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The phonographic *mise-en-scène*

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Abstract: For Adorno, the graphic reproduction of operatic performance means that the primary scene of audition has shifted as well: from the theatre – and the telic determinations towards which the natural history of the theatre tends – to the living room, where people gather to listen to what they no longer concern themselves to perform. The phonograph allows the vagaries and vulgarities of the visuality of (operatic) performance to be held off or back by an auditory experience whose condition of possibility and whose end is the illusory recovery of something literary – and thus essentially visual. What remains is to begin an attempt to see and hear what might be gained by moving through the opposition of the denigration of the recording in the discourse of performance and the denigration of performance in the discourse of 'classical' musicology. This attempt is made by way of the 1993 recording of Arnold Schoenberg's monodrama *Erwartung*, starring Jessye Norman as the opera's single character, Die Frau, with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra under the baton of James Levine. It is an attempt that has required reading with and against Adorno – which is to say, listening to and for the sound that works in and against him.

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It would be difficult to overstate the importance of writing for Theodor Adorno, who understands the graphic as something on the order of an interinanimation of drive and affect that is essential to aesthetic experience, whether the medium is film (wherein the technique of montage approaches writing) or music (whose authenticity is ensured by a mode of audition that simulates composition, thereby sanctioning a practically literary displacement of the musical performance in favour of the musical work). As essential as writing is to Adorno's idea of the aesthetic, and as central as music is to that idea, phonography presents a specific problem for Adorno because it shifts the scene of writing from composition to mechanical reproduction – even if such mechanical reproduction might also render feasible a form of structural listening that would re-establish the primacy of composition by reproducing, as it were, composition's originary moment.

The problematic of writing is, for Adorno, a problematic of reproduction, and one that produces another, more fundamental, double bind. On the one hand, the reproductive nature of writing confirms the distinction between technique and technology upon which the singularity of the work's internal structure rests, even as it marks another distinction between original and copy. But at the same time, writing is perceived as that which delays or defers any immediate reference of the copy to the original, an immediacy upon which film depends unless it adheres to a grapho-montagic structure that is at once essential to and immanently critical of cinema.

To defer the immediacy, to disrupt the representation of the object: this, for Adorno, is the true essence of film, of music, of art. Or, stated another way: art must shift its representative function away from the object and towards subjective experience. For the cinema subjective experience resides, most of all, in montage.

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To the extent that dissonance can be understood as deferral, as a disruption of immediacy-as-resolution; and to the extent that abstraction is, too, the holding off, of any simple and immediate experience of the object and of its story; and to the extent that this deferral or disruption or, equally, this indeterminate extension of expectation can be understood as a kind of rupturally rhythmic, asynchronous suspension better known as syncopation, then we can understand the central importance of the ensemble of montage, dissonance, abstraction and syncopation that animates the phonographic *mise-en-scène* for modernity, its aesthetics and its politics.

The hybridities of the circus and of burlesque, which Adorno dismisses due to what he terms their 'venerable roughness and idiocy', are best understood as the interstitial sloughs wherein the singularity and autonomy of the arts falters.[1] These locales of inarticulacy, spaces marked only in and as the warping, broken and breaking articulation of objects, only in and as the site where one comes upon or encounters the object, are also the hybrid *modes* of what Michael Fried disparagingly characterises – in its mid-twentieth-century manifestations in the plastic arts – as theatre.[2] These hybridities are the structured and structuring origins of hybridities; they are the district, the bottom, the side, the (cut) Cuba Addition, the terry, the plain as well as the 'process of dilution and bastardisation' where misalliances of all paraesthetic and un/natural (or radically natural) kinds come or come up or are come upon.[3]

Adorno valorises montage as writing, the sensuous theorisation of the interval, while denying, even as he acknowledges the undeniability of whatever emerges – precisely as theoretical sensuousness – from a certain lingering in, or from whatever object lingers in, the interval. Whoever this object is is not just what she is – the apparatus, the *dispositif*; her invented and philosophical sensing is the anorigin of our modernity. In the particular instance that interests me right now – one that operates at and in the audiovisual convergence of musical composition, phonography, the animaterial and animetaphoric trace of cinema and the fantastic *Gesamtkunstwerk* (*lichkeit*) of opera – the object's name is Jessye Norman, born and raised in the respectably asymptotic outside of the terr(itor)y of Augusta, Georgia. Meanwhile, the intervallic breaking of the flow is the flow's condition of possibility and this, of course, is both good and bad. In the end we are interested in the objection to (that is also the constitutive objection of and in) the story – the mellifluous off inside the drama; the montagic, dissonant, syncopated abstract; the criminal disruption of narrative; the grapho-reproductive improvisation of narrative; the black performance of narrative; the irreducible trace of (slave) narrative. The dramatic quarters of narrative are where we're lingering now in this, in our, modernity. The portable dark (in)continent, not even all that far back in the woods.

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Transparencies on Film', trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique*, 24–5 (Fall–Winter 1981–2), 204.
[2] See Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999), 116–47.
[3] Miriam B. Hansen, 'Introduction to Adorno, "Transparencies on Film" (1966)', *New German Critique*, 24–5 (Fall–Winter 1981–2), 188 n.5.

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Access to the seeming remoteness of such seemingly wild space is made more possible by recognising that, for Adorno, the graphic reproduction of operatic performance means that the primary scene of audition has shifted as well. The theatre – and the telic determinations towards which the natural history of the theatre tends – has been replaced by the living room, where people gather to listen to what they no longer concern themselves to perform, where the reproduction of performance is brought to give notice to what the new technologies of reproduction make performance no longer able to reproduce, where the stereo (and the television and all their digital accoutrements) – now even more than in Adorno's time – eclipse the piano as the piece of furniture most iconic of bourgeois domesticity and accomplishment, where 'through the curves of the needle on the phonograph record, music approaches decisively its true character as writing'.[4] Thus the phonographic *mise-en-scène*, because of and despite the structuring degradations of the culture industry, is revealed to be the most authentic site of a mode of 'structural listening' that approaches reading, one where development and the closed totality of the work become the objects of a kind of ocular-linguistic musical perception in which music's textual essence comes to light. As Rose Rosengard Subotnik puts it, this kind of structural listening 'makes more use of the eyes than of the ears', though, for Adorno, the scene of phonographic audition comes to constitute something like a prophylactic against the degradation or waste of musical substance that is always given as a danger of the ideological spectacle of operatic staging as well as the materiality of sound.[5]

Adorno's valorisation of the auditory phonographic relation to the literary experience of the score displaces the effects and affects of sensuous visuality that had seemed an inescapable by-product of musical performance in general and operatic performance in particular. This is to say that the condition of possibility of the revalorisation of pure sound is that the new phonographic medium makes possible – by way of its erasure of itself as medium or as the medium of a medium, the vehicle of sound; and by way of the repetitive listening it allows – a more proximate relation of the experience of music to its essence as writing. Sound comes back but only by way of its graphic overwriting, underwriting, *Ur*-writing. The phonograph enables the illusory recovery of an architrace. At the same time, the vagaries and vulgarities of the visual are held off or back by a phonography whose condition of possibility and whose end is the illusory recovery of the essentially literary – and thus essentially visual – experience. That experience – literate or 'structural listening' – is imagining composition: the listener's impossible inhabitation of the imagination of the composer in order to discern those structural

[4] Adorno, 'The Form of the Phonograph Record', trans. Thomas Y. Levin, in Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2002), 279–80. See also Adorno, 'The Natural History of the Theatre', in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York, 1992), 65–78.

[5] Rose Rosengard Subotnik, 'Towards a Deconstruction of Structural Listening: A Critique of Schoenberg, Adorno, and Stravinsky', in *Deconstructive Variations: Music and Reason in Western Society* (Minneapolis, 1996), 161.

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intentions upon which the interinanimation of individual and universal autonomy is supposed to rest.

What remains is to begin an attempt to see and hear what might be gained by moving through the opposition of the denigration of the recording in the discourse of performance and the denigration of performance in the discourse of 'classical' musicology. So I've been preparing myself for the 1993 recording of Arnold Schoenberg's monodrama *Erwartung*, starring Jessye Norman as the opera's single character, 'Die Frau', with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra under the baton of James Levine.[6] That preparation has meant reading with and against Adorno – which is to say listening to and for the sound that works in and against him. Listening to Norman's unmistakable voice sing *Erwartung* on disc, I want to suggest, reintroduces the body – and specifically the black body and the black voice – at the scene of literate audition and in the process disrupts Adorno's ideal of a smooth, composerly structural listening unmarred by contact with or memory of the represented object.

3

Schoenberg calls *Erwartung* the representation 'in *slow motion* [of] everything that occurs during a single second of maximum spiritual excitement, stretching it out to half an hour'.[7] Adorno describes the work in this way:

> The monodrama *Erwartung* has as its heroine a woman looking for her lover at night. She is subjected to all the terrors of darkness and in the end comes upon his murdered corpse. She is consigned to music in the very same way as a patient is to analysis. The admission of hatred and desire, jealousy and forgiveness, and – beyond all this – the entire symbolism of the unconscious is wrung from her; it is only in the moment that the heroine becomes insane that the music recalls its right to utter a consoling protest. The seismographic registration of traumatic shock becomes, at the same time, the structural law of the music. It forbids continuity and development. Musical language is polarized according to its extremes: towards gestures of shock resembling bodily convulsions on the one hand, and on the other towards a crystalline standstill of a human being whom anxiety causes to freeze in her tracks.[8]

If the seismographic register that is *Erwartung* comes fully into its own not on stage but only in the fully equipped living room, undetermined by the pre-scriptive primitivity of embodied performance, it is liveness in and as its somatic manifestation that has caused this deferral. For Adorno it is imperative that the spectacular

[6] Monodrama is an interesting word. The trajectory of its definition moves from words to which music was meant to correspond and to accentuate towards visual spectacle (which doubles and is meant to be doubled by the music). *Erwartung* recoils from that trajectory and Adorno admires such critical 'regression'. The recording I am concerned with is Arnold Schoenberg, *Erwartung/Brettl-Lieder*, performed by Jessye Norman, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, Philips 426 621–2.

[7] Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975), 105.

[8] Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York, 1973), 42.

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experience of the performing body be disrupted in a scene of auditory reading that stages the protection of the aesthetic and of subjectivity from the sensual, ideological and objective impurities of style, theatricality and performance that make subjectivity and the aesthetic possible. In the case of *Erwartung*, the subject will have been protected by the breakdown of the subject's line. That paradoxically prophylactic rupture is sutured, as it were, by a phonographic structural listening 'that, when successful', according to Subotnik, 'gives the listener the sense of composing the piece as it actualises itself in time'.[9]

This solicitation of the temporal coherence of the subject of musical experience – which appears as the imagined composure of the composer – is the moral, so to speak, of *Erwartung*. The restoration of the subject will have been made possible by the subject's having been broken by waiting. If, as Susan McClary puts it, 'tonality itself – with its process of instilling expectations and subsequently withholding promised fulfilment until climax – is the principal musical means during the period from 1600 to 1900 for arousing and channelling desire' and if the subject stands in as an effect of the regulative channelling of aroused desire, then *Erwartung* (or 'Expectation') can be understood as the knell of a new moment in music history, the moment when disruptive atonality troubles the twin essence (development and a resolved, even resolutely coherent totality) of both the musical tradition and the mode of subjectivity that tradition helps to form and deform.[10] The discontinuity that goes with the interminable extension of the moment is nothing less than the rupture of development that is development's last resort, a rupture that phonography underscores.

4

The evolution of Adorno's attitude towards phonography marks something like a path to the last resort. In his 1927 essay 'The Curves of the Needle', he writes:

> Talking machines and phonograph records seem to have suffered the same historical fate as that which once befell photographs: the transition from artisanal to industrial production transforms not only the technology of distribution but also that which is distributed. As the recordings become more perfect in terms of plasticity and volume, the subtlety of color and the authenticity of vocal sound declines as if the singer were being distanced more and more from the apparatus. The records, now fabricated out of a different mixture of materials, wear out faster than the old ones. The incidental noises, which have disappeared, nevertheless survive in the more shrill tone of the instruments and the singing. In a similar fashion, history drove out of photographs the shy relation to the speechless object that still reigned in daguerrotypes, replacing it with a photographic sovereignty borrowed from lifeless psychological painting to which, furthermore, it remains inferior. Artisanal compensations for the substantive loss of quality are at odds with the real economic situation. In their early phases, these technologies had the power to penetrate rationally the reigning artistic practice. The moment one attempts to improve these early technologies through an emphasis on concrete fidelity, the exactness one has ascribed to them is exposed

[9] Subotnik, 'Towards a Deconstruction of Structural Listening', 150.
[10] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, 1991), 12.

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as an illusion by the very technology itself. The positive tendency of consolidated technology itself to present objects themselves in as unadorned a fashion as possible is, however, traversed by the ideological need of the ruling society, which demands subjective reconciliation with these objects – with the reproduced voice as such, for example. In the aesthetic form of technological reproduction, these objects no longer possess their traditional reality. The ambiguity of the results of forward-moving technology – which does not tolerate any constraint – confirms the ambiguity of the process of forward-moving rationality as such.[11]

This is a problematic that concerns narrative, where what is encoded as the interplay of photography and lifeless psychological painting is more properly understood as the audiovisual locus of stolen life. Moreover, the entire problematic of intolerance for constraint, in its positive and negative forms, is at stake here – power/capital's intolerance for constraint, the slave's intolerance of constraint. We'll see how this concerns the relation of *Erwartung* to the photographic silence of the servant girl (the apparatus's shy relation to the speechless object) even as it is also about the shrillness of her scream. This is about the convergence of new technology with speechless object, screaming servant girl, irreproducibly reproduced and reproductive singer, the pregnant, *mater*ial individual and her event. It is also about the criminalisation of forward-moving development that is irrevocably bound to the scream, to chromatic-libidinal saturation, to the end that is, at once, deferred, impossible and premature.

Meanwhile, in the 1934 essay 'The Form of the Phonograph Record' – as in 'The Curves of the Needle' seven years earlier – Adorno figures phonographic records as 'herbaria' that provide the shrinking sounds (of a music whose performance is already understood as the somatically degraded copy of a scriptural original) with a kind of archival space, an audio-visualised display like some kind of auditory equivalent of the diorama.[12] Music is an analogue of naturalistic oil painting, where a kind of scientism or positivism is inherent in the technical form. But even as Adorno decries the muting privatisation forced upon music by the emergent technologies of the nineteenth century, the mutational force of an essentially graphic form/medium becomes for him a positive value insofar as it makes possible a more genuinely literary musical experience. The strife between eye and ear bears complications and ambivalences that remain.

This struggle between two ways of valorising the muting of music is paralleled by two ways of valorising the emergence of music as a private experience. The complex relation between the private, the individual and loneliness is unique and necessary to Adorno's work, despite the rich annoyance of his particular mode of provocation. A glancing, antipathetic engagement with, in turn, pregnant stillness and profligate shrillness lets us get at the sexual dimensions of the ensemblic barrier to the last resort:

[11] Adorno, 'The Curves of the Needle', trans. Thomas Y. Levin, in *Essays on Music*, 271–2.
[12] Adorno, 'The Form of the Phonograph Record', 278–9; see also his 'Curves of the Needle', 272–3.

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The relevance of the talking machines is debatable. The spatially limited effect of every such apparatus makes it into a utensil of the private life that regulates the consumption of art in the nineteenth century. It is the bourgeois family that gathers around the gramophone in order to enjoy the music that it itself – as was already the case in the feudal household – is unable to perform. The fact that the public music of that time – or at least the arioso works of the first half of the nineteenth century – was absorbed into the record repertoire testifies to its private character, which had been masked by its social presentation. For the time being, Beethoven defies the gramophone. The diffuse and atmospheric comfort of the small but bright gramophone sound corresponds to the humming gaslight and is not entirely foreign to the whistling teakettle of bygone literature. The gramophone belongs to the pregnant stillness of individuals.[13]

Male voices can be reproduced better than female voices. The female voice easily sounds shrill – but not because the gramophone is incapable of conveying high tones, as is demonstrated by its adequate reproduction of the flute. Rather, in order to become unfettered, the female voice requires the physical appearance of the body that carries it. But it is just this body that the gramophone eliminates, thereby giving every female voice a sound that is needy and incomplete. Only there where the body itself resonates, where the self to which the gramophone refers is identical with its sound, only there does the gramophone have its legitimate realm of validity: thus Caruso's uncontested dominance. Wherever sound is separated from the body – as with instruments – or wherever it requires the body as a complement – as is the case with the female voice – gramophone reproduction becomes problematic.[14]

Here, the fact that the female voice is tainted by the bodily presence that it requires in turn taints the gramophone, since it is revealed to require the very body from which it promised to liberate us. Moreover, the degraded nature of the form is tied, as we have already seen and will see again, to its incipient visuality. Phonograph records are 'a virtual photograph of their owners, flattering photographs – ideologies', commodities that come to embody, in their portrayal of a pseudo-cultured ideal, the lack of individuality that marks their consumers. Yet Adorno derives a kind of memorial hope from the record – the dead phonographic object, in and despite its petrification, reification and commodification, is invested with a life that would otherwise vanish.[15]

In this sense, at this moment, Adorno begins to think more seriously of the record as a kind of writing, as letters from the dead that enable the musico-literary experience sometimes called structural listening. This is elaborated, in relation to the phonograph's temporal capacities, in the 1969 essay 'Opera and the Long-Playing Record' where Adorno exults that 'the entire musical literature could now become available in quite-authentic form to listeners desirous of auditioning and studying such works at a time convenient to them'.[16] The long-playing record 'allows for the optimal presentation of music, enabling it to recapture some of the force and

[13] 'Curves of the Needle', 272.
[14] 'Curves of the Needle', 274.
[15] 'Curves of the Needle', 274.
[16] Adorno, 'Opera and the Long-Playing Record', trans. Thomas Y. Levin, in *Essays on Music*, 283.

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intensity that had been worn threadbare in the opera houses. Objectification, that is, a concentration on music as the true object of opera, may be linked to a perception that is comparable to reading, to the immersion in a text'.[17] He adds:

> The ability to repeat long-playing records, as well as parts of them, fosters a familiarity which is hardly afforded by the ritual of performance. Such records allow themselves to be possessed just as previously one possessed art-prints. But there remains hardly any means other than possession, other than reification, through which one can get at anything unmediated in this world – and in art as well . . . LPs provide the opportunity – more perfectly than the supposedly live performance – to recreate without disturbance the temporal dimension essential to operas.
>
> . . . Similar to the fate that Proust ascribed to paintings in museums, those recordings awaken to a second life in the wondrous dialogue with the lonely and perceptive listeners, hibernating for purposes unknown.[18]

Indeed, hibernation, here, is quite obviously meant to facilitate a structural listening whose loneliness moves in some perfect correspondence with the loneliness of the composer, especially Schoenberg's loneliness, embodied perhaps most purely in *Erwartung*, in relation to which Adorno writes, in his 1948 *Philosophy of Modern Music*:

> That the anxiety of the lonely becomes the law of aesthetic formal language, however, betrays something of the secret of that loneliness. The reproach against the individualism of art is so pathetically wretched simply because it overlooks the social nature of this individualism. 'Lonely discourse' reveals more about social tendencies than does communicative discourse. Schoenberg hit upon the social character of loneliness by developing this lonely discourse to its ultimate extreme.[19]

But why is this loneliness 'of city dwellers totally unaware of one another' best understood from within the singularity of the phonographic *mise-en-scène* and out of the crowd of the concert hall?[20] Is there a new or another understanding of the sociality of loneliness embedded in certain qualities of the black voice that Adorno elsewhere dismisses? Does the troubled voice, the voice that is both more and less than complete, resocialise the iconic loneliness of the phonographic *mise-en-scène*? What is the status of its auditory extension of composition and its suppression of spectacle even as the trace of operatic staging irrupts forcefully into phonographic audition by way of the racial-visual language so closely tied to the psychological extremity of loneliness? This is a question to which I'd like to turn, precisely by way of the disruption that it implies.

5

Such disruption – wherein the development and coherence of the (musical) subject is suspended within a fearfully crowded solitude – is one way both to describe and

[17] 'Opera and the Long-Playing Record', 284–5.
[18] 'Opera and the Long-Playing Record', 285. For an excellent overview of and introduction to the three articles by Adorno I have just discussed, see Thomas Y. Levin, 'For the Record: Adorno on Music in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', *October*, 55 (Winter 1990), 23–47.
[19] Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 43.
[20] *Philosophy of Modern Music*, 47.

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theorise what Schoenberg called 'the emancipation of the dissonance'.[21] Dissonance implies neither 'disagreeable noise' nor the necessity of two notes being played together. Reminding us that dissonance and consonance are historically contingent concepts, Charles Rosen defines dissonance as a function of 'language' rather than of physiology:

> There is nothing inherently unpleasant or nasty about a dissonance: insofar as any chord can be said to be beautiful outside of the context of a specific work of music, some of the most mellifluous are dissonances. . . . It is not . . . the human ear or nervous system that decides what is a dissonance. . . . A dissonance is defined by its role in the musical 'language', as it makes possible the movement from tension to resolution which is at the heart of what may be generally called expressivity.[22]

Rosen argues that dissonance, in its irreducible relation to the process of development, is fundamental to musical expression; Schoenberg and Adorno imply that such expressivity is, necessarily, written; and Subotnik shows that what allows for the disruptive and anticipatory force of music-as-writing is the reduction of phonic materiality and the submergence of the spectacle of the performing body. The traditional *mise-en-scène* of operatic performance is abjured by Adorno, not only because it causes the ignorant to mistake sound for music but because it dilutes music with the visual, thereby enacting that vulgar hybridity that Michael Fried calls theatre. The phonographic *mise-en-scène* that Adorno desires is a scene of subjection in Saidiya Hartman's sense of the term, where the ambivalent and timeless sublimity of the musical aspiration for 'freedom under continued unfreedom' is continually played out.[23] But what if the unfreedom that covers freedom is precisely that state of affairs that is characterised by the impossible forfeiture of an haptic materiality that is understood to be tainted by madness, blackness and femininity?

Adorno's criticism of jazz reveals that for him the body, in its material objectivity, is an irreducible substance that must be reduced by way of a discursive pathologisation of sensually experienced racial and sexual difference. Elsewhere, it might be possible to show that such pathologisation is a, if not the, central teleological principle animating the Kantian line – wherein natural history subsumes natural description in a way that had major implications for the dream of a sociologically and philosophically informed musicology – that Adorno's work critically extends. For now it is imperative that we recognise that the phonographic *mise-en-scène* of subjection is the erstwhile staging of a sensual and substantive reduction whose failure is revealed always and everywhere by the material trace – in Adorno's writing of and on the music that he loves – of the music that he loathes.

An anticipatory materiality discomposes the composer and his most faithful structural listener, writing and reading them in their most immediate graphic relations to a music that turns out to have no existence other than in its faithfully disruptive, disruptively constitutive occupation by the materiality of pathologised

[21] See Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 84, 91, 216–17.
[22] Charles Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg* (Chicago, 1996), 24–5.
[23] Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, 1998), 44.

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racial and sexual difference. Such invaginitive piercing is decisive for – indeed generative of – a musical event that takes place at the articulated combination of atonality and atotality. Jessye Norman's performance within the phonographic *mise-en-scène* records this illegitimate birth, offering up a renewal of the dissonance where rebirth and liberation converge, one carried in the change and trace of a kind of crossing over, a translation of the body from unfreedom to freedom. Norman's phonographic re*mater*ialisation of *Erwartung* disrupts discontinuity with the radical force of an objective and objectional continuance, reconfiguring the concept of writing as that which occurs where performance and recording converge at the site of a *bodily* inscription. Unsuspecting in his office, den or living room, Adorno is being written (on) and read by the syncopated vagaries of an un/broken line for which Schoenberg's composition is an ambivalent medium. I'd like, now, to begin an approach towards something like an unnatural descriptive history of this operation, one that takes into account Rosen's understanding of dissonance while expanding it in order to be able to consider every *micrological* scar on the surface of musical *récit* and recitation, scars that occur not only in the movement from note to note but in the internal differentiation and multiplication of every tone.

6

At the end of *Erwartung*, at the very edge of expectation, Rosen finds – in lieu of tonality's climactic resolution and the structural or formal assurance it gives – what he calls 'chromatic saturation'. All the tones/notes in the chromatic scale are given, at various speeds, as something like that 'dense interlock of competing energies' that Sandra Richards has noted as correspondent to the deferred but foundational presence (or, perhaps just as precisely, the suppressed but resistant trace) of Ma Rainey in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. In *Erwartung*, as in Wilson's play, what has been overlooked as 'the unwritten, or an absence from the script [or score] is a potential presence implicit in [an always already phonographic] performance'.[24]

I want to think about this potential performance in its relation to the so-called 'black sound' in opera that moves, mysteriously, like some kind of photo-phonographic haint tautology. The sound is sometimes visually figured as a certain aural duskiness, smokiness or huskiness and sometimes characterised, by way of taste and/or touch, as rich and velvety. Often understood as the trace of an ineradicable and collective pain, it is then figured as a plaintive quality where the 'plain' in 'plaintive' goes all the way back to the plexed, cut, cutting, augmentation of what Cedric Robinson calls the 'ontological totality' whose preservation is the essential task of black radicalism.[25] The black voice is also figured as 'deep', an adjective that is both spatialised through metaphors of meaning, truth and history (as opposed to surface, as opposed to any absolute newness) and anatomised

[24] Sandra L. Richards, 'Writing the Absent Potential: Drama, Performance, and the Canon of African-American Literature', in *Performance and Performativity*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York, 1995), 83.

[25] Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), 171.

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(wherein the sound is tied to a kind of deep-throatedness that is sometimes seen as a function of training but has often been linked to supposed anatomical features specific to black bodies). Some just call the black voice mellifluous, which brings to mind Rosen's assertion that some of the most mellifluous sounds are dissonances. On the other hand, the ugly beauty of the low and the guttural are coded as black, whether they come from a black singer or not.[26]

One wonders whether Adorno had an understanding of the relation between opera and blackness that was as fully formed as the following thoughts he offers on the relation between jazz and blackness in his 1936 essay 'On Jazz':

> The relationship between jazz and black people is similar to that between salon music and the wandering fiddle players whom it so firmly believes it has transcended – the gypsies. According to Bartòk, the gypsies are supplied with this music by the cities; like commodity consumption itself, the manufacture of jazz is also an urban phenomenon, and the skin of the black man functions as much as a coloristic effect as does the silver of the saxophone. In no way does a triumphant vitality make its entrance in these bright musical commodities; the European-American entertainment business has subsequently hired the [supposed] triumphant victors to appear as their flunkies and as figures in the advertisements, and their triumph is merely a confusing parody of colonial imperialism. To the extent that we can speak of black elements in the beginning of jazz, in ragtime perhaps, it is still less archaic-primitive self-expression than the music of slaves; even in the indigenous music of the African interior, syncopation within the example of a maintained measured time seems only to belong to the lower [social] level. Psychologically, the primal structure of jazz may most closely suggest the spontaneous singing of servant girls. Society has drawn its vital music – provided that it has not been made to order from the very beginning – not from the wild, but from the domesticated body in bondage. The improvisational immediacy which constitutes its partial success counts strictly among those attempts to break out of the fetishized commodity world which want to escape that world without ever changing it, thus moving ever deeper into its snare. . . . With jazz, a disenfranchised subjectivity plunges from the commodity world into the commodity world; the system does not allow for a way out. Whatever primordial instinct is recovered in this is not a longed-for freedom, but rather a regression through suppression.[27]

What's the difference between the phono-political weight of servant girls singing – the performance of the music of slaves – and the full content of that moment of insanity followed by consoling protest that constitutes the impossible end of *Erwartung*? That the latter is given only in its alignment with the other, hidden tradition that the former embodies is a relation whose suppression sometimes seems to be the most essential function of Adorno's music criticism. The recovery of that line in Schoenberg's music makes necessary what Subotnik might have called '*post*-structural listening'. But such listening will have already been anticipated not only in the very music of servant girls that Adorno dismisses, but in the style of his dismissal. Adorno never talks as cogently about the interplay of development and stasis, or even development and regression, as when he speaks of it in relation to

[26] For more on the 'black sound' in operatic and concert performance, see Rosalyn M. Story, *And So I Sing: African-American Divas of Opera and Concert* (New York, 1990), 184–6.
[27] Adorno, 'On Jazz', trans. Jaime Owen Daniel, in *Essays on Music*, 477–8.

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blackness, to femininity, to black femininity in and as jazz. It's as if the music that 'is not what it is' is revealed to be – both in the violated maternity of its elusive but irreducible Africannesses and in the dis/possessed materiality of its undeniable hybridities – not only the essence of *Erwartung* but also Adorno's primary object and aim.

The scene that I have been imagining (or the imagining whose preface I have been writing), in which Adorno listens to the irrepressibly visual, haptic presence of Norman's recording (wherein one is not only denied, by the reproductive apparatus, the immersion in the large-scale musical-theatrical space that Adorno likens to a 'magic circle [placed] around both artist and audience that neither can escape', but where one is instead confronted by the objecthood and objection of a black performing body and all of the historico-musical material/ity that it bears), is the condition of possibility of that revelation.[28] Adorno is interested precisely in the flight from the 'magic circle' of liveness, but he is profoundly troubled – to the point of the most stringent denials – by the fact that the scene is located where the story of disenfranchised subjectivity falling from the commodity world to the commodity world is displaced by a convergence of personhood and audiovisual objecthood whose music Adorno reads and thereby produces without discovering, amplifies without hearing.

You have to be used to the work of discerning value in that which is most degraded, a kind of work which Adorno would have seen as obscene, as having been determined totally by the obscenity, finally, of being seen, the obscenity of a degradation which is at once ordinary and spectacular. Such discernment, such seeking, is the task towards which *Erwartung* tends, a task written on to the voice that strains to see, the voice that a necessarily social vision strains towards the figuring of a non-exclusionary ensemble, as *mise-en-scène* turns to *mise-en-abyme*: 'Oh, bist du da . . . ich suchte' ('Oh, there you are . . . I was looking'). Norman sings with the knowledge of an object in search of something, with a trouble in the voice that theatricality lets us see, a trouble that is at once of and before the extended encounter that structures the historical drama we now inhabit.

Someday I'd like to be able to make somebody see and hear the objectional and ontological sociality of the black voice, where being black is only being black in groups, where not only the group of blacks but the group as such is given as an object of a specifically politicised fear and loathing precisely because of the object's collective and disruptive seeing. Adorno's problem is not so much with disenfranchised subjectivity as with the abandonment of a specifically individualised subjection, the sidestepping of the dialectical snare of a freedom that exists only in unfreedom. That abandonment, as given in jazz, is aligned by Adorno with the music of 'the new objectivity'. Though any relation jazz has to that movement is minimal, certainly jazz moves within the history of a resistant if commodified objecthood, the history of an aggressive audiovisual objection that constitutes nothing other than the black and animating absent presence of *Erwartung*, that Norman's objectional audiovisuality animates or reproduces with each encounter.

[28] Adorno, 'The Natural History of the Theatre', 66.

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Blackness, which is to say black femininity, which is to say black performance, will have turned out to be the name of the invaginative, the theatrical, the dissonant, the atonal, the atotal, the sentimental, the experimental, the criminal, the melodramatic, the ordinary. It is and bears an aesthetic of the trebled (troubled, doubled) seer's voice disturbed by being seen and seeing up ahead where escape, crossing over, translation will have meant the continual reanimative giving – unto the very idea of freedom – of the *mater*ial.

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