idea that everyone thought of, but Takemura was the first to perfect). The skips themselves have a lattice-like regularity, granted, but he does not adopt this regularity to *structure* the song. The skips are mere color and substance, and rhythmic only in the way that pitch, as the regular repetition of soundwaves, is rhythmic.

If patience is not one of your most sterling virtues, if your synapses have been rewired by Adderall and years of Woody Woodpecker, another method exists which, from first glance, appears to be the very opposite of a slow dialectical play between the familiar and unfamiliar. An action-principle that I will call *flow*: the rapid overturn of sound-images that creates a discernible, “coming-through-the-pipes” sensation of motion. In this frenetic method, gradual diachronic change can give way to total discontinuity, surprise and overstimulation. *Flow* is not total cognitive chaos, however. Depending on how it's done, it can be very, very pleasant to the ears, even to the ears of mothers and fathers. Done right, the body can and will strongly identify with flow.

Probably, I'd venture to guess, because of our very primordial and visceral appreciation of flowing water. The very attraction we have to Niagara Falls, gardenhoses, and dinky shopping mall fountains can be transferred onto the velocity of sound-images as well. A parade of sound-images that, at a certain point, creates the illusion of motion, of flow. Compiled too slowly, the illusion is lost, like movies viewed one frame at a time. Without a proper, locomotive velocity, it goes from being a life-giving action-principle to a mere sound-collage reflecting an older, documentary, Edisonian logic... more of an environment, or its reflection, rather than musical figure with a will of its own.

But if the sound-collage is splitsecond enough— or just surprising enough— to pry its sounds from its original contexts, to keep its listeners guessing and mindfucked, it can give a new human shape to these environments, and make them speak. This phenomenon can be achieved and observed by toting a dictaphone or mini-disc recorder into brilliant found-soundscapes. Casinos. Toystores. Science Museums. Quick fingerwork with the *record* and *pause*, at key moments, results in a manically flowful sound-collage that only gets better and better with every playback. *Flappy Action Packers* was the result of such an experiment. A day spent in Massachusetts toystores and toy sections, fully capitalizing on the hyperreal, battery-operated renaissance in today's toy industry. It's critical to note that, in this case, the dictaphone itself became a musical instrument. Not in the way that computer music programs like *Fruity Loops* and *Reason* are instruments, but in the classical sense of responding immediately to human action, like horns and violas. The only difference is that the dictaphone only has two keys— *record* and *pause*— and cannot be heard until well after all the “human action” is over and done. One lesson to be learned here is that any live, hands-on manipulation of sound, if done according to some tastes and criteria, will serve to some degree as an action-principle. Even if it's a sheerly bunch of button-pressing, knob-twiddling, or pedal-stepping, it will represent action *analogically*.

Flow can also be used in the clever slicing and dicing of hyperreal environments, such as television and radio. Rocking the pause button on vibrant soundtracks such as *Barberella* or *Tom and Jerry*, reworking the gritty substance of their sounds by not allowing enough time to catch the full source or context. I did recently this with the radio collage *Three-Way Radio*; where with the exception of a few juicy quotes and erratic station ids, hardly a sound is recognizable from its original song, no matter how classic the riff or chorus. Ten minutes of *Three-Way Radio* represents roughly “the best of radio” channel-surfed over countless hours; not to mention a fairly good petri-dish experiment of how modern, superproduced, action-packed radio is altering our sensibilities. How, for instance, the *extra-musical* has bumrushed the gates of the

musical.

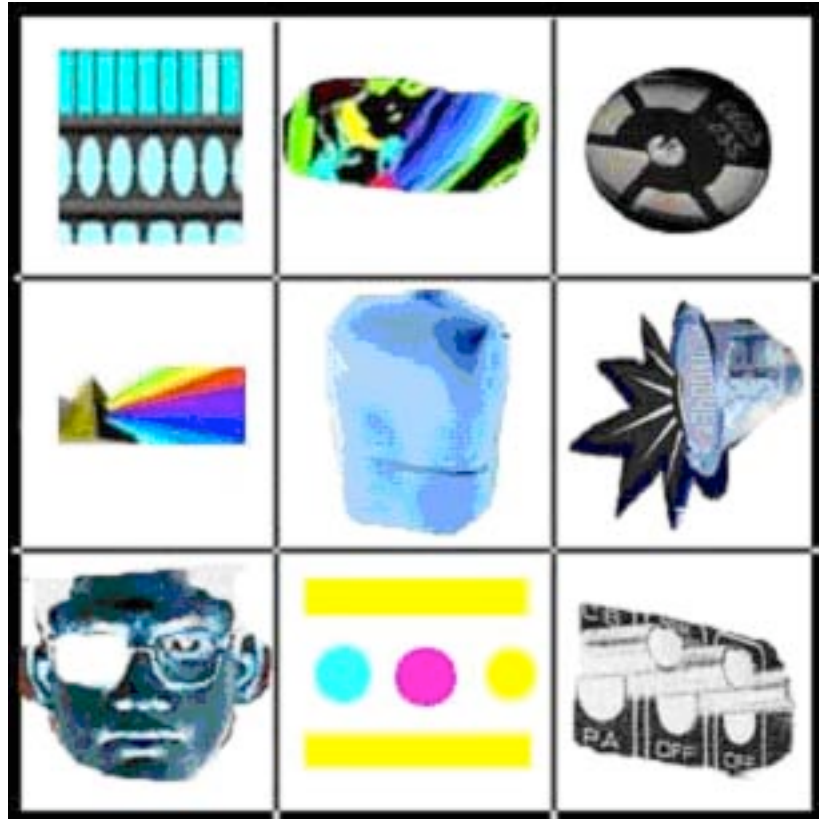
VI.

An obliquely insightful friend of mine, Howard Kleger, once remarked that music was no longer about melody or rhythm but “about...*shapes!*” And as funny as it sounded coming out of that man’s mouth, a great deal of wisdom lay sheathed in his observation. “Shapes” being another, radder term for the figurative development of sound, where shapes are added and played with to create an entire vocabulary of sound. Obviously, this resonates strongly with Schaeffer’s *sound-objects*, but I want to keep things a little looser. In that our patriarch, M. Pierre Schaeffer, had a very well-defined theory or *sofège* worked out for his *objets sonores*, in opposition to other schools and tinkers. Both conceptions though— Howard’s shapes and *musique concrète* — describe a sense of composition in which *independent bundles of characteristics* serve as building blocks, rather than diachronic relations within one aspect that has been peeled off from the rest. Each shape, sound-object, or trope is allowed to keep its identity, however pithy or incongruent or unidentifiable.

This is a new musical logic. A logic best embodied by and developed through *the sampler*, in which each button or pad *instantaneously* produces an assigned sound. Each button represents a distinct sound-shape; and every array, an entire vocabulary at your fingertips.

The typical uses of samplers, in which the sounds are automatically configured into loops or rhythmic blocks, are not what I have in mind when I speak of a “new musical logic.” It’s prior to this. When the would-be music-maker is screwing around with his soundbank, learning that these sound-shapes are under his instantaneous command and control. Better than samplers, perhaps, would be children’s toys that produce a variety of sounds with the press of a button— barnyard animals, letters of the alphabet, or emergency vehicle sounds. In these cases, even their temporal arrangements are the direct result of action; of hands and muscle movements. Whichever is better, sampler or Playskool, the logic behind both can be simplified in the following illustration:

Diagram 4.



Each cell has its own idiosyncratic pitch or pitch pattern, its own spectral qualities, its own temporal morphology, its own significations, maybe its own dynamic envelope—its own properties. Each sound-shape is then recognizable, just as a face is recognizable. Each cell can be played and *returned to*. The concatenation of sound-shapes can create new relationships both as a principle-of-voice or a principle-of-action. As a principle-of-action, a quasi-rhythm could be built from a semi-closed vocabulary of irregular shapes, rather than just loops and equal lengths. Independent variables, like pitch, speed, or delay, could still be controlled, but perhaps by another panel of dials and knobs altogether, with another kind of logic.

Our array, theoretically, could be a hundred cells squared, but we use the three-by-three cutie above to better display the thinking. After a quick screw-around session, we may have a likeable creation, depicted by the following string:

Diagram 5.



This string is not, by any means, to be thought of as a musical notation. In the era of laptop dominion, or the universe of sound, when the only difference between composition and performance is pressing *play*, a lot of notation is either useless or beyond the point of anything simpler than charts and numbers anyway. The string above is just a model of its matrix-like logic. This logic is also only one of many possible new logics— the one best tailored for the play of distinct soundshapes, sound objects, or sound tropes.

If we want chromatic variables, as we did with the panel of dials and knobs, we can adopt other logical forms, such as the *logic of the joystick*. That is, an x and y axis, with chromatic variables like *hold* or *resonance* assigned to each variable. Hell, there may even be room for a z and w axis as well, or the assignment of even more variables, depending on the make of your gadgets or number of joystick operators. So bands of the future, instead of being a man on drums and a man on lead guitar, might have someone on joysticks and the other on samplers. Larger orchestrated operations could assign one variable— like *delay* or dynamic envelopes— each to a single operator, perhaps making linear notation sensible once again.

Like I said, much will depend on our gadgets, and the logics that follow and precede them. I'm certainly not the first to say this. The hand-in-handedness of technological form and musical possibility is a toted truism in musical literature. Russolo spoke of it at length in *L'Arte di Rumori*. That was 1913, and he wasn't the first either. He was, however, very quick to realize that our musical conceptions were shaped, not just by innovation in *musical* equipment, but by every mechanism that beeped, burped, or transmitted sound. Any nudge in the meaning or technology of sound is inherently a nudge in the meaning and technology of music, as well. So in the wake of the Victrola, we have Hindemith's *Grammophonmusik* and modern turntablism, interrupting the transparency of recorded sound, and self-reflexively working out the possibilities of this *thing*— the phonograph or record-player... A musical form is invented from playing with the features of a *technological* form.

And it is my hunch that *freeplay* will be the truest avenue to mastering new musical forms and ideas, on a widescale, and in a real, visceral way. The eager freeplay of a three-year-old screwing with his Playskool barnyard sound-panel; rather than solemn masterworks of experimental composition. It will be a matter of kids getting their hands— quite literally— on new gadgets and programs, playing with sound materials and sound effects, and rewriting music theory purely by spoof and bricolage...

Aesthetic sensibilities will evolve, not in theoretical leaps, but in small, unwitting trespasses outside of musical theory. It will be some busboy with a circuit-bent Teddy Ruxpin, obsessing over an exciting new musical virtue, while the other virtues like melody and rhythm fall to the wayside. Who knows... this new musical virtue might only be possible on circuit-bent Teddy Ruxpins, making it all the trickier to incorporate into traditional staff-and-quaver musical theory. Whatever the case, new musical criteria will move half-intuitively, by little surprises and satisfactions, from stepping-stone to stepping-stone, rather than the fulfillment of overarching theoretical frameworks such as the one you're reading right now. Listening to *Lucky Dragons* for a while, you'll no longer put much stock into Adorno's gloomy suggestion that "after the *Magic Flute*, it was never again possible to force serious and light music together." The most "serious" ideas will parade around in ridiculous dress. Which is great— music is not meeting any hard, economic necessities. It should not be turned into *work*, the begrudging production of a commodity.

VII.

The mastery of a sound-array, like the one above, and any process of musical acculturation, is exactly like learning a language, a mode of expression. Again, no surprise. Music and language even overlap in the left-hemisphere of the brain. Traditional musical theory— the combined wisdom on melody, harmony, and rhythm— describes what is, essentially, a purely *connotative* language, however. Purposely unspecific in issue or detail, melody has the capacity to emote without referring. It is for this, I think, that melody is more charismatic than the written word. For one, it cannot be directly *disagreed* with. Still, many songs are served with lyrics. They choose to become

more specific, more evidently linguistic. But lyrics only compliment traditional musical theory, they do not intermingle whatsoever.

After the annexation of the universe of sound, this changes. Sounds borrowed from life, or reminiscent of life, will smuggle in semantic baggage. War sounds, and even war rhythms, will still *signify* bellicosity, however vaguely and backbrain. Howling-wind shapes will unsettle and foreshadow. And even without recourse to words, laughter will elicit laughter in the listener. So every sound and sample now has two poles: an acoustic pole and a linguistic pole. Below is a diagram of a sound easily recognizable as a lion's roar.



The lion's roar has acoustic aspects, which we could appreciate even if we had never heard anything like a lion before. Its loud grumble, its pitch, its timbre, its patchiness—all a matter of what the soundwave looks like. On the other end, the linguistic elements come into play, and the lion's roar becomes a signifier signifying lions... as well as the animal kingdom, jungles, dens, kings, MGM, Wizard of Oz, fear and triumph, Kenya, and pretty much anything else that might be loitering in the bottom of your memory under "lion." Since you *do* recognize a lion's roar, these poles cannot be cleanly extracted from each other. For example, the loud grumble could evoke some miniscule amount of fear in you, as much for its loudness or its similarity to thunder, as for its signification of a real lion.

Every sound has these two poles, but some sounds tend to be lopsidedly more

interesting in one or the other. Consider a small clip of someone saying the word “sunglasses,” or reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. In both these cases, both involving human speech, the acoustic elements are not likely to cause much conversation. The voice does have acoustical aspects nonetheless... On the other side of the divide, even a traditional instrument will have some language-like signification. A banjo song, let’s say, for the sake of argument. An Earl Scruggs number. We can appreciate the emotive melody being plucked out, but meanwhile, cityfolks still conjure up cartoonish scenes of Appalachian porch living, hillbillies, Steve Martin, Uncle Remus, your father’s side of the family, moonshine, chase scenes, and everything else we presume about the banjo itself. The very connotative baggage that would make it a squeamish fit in a rap video or a gelateria.

So these poles have always existed, to a degree, but in a much more dualistic way. Today, the divide between music and language— between composer and librettist— has given way, and structures and devices once reserved for poetics can now work minor miracles in the musical sphere. Musical composition can employ semantic aspects to its advantage; structuring its compositions for representation, for narrative— or by using sounds that *evoke* without the binding precision of actual words. A poetics that is as loose as Lettrism could have ever wished for.

More literally, this also invites music-makers to pick over speech patterns for organizing, action-principles. Rap has linguistic content, of course, but if you’re like me, you’re likely to miss or misconstrue a good seventy-five percent of it. Nevertheless, aside from the apparent rhythm of the underlying track, rap also fully exploits the rhythms, shapes, and dynamics of human speech. Run through a weird flying-saucer effect as in the *Jawa Wawa* clip, or heard in Arabic or Portuguese, rap still retains a large part of its force and appeal. I’m reminded of *Neon Hunk* with their voices indecipherably scrambled by pedals and their faces masked by dummy heads and glo-green bandanas, still conveying a whole range of emotions. From love and excitement through scowling disapproval. Or, Paul Lansky’s *Idle Chatter* in which vague speech, just out of earshot, invites the listener’s brain to fill in the blanks with interpolative guesswork, interpolative meaning. In this, the cognitive reach for meaning, in itself, becomes the very substance of the music. A pretty unlikely base for any composition, but— point is— it clicks.

VIII.

Along with pitch and rhythm, we mentioned that relationships can be created within and among numerous other independent aspects of any sound— spectral qualities, dynamics, reverberation, orientation, distortion, and countless others. But in addition to these aspects, which are more or less independent dimensions, more complex qualities emerge when we start combining them in various ways, and steeping sounds in contexts. One quality that I will tentatively name “*horsepower*,” is a uniquely modern attribute of sound. It is the quality we have been acculturated to appreciate by powersaws and gas pedals; by the motorized and the mechanical. Theoretically, we can try to break down *horsepower* into constituent elements of tone, dynamics, and pitch changes, but it would miss the Gestalt unity of the concept. And I have my doubts of its possibility. The throaty rumble of a idling car engine does not share much with a bandsaw in terms of intensity, dynamic envelope, or even pitchshapes, but I could sensibly speak of both in terms of *horsepower*.

The unity of the concept comes mostly from the context of experience; in the way that the Doppler effect signifies velocity and position, but solely through its place in the jet and automobile age. Horsepower is the relationship with sound we learn by holding an electric drill in our hand. The hum and vroom. The tones and dynamics. The gritty materiality of the wood or metal being drilled.

Horsepower is not confined to literal workshop noise, but to anything that borrows its texture and patterns. Whatever sound-associations we learned and experienced in the woodshop and garage have been eagerly imported into the musical sphere, and to an obvious extent in charismatic rock and noise. Amplifiers and distortion pedals very obviously turn instruments into powertools, and the horsepower criterion is essential to their meaning. Many times, more essential than the melody and rhythm it intensifies. Imagine *Saint Jacques* by *Lightning Bolt*— whose melody is basically *Frère Jacques*— played out on a lyre and bongos, or scored with “*Fortissimo. Molto Vivace*” inked above the staff. Somehow, its brilliant anthem-like energetics are completely lost in the translation, and traditional music theory can't really explain the gap.

The same holds true for *smoothness*, a second-order quality from the opposite side of the mood spectrum— and perhaps the closest I'll come to having all the music I dislike grouped under a single term. If I try to break it down to constituent qualities, like the tempo, the goldenness of throats, or the presence of an alto saxophone, it slips through

my grasp. Smoothness seems to have a Gestalt unity that, for me, must be heard to be hated. Songs, as a whole, have smoothness in the same way pebbles or warm brandy have smoothness. Smoothness, though, could also be a characteristic of a sound-object, a solitary musical figure. An auditory pebble or an auditory mug of warm, spiced brandy. Intense, overdriven soundshapes could alternate with smooth soundshapes, countless times within a given song. The number of such higher-order qualities is as high as the number of adjectives in our experience. We can speak of concreteness, balance, irritation, decipherability, naturalness, size, continuity, disparity, unity, density, ugliness, infectiousness, or fatigue. We can speak of sounds being a solid, liquid, or gas. We can borrow Schaeffer's *mass* or *color*. In fact, we can use whole systems of analogy from linguistics, the visual arts, electronics and mechanics, or any sphere of life, to create a new rubric of musical meaning.

Some higher-order qualities may not be able to be isolated in one solitary sound-shape, but are inherently structural *macroshapes*. Qualities like suspense and tension, found in crescendos like Ravel's *Bolero*, or the tension illustration, *Belarus. Barrage* or *vortex*, of the sort perfected on Rich and Ramsey Arnaoot's Charlottesville radio show, *Awesome Party*, is another prominent macroshape. In which, with as much as six tracks playing simultaneously, musical elements clash and combine like particles in a cyclotron. This macroshape, this pattern-play, soon erodes the need for total musical unity. Even worse, after a while, you come to expect and want a minimum of two disparate tracks battling, just to keep the ears entertained. We can surrender the need for a unified simultaneity—for harmony or rhythmic congruence—and hope for clashes, rare gems and occurrences, brief synchronicities, duels, and the auditory equivalent of Moiré visual pattern-play. Sound-vortex or sound-barrage like *Awesome Party* differs from everyday noise pollution in that there is still a purposive will sitting behind the mixing board, making aesthetic discriminations and choices. The shapes are shaped, as expression, in proportion to a human will.

IX.

Above these, there are qualities even softer, and even more complex— *meta-musical* qualities— that have more to do with a song or piece’s familial relation to other music and meanings. *Genre* springs to mind first, as the most general taxonomy of musics. It’s much more than a taxonomy though, or a stylistic choice-of-weapons. Each genre in itself evokes a family of sentiments and associations. Genre thus amounts to a meta-language unto itself. A language that can be utilized, especially by today’s discriminating teenage ear, *inside of a song*, as a quality of ever-shortening strips of sound. In shorter words: music is anything but ahistorical, and musical history can be tapped for creation rather than just criticism and stocking merchandise. Musical genre has a social signification, that is conventionally used for tribal alliances in mall-culture, but can successfully used in meaningful chunks of sound.

We can play off class differences by playing off dissonances between strange bedfellows like classical and Baltimore club, either in alternation or montage. Since music is so historical, representative of a moment, we can even shape meaning out of *nostalgia*, personal and public. In order to make these suggestions more suggestive, the music-maker must strive to make these qualities sharper at the edges; work with specifics. But these specifics are not so much internal aesthetic judgments— whether the melody hooks or the rhythm motivates— but the specifics of historical context. Both the music-maker and the listener are bound to have pretty steady preconceptions about the second Hungarian Rhapsody, the Beer Barrel polka, or Frank Sinatra well before we begin. Instead, whether loved or hated, these preconceptions about sinatras, hungarian rhapsodies, and polkas are evoked on purpose, or *to effect*... Even if it’s evoked in order to be parodied.

Likewise, when the Marx Brothers use a two-second clip of *Stars and Stripes Forever* to shatter the silence of a tiptoe, we do not pull out our everyday aesthetic considerations. It is used in the way a hammer is used; which is to say that music, and its various parts, can also have a *functionality*. A functionality which achieves a result. *Yes or no. Off or on.* A biopsych nerd may have a personal dislike of binaural pink noise. It nevertheless performs a function. It creates something in the listener; in this case, an effect on your brainwave patterns. Once upon a time, I cranked out an hour-long album to be played solely on the occasion of a Philadelphia house-warming party. The album was mostly silence, punctured every now and again by sudden, deafening noises. Giant *whams*, *booms*, *boings*, and quick clips of a brassy merry-go-rounds. The whole operation was run through an amplifier and hidden under the refreshments table, the better to terrify our guests. The merry-go-round music, here, is performing a function:

terror. Such functionality can also be gradual or even subliminal, like Eno's "perfume" music or the tightly-repetitious live rockloop of Oneida's *Sheets of Easter*. If I put on *Sheets of Easter*, at a party, active listeners first will marvel at its stamina, but eventually move on, a little exhausted. But if it's played *just so*— subliminally— among inattentive hubbub, it will induce a very noticeable froth and frenzy in the crowd. The music is turned on, just as a machine is turned on.

You may be inclined to say that, in these scenarios, we're not using music *musically*. But, even if I were to grant that such a purposive use of sound was not musical— which I wouldn't— I'd insist that functionality can be incorporated into a larger aesthetic understanding of music. Perhaps fleshing out a more cinematic use of sound; in which surprise, suspense, and terror are used in a very Hitchcockian manner. Or, in which small sound-shapes and sound-tropes each perform a *function*, pulled from the toolbox when right and ready. To relax, to rattle, to excite, to confuse, to swoon, to irritate. We can comb through a book on psychoacoustics and find a wealth of other devices too: the play of thresholds and extrema, musical illusions like the ever-ascendant pitch, the soundpieces that play off the very categories of perception and memory. Used alone, these mechanisms are scientifically interesting, but used in combination with aesthetic criteria they can be put at the service we can justifiably deem "musical."

X.

I want to speak about the charismatic for a moment here... Likes and dislikes do not often change by argumentation— by being proven wrong or right. They more often change by startling arrangements and glimpses onto the Sublime, the Beautiful, and the Interesting. Such glimpses and scenarios suddenly I'm inclined to call "charismatic." However, when I speak about charisma, I do not mean simply *allure* or *stage presence*, but rather a kind of magnetic field created by the force of wills and desires— a Weberian sense of the charismatic as an uncharacterizable, totalizing persuasion that shifts and shoves and flips all our criteria in one go. Without recourse to previous, fixed, and effable criteria.

It is the play of charisma— in experiences outside of the music itself— that help explain our transition from *Def Leppard* to *Bad Brains*, in the sixth grade, rather than anything about the sound or shape of the music. We liked that album, *Hysteria*, truly and genuinely, but it no longer met all our paramusical needs at that tender moment of life, in

Middle School.

Charisma, in my thinking, has its holy fount not only in charismatic individuals such as school-hallway heroes and Yamatsuka Eye, but in all social situations, and in many other stirring, asocial situations. If other wills are appreciative or disdainful enough of something— like bright yellow or harsh noise— then this alone persuades, and can bring on sudden wind changes in our field of likes and dislikes. And it may be charisma, rather than strictly *musical* qualities, that alters our sensibilities in the largest chunks.

Music does not just concern the musical, however. And musicians quickly incorporate the paramusical and charismatic into their acts— in videos, in extravagant stage shows, in design and packaging, or even in exploiting, as Nate Davis has remarked, "the anthropological aspects of music." Eventually these paramusical aspects— charismatic aspects— seep further and further into the fold, until they become, at end, musical criteria. Or, if nothing else, affect the musicians you praise and the shows you attend.

One such charismatic criterion that can be reasonably tacked down is the purposive, *expressive deviation* from the lines established by more level-headed criteria like melody, timing, and listenability. A musical criterion defined in negative terms, by how much it fails or refuses to accord with expectation. Slight deviation has a well-worn history— tuning sharp or trailing the beat— but ballsier deviation, in which musical standards are defied in an expressively variant way, can itself take a turn as a new musical element or measure. We must have in mind, first, a proper curve from which to deviate: a well-behaved melody, or routinized rhythm. Only then we will understand the strength of the refusal.

And on some finer micro-level, it is always this deviation, rather than accuracy, that we enjoy. In the "warmth" of vibrato or the introduction of error into electronic music. Likewise, no one listens to Johnny Cash for his Midi-like replication of the original scoresheet. We want idiomatic, charismatic, swaggering outlaw, Man-in-Black deviation from what otherwise would be musically traditional songs.

In expressive deviation, it's not the relationships or qualities *themselves* that count. It's the measure of clash, denial, and distance with respect to traditional musical lines and virtues. To be unlistenable loud— loud enough to sever the presumed bond between music and pleasure— is yet another expressive variation on inherited musical dynamics. It means, does, and conveys *something*. As does the common musical refusal of singing in key or sharply on time. They are charismatic refusals of both the soft, vulnerability of melody and the step-to punctuality of kept rhythm. To other ears, they just sound like

negligence...

This deviation can be sincere— like the sonic fuck-yous of *Prurient* or *Whitehouse*— or it can be *ironic*, when its very badness and failures become its best part and saving grace. Irony, from what I can tell, may be the most powerful and shadowy of all charismatic devices. Capable of turning the most fixed aesthetic prejudices on their heads. Capable of inverting the categories of best and worst with a clever, charismatic reworking of context. Irony alone compromises the whole shebang of fixed musical judgment and universalism. With irony, aesthetic badness and goodness can capsizes by the slightest wobble in *intent*... “*Is he doing that on purpose? ... If so, he’s a genius.*” What I’m saying is that the emotive properties of music are not *inherent* characteristics of any play of scales or melody; of “the Do-Re-Mi,” as Pierre Schaeffer called it.

The Lawrence Welk Show is a favorite television program for both me and my grandmother, but for two completely different, completely incommensurable reasons. Melodically speaking, the music is tranquil, pastel, and reassuring to most Americans over the age of sixty-five. For me, it elicits emotions ranging from giggling disbelief to an Easter Sunday kind of empty horror. Never tranquility, never reassurance. *Theme for the Summer*, when it was written and radio-played, probably evoked every ideal of warm, courtly amour and nostalgia for the present. Among my friends, though, it strikes us more as mid-century repression put to vinyl; musical Thorazine reminiscent of mental institutions and *One Flew Over the Coo-Coo’s Nest*. But how can this be? How can such a straightforward composition have such starkly different things if melody is a set psychological language *inherent* to certain plays of pitch? Needless to say, I don’t think the emotive language of music is fixed or innate. It just may take a little while— of resensitizing our ears and reshuffling our cognitive categories— in order for these new musical languages to be able to really emote like the old and golden ones.

XI

For militant anti-essentialists, such as myself, the question “*what is music?*” might perhaps unearth some interesting theories or factoids about musical history, about “*what music has been.*” But as for what music *must* be, what it *will* forever be, or what distinguishes music from non-music, the question is doomed and pointless. Music becomes *musical*— as opposed to mere sound or racket— as soon as someone recognizes or mistakes it for music, no matter how questionable or incoherent or drugged-up this someone might be. It’s not really helpful to theoretically acknowledge that something *could be* music— anything *could* theoretically be musicalized— but that it actually intuitively *clicks* for somebody, somewhere... Gets really tangled in their likes

and dislikes. And even this criterion— the only criterion I could muster— is as cavalier as they come. It could never be used to settle arguments, or distill musical essences, or banish impostors from the republic of music.

Essentialists would like, still, to have *some* criteria in their pencilbox, something to preemptively parse music from non-music. Some set of qualities, tastes, or standards that they can isolate in order to better understand music. Perhaps they might claim that, one thing that is essential and pretty *sine qua non* about music is that “*it is about sound.*” Besides being uninformative, however, this is also not true. Rhythm is perfectly translatable into the visual field— or any other of our senses, for that matter. And, if you wanted to be a bastard about it, extremes of frequency can be felt and even *seen*. So essentialists here would not only be wasting time on a snark-hunt for musical essences, they would also be closing off the horizons of musical progression (i.e., the capillaries between sight and sound)...

The essentialists I’m talking about are not just academic philosophers, though. I mean more the majority of the Earth’s population who, when hearing something sufficiently novel, snottily announce that this or that “is *not* music”— as if this means anything. Essentialism, in this case, is more of a grudge than an aesthetic philosophy. Anti-essentialism is simply the opposite; the musical openness we find in figures like Ferruccio Busoni, who in his *Sketch of a New Aesthetic in Music* wrote that “*Only a long and careful series of experiments, and continued training of the ear, can render this unfamiliar material approachable and plastic for the coming generation, and for art... And what a vista of fair hopes and dreamlike fancies is opened for both... Let us free music from its architectonic, acoustic, and aesthetic dogmas.*”

Any visible limits we could foresee in music, like maybe the psychoacoustic limits of our perception, are themselves continually being pushed further and further back by technological innovation, thereby becoming more of a horizon than a ceiling or limit. Howard Kleger, interrupting my beauty sleep one morning, barged in at 7:00 AM with the blueprints for just such a bleeding-edge invention... “*What if... we could have microphones that were like... microscope microphones... that way, we could hear what germs sound like...*” This idea— that, at some far-off point, *germs* could be musicalized— seemed to me a fairly strong indicator that music was in no jeopardy of exhaustion...

XII.

Sweet-tooth is more or less the song I had always wanted to hear. The micromanaged, maximalist creation only its creator could love. Twelve years previous, my mother and I were having a pleasant car-ride conversation about experimental music. She had heard something by John Cage earlier on public radio, and was trying to explain the piece and the impression it left with her. “*It was like,*” she explained “... *music with objects.*” That phrase stuck with me and singlehandedly revealed to me the myopia of “the musical” in a universe of sound (which Cage would probably have been pleased to know). *Sweet-tooth* is a re-creation of the song I imagined that day when she said “music with objects.” Now that it’s here, I consider myself semi-retired. I crammed about two zillion protomusical principles into 8 minutes and 47 seconds; then wrote this twenty page monster to convince friends and listeners that it was not just an irritating joke.

Although *Sweet-tooth* may be a showcase of many principles, it is a far cry from their logical conclusion. It is only the expression of a very specific sensibility: *mine*. A caffeinated musicality that works primarily in energetics rather than sentimentality. A maximalism that slakes my private needs for hypermeaning and overstimulus. But it’s not for everybody. Or many people, for that matter. Instead, everybody is now responsible for making their own masterpieces, their own favorite song. This is the drift of things. Job creation. The musical democratization that is sure to follow such an explosion in concept, category, and technological means.