The privilege granted to unity, to totality, to organic ensembles, to community as a homogenized whole—this is a danger for responsibility, for decision, for ethics, for politics. That is why I insisted on what prevents unity from closing upon itself, from being closed up. This is not only a matter of description, of saying that this is the way it is. It is a matter of accounting for the possibility of responsibility, of a decision, of ethical commitments. To understand this, you have to pay attention to what I would call singularity. Singularity is not simply unity or multiplicity. Now, this does not mean that we have to destroy all forms of unity wherever they occur. I have never said anything like that. Of course, we need unity, some gathering, some configuration. You see, pure unity or pure multiplicity—where there is only totality or unity and when there is only multiplicity or disassociation—is a synonym of death. What interests me is the limit of every attempt to totalize, to gather...[1]

—Jacques Derrida, speaking at the Villanova Roundtable, Villanova University, on October 2, 1994.

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 13.

University of Alberta

A Derridean Approach to Musical Identity

by

Laurel Megan Ralston

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally in the philosophy of music, the musical work is conceived of as an immutable object having a fixed identity, which is defined by the composer at the time of composition. The main objective of musical performance is to discover and preserve the work's true identity and to display the work in the best possible light. I attempt to construct an alternative view of musical identity by analogy with Jacques Derrida's description of literary identity. Derrida argues that literary identity is never absolutely determinable and that the literary text is never fully identical with itself. Instead, its identity hovers in the differences between readings. I suggest that the identity of musical works is constituted in the same way and argue that musical practice—the firsthand, physical work of creating different sounds in response to a score—itself is a responsible, identity-giving practice in the way that Derridean reading is.

With love and gratitude

For my parents, Louise and Jim Ralston,
who have always given me everything I need and more.

And for Lars, whose support, patience and love through this process
have taught me more than any degree ever will.

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PRELUDE

Although I think it fair to say that my interest in philosophy of musical performance stems from my own experience as a performer, before embarking on this thesis, I had never examined systematically the theoretical, philosophical principles implicit in my own musical practice. As a student and performer of music, I had compiled strategies, techniques and habits of musical practice without asking myself what philosophy or philosophies they might reflect. Early on in my research I had to overcome a very strong resistance to doing so, feeling that philosophers ought not to meddle in the practical matter of creating music. When I first decided to explore the philosophy of music formally, it was with an interest in possible parallels between music and language. To be honest, I do not even remember in any more detail than that what I had in mind at the time. What I remember is that I found myself frustrated and exhausted by what I was reading, alternately feeling that the approaches I came across were irrelevant to me as a musician, or else simply so tedious as to obscure in my mind the living, breathing quality of music that captured my heart when I decided to dedicate myself to it fully ten years ago.

So it was with some surprise that, when I was first introduced to the work of Jacques Derrida during my first term of graduate studies, I felt an immediate urge to study it with a view to applying it to musical practice. What caught my attention was the way that the principles Derrida espoused—taking written texts to their interpretive limits, entertaining alternatives, embracing reading as a responsible act—resonated with my sensibilities as a musician. Here was a philosophy that recognized reading as an act of creation in itself, in which the reader was not simply a recipient of a given

meaning but an agent to whom was entrusted a task, an obligation, to look after a text, to take care of it, to respect and challenge it. That, I realized when I thought about it, was how I felt about music. Moreover, it seemed to me that Derrida's approach to reading and writing honoured the fluidity of these two processes and acknowledged them as processes, as practices, in which are necessarily involved both affirmations and betrayals of 'conventional' readings, in which dividing the text against itself could be a means of affirming its identity rather than obscuring it.

I do not at all want to imply that traditional philosophies of music do not have in mind looking after music, and even looking after musicians. The vastness and attentiveness of the philosophical literature about music attest to the deep concern that philosophers have for its well-being. I simply do not find the literature satisfying in light of my first-hand experience playing music. What in particular made me suspicious of it was the fact that in general my experience as a performer does not seem to fit the ethical models laid out in much of the traditional philosophical literature about music. I cannot remember ever feeling the ethical pulls that such literature typically tells me that I should have felt. When faced with a musical score I do not, for example, find myself immediately compelled by the presence of a name, even one I recognize and respect, in the upper right-hand corner, to ask myself what that person, the composer, intended me to do with the notes that follow. This may simply be a manifestation of intellectual or moral laziness—I am a trumpet player, after all, and as a group we trumpet players are not known for the strength of our intellects or our moral fibre. Leaving aside the possibility of this personal failing, however, I think my response to a musical score stems primarily from a conviction

that the name, like the notes on the page, is only one part of a much larger whole that is the piece of music, and furthermore that this whole is not defined exhaustively by any or even all the things that can be 'known objectively' about it; and so perhaps the term 'whole' is not wholly suitable here.

In the thesis that follows, I quote on a number of occasions philosophers who like to appeal to our collective intuitions about musical works, their modes of existence, the duties they impose on us, and so on. Whereas I am content to grant that some, maybe even many, people possess these intuitions, I do not believe that they are adequate bases for ontological and ethical models of music. More importantly, though, I believe that they dismiss as almost accidental what, by my own intuition, is essential to the nature of musical works[1]: that when music is passed on, in whatever form this passing-on takes, the task of growing the life and identity of the work is entrusted to those that look after it; that no two performances of the work will ever be the same; and that 'deviation' from its past must occur at every turn.

[1] And in affirming the term 'works' by using it I nonetheless wish it to remain vague.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of musical identity, of what defines works of music, gives each its unique character and distinguishes them from one another, is one of the central issues in the philosophy of music. Too often in the philosophical literature it is approached as a purely theoretical question, one that can be answered adequately through careful intellectual consideration of scores and performances. The answers take the form of ontologies—descriptions of how musical works come into being, what their origins may be, which of their structural and aesthetic elements must be observed and conserved in its representations, and so on. Ontologies go hand-in-hand with ethical issues, critical matters and attempts at normative or prescriptive theories of performance. When philosophers, critics or musicologists make statements regarding the identity and mode of existence of musical works, implicitly these statements serve to guide performers as well, for these are the persons whose actions are to be criticized. However, the priorities of, for example, composers, performers, recreational listeners, and critics often appear to conflict, for various reasons, and rarely does any one philosophical or theoretical analysis satisfy the prejudices of all involved. I bring to this thesis the prejudices of a semi-professional classical musician, and in it I begin to formulate a non-traditional account of musical identity and ethics of performance, founded on sympathies between my own experience as a musician and Jacques Derrida's account of linguistic meaning and writing, which satisfies my performer's prejudices to a greater degree than any other philosophy I have yet encountered.

The traditional approach to musical identity and ethics

The prevailing ontological approach to the performance of Western art music, particularly that composed between the Baroque and Romantic eras, takes the written notation of a musical work, the score, to be a kind of blueprint created by a composer, defining and describing an autonomous musical entity, the musical work, such that another person might perform it. The work is recognized paradoxically as something existing independently and deriving its identity from its origins with the composer. Traditionally, one of, if not the most important, consideration in a performer's decisions about how a score is to be realized is the degree of faithfulness to the composer's wishes the performance is meant to achieve. In spite of the indefiniteness of musical notation, the work (which for now I will consider to include the score and all of its instantiations, in performance and rehearsal) remains primarily the property of the composer. The score is treated as a set of instructions for the creation of a specific auditory (and perhaps also other-sensory) event, fixed by the composer and to be brought to public experience by a performer or group of performers whose responsibility it is to produce that event on the composer's behalf. To do this accurately, the performer is often expected to integrate into her interpretative choices information beyond the score itself: researching the performance practices of the day, placing the individual piece within the context of the composer's entire oeuvre, heeding any commentary that the composer may have given outside the score, and so on. The relationship of a performance to the expressed intentions of the composer with regards to the work performed is the authenticity of the performance: A performance

is more or less authentic depending on the degree to which the composer's intentions have been respected. In fact, this quality, authenticity, can be measured independently of a performance's musical success and in some accounts even supercedes it—philosophers whose commitment to compositional intention and authenticity is absolute sometimes state that the composers' intentions must be followed at all costs, even when this results in a less musically interesting performance. It is a principle of deference that can demand that a performer make musical decisions contrary to what the formal elements of the work might suggest, because the composer, as the creative consciousness behind the score, is taken to be the ultimate authority when it comes to how that score should be realized. Disputes between a work's internal constitution, i.e. its formal elements, and the instructions of the composer, i.e. the score, are to be resolved in favour of the latter, to uphold the latter's supposed creative, musical intentions, and in doing so preserve the work's identity as it was established at the time of its composition.

A post-structuralist alternative

A number of objections have been raised in response to the view outlined above. Musicians and philosophers alike acknowledge the indefiniteness of the score, that is, its inability theoretically to determine a single, exactly repeatable performance in response to it, one identical with what the composer had in mind. Philosopher Stephen Davies, for example, even goes so far as to suggest that this indefiniteness is a normatively necessary characteristic of music notation, a practical principle that

composers can wrongly transgress by issuing directions outside conventional notation and thus attempting to impose too much constraint on the range of acceptable authentic performances.[2] It often seems, however, that such acknowledgments are made grudgingly at best, and rarely do they lead to serious questioning of the ontological foundations that they concern; philosophers continue to uphold works as fixed, immutable entities.

I propose in this thesis that another, more radical response to this philosophical tradition can be constructed by analogy with the 'textual strategies' characteristic of Jacques Derrida's approach to literary theory, criticism and the philosophy of language. I aim to challenge the traditional view of musical identity by examining Aristotelian and Platonist ontologies of musical works according to the approach taken by Derrida in analyzing writing.

Structure of the Argument

In Chapter One, I explore how the issue of musical identity is treated in traditional philosophy of music, outlining and setting off against one another the ideas of two contemporary philosophers of music, Jerrold Levinson and Peter Kivy, in preparation for a demonstration, in Chapter Four, of the ways in which the privilege granted to compositional intention and historical context infiltrates many aspects of their philosophies. Levinson and Kivy adhere to ontological viewpoints called musical

[2] Stephen Davies, "The Multiple Interpretability of Musical Works," *Themes in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Aristotelianism and Platonism respectively, both of which admit the existence of objects, called musical works. These objects are distinct from the visual and aural signs associated with music—the scores we read and the sounds we hear—yet they can only be revealed through these signs. I pay particular attention to each philosopher's account of which elements of a musical work are work-identifying and to their depictions of the relationships between the work, its composer, scores, and performances. In so doing, I begin to draw a connection between musical identity and meaning.

In Chapter Two, I examine the relationship of musical identity to meaning more closely. I suggest that, although explicitly they serve to describe which elements of musical works are essential to their identity, implicitly Platonist ontologies function prescriptively insofar as they demand that those elements be present in performance and in so doing impose boundaries on interpretation. This makes the issue of musical identity a practical as well as theoretical concern. I then assess the plausibility of a linguistic model of musical meaning and identity through a consideration of music as a system of signs, using a common-sense view of signification. I reject this model as inadequate and propose that a Derridean model could accommodate more generously the enigmatic and fluid character of musical identity.

In Chapter Three I describe in detail Derrida's analysis of writing as presented in several of his early essays, and through this description hint at an alternative approach to traditional notions of linguistic identity that I believe to be especially relevant to music as well. Derrida's characterization of writing belongs to his attempt to 'deconstruct' the philosophical tendency to view texts as fixed and limited by

authorial intention and by context. The alternative he offers shows writing as a perpetually active phenomenon, one that is not simply a tool for the mute representation of speech, subordinate to and somewhat parasitical upon it, but instead operates upon writers in a way that exceeds their powers of control over it. Derrida proposes that no thing and no meaning is ever fully identical with itself, but is divided at its very origin because all meaning and experience is constituted differentially. The repeatable nature of writing acts as a force that divorces what is written from its writer and allows it to have meaning both in spite of and because of this separation. Derrida's account of writing emphasizes our embeddedness in language itself and re-positions writing as exemplary of what he calls *différance*, a differential system that, in effect, encompasses the whole of what we call communication and becomes the very condition of possibility of history. Yet he does not, as some believe, unravel the entire fabric of meaning as we have come to know it. Derrida tempers his approbation of dissemination, the force of breaking and spreading meaning, with the stipulation that responsible reading still take into account the influences of intention and context while not mistaking these as exhaustively determinate forces themselves. The consequence is that linguistic identity can no longer be thought of as fixed at the time of inscription so much as offered to re-evaluation and creation at every instance of reading.

In Chapter Four, I return my attention to the ontologies of Levinson and Kivy in order to re-interpret them in Derridean terms. I begin by drawing on the work of musicologist and musician Richard Taruskin in identifying the ethical risks posed by ontologies that take musical works to be fixed and autonomous entities and arguing further the need for a more fluid conception of musical identity. I offer a critical

examination of the significance of composers' intentions and historical context within Aristotelian and Platonist ontologies by applying the concept of substitution to the depicted relationships between work, composer, score, and performance, and throughout the chapter try to show how a Derridean concept of identity accounts for the reality of the musical work's constant evolution in performance.

To conclude, in Chapter Five, I show how applying a Derridean concept of identity to the musical work shifts the ethical impetus in interpretation from the supposed authority of compositional intention to the fact of one's very engagement in responding to the singularity of the text, the work of music. It is this singularity itself that demands to be celebrated. The musician's responsibility toward the musical work thus flows not simply from the connection between writer and text—composer and work—but from the way that musical works defy exhaustive determination and absolute substitution, such that a just response to it must honour this quality at the same time that it tries to grasp a meaning of the text, to effect substitution without reduction. This 'law', applied to music, does not dictate the primacy of any particular musical goal insofar as it is applicable regardless of goal. I call upon my own experience as a musician to show how a Derridean notion of musical identity embraces and grounds the exploratory nature of musical practice.

1—MUSICAL IDENTITY AND ONTOLOGY

In this first chapter, I will outline briefly some of the ideas at stake in the debate over the definition of a musical work, beginning with an overview and then proceeding to a more in-depth examination of two well-developed ontologies of the musical work. I aim to frame the ontological debate over musical works in terms of identity, and to show how, in traditional philosophy of music, the intelligibility of the ideal of truth-to-the-work in performance is made to rely heavily on the concept of the stability and unity of the musical work. In this section, I will draw mainly on the work of two prolific philosophers of music, Jerrold Levinson and Peter Kivy, whose thought I take to be exemplary of the quest for a rigourous definition of the musical work. I begin here in order to demonstrate how the objects and relationships asserted and described in musical ontologies lay the groundwork for evaluative and prescriptive discussion of musical performance by elaborating criteria for determining and respecting the identity of the musical work. Stephen Davies neatly sums up the relationship between ontology and performance: "[The pursuit of authenticity in performance] is intimately connected with ontology. To interpret a work one must instance it, and one cannot do that except by being faithful to the composer's work-identifying instruction."[3] I will leave aside for now the degree to which the knowledge of the sources of musical identity are available to the performer—in the case of Western art music, for example, the main mode of access is of course the score, interpreted both as the dwelling place of the work (under some belief systems) and the instruction key to its faithful re-

[3] Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 241.

creation in sound—and the degree to and ways in which the performer is accountable to them. However, I hope through this discussion to illustrate one of what I believe to be the key failings of the traditional approach to the philosophy of music: namely, that it is so deeply rooted in the intellect alone as to neglect the fluidity of the of musical practice—which includes both composition and performance, but also the processes of preparing for performance, playing music for pleasure, experimenting with sound, and so on—and at times depict it abstractly, without recognizing that in all its forms, music takes time to create and experience. This emphasis on intellectual analysis and objective knowledge, I will argue later, risks alienating the intellectual exercise from the physical practice of creating sound and obscuring the importance of the latter with respect to the determination of musical identity.

Background on the 'musical work'

The musical 'object' most frequently analyzed by philosophers is the musical work. The work concept is both convenient and problematic. It is convenient because it offers a way to speak about music that mirrors the way we speak about works of visual art, as complete and singular entities that can easily be distinguished from one another. It is problematic because the concepts of completeness and singularity are not easily applied to objects that are not clearly or purely physical in nature. Since the "musical work" is a concept developed within the realm of Western art music, discussion in which the work is invoked takes as paradigmatic the case of music that is notated and perpetuated primarily through a written, as opposed to oral, tradition. In *The*

Imaginary Museum of Musical Works, Lydia Goehr gives thoughtful consideration to the idea of the musical work and its influence as an ideal. She writes, "It is the ideal of the work (the workings of the work-concept) that distinguishes Western classical music from other forms."[4] Although the work's existence is rarely questioned by philosophers, its nature and definition remain contentious issues. Goehr gives the following account of 'the problematic nature of works':

> Musical works enjoy a very obscure mode of existence; they are 'ontological mutants'. Works cannot, in any straightforward sense, be physical, mental, or ideal objects. They do not exist as concrete, physical objects; they do not exist as private ideas existing in the mind of a composer, a performer, or a listener; neither do they exist in the eternally existing world of ideal, uncreated forms. They are not identical, furthermore, to any one of their performances. Performances take place in real time; their parts succeed one another. The temporal dimension of works is different; their parts exist simultaneously. Neither are works identical to their scores. There are properties of the former, say, expressive properties, that are not attributable to the latter. And if all copies of the score of a Beethoven Symphony are destroyed, the symphony itself does not thereby cease to exist, or so it has been argued.[5]

Accordingly, the relationship between the written score as a representation or manifestation of the musical work and the performance that purports also to manifest the musical work comes under particular scrutiny. The mode of analysis tends to be ontological insofar as its goal is to define rigorously what the musical work is—that is, to identify systematically all of the elements of works in general that constitute it and are necessary in performance in order for a performance to be of the particular work it claims. Such elements include, but are not limited to: pitch structures (rhythmic or temporal sequences of notes and intervals, of which are formed melody and harmony),

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[4] Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 99.
[5] Ibid., p. 6-7.

performance means (instrumentation), narrative and emotive qualities, and so on. Although the matter is approached theoretically, the conclusions drawn and definitions formulated have practical implications when they are meant to function prescriptively, that is, to instruct and guide performers faced with the practical question of how to play the work, especially where works are considered to exist independently of their performances. Almost invariably, the practical goal of this endeavour is to generate performances that resemble as closely as possible works in their purest or original forms, what is known as *Werktreue* or truth-to-the-work. In *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, Goehr argues that the work concept and the *Werktreue* ideal may even have had a regulative impact on the creation of music since coming into fashion with the emergence of Romanticism.

Goehr distributes what she calls 'analytic' (Anglo-American) approaches to the musical work into four main categories: nominalist, idealist, Aristotelian, and Platonist. All four approaches capture some intuition about the nature of music, and there are affinities among them in spite of their differences. A *nominalist* perspective acknowledges no such abstract object as a work, but considers works to be "linguistic items—general names or descriptions—serving as convenient ways to refer to certain classes of particulars,"[6] that is, to function as proper names but refer to groups of performances and score-copies. Goehr elaborates: "A musical work-name stands to its performances as a type stands to its tokens. The type does not exist

[6] Ibid., p. 17.

other than linguistically, even though the corresponding tokens are identified in relation to the type."[7]

The *idealist* perspective, in contrast, identifies works with ideas formed in the composer's mind, expressed or recorded through musical notation such as a score, and thereby transmitted to others' ears and minds by public performances. The work thus is an imaginary object, and as such is available only to the composer herself; the creative activity involved in composition is imagination. However, to pass off works as existing exclusively in the composer's mind and deem them imaginary does not satisfy all intuitions; Kivy writes, "When I think of the mode of existence of Bach's *ricercare* before he had time to write it down, and after he had composed it, I tremble as Darwin did at the thought of the human eye. Where did that *ricercare* exist? In Bach's head. But what is the cash value of that? What mode of existence 'in Bach's head' did that *ricercare* have?"[8]

The *Aristotelian* view, unlike either of the above, classifies works as essences, "(typically sound structures) exhibited in performances and score-copies," that is, sound structures that "[belong to and inhere in] other things, rather than distinct entities in their own right."[9] Aristotelian thinkers "[take] musical works to be immanent in their performances" and stipulate that they are "created along with their first instances and may be destroyed where no

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[7] Ibid., p. 17.
[8] Peter Kivy, "Platonism in music: A kind of defense," in *The Fine Art of Repetition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 57.
[9] Goehr, p. 15.

instances remain and more cannot be made. Aristotelian universals are firmly tethered to this world and its concrete items and events."[10]

Musical *Platonism* differs from the Aristotelian view with respect to the way in which works both come into being and come to our attention. As Goehr notes, this name does not derive from Plato's own thinking regarding music, but rather from its similarity to the most famous distinction present in his philosophy, namely, the duality of form and matter. Under a Platonist theory of music, the sound structures of which musical works are comprised "lack spatio-temporal properties and exist everlastingly,"[11] that is, exist long before a work has been composed and long after any evidence of it has disappeared or it has ceased to be performed. Yet the distinction between Aristotelian and Platonist ontologies can be blurry, as they too fail to capture fully our intuitions:

> Platonic universals exist timelessly, whereas we think of musical works as created and as potentially destructible. Some Platonists respond by biting the bullet. Musical works are discovered, not created. To make the bullet more palatable, they argue that discovery is not so different from creation; some discoveries become possible only when an individual with particular talents finds herself within a particular cultural or musico-historical setting. Other Platonists argue that the work is created, because it comes into existence when the eternal pattern or form is selected, indicated, or prescribed by the composer. As well as picking out the given pattern or structure, the composer says something like 'Make it so', and the work is not created as such until the pattern is brought into conjunction with, and therefore given salience by, this injunction.[12]

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[10] Davies, "Ontologies of Musical Works," in *Themes in the Philosophy of Music*, p. 32.
[11] Goehr, p. 14.
[12] Davies, "Ontologies of Musical Works," pp. 31-32.

In either case, the work and the performance are related but not reducible one to the other. The fully-convinced musical Platonist might deny the work's vulnerability in this respect and claim that it will continue to exist regardless of whether or not there is any evidence of it, visual or aural, but that is an opinion of almost religious proportions. A slightly more pragmatic believer might express the situation in terms of possibility, leaving the improbable open by noting that certain conditions of possibility have to be met in order for us to have a chance at recognizing and reaching toward a work, and one of these is that there be evidence of it available to us in an interpretable medium.

The work occupies the metaphysical position of a form, eternal and immutable, while any performance of it is relegated to the lesser status of instance. A performance never constitutes a work in itself. The task of performance is the activity of instantiation, of creating on an earthly scale a tangible but imperfect replica of a unique, ethereal work.

Two paradigms: Levinson and Kivy

In this thesis I have chosen to focus exclusively on the Aristotelian and Platonist views, which, because they consider works to be actually existing objects and grant them a certain autonomy, are very much concerned, as I am, with elucidating the nature of musical identity. Furthermore, such views tend to be compatible with the *Werktreue* ideal, which is not necessarily specifically named in Aristotelian and Platonist writings on music, but makes shadowy appearances in their prescriptive theories of musical performance. I turn to the writings of two thoughtful and prolific

contemporary philosophers of music, Jerrold Levinson and Peter Kivy, the latter who identifies himself positively as a musical Platonist, and the former whose views approach Platonism but uphold the Aristotelian concern with the creatability of musical works. Levinson and Kivy have published extensively on the topic of what musical works are—their means of creation, modes of existence, defining characteristics, and so on. They have elaborated their opposing views concerning the ontology of musical works in a debate that evolved primarily over the course of five essays: Levinson's "What a Musical Work Is" and "What a Musical Work Is, Again", and Kivy's "Platonism in music: A kind of defense", "Platonism in music: Another defense" and "Orchestrating Platonism". Their debate centres mainly around three issues: the mode of existence of musical works (roughly, asking what form the original work takes); the nature of the creative act involved in composition; and the elements of the work as recorded that ought to be taken to be definitive or work-identifying, and therefore necessary in performance. Although their reasons for believing so differ, both philosophers maintain that the work itself is unchangeable and demand that performances focus primarily on revealing the ideal form of the work. The result is that, for the purpose of performance, the identity of the work is to be discovered by appeal to two sources: the composer and the work itself. Thus, Levinson and Kivy also share an emphasis on knowledge of context and historical background as a means of understanding the work—not just its place as an historical artifact or sign of the times, but its very identity as a work.

Levinson's philosophical leanings bear some characteristics of both the Aristotelian and Platonist models. He claims that musical works achieve

existence only through the agency of a creator, the composer, who by producing a score fixes the work's identity and defines the parameters for its re-creation in performance. Levinson upholds the distinction between what we hear in a performance and what qualities may be inherent in a musical work, although for him these inherent qualities are not only of the emotional or expressive sort: "There is a difference...between a piece of music itself—an aurally experienceable sequence of tones—and the structure or form of that piece of music exhibited at some level of analysis."[13] The essence of a musical work includes a sort of complex division within itself. Thus, Levinson finds inadequate the view that "a musical work is a *sound* structure—a structure, sequence or pattern of sounds, pure and simple."[14] He proposes to replace this view with an ontology under which "a musical work consists of at least two structures. It is a compound or conjunction of a sound structure and a performing-means structure."[15] So it is the structure or form with which a musical work ought to be identified, but the structure or form is not in particular a sound structure, for the three reasons outlined below.

The first is that, according to Levinson, sound structures exist autonomously and "are types of a pure sort which exist at all times".[16] Since Levinson is deeply committed to the view that musical works are created, this

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[13] Jerrold Levinson, *Music in the Moment*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 155.
[14] Levinson, "What a Musical Work Is," in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics*, (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 64.
[15] Ibid., p. 78.
[16] Ibid., p. 65.

characterization of sound structures can have no place in his account of musical works. He writes: "Sound structures predate their first instantiation or conception because they are possible of exemplification *before* that point. So, if composers truly create their works—i.e., bring them into existence—then musical works cannot be sound structures."[17]

The second reason why Levinson thinks that the sound-structure theory ought to be abandoned is that "certain attributes of musical works are dependent on more than the sound-structures contained. In particular, the aesthetic and artistic attributes of a piece of music are partly a function of, and must be gauged with reference to, the total musico-historical context in which the composer is situated while composing his piece."[18] Levinson alludes to what those attributes might be by discussing several speculative examples of imagined displacements of musical works to and from different points in music history, such as works coming into the public ear before or after their actual times of creation. He does this in order to demonstrate that the aesthetic qualities (aesthetic in these cases being something like 'emotive' but also, more importantly, being located mainly in or describing an audience's reception and response) vary according to the conditions under which they are received, that is, with respect to the entire musical conditioning of an audience

[17] Ibid., p. 65.
[18] Ibid., pp. 68-69.

to that point.[19] From this we might surmise that a proper understanding of any work can only come with an understanding of the conditions under which it was first recorded in writing and performed, because it seems that the aesthetic qualities that define works, excluding any difference of sound-structure as well, would be established and fixed at the time of its initial release. Furthermore, a listener who wishes to have for herself the appropriate experience, that is, actually perceive these aesthetic qualities through her own listening, would have to put herself in the position of one who possesses the corresponding listening history and context.

The third reason Levinson gives why a work is more than a sound-structure is that if it were one, it "would not essentially involve any particular means of performance."[20] His evidence for this claim again appeals to the will of the composer who, by specifying the means of performance, implies that the means are in fact integral to the work as it has been created through the score. The means of performance, on this account, are non-negotiable; where scores are involved, for example, "there is nothing in the scores themselves that suggests that instrumental specifications are to be regarded as optional—any more than specifications of pitch, rhythm, or dynamics."[21] Furthermore, the performance means produce a certain aesthetic effect that cannot be achieved otherwise: "Musical compositions, by and large, have reasonably definite

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[19] The standpoint of the listener is, for Levinson, of the utmost importance in the evaluation of both performances and works, and so strategies of evaluation must be relativized, to some degree and within reason, to the listener.
[20] Ibid., p. 73.
[21] Ibid., p. 75.

characters; that is to say, we can and do ascribe to them many fairly specific aesthetic qualities. But if prescribed performing forces were not intrinsic to musical compositions, then those compositions would not have the reasonably definite characters we clearly believe them to have. The determinateness of a work's aesthetic qualities is in peril if performing means are viewed as inessential so long as exact sound structure is preserved."[22]

Throughout Levinson's account of the musical work he makes a distinction between sound structure alone, which roughly might be thought of as the particular sequences and combinations of pitches that make up melody and harmony (which, since they can fully be described in terms of mathematical ratios, arguably need not be heard to be perceived or understood, at least in the case of Western art music in which the basic pitch divisions are maintained) and the way that structure is dressed up in performance, the way that it works out in sound. In a footnote, Levinson categorizes these as *pure* and *performed* sound.[23] Aesthetic qualities such as tone and timbre are not considered to be structural elements. Oddly enough, these last kinds of elements, the ones that are exclusive to sound itself and cannot be captured or represented by any other means of perception, are conspicuously excluded from the concept of "sound works *simpliciter*,"[24] even though the concept of sound itself does not make sense without them. Instead, Levinson's account characterizes them as another kind of structure having a linear relationship in

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[22] Ibid., p. 76.
[23] Ibid., footnote 25, pp. 78-79.
[24] Ibid., p. 78.

time to the sound structure and adding the layer of complexity to the work's definition that he believed was missing: "If the sound structure of a piece is basically a sequence of sounds qualitatively defined, then the performing-means structure is a parallel sequence of performing means specified for realizing the sounds at each point."[25] Accordingly, he defines the work in terms of the following formula:

(MW) S/PM structure-as-indicated-by-*X*-at-*t*

where S/PM indicates the sound-performance means structure, *X* is the composer and *t* is the time of composition. This formula clearly reflects the Platonist conception generalized earlier according to Davies, in which a structure combined with an injunction form a musical work.

"Platonism in music: Another defense" is Kivy's response to Levinson's claims outlined above. Of his own view Kivy writes: "Some writers, taking a more or less Platonic line, find it plausible to say that musical works are universals, or types or kinds, and the performances of them are particulars, or tokens, or instances. I am one of those writers, even though I think of myself as a down-to-earth, sensibly empirical fellow, and the view about works and performances that I espouse has the reputation of being starry-eyed metaphysics."[26] Platonism remains dear to his heart because "it offers a way to understand the relationship between musical works and their

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[25] Ibid., p. 78.

[26] Kivy, "Platonism in Music: Another defense," in *The Fine Art of Repetition*, p. 59.

performances that, I believe, captures a great many of our intuitions and musical *façons de parler.*"[27]

In general, what Kivy appears to object to the most, and for several reasons, is the amount of stock Levinson puts in the created nature of music and the ways in which this prejudice for creation influences his ontology of the work. In his first article on musical Platonism, Kivy argues that the tendency to regard composers as God-like creators is an historical phenomenon with relatively recent roots in the Romantic era, but that reference to such a creative thought process is not necessary either for the composition or the evaluation of musical works. In this regard, Kivy differentiates between creation and creative activity, dividing them respectively into acts that make something from nothing and acts that transform existing entities into new ones. He then proposes that acts of discovery can be as original and creative as acts of creation, and ought not be thought of a priori as having lesser value. Furthermore, he claims that even if, for some reason, we do think this way, it does not constitute sufficient reason to maintain the creatability requirement as Levinson has defined it.

Regarding the idea that works cannot be identified with sound structures because their essential aesthetic qualities are more accurately attributable to musico-historical context, Kivy notes that although to some extent our knowledge of the place of a piece of music in the grand scheme of things will influence how we hear it, the amount of change that will typically be effected by, for example, the discovery that some work has been wrongly attributed to one composer subsequently re-attributed to another, lesser

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[27] Kivy, "Platonism in Music: A kind of defense," in *The Fine Art of Repetition*, p. 35.

composer, is not so large that it destroys the very identity of the work. Our evaluation of its worth with respect to either composer's *oeuvre* may change, but the bottom line is that we are still hearing the same sounds. Kivy writes: "Our intuition here, I think, is firm. The pull of sound structure as a concrete identity criterion is too powerful for us to waver from it, far too paradoxical, at least for the musical mind, to think of disputes over authorship, or changes in attribution, as questions about changes in the identity of the work...It is...the same thing we are hearing differently, not a different thing altogether."[28] The implication seems to be that the sound structure itself possesses or implies the aesthetic qualities that Levinson thinks are bestowed upon it by and perceptible mainly on account of its musico-historical context.

Nor does Levinson's argument about pure sound-structures pre-existing composition and therefore not fulfilling his createdness stipulation have any sway with Kivy, who writes:

> The problem seems to be this. If musical works are Platonic objects—types, kinds, universals—then they are agreed on all hands to be eternal objects: they do not, cannot come into being; they do not, cannot pass away...But if that is the case, then composition cannot be, as most believe, an act of creation; rather, because the work already exists, it must be an act of discovery instead...If the main reason for rescuing musical works from Platonic eternity is to avoid the conclusion that they are discovered rather than created, eternity holds no terrors for me. For it seems to me as much, if not more plausible to think of musical works as discoveries, rather than as creations.[29]

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[28] Kivy, "Platonism in music: Another defense," pp. 63-64.
[29] Ibid., pp. 66-67.

Recall that for Kivy, the conditions of possibility are created by history; he believes that the history of music is teleological in the weak sense that the work of one generation of musicians and composers, as well as the social, political, technological, etc. conditions in which they lived, paves the way for the work of their successors and is made possible by the work of those who have come before them. In defending his view that works are discovered, he has this to say: "Think of the *Tristan* chord. It seems to me quite plausible to regard it as a discovery of Wagner's rather than his invention, although, of course, the discovery of that chord required the labor of more than one lifetime."[30] So conceptual progress is not excluded from evolution any more than is mechanical progress, for example: in order for there to have been a Richard Wagner who composed in the way that Richard Wagner of *Ring Cycle* fame did, so many others—Des Prés, Bach, Beethoven—must have gone before and opened gradually the realms of melody, harmony, form, sound, instrumentation, expressiveness, and so on, to produce the conditions under which Wagner could have created what he did. In a way, this resembles Levinson's position regarding the created nature of music, but for Kivy the ontological consequence of it is not that those works are not eternal (in the sense of having to be brought into being from nothing) but that they are discovered rather than strictly speaking created. In spite of his objections to Levinson's creatability requirement, Kivy upholds the importance of ensuring that composers are both kept in constant contact with their works, through proper identification, and that they be held in high esteem for their creative abilities.

[30] Kivy, "Platonism in music: A kind of defense," p. 46.

Having examined the issues and thought processes involved in establishing Aristotelian and Platonist ontologies of musical works, I would now like to turn to the issue of musical meaning, and to call attention to philosophical tradition again by examining musical meaning according to an analytic linguistic model. The relationship between musical ontology and meaning is close and complex: The thicker one's account of musical identity—that is, the more extensive is the list of non-negotiable work-identifying characteristics to be brought out in performance—the more limited is the scope of interpretation and expression available to the performer, and the more creative she must be in finding ways to make her performance distinctive. In the second chapter, I will examine the commonplace understanding of meaning and draw connections between the identity-giving aspects of ontology and the identity-giving aspects of this concept of meaning. I will try to show how intricately bound together ontology, meaning and identity are when it comes to defining and discussing musical works and their performances. I will also refer to the work of a third renowned philosopher of music, Stephen Davies, whose ideas about musical ontology and identity will serve to bridge the gap between the views I am about to present and my own view based on the work of Jacques Derrida.

2—A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO MUSICAL MEANING AND IDENTITY

Musical meaning concerns, among other things, matters of musical truth and expression, both of which have been hotly debated for centuries among musicians and theorists as well as philosophers, and which in the process have had political and social implications apart from strictly musical ones. So what importance does a consideration of musical meaning have with respect to the formulation of an ethics of performance? It is important because, whatever one's beliefs may be about the possibility and form of musical meaning, the process of musical interpretation is in some sense a search for meaning. The notion of musical meaning is extremely tricky, and even were one to grant that non-representative sound structures can have meaning at all—meaning in this case being perhaps intuitive or ineffable, a feeling of having been touched—it is difficult to locate or describe how and why this is possible. Sounds in music do not mean things in the same way that words do. They can be forced into relationships, say, with extra-musical ideas, such as in the case of programmatic music; a melody might for the purposes of a narrative piece or an accompaniment to a ballet be identified with a certain character or object (by appearing in a discernible pattern along with that character or object, perhaps every time it enters the stage, for example). But these relationships hold only where they occur, and the same melody, were it to occur elsewhere, might not be identified the same way.[31]

Ontologies of musical works affect the scope and variety of musical meaning available through works by laying down standards of acceptable performance, but in doing so they also function prescriptively, defining which elements of a piece are

[31] Consider, for example, a folk tune used in a larger work of art music.

integral to its identity and thereby installing boundaries for interpretation. So the problem of meaning in music is as much a practical as a theoretical one. Given an analysis of music that is largely modeled on the traditional concept language, meaning is also intimately connected to identity—words, for example, obtain their identity by virtue of what they mean, and by some accounts so do musical works, insofar as their meaning is a function of their structural and aesthetic properties. One's beliefs about the way in which meaning is conveyed and, perhaps more importantly here, is established are bound to guide and to some extent determine one's understanding of the identity of the work and one's search for interpretation. The performer's consideration of elements within and beyond the score, and her trying-out of different sound impressions intended to reflect the score, are often influenced by these beliefs. Conversely, one's beliefs about the provenance and form of musical meaning influence one's ontology of musical works, that is, the description of what a work is, how it comes into being, and how and to what extent it is available to us in the present moment.

Linguistic and musical meaning—an assessment

Analogies between music and language have been made throughout the history of philosophy, to the extent that techniques applied in the analysis of language have been applied to music as well. Leo Treitler observes that "a language-based music concept

survived from the earliest history of Western musical practice."[32] Terms used to describe linguistic phenomena, such as 'phrase' and 'statement', are commonplace in music theory and analysis, revealing a perceived congruence of some linguistic and musical structures. But it is not just the structural elements of music that are compared with those of language. Functional or expressive elements in music are also analyzed and interpreted according to linguistic models, approached from the perspectives of semiotics, semantics, and so on. To the extent that language and music are both generally considered to be modes of communication and expression, and to involve established systems of signification, they are considered to communicate and express content, to be the bearers of meaning. This makes sense intuitively, at the very least. However, although the foregoing exploration of musical ontology has suggested which elements might be responsible for possessing or transmitting meaning, it is by no means clear how or in what sense they are able to do so. In the following section, I will sketch briefly some ways in which linguistic meaning and musical meaning may be related, beginning by considering the applicability of something like a common-sense understanding of linguistic meaning to musical meaning. The common-sense approach will prove to be inadequate, and in explaining why it fails I will begin to make my case for taking a Derridean approach instead.

[32] Leo Treitler, 'Language and the Interpretation of Music' in *Music and Meaning*, ed. Jenefer Robinson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), footnote 31, p. 43.

A common-sense model of linguistic meaning, after Frege

Our most conventional, and perhaps most intuitive understanding of linguistic meaning is close to the view elucidated by Gottlob Frege's *On Sense and Nominatum* (*Über Sinn und Bedeutung*), in which he attributes to linguistic signs two functions, namely, sense and reference. Reference is the sign's designation of an object outside itself, what Frege calls the 'nominatum', and sense is the connotation or meaning expressed by the sign, which "is contained in the manner and context of presentation."[33] To borrow Frege's own example, if we let a, b and c be straight lines that connect the corners of a triangle with the midpoints of the opposite sides, the point of intersection of a and b is the same as that of b and c. Thus, "the *nominata* of the expressions 'the point of intersection of a and b' and 'the point of intersection of b and c' would be the same—but not their senses."[34] In designating or referring to the nominatum, the sign acts as both pointer and substitute.[35] The sign "functions as a proper name, whose nominatum accordingly is a definite object (in the widest sense of this word)" and the "regular connection between a sign, its sense and its nominatum is such that there corresponds a definite sense to the sign and to this sense there

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[33] Gottlob Frege, "On Sense and Nominatum," in *The Philosophy of Language*, AP Martinich, ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 200.
[34] Ibid., p. 200.
[35] The concept of substitution—of a sign standing for an object of a person, taking the object's place in its absence—is of utmost importance in Derrida's analysis of linguistic signification and writing, and it is prominent in his later work on justice and politics. It is at work on multiple levels within writing and serves to animate ethics in that domain. I will attempt to show, later on, how a similar structure of substitution presents itself in traditional approaches to musical identity, meaning and performance, and thus how a Derridean approach can transform these approaches in order to do greater justice to music as a written tradition and a practice.

corresponds again a definite nominatum; whereas not one sign only belongs to one nominatum (object)."[36] This is what Frege believes to be the normal use of language, in which the linguistic sign relates to a definite object, or in other words has a nominatum. The normal use of language, he believes, has as its goal the representation of the truth, such that "it is the striving for truth which urges us to penetrate beyond the sense to the nominatum."[37] In normal use, one of the most important linguistic units is the proposition—the statement that can be deemed true or false. Thus, the existence of nominata and their separation from linguistic signs is crucial to the normal use of language. Language itself is a vessel for truth, and its successful usage would be measured as the degree to which the systematic correspondence between linguistic signs and direct objects is upheld in order that propositional truth or falsity can be determined.

What Frege considers to be the normal use of language, however, is not its only possible use. It is not the case that every sign has both sense and nominatum, for although it "can perhaps be granted that an expression has a sense if it is formed in a grammatically correct manner and stands for a proper name...whether there is a denotation corresponding to the connotation is hereby not decided."[38] In short: it is possible for a sign to have a sense without at the same time referring to an object, and for the truth or falsity of a proposition not to be at stake in the usual way. Consider, for example, the case of creative writing—such as poetry or fiction—in which 'striving for truth' is not, from a linguistic point of view, directly invoked. In such cases,

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[36] Ibid., p. 200.
[37] Ibid., p. 200.
[38] Ibid., p. 200.

questions of truth, which are inextricably bound to nominata and depend on the existence of nominata, may be "immaterial to us so long as we accept the poem as a work of art."[39] Poetry and works of fiction have meaning for us by virtue of the separability of sense and nominatum, which allows language to express a sense even when it does not refer or correspond to any direct object. We are able to grasp the sequence of events, the imagery and the characters portrayed in works of fiction in spite of our understanding that those events, images and characters do not correspond directly to objects outside their linguistic framework.

Applying the common-sense model to musical meaning

Let us now apply the common-sense analysis of linguistic meaning and function to music. Two problems arise immediately: First, what is the status of music as a system of signs? And second, to what would music owe any relationship it could have with truth? Below, I consider three answers to each question.

There are several senses in which Western classical music in particular, music that is notated, recorded in writing, can be thought of as a system of signs. The most obvious of these is the practice of notation itself—the systems that have developed through ages and cultures for representing musical sounds visually, which allow musical works to be recorded and transmitted via a paper tradition, as it were, as well as an oral tradition. These systems are many and varied, and they respond to the needs of the communities practicing the musics that they represent. The notation of early

[39] Ibid., p. 203.

sacred vocal music looks vastly different from, for instance, contemporary instrumental music. Notational systems change and adapt according to the phenomena they are required to represent—values for time, loudness, articulation or attack; changes in any of these, sounds particular to a given instrument, and so on. Composers and performers adapt the systems that they inherit in order to make them coherent with the sounds they wish to produce. Our understanding of notational systems is informed by our teachers, our listening experiences, our encounters with composers, and the work of theorists and analysts whose research focuses on and reveals the congruencies that emerge between notational and performance traditions, and the patterns and idiosyncrasies within them. It is important to note again, though, one crucial aspect of musical notation as sign, which Leo Treitler calls 'transparency,' or the sign's disappearance once its referring function has been carried out. Treitler illustrates: "once we have been led by the sign [treble clef, staff, second-space whole note] to the sound A440, we lose interest in the sign."[40] This idea of transparency reinforces the function of the sign as substitute; the substitute only commands our attention until that for which it is a substitute appears, is called to mind.

Does the concept of truth apply to this particular aspect of music as a system of signs? Insofar as history has yielded a body of informed beliefs about performance practice, one might justifiably consider a particular performance or interpretation of written musical signs to be 'true' in some sense—true in this case being equivalent to 'correct' or 'in conformity with the findings of our most current research' or even 'the closest approximation to the practices believed to have been contemporary to the

[40] Treitler, p. 29.

composer.' With such an application of the notion of truth to music, however, a sort of dual sign-relationship is established. Two comparisons are drawn, one between the notation and the present sound produced, and the other between the present sound produced and the entire history of sounds that serve as its precedent. Under this analysis, the written sign now represents not only the present or future sound, but the entire history or chain of past sounds that also could have been represented by it, or by a sign identical to it. Furthermore, we are now drawn towards a representation of musical signs (or sign-functions) that takes sounds themselves to be signs.

A second sense in which music can be thought of as a system of signs is with respect to deliberately constructed relationships between musical and so-called extra-musical elements, as in the case of programmatic music—music composed with the intention of representing or reflecting a story or picture that exists, that is articulated, outside the music itself.[41] An example of this would be music to accompany a ballet, such as Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* or Stravinsky's *Petruchka*. In such cases, musical fragments, motifs or themes, become associated with characters or other narrative elements, and they sound and change in tandem with the characters' appearances and experiences throughout the associated narrative. Perhaps more importantly in terms of musical signification, these motifs or themes might sound in the score in the characters' absence, for example, when other events that concern them

[41] The dichotomy of musical and extra-musical content itself is not to be taken for granted. Treitler points out that it "was a creature of the project of redefining music undertaken around 1800 by those whose aim was to elevate the status of music that was independent of language, mimesis, and functions related to the institutions of church and state authority" (p. 43). But this and other theories about what music means and how it means have practical importance as well as philosophical currency, as I will discuss later.

are being evoked musically, in order to emphasize the narrative connections between those events and characters. On such occasions, the music might be said to 'mean that' a character is implicated in the action, or about to appear on stage, and here 'meaning' can be something akin to indicating or suggesting, referring. Similarly, what we might think of as representational sounds, such as trills evoking bird calls, can be thought of as referring to direct objects. This type of signification, however, does not possess transparency: Our attention does not pass irrevocably from the musical sound to the (to use the example again) real-life bird call, never to return to the music again—"the reference between sign and signified flows in both directions. We do not lose interest in the sign once our attention has been drawn to the signified; the sign is not absorbed by the signifying process, it is not transparent to the signified."[42] Does truth apply here? Again, one might raise the question of accuracy—how close is the violin's trill sound to the lark's? Or one might consider whether the 'mood' of the music suits the 'mood' of the narrative and in that way is true-to-the-narrative, or turns our attention to the narrative. But neither of these scenarios clearly engages transparent reference to and correspondence with a direct object, for not only does reference now flow in two directions, but the extra-musical objects themselves can be vague, ambiguous, imagined, or fictitious, all of which are conditions that for their part would weaken the bond between sign and signified.

A third, and perhaps most important, possibility for signification is what some might call 'purely musical' or 'internal' signification, an analysis characteristic of formalist accounts of musical meaning. Such accounts consider the formal and

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[42] Treitler, p. 34.

thematic elements of a piece of music, the architecture, and finds patterns, developments, similarities between themes, and so on to refer to one another musically. This type of observation often takes place through the conjunction of listening and score analysis, but does not include recourse to any extra-musical narrative. Here again, though, signification is not characterized by transparency: A recurring theme, for example, might be said at a given appearance to refer to (signify) its own earlier appearances, but while the 'pointing-to' function of signification may now be invoked, the 'substitute' function is much less easily applied. It is precisely in the mutual reference of such themes that structure is created; one does not build a wall by removing each preceding brick once a new brick has been laid. Without substitution, truth cannot apply either. The 'pure' musical work is akin to a work of fiction, referring only to itself, creating sense without nominatum.

One might object to such a formalist account of music not on the basis that structure plays no part of music, but because our reactions to music suggest that music does not only refer to itself. At the level of personal experience, listeners (including many philosophers among them) find that music is expressive of things beyond itself—but as to what the 'things' are, and how this expression is possible, the debate continues. The inclination to regard music in this way may simply point to a tendency to transpose our privileging of the 'normal use of language' model onto our analyses of music. The highest, or most serious function of music then would be to reveal things beyond itself. [43]

[43] Personally, with respect to what music means, I am inclined to agree with Charles Fisk, who writes, "Musical experience, intense musical experience especially, thrives

Stephen Davies, in *Musical Meaning and Expression*, begins his examination of musical meaning by considering the question of whether or not music either is a language or is significantly like a language, basing his early analysis on a set of conditions identified by Göran Hermerén.[44] The conditions of being a language are that it must possess all of the following: "(1) discrete and repeatable elements (2) which, when strung together, suggest or evoke ideas or feelings (3) because they constitute a vocabulary...(4) indexical and characterizing elements, (5) force-showing devices and modalities, as well as (6) logical connectives; in being thus, (7) it must admit the possibility of metalinguistic assertions about itself." Davies suggests that at best music meets only the first three of these conditions, which he considers to be the weakest, and thus concludes that musical meaning "is not a special kind of quasi-linguistic meaning."[45] I share Davies' reservations with regard to thinking of musical meaning as quasi-linguistic. I do not wish to suggest, through my use of a philosophy of language as a basis for a philosophy of music, that music is a language, or to invoke a privilege to any understanding of musical meaning that is modeled on a conventional understanding of linguistic meaning. I will claim, however, that music and language, especially music and writing, do have some important things in common, and that furthermore the philosophical and practical implications of those things are similar in both fields. Whether one's own account of musical meaning demands or

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on the loss of meaning" ('Schubert's Last Sonata,' p. 195). I see it as no disservice to music not to attribute to it any referential function.

[44] Göran Hermerén, 'Representation, Truth, and the Languages of the Arts' in *Essays on the Philosophy of Music, Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 43, eds. Veikko Rantala, Lewis Rowell and Eero Tarasti (Helsinki, 1988), pp. 179-209.

[45] Stephen Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 5.

accommodates 'external' reference or not, the fact of 'internal' reference remains. If nothing else, music can always be examined with respect to its structure, and musical structure is the ever-expanding and ever-changing vocabulary that creates the very possibility of meaning, the 'discrete and repeatable elements' made audible in performance. Whereas for Davies the requirement of 'discrete and repeatable elements' is only a weak condition of language, for Derrida it is the most consequential defining characteristic of writing. However, Derrida rejects the usual notion of 'discrete and repeatable elements' according to which signs mean by virtue of their fixed reference to things outside the system of signs, their reference being fixed in advance in such a way as to allow them to be self-identical, and thus to be iterated and reiterated over time. Rather, for Derrida, the meaning of each discrete and repeatable element is constituted in virtue of its difference from other signs in the sign system, and is constituted as the 'same' over time in and through its being repeated as the same in the on-going dissemination of meaning. As Penelope Deutscher writes, the meaning of each discrete and repeatable element "is produced through an infinite differentiation from possible alternatives.... [It] arises in the connections between the associations and imagined substitutions of countless kinds."[46] Each repetition forges a new connection, not merely re-iterating a self-identical meaning given in advance, but establishing the element as the same and different at once. We have seen, already, some of the difficulties encountered when musical meaning and identity are taken somehow to be fixed concepts, in general or in any individual case. In the next

[46] Penelope Deutscher, *How to Read Derrida*, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), p. 31.

chapter, I will explore Derrida's model of linguistic meaning as it concerns writing and offer it as a viable alternative for conceptualizing musical identity as a fluid phenomenon and for understanding, if not *what* music means, *how* music means.

3—A DERRIDEAN APPROACH TO MEANING

At the end of the second chapter, I briefly alluded to Derrida's idea that meaning is established differentially, thus cutting off the possibility of self-identity of written marks. In this chapter, I will delve into this complex and original idea by following it through several of Derrida's works on writing and literature. For in exploring the meaning and consequences of repeatability, Derrida deals not only with the ontology of written texts, but explains in detail how the change in ontology that he proposes affects the ethics of reading, that is, the responsibilities of the reader with regard to interpreting a text. Derrida allows, because of his account of the way that language functions as a bearer of meaning, a very fluid yet reasoned approach to the idea of identity. He rejects the idea that any written mark can be fully identical with itself. This, I will show, has significant consequences for the reader of such marks, as well as serious implications for understanding identity and meaning in music. Although in his early work, from which I will draw heavily at the beginning of this chapter, Derrida's main concern appears to be writing itself, this concern is sparked by an interest in the philosophical tendency to privilege those notions of being and existence that regard being and identity to be fully determinable and homogeneous—that in their being the things that 'are' must be autonomous and consistent with themselves. Inherent to Derrida's thesis is the idea that all meaning, and hence all being for us, is textual, that textual meaning is paradigmatically a matter of writing, and that there is no meaning (i.e., no text) that is simply given and determinate as the final authority ("*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*"—there is no outside-the-text and no outside text—*Of Grammatology*, p. 158). In this regard, Derrida wishes to debunk as a myth that there is in a text

something singular to be grasped as the determinate basis of all meaning and truth, whereby the determinacy of signs themselves and of texts would be decided ultimately with respect to authors' intentions. He argues instead that no event (literary or musical or otherwise) is fully determined either by its elements taken singly or by its context, in spite of whatever intentions lie behind it. He claims rather that that text's identity begins as, and is bound to remain, fluid and undecidable. Furthermore, Derrida goes so far as to contend that even authors' intentions are never fully determined in and for authors themselves. Although meaning can be traced through contexts, there is no fixed, determinate origin or defining context to secure meaning against interference from other, future contexts. Meanings ascribed to events cannot be boiled down to one meaning, final and unequivocal. On the contrary, the very structure of context and coming to presence through textual play necessitates a certain indeterminacy and equivocality of meaning. I will explicate these claims later in this chapter and, through a brief exploration of Derrida's account of the sign, will show why he holds these views about meaning and identity.

I wish to preface this discussion of Derrida, however, by first identifying what I take to be the need for an analogous approach to the philosophy of music. In my view, Derrida's analysis of what he calls classical semiology is especially applicable to the philosophy of music, insofar as the belief that writing speaks for and represents the writer is rampant there. The appeal to an original and lost presence, as he would call it—an author, an historical context, a real and immediate object for which writing is thought to stand—forms the basis of many philosophical approaches to musical performance and interpretation, whether that presence be the composer, the musical

work, the idea that prompted the composer to write the work down, and so on. This appeal proves in most cases to be a restrictive gesture, limiting the performer's interpretative choices by invoking an origin or an ideal state, the return to which her performances must aspire. Though the imposition of limits on interpretative choices is not objectionable in itself, the foundations of those limits remain open to scrutiny. The question Derrida poses is, Does this sign really speak on behalf of me, of a presence or origin? Does it represent and re-present me when I am unable to present myself? The answer to these questions, he argues, must be negative, whereas the assumption that it is positive is the result of a misunderstanding of the role and the influence writing yields or wields in the operations of presence. Derrida, over the course of his analysis, breaks down the idea that writing has (or ever can have) a fixed and identifiable origin at all, by presenting an alternative view that since all writing can occur only from within a system of writing in which meaning emerges as a product of the differences between words, not only the writer's text but her intentions and self-understanding are always subject to the laws of the system. These laws prevent the construction of fixed meaning because meaning is not constituted as a purely self-referential phenomenon, but as a manifestation of what he calls *différance*. He challenges the homogeneity of identity and develops a picture of linguistic identity that later guides his work in political philosophy and ethics, when he approaches subjects such as religion, culture and community. What I wish to relate now to music are these "'deconstructive' seisms shaking the authority and the pertinence of the question 'What is...?' and all the associated regimes of essence or truth."[47]

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[47] Jacques Derrida, 'Interview with Jacques Derrida,' in *Acts of Literature*, Derek

The foundations of the project

On several occasions, Derrida offers concise and insightful summaries of the epistemological and ethical concerns raised by literary texts. In his own text 'Before the Law,' a close reading of a short story of the same title by Franz Kafka, Derrida offers the following summary of two axiomatic beliefs on which he takes most literary analysis and criticism to be founded:

> The first axiomatic belief is our recognition that the text I have just read has its own identity, singularity and unity. We consider these, a priori, inviolable, however enigmatic the conditions of this self-identity, this singularity, and this unity actually remain. There is a beginning and an end to this story whose boundaries or limits seem guaranteed by a certain number of established *criteria*—established, that is, by positive rules and conventions. We presuppose this text, which we hold to be unique and self-identical, to exist as an original version incorporated in its birthplace within the German language. According to the most widespread beliefs in our domains, we generally allow that such a so-called original version constitutes the ultimate reference for what might be called the legal personality of the text, its identity, its unicity, its rights, and so on....The second element of this axiomatic consensus, essentially inseparable from the first, is that the text has an author.[48]

The beliefs described in this passage with respect to literary texts are equally at work in traditional philosophies of music—the belief in the inviolable self-identity of musical works, in spite of having no established consensus on how to define that identity; the belief in the existence of an original version (whether we consider it to have disappeared in the moment of its inscription or at the composer's death, or whether we have absolute faith in the Urtext); the elevation of that original version to the status of ultimate reference of all subsequent versions (performances or score editions); and the belief that the composer too possesses an inviolable self-identity that

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Attridge, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 48.
[48] Derrida, 'Before the Law,' in *Acts of Literature*, pp. 184-185.

is expressed in the work. In the following chapter, I will demonstrate how Derrida's ideas can inform analysis and critique of Platonist philosophies of music; right now, though, let us examine the 'laws' underlying Derrida's own account of writing and literary meaning.

Meaning according to Derrida

One of the most important ways in which Derrida's concept of meaning differs from those traditionally espoused by philosophers is that in it meaning is primarily a matter of sense, as opposed to a matter of reference,[49] since it admits no positive terms, no terms having fixed identity by virtue of links to objects outside the linguistic system. Meaning is a component of the sign, not something external that has been appended to it, and thus each sign "does not so much express a meaning as mark a divergence of meaning between itself and other signs."[50] Robert Burch gives the following description of this contrast *in Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing, Rhythm and History*:

> In this version of the story, the traditional role of philosophy—to make the absent, occluded 'true in itself' totally present by means of the 'literal' word—is played out as merely one more substitution within an open-ended interweaving of text. Traditional philosophy is thus deprivileged, not on skeptical grounds that its word falls short of what lies outside it, but because

[49] As I have shown, the meaning-as-reference model is not ideally suited for analysis of musical meaning, since its referential capacity is limited at best.
[50] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, Trans. Richard C. McCleary, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 44-45. Quoted in *Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing, Rhythm and History.* R. Burch and M. Verrdichio, eds. (London and New York: Continuum, 2002).

> this story admits of no 'outside' to the open play of significations, no positive entities, and no center to 'arrest and ground the play of substitutions.'[51]

Derrida's analysis of writing takes its cue from the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who famously noted that the relationship within the linguistic sign between the signifer (i.e, primarily sound-image, and secondarily written marks) and the signfied (i.e., the concept or object-meaning) to which the signifier refers is arbitrary. Derrida follows and goes beyond Saussure in proposing that language, "or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted 'historically' as a weave of differences,"[52] that is, that it contains no positive terms but only terms in relation to one another and reliant upon their non-identity for their identity. He concurs with Saussure's assessment that in language the referent can never be made fully present, and argues that the direct object-meaning—signifieds—of language never appear to us as positive, autonomous entities. Object-meaning can exist only within a system of signs, not outside it. This is at once a cause and an effect: "There can be arbitrariness only because the system of signs is constituted solely by the differences in terms, and not by their plenitude."[53] As soon as we have formed a concept of an object, even when this occurs before we have linked a word to that concept, we have already entered into a kind of differential representative structure, for the concept and the object are neither identical or independent from one another. This condition is made possible in a sense of 'made' that is not strictly cause-and-effect, by a phenomenon Derrida has reluctantly named *différance*—reluctantly because to name something at

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[51] Burch, *Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing, Rhythm and History*, pp. 1-2.
[52] Derrida, 'Différance,' in *Margins of Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 12.
[53] Ibid., p. 10.

all seems to be to reduce it to a unity or totality that is finite and finished, a self-contained and positive (as opposed to relative) term. This tempering or suspension of the cause and effect is expressed in the spelling of *différance* itself:

> "In a conceptuality adhering to classical strictures '*différance*' would be said to designate a constitutive, productive, and originary causality, the process of scission or division which would produce or constitute different things or differences. But, because it brings us close to the infinitive and active kernel of *différer*, *différance* (with an *a*) neutralizes what the infinitive denotes as simply active, just as *mouvance* in our language does not simply mean the fact of moving, of moving oneself or of being moved. No more is resonance the act of resonating. We must consider that in the usage of language the ending *–ance* remains undecided *between* the active and the passive...*différance* is neither simply active nor simply passive."[54]

This 'operation' of *différance*, furthermore, is an elusive one, almost invisible—being that which "makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as such. It is never offered to the present."[55] Linguistic identity is constituted instead by the differences between terms; each element is identifiable by virtue of its being distinct from other elements. "The signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that it would refer only to itself," Derrida writes. "Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general."[56] It is precisely the nature of *différance* that it is always on the way, always becoming itself.

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[54] Ibid., p. 9.
[55] Ibid., p. 6.
[56] Ibid., p. 11.

Because *différance* allows no positive terms, no terms that are not subject to or effected by it, it upsets the classical semiology that is based on a privilege granted to the present. The present as a simple and positive phenomenon is no longer conceivable since "[a]n interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present."[57] *Différance* thus puts into question the value, and even the possibility, of literal meaning. It offers an alternative picture of meaning that is not founded principally on nominal reference, on the 'naming' function of words as pointing to direct objects that are themselves beyond language, and as being transparent (to borrow Treitler's apt phrase) to those objects. Transparency has been precluded by *différance* because its cause/effect is that no sign means independently of other signs. The sign's identity (meaning) is only discernible within and as a part of a system of reference to other signs. Furthermore, *différance* is then not simply a linguistic condition, but the condition of all experience, "the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted 'historically' as a weave of differences."[58] That is, human experience itself is a process of conscious referral to things outside ourselves, which is only possible in terms of a system of semiotic referral constituted differentially, by the non-identity of ourselves with others. With this interpretation of signification, Derrida reverses the traditional hierarchical relationship between language (spoken and

[57] Ibid., p. 13.
[58] Ibid., p. 12.

immediate, complete) and writing (parasitical), declaring that the former is in fact a species of the latter. The entire field of experience can be called 'writing' under his analysis, because it, like writing, is a system of referral conditioned by *différance*. He observes that the purpose of writing has been to circumvent the restrictions imposed on presence by extending presence through a process of substitution—representation and repetition. It is this general structure at work in all experience that allows a textual approach to many phenomena that we would not normally think of as texts. It is a matter of understanding experience as a system in which there are signs and meanings, but these meanings arise out of their relationships with other signs and meanings, in a web so complex and self-referential that it cannot be exhaustively mapped in any singular and final way. The 'chains' of signifiers in which meanings are inscribed grow and connect with one another in an infinitely spreading movement. Not only literary texts, but all experience is composed of signs insofar as it is conceptual. Our experiences are constituted by concepts that could be repeated and represented further, which furthermore prevents experience itself from being self-identical—*différance* is at work again.

What then is put aside is the idea of the origin, origin too being in the classical conception a simple and positive or absolute value outside the system, pre-existing the system. *Différance* cannot be described in positive terms; it is the "constitution of the present, as an 'originary' and irreducibly non-simple (and therefore, *stricto sensu* nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions"[59] that cannot be attributed any governing power in the usual sense of the word, "the power of

[59] Ibid., p. 13.

synthesizing traces, and of incessantly reassembling them."[60] No presence now has the authority to reduce the myriad meanings and referents engaged in writing. The structural impossibility of a presence that exists outside the play of *différance* throws into question the possibility and value of *arché*, the idea of a founding and governing principle which the above semiology presupposes. Now, "no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field"[61]—writing as a whole cannot be mastered. Instead, "the subject (in its identity with itself, or eventually in its consciousness of its identity with itself, its self-consciousness) is inscribed in language, is a 'function' of language, becomes a *speaking* subject only by making its speech conform—even in so-called 'creation,' or in so-called 'transgression'—to the system of the rules of language as a system of differences, or at least by conforming to the general law of *différance*."[62] Two elements in this passage ought to be noted: First, to emphasize the point again, the word 'function' appears in scare quotes because the notion of causality to which it is tied has been suspended; to call something a function of some other thing suggests that a relationship of production is delimitable between them, and Derrida's point about language is that the designation of cause and effect is no simple matter—*différance* is "a system that no longer tolerates the opposition of activity and passivity, nor that of cause and effect, or of indetermination and determination, etc."[63] Second, these three exemplary oppositions bear a kind of synonymy with one another, cause and

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[60] Ibid., p. 16.
[61] Ibid., p. 7.
[62] Ibid., p. 15.
[63] Ibid., p. 16.

indetermination being active or productive states, and effect and determination being passive states. Similarly, one might venture to equate to an extent the active with the present. The very realm of cause and effect has been shaken up at the root of the privilege of the present.

It might be objected that what is at issue here is merely a matter of technique, that a writer in the fullest sense and of the highest ability would manage to master writing, to force it into submission so that nothing could be meant that was not intended—in a way to insulate it from context or changes in context while at the same time exerting the highest degree of authority. However, according to Derrida, as much as the author exerts a force upon writing, so writing exerts a force on the author, who involves herself inescapably in the structure of writing by writing. This structure is not fully controlled by the author, for "[the written must continue to act] if in general [the author] does not support, with his absolutely current and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his meaning, of that very thing which seems to be written 'in his name.'"[64] This is a bold proposal: that in the very identity of writing is inherent the possibility that its meaning (or perhaps more accurately, meanings, or meaning in the most broad and inclusive sense) may deviate from the meaning intended by the author. The meaning of writing cannot exhaustively be determined by the author (and neither, accordingly, by the context, of which the author is often taken to be the most important element). It is "an iterative structure cut off from all absolute responsibility,

[64] Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' in *Margins of Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 316.

from consciousness as the authority of the last analysis."[65] According to Derrida the consequences of this writing are fourfold: communication no longer communicates presences or consciousnesses; writing no longer belongs to the semantic or hermeneutic horizon; polysemia (multiple meaning) must be distinguished from dissemination (growing meaning); and context must be recognized as not exhaustively determinate of meaning. What we call the subject is no longer central—intentionality is exceeded by writing, as we have noted above. Thus, within the bounds of this definition of writing, the phrase "the last analysis" itself has become precarious. If meaning ceases to be fixed or exhaustively determined, then any idea of finality or of a definitive interpretation is precluded as well.[66]

Clearly, this analysis of writing renders it a much less stable phenomenon—with the elimination of the ability to reduce pairs of oppositions to one, that is, to choose between them in the fulfillment of an either/or, final analysis is precluded. Although meaning "must defer to the discourse in which it occurs, its interpretive context,"[67] this deferral is an activity of suspension rather than of choice: In deferring to the discourse in which meaning occurs, possible meanings extraneous to the interpretive context are recognized but held in reserve while context suggests what ought to be privileged. These supplementary meanings remain available and persist in

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[65] Ibid., p. 316.

[66] It is for this reason that deconstruction has been criticized as nihilistic and too permissive, to place the assignation of meaning solely in the hands of the reader, who is free to read into a text anything at all. As we shall later see, this is not the case; the reader is obliged not to take such a selfish and irresponsible stance toward writing. Responsibility has not been removed completely from the author, but it is now divided. How this responsibility is to be taken up by the various consciousnesses involved is a matter to be addressed later.

[67] Derrida, 'Différance,' p. 8.

announcing their availability even after they have been rejected in the present context. What is more, the interpretive context itself is subject to *différance* and therefore itself is not final or unequivocal, and it is difficult, with such a picture of writing and meaning, even to separate a single element from its context as though it too were not part of the context of other elements, as through the object and the space around it could definitively be assigned borders—"each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other."[68]

Absence and presence

Instead of invoking philosophy's traditional privilege of being-present, Derrida has shown that the structure of writing is, instead, constituted more directly in relation to absence. His analytical strategy is to push the absence traditionally acknowledged in concepts of writing to its limit, "the absolute absence of the addressee or of the empirically determinable set of addressees."[69] That is to say, writing must be legible, repeatable even in the event of this absolute absence—it must, in a way, be independently, autonomously transparent, structurally transparent. This is how it accounts for absence: by ensuring that its own identity and function cannot be negated, stolen by the absence of another. Note that in this way, too, it denies authority, preventing the other from destroying it even in theory: "To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive, that my future disappearance in principle will not prevent from functioning and from yielding, and

[68] Ibid., p. 17.
[69] Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' p. 315.

yielding itself to, reading and rewriting....For the written to be the written, it must continue to 'act' and to be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed."[70] The implications of this last statement are severe as concerns the authority of the author: A clause of release is built into the very definition of writing according to Derrida, which says that writing (and meaning) are characterized by an "essential drifting"—the fact of writing's ability to retain meaning in the absence of any agent who speaks for it or supplements it.

As a consequence of this loosening of writing from the grasp of the writer, the authority of context has also been challenged. Specifically, Derrida challenges is the idea that context, by surrounding an event or a text, dictates the acceptable actions and meanings involved, specifies requirements, diminishes ambiguities, and so on. We like to believe that identifiable links can be made between one event and another, or between an event and a trace, and to believe that these links are strong, definite, maybe inevitable—a reliable causal relationship, or something like causality: "the simplicity of the origin and the continuity of every derivation, every production, every analysis."[71] Just as a prescribed context (such as the colloquium conventions described by Derrida at the beginning of "Signature Event Context") can guide future events, shape them, we can (and do) also look outwards from an event to the surrounding circumstances and precedents for help interpreting that event, to identify it, define its borders, and understand its significance. We relate it to things outside itself, not

[70] Ibid., p. 316.
[71] Ibid., p. 311.

necessarily implied by it on its own, and in so doing come to a better understanding. In music, for example, a person wishing to interpret (both intellectually and in sound) 18th-century dance music might inquire into the particular movements of the dance, the gestures, so then to imitate them in sound; or find out for what occasion or social class or locale the music was composed, as a hint about its mood, tempo, performing forces, style, and so on. The desire here is to be faithful to something—the spirit of the age, the traditions or another time and place, to recreate the mood, to do justice to the composer's ideas—and this requires faith toward a great number of other distinct but related things. However, according to Derrida, context is not outside text at all, but itself is another text.

Derrida's pointed critiques of structuralism in 'Force and Signification' and 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' offer further insight into the risks of using context, and rules founded on the basis of context, as a guard against excessive freedom of interpretation. At issue in these essays is the practice of establishing (conceptually, if not otherwise) a centre around which writing is thought to evolve—"the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play."[72] This centre, "because it can be either inside or outside, can also indifferently be called the origin or end, *arché* or *telos*."[73] It is that which both creates the play and is the goal of the play, the point to which the structure must always return. For musical Platonists such as Levinson and Kivy, the work of music

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[72] Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' in *Writing and Difference*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 279.
[73] Ibid., p. 279.

fulfills the centre function in musical practice because it is the model, the form, to which scores refer and to which performances aspire. The work anchors performances that are directed toward truth-to-the-work and attempt to re-create the Platonic form as closely as possible. As such, it guides the choices made by performers and establishes itself as the ultimate goal. Furthermore, it reinforces the principle of the immutability of the work.

Différance intervenes at this point once more. The 'law' of *différance* governs (in the non-simple sense of govern, again) all forms of signification and referral, as noted earlier, including the activity of speech previously believed to be immediate. Derrida argues that the concept of context that has been active traditionally is not adequately rigorous or scientific, and he wishes to show that what we think of as something decisive and determinative is defeasible, a much less final source of meaning than we would like it to be. Let us look again at how Derrida observes absence to be a governing 'law' of writing. First, it is in the absence of the addressee, who is the intended recipient of the meaning intended to be communicated through writing. In order for writing to function, it must take account of the space between addressor and addressee such that the marks left by the former "continue to produce effects beyond his presence and beyond the present actuality of his meaning, that is, beyond his life itself."[74] The second determination of absence occurs as "a continuous modification, a progressive extenuation of presence"[75] that extends the presence of the addressor beyond her lifetime without any break in presence. Her writing stands

[74] Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' p. 313.
[75] Ibid., p. 313.

constantly in her place when she is not available to occupy it in person. Under a classical viewpoint, this activity constitutes a smoothing-over of the fields of time and space, but according to Derrida it marks writing as a point of rupture between these.

Summary and projection

We have seen that the structure of writing, of all writing, precludes any notion of the written text as fixed and eternal, because signification, representation, substitution all occur indefinitely within it and without closure. Writing works in such a way that it engages signified meaning "in its own *economy* so that it always signifies again and differs…[That] which is written is never identical to itself."[76] The centre that would enclose this economy, that could cause the chain of signification to close itself by linking the origin and the end and finally bringing all substitutions around to repeat themselves, would transgress this structure of writing. For although signification is the substitution of one item for another, the signification of the written text—which is also the musical work—always leaves a remainder, another signification, another reference, and is never full or transparent.

So, to think writing in the classical way, as a deferred presence, a collection of signs that "[represent] the present in its absence," a structure that "presupposes that the sign, which defers presence, is conceivable only on the *basis* of the presence that it defers,"[77] ignores or represses *différance*. "[The] sign…defers presence [and] is conceivable only on the basis of the presence that it defers and moving toward the

[76] Derrida, 'Force and Signification,' p. 25. I will recall this statement later on.
[77] Derrida, 'Différance,' p. 9.

deferred presence that it aims to reappropriate. According to this classical semiology, the substitution of the sign for the thing itself is both secondary and provisional: secondary due to an original and lost presence from which the sign thus derives; provisional as concerns this final and missing presence toward which the sign in this sense is a movement of mediation."[78] That is: when I can be here fully and speak for myself with my body, with sound, and in a performative way supplement my words with gestures or more words, to modify or clarify or elaborate my own meaning and also distract from it, I am acknowledged as the owner of my words and meaning. I am allowed a certain amount of non-identity between my words and my meaning because I am available to replace my words with more words if necessary. In a broad sense, by virtue of its process of substitution based on the performative paradigm, writing has in a way been interpreted as an equivalent statement of 'Here I Am,' a self-affirming statement of presence in spite of the absence of the writer or addressor. Furthermore, it is an assertion of power and autonomy over the expression of one's own being and existence, the ability to declare in advance one's influence on other beings, to stake a claim to some metaphysical territory, the future 'here.' The linguistic sign accomplishes this by leaving behind (or, more accurately, leaving forward) a sign that speaks on my behalf when I am not available or able to speak for myself immediately, that is, supposedly without the mediation of another sign of presence. Writing takes the place of my absence, but this "is determined in the most classical fashion as a continuous modification, a progressive extenuation of presence. Representation regularly *supplements* presence. But this operation of supplementation...is not

[78] Ibid., p. 9.

exhibited as a break in presence, but rather as a reparation and a continuous, homogenous modification of presence in representation."[79] So representation is very much a return of the present—that something is brought again (re-) to presence, the act of doing so.

However, as the quote above suggests, while traditionally representation smoothes out and joins the spaces between presence and absence, making of the alternation of opposites a continuous field, for Derrida it harbours the 'law' of breakage, articulation, interruption, discontinuity, which causes an opening or rupture on the horizon of presence. Rather than encouraging forgetfulness of absence, it reminds us of absence and death: "it is a break in presence, 'death,' or the possibility of the 'death' of the addressee, inscribed in the structure of the mark."[80] Absence asserts itself in representation but presence does not, and in representative phenomena such as writing absence not so much demands to be accounted for as realizes its power. Representation accounts for absence, but does not thwart it. Derrida proposes instead that there is an original kind of absence in the field of writing that sets writing apart, and that this is of a sort that, once examined, proves itself (could prove itself) to subsume all other species of communication and call into question the authority of the traditional views and thus, of the origin and context.

In the following chapter I will attempt an analysis of the ways in which the philosophy of music exemplifies the principles that Derrida wishes to challenge, which pervade many aspects of musical thinking, from the formation of ontologies of

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[79] Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' p. 313.
[80] Ibid., p. 316.

musical works to the establishment of guidelines for performance practice and interpretation, remembering that all of these elements in the philosophical system are very closely connected, such that the choices and judgments made with respect to one branch of musical experience systematically influence those made in other branches. I will then attempt to re-frame those philosophies of music in terms of a Derridean analysis of writing and to show how awareness of 'laws' such as *différance* go a long way toward tempering the authoritarian impulse while maintaining a respectful stance toward composers and works of music. Most importantly, I will argue throughout what remains that, far from relieving the performer of any responsibility in relation to the identity of the musical work, under a Derridean account, the musician is more responsible, if in a different way, than she may have thought previously, and that this responsibility infuses not just her performance decisions, but her entire practice.

4—IDENTITY AND SUBSTITUTION

In the first and second chapters, I presented the key aspects of two traditional philosophies of music, those of Levinson and Kivy, and in the third chapter outlined those themes of Derrida's philosophy of writing that I believe can be used to formulate a new account of musical works and practice. Now, in this chapter, I will examine in more depth the difficult relationships between work, score and composer in terms of a Derridean concept of substitution, and elaborate the ethical risks that emerge when traditional ontologies are used to found prescriptive theories of performance practice. Derrida has pointed out the problematic nature of traditional thought regarding literary texts: that there is a certain incompatibility between the recognition of the 'enigmatic' conditions of literary self-identity and the continued belief in its possibility. Philosophical accounts of literary identity have upheld the supposed immutability of the 'original version' of the text and allowed it to remain the 'ultimate reference' for its identity. The principle of immutability is precisely what Derrida has attempted to dethrone, and he identifies by name the philosophy that it exemplifies: "The notion of an Idea or an 'interior design' as simply anterior to a work which would supposedly be an expression of it, is a prejudice: a prejudice of the traditional criticism called...'Platonism' or 'Neo-Platonism'."[81] I will now show how these same prejudices emerge throughout traditional philosophies of music—ontologies of musical works and theories of acceptable performance practice—and how Derrida's treatment of them with respect to literature applies easily and appropriately to the realm of music as well.

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[81] Derrida, 'Force and Signification,' pp. 11-12.

At this point I would like to introduce the work of Richard Taruskin, a self-professed curmudgeon who is prolific as a writer, critic, musicologist, and musician in his own right. Taruskin has written extensively on issues surrounding the relationship of performer to work to composer to score and back again. His criticism of the Historically Informed Performance movement, in which he argues that the aesthetic and ideals at work in the movement are thoroughly contemporary, however they may try to pass themselves off as historical, created a fair amount of controversy among his colleagues. Much of what he has to say about that movement is directly related to the topic at hand, and his analysis of performance practice bears some of the hallmarks of deconstruction, as he exposes the incongruities between performers' and historians' expressed values and the practices that they claim have issued from those values.

Taruskin challenges two ideas implicit in philosophies such as musical Platonism: that objective knowledge and insight into the work itself or the composer's intentions are possible, and that, if they were possible, that they would form appropriate bases for responsible musical practice. Most philosophers and musicians would concede that the possibility of objective knowledge is limited. The second idea is of greater importance here. Taruskin proposes that both supposed types of authority, while masquerading under guises that suggest autonomy from any influence of the musical interpreter, in fact only open themselves up for the interpreter either to take ultimate authority or else accept none at all—to abdicate responsibility for their

musical decisions[82] by invoking another authority. What is peculiar and suspect about their approach, from a deconstructive standpoint, is the equation of adherence to rules, traditions, and 'objective' knowledge with true ethical behaviour. The limits of ethical behaviour, then, are dictated by the limits of current musical-historical scholarship, an entirely separate field of inquiry. Furthermore, Taruskin charges that the authority of the work, "rescued, as it were, from tradition (and, as we shall see, from the composer) and enshrined as autonomous, eternally fixed"[83] is only granted by virtue of a process of choice, in which works "are routinely outranked, if only by other texts or types of texts; that when choice among texts is exercised, the choice is irreducibly arbitrary however elaborately fiat be disguised as rule."[84] Taruskin expresses doubt here that at any time can interpretive prejudices be left completely out of musical decision-making, even at the level of text selection (such as deciding which edition to work from), for the judgment informing the choice between potential sources is itself an interpretive matter. So, we can no longer think even that the rules of the game, insofar as they are established somewhat by the score, are autonomous or objective; these rules themselves have been selected with some end in mind, after some process of elimination.

Taruskin further questions not only the authority of the composer over the work, but the sense of commitment that performers and philosophers have toward it. He, like Kivy, addresses the importance of the composer's identity to the value

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[82] The possibility of abdication of responsibility should be a major concern for philosophers who concern themselves with prescriptive theories of performance, but it seems not to be recognized as a risk of strict adherence to a Platonic view.
[83] Taruskin, 'Tradition and Authority,' p. 185.
[84] Ibid., p. 185-186.

attributed to his works. Recall that Kivy argues that knowledge of who produced a given work makes only a negligible amount of difference to its aesthetic value, citing as examples cases of misattribution and attempting to demonstrate the degree to which a work's patrimony changes the work itself. Kivy proposes, in response to Levinson, that the object that has been misattributed retains its identity in spite of the misattribution, and thus we might say that it has a certain autonomy with respect to the composer. For Taruskin, however, these cases and arguments do not preclude a prejudice in favour of compositional privilege, and he questions, in a general way, the strength of philosophers' and musicians' convictions when it comes to restricting creative license on the basis of compositional authority. He writes hypothetically of a case in which a potentially work-identifying musical event might be produced in a performance rather than belong to 'the work itself':

> ...I listened to Jacob Lateiner's loving description of the manuscript containing Mozart's Rondo in A Minor, K.511. I was fascinated by his account of a small alteration in the slurring at the end of the first phrase, and convinced when he characterized it as a stroke of genius. And yet, I had to wonder, would its sound, its effect, its meaning, or its genius be any different if, instead of occurring to Mozart in the act of writing the piece down, the change had occurred to Mr. Lateiner in the course of practicing or performing it? The answer must obviously be no, so far as the listener is concerned, and yet it is part and parcel of the *Werketreue* philosophy, as Mr. Lateiner himself outlined it, that any such spontaneous tampering is forbidden.[85]

Taruskin's example asks us to reconsider the composer's proprietary rights of genius and creative power with regards to his works, and also the privilege given to the written text as the only source of inspired performances or sounds. Furthermore, it challenges the idea of a fixed and fully determined musical identity by affirming,

[85] Ibid., p. 190.

implicitly, the importance of each unique performance in defining the work, and the role of the performer's imagination in spontaneously producing such unique performances.

With Taruskin's challenges and concerns in mind, let us now turn back to Levinson and Kivy, and assess their philosophies from a Derridean standpoint. The ontologies put forth by Kivy and Levinson betray much about their beliefs about musical meaning even where meaning is not explicitly addressed. Both philosophers take the musical work to be an ideal and fixed object that is present in, but not identical with, its score. Both also acknowledge that the sound structure itself (the main object represented by the score) is integral to the identity of the work, but does not constitute it exhaustively. For Kivy, the sound structures comprised in a work are eternal and immutable, and they pre-exist their moment of inscription, such that the relationship of composer to work is akin to that of discoverer to discovery. Levinson, on the other hand, asserts that these structures are created by the composer and therefore do not pre-exist the moment of inscription. In spite of these differences, both philosophers insist that the intervention of the composer in the compositional process is purposeful and intentional, such that the composer is the highest authority over the work and is the source of its meaning. Whether she is a creator or a discoverer, the composer expresses herself and her own intentions in the score and fixes at the time of composition the identity and the meaning of the work. Because she is bound to be in some way a product of the musical, social and political climate and tradition in which she lives, these too are recognized as having influenced the identity of the work. In short, the composer (and by the world contemporary to her) is the central figure

towards which the work of music points. The reference of the work, then, is dual: it refers at once to itself and to the composer.

As a result, the performer approaching the work of music is obliged, by a philosophical and ethical tradition that privileges consciousness and its manifestations, to pay attention to and inquire about the composer's intentions with respect to the work to be performed. She must consider the performance practices in effect at the time of the inaugural performance (or time of composition, if the work is first performed posthumously) and try to hear and to play the work as though she too were a contemporary of the composer. She ought to defer to the most current knowledge about performance practice and deviate from this knowledge only where it is questionable or silent. Kivy and Levinson recognize that a great amount of detail will be beyond the scope of objective knowledge, and thus that performers will be required to interpret the score independently at times, yet this is the case not because no objective and autonomous work exists, but because our modes of access to it cannot reveal it fully. So the performer is responsible to the work and, by extension, to the composer, to represent (in the sense of speaking for as well as re-creating or illustrating) these faithfully to the audience, for being true to the work, and to let the work and the composer speak for themselves through the her performance.

A strong sense of causality underlies this kind of ontology, which considers works to be the direct result of any number of traceable causes. The work's context, a broad and complex collection of circumstances and influences, is embedded in it, and in theory at least its identity consists of the traces of that context. Our understanding of the work depends on our ability to recognize those traces as indicators of its origins,

but also to think of them as living entities that continue to act on the work in the absence of those origins, to define it in perpetuity even though their inaugural moment has passed. Yet our expressions about the work itself as something generative suggest that it possesses an ability to be self-referential and unambiguous. It is as though we expect or believe the work to make propositional statements of its own—to say unequivocally, "I am this" and "I am not that." Our approach to the work's identity hovers between control and surrender insofar as we treat it both as something objective and independently existing, and as something requiring advocates—composers and performers—to render it visually and aurally accessible. The work itself is in this way parasitical upon performances, but paradoxically any performance of it is parasitical upon the work itself as well, drawing energy from the work at the same time that the work asserts its identity or identifiability through the performance.

Derrida would not deny that the composer's intention plays a role in defining the identity of the musical work. The following passage, which concerns literary texts, suggests that works as such could not exist without the intention on the composer's part to create them, and that this intention is embedded in them:

> Moreover, there is no text which is literary *in itself.* Literarity is not a natural essence, an intrinsic property of the text. It is the correlative of an intentional relation to the text, an intentional relation which integrates in itself, as a component or an intentional layer, the more or less implicit consciousness of rules which are conventional or institutional—social, in any case.[86]

It seems only natural, then, even according to Derrida, that some consideration of the composer's intention in creating works be part of a responsible musical interpretation. But the philosophies of Levinson and Kivy go beyond acknowledging the influence of

[86] Derrida, 'An Interview with Jacques Derrida,' in *Acts of Literature*, p. 44.

intention. For them the composer's intention does not only establish the work as a work, but defines its aesthetic qualities as well, and thus must be the centering force around which all performances revolve.

The philosophies of Levinson and Kivy can be analysed in Derridean terms as manifesting two consequential substitutions: the work as a substitute for the composer, and the performance as a substitute for the work. Such an analysis provokes suspicion over the validity and authority of these substitutions, because Derrida has argued convincingly that no substitution is ever perfect or complete, because not only are a thing and its substitute never identical with one another, but they are never identical with themselves either. Furthermore, substitution as it occurs in writing does not simply happen once and for all. The same structural necessity that dictates the substitution of notation for sound also dictates that this substitution be able to occur *ad infinitum*, in theory if not in practice, by virtue of the structure of all writing, the structure set in motion by *différance*, the playing movement that in music invokes more than one sense of 'play'. This is the case with all written texts—they do not possess a simple origin, because they are originally iterable:

> To say that marks or texts are originally iterable is to say that without a simple origin, and so without a pure originarity, they divide and repeat themselves immediately. They thus become capable of being rooted out at the very place of their roots. Transplantable into a different context, they continue to have meaning and effectiveness.
>
> Not that the text is thereby dehistoricized, but historicity is made of iterability. There is not history without iterability, and this iterability is also what lets the traces continue to function in the absence of the general context or some elements of the context.[87]

[87] Ibid., p. 64.

In the case of musical works, then, it is philosophically dangerous to proceed as though such substitutions could be effected fully, as though a work's original identity was ever fully determined and could be restored, and to base one's ethics and sense of responsibility on the goal of minimizing the 'remainder', that which defies substitution. However, rethinking traditional philosophies of music in order to accommodate this insight clearly does not require that concern for compositional intention and authenticity be abandoned—it simply sets in motion a process of critical thought that opens the field of musical interpretation beyond its traditional boundaries, making room for an ethics inclusive of practices and performances otherwise discouraged by traditional philosophies of music, and intensifying rather than obscuring the issue of musical identity.

By reconsidering the work's ontological status from a Derridean point of view, we can see how, as part of a written tradition, the score has traditionally been conceptualized as a manifestation of presence, in fact of multiple presences, work and composer. The first substitution at work in Levinson and Kivy is that of the score for the work of music. It is clear that the two can co-exist—the score remains intact as the performance occurs—and so already the substitution is by no means complete or without inequality, and it is complicated further by the work-performance relationship. In ascribing immanence to the work in the score, the performance, or both, the presence of the work is asserted implicitly. The work is the object toward which both score and performance gesture. Yet the work is never fully present in and of itself, observable or capturable without mediation from something 'outside' of itself. The work takes on the role of the "central presence which has never been itself, has always

already been exiled from itself into its own substitute."[88] The 'central presence' to which Derrida refers in this passage is the centre that limits the play of signification within a structuralist approach to literature, but an analogous limitation on the play of the musical work itself occurs when the work is taken to be the "point of presence" or "fixed origin"[89] of its instantiations—scores and performances. This characterization of the work promotes conceiving of scores and performances as doomed attempts to capture and re-present the fixed origin exactly as it first occurred—doomed because, as has often been noted, scores are but impoverished images of musical works, and thus cannot provide enough information about the works to yield performances that are identical with the work.

So the score, as a signifier of the work, gives itself over[90] to not one but two signifieds, the work and the performance, where these are not considered to be one and the same. The work is immanent (and imminent) in the score, but also immanent in the performance. The score and the performance both stand in for the work itself. This signification is not transparent: the work is never fully replaced, never disappears. Neither, it is important to note, does the score. The score, the work and the performance all signify in two directions—back and forth toward two possible substitutes. We might say, then, that the score-work signification is not replaced but *supplemented* by a score-performance signification, which furthermore yields a performance-work signification. The conceptualizations and substitutions that arise

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[88] Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' p. 280.
[89] Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," p. 278.
[90] And we will see that it is not clear that this giving-over occurs fully or completely with respect to either signified, work or performance.

out of the ontologically dubious account of the musical work as fixed and eternal bring us up against something like an impossibility or an impasse, a substitution that both happens and does not happen at the same time. It happens as something fluid, continuous, temporal, and in a way necessary: the substitution of real sound for some signifier (a score, an idea, a verbal description) is, after all, the goal of music notation.

This is an important difference between a Derridean approach to musical identity and the approach taken by Levinson and Kivy. For the latter two, the musical work at some point was defined and perceived fully or exhaustively—at the moment of its creation by the composer—but this fullness is lost when the work is recorded, changes from its initial form to a form accessible to others but the composer. From a Derridean perspective, though, music in any manifestation (visual or aural) is writing from the very beginnng,[91] and as such musical works are both never and always fully present: never because writing is structurally infinite, and thus the manifest work can never be identical with itself, and always because every manifestation necessarily re-awakens and re-creates the work.

This structural infinity, explored earlier through the discussion of *différance*, itself must inspire an ethical response, yet traditionally the ethical response in music is generated by the attribution of musical works to composers, by the bond of work to composer. Here is the second substitution: the thinking of the work as an extension

[91] Another reason why such an approach seems to me to reflect more accurately the true nature of musical creation and practice is that it does not suggest that composition happens instantaneously. Traditional philosophies of music that speak of musical works as having appeared fully and completely to their composers seem to me to ignore the fact that composition often involves a lengthy process of revision—composers, too, must struggle with works' being divided from themselves and not appearing as fully and consistently self-identical.

and representation of the composer, the substitution of work for composer, of object for person. The performer's duty to present the work as much as possible in accordance with the composer's intentions is a manifestation of the double substitution of performance and score for work and of work for composer. The score, as a representation of the work, is by extension a kind of representation of the composer, a stand-in for the composer that speaks on his behalf. Both score and work speak for the composer in the composer's absence, represent the composer in her absence. This is the order of the traditional semiology of writing, which repairs and smoothes over breaks in presence, extends presence beyond the usual physical limits.

Taruskin also sees in traditional approaches to musical performance the substitution of work for composer, as well as the position that the work occupies as the composer's mouthpiece in his absence, recognizing that the one can act as a foil for the other: "Even if impossible to realize absolutely, 'letting the music speak for itself' may still be a worthy ideal to aspire toward. What does it mean, though? For the moment, let us assume it means realizing the composer's intentions as far as our knowledge of them permits. What we are really being told, then, is to let the composer speak for himself."[92] This is precisely that 'law' of writing described by Derrida in 'Signature, Event, Context' under which writing exists to speak for the writer when he is no longer present to speak for himself. Taruskin recognizes the impossibility of fulfilling this substitution, stating that "in the case of notated music there is always a middle man, even if it is only ourselves as we contemplate the written symbols."[93] The

[92] On Letting the Music Speak for Itself, p. 53.
[93] On Letting the Music Speak for Itself, p. 53.

homogenous field required for communication to take place without interference, for signifiers to bring their meaning home intact, is precluded.

Though in the above passage Taruskin mentions only notation in symbols, the principle ought, according to Derrida, to apply also in other cases in which visual symbols are not in use, since all experience can be subsumed under the heading of writing insofar as experience is repeatable, manifesting the same structure as signification. An oral tradition is still writing under Derrida's analysis, and thus the opposition between writer and reader remains in effect. Derrida's analysis of performatives is apposite here, as it bears on the question of 'whose' meaning a text is meant to convey. Taruskin, as we have seen, deals with 'letting the music speak for itself' and 'letting the composer speak for himself'; Davies writes in a parallel vein of 'utterance meaning' and 'utterer's meaning'. Derrida comes to these same issues through an examination of the views of J.L. Austin, in whom he finds to some extent a kindred spirit. Their affinity breaks down when Austin comes up against the question of the source or origin of writing and reaffirms the authority of these, and thus the privilege granted to consciousness and the present. Austin places great emphasis on the intentions of the source, such that "performative communication once more becomes the communication of an intentional meaning, even if this meaning has no referent in the form of a prior exterior thing or state of things."[94] Austin's account of the structure of performatives mirrors that of composition taken as a kind of performative itself, as a set of instructions left for future readers. The philosophy of music seems susceptible to this prejudicial limit, shared with Austin, in that by and

[94] Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' p. 322.

large in it too "the value of risk or of being open to failure...is not examined as an essential predicate or *law*."[95] This is not to say that the risk goes unacknowledged, but it is approached with a tone of resignation and not as a risk that displaces in any way the obligations of the performer to the composer; instead, it increases the responsibility of going beyond the notation to discover the work and to fulfill the composer's intentions. The status of those intentions as authoritative remains intact. The difficulties encountered in a musical tradition perpetuated in writing, that is, the indeterminacy of the score with regards to performance, are taken most often as a function of the inadequacy of notation to express a full sound.[96] According to Derrida's analysis, however, even the fullest possible notation or the actual (rather than interpolated, written) presence of the origin of the musical work, would fail to be completely determinate. He notes that even "a successful performative is necessarily an 'impure' performative,"[97] containing the possibility of repetition, re-contextualization and re-interpretation. It is a mistake to believe that the physical presence of the source, "[t]his conscious presence of the speakers or receivers who participate in the effecting of a performative, their conscious and intentional presence in the totality of the operation" cancels the effect of *différance* or "implies teleologically that no *remainder* escapes the present totalization."[98] Consider the case of composers performing their own compositions: A subsequent interpretation

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[95] Ibid., 324.
[96] In his essay 'The Multiple Interpretability of Musical Works,' Stephen Davies offers an alternative view that presents the indeterminacy of notation as a law that affects composers as much as performers, and which the former ought not attempt to transgress by taking extreme measures in their own notational systems.
[97] Ibid., p. 325.
[98] Ibid., p. 322.

modeled on what would seem at first blush to be an authoritative performance, even if it captures exactly all of the subtleties of the original, is still bound to undergo mutation and to take on its own meaning simply by virtue of its being other. We may attempt to begin with an exact duplicate or repetition, but the very fact of its being an exact duplicate is a kind of commentary, subject to interpretation in its own right and therefore contributing something new to the tradition to which it belongs.

So the relationship between tradition and authority appears to be an uneasy one. There is tension between the ideas that what belongs to a tradition is subject to the forces that influence tradition and define it as something that changes, to which change is inherent, and the idea that what is transmitted through tradition (and let us note here the similarities between the definitions of tradition and communication) is itself unchangeable, that for tradition to function, the object of the tradition is immutable. There is tension between 'a tradition' as an object and 'tradition' as activity, as the process of handing down. Tradition is the juxtaposition of preservation and evolution.

5—PRACTICING RESPONSIBILITY

Thus far in this thesis I have outlined theories of linguistic and musical meaning; engaged in a brief description and analysis of two Platonist ontologies of musical works, formulated by Peter Kivy and Jerrold Levinson; and suggested how these ontologies and the ideas that flow from them might be re-framed in terms of a principle of substitution, after Derrida. I will now proceed, in this final chapter, to delve more deeply into my own analysis of musical works, meaning and performance, with the goal of showing how re-thinking musical practice in terms of Derridean concepts of *différance*, substitution and justice allows us to account for many of the observed but unwelcome difficulties encountered through musical Platonism. I also hope, more importantly, to show how this approach allows us to account for many of the techniques in which musicians engage during the ongoing process of interpretation and legitimate approaches that might otherwise seem out of line. In doing this, I will explore briefly the consequences of all of the above with respect to what seems to be an implicit affirmation that the only musical activity worth philosophical consideration is that which is geared toward performance. I will argue that although the presence of the audience is indeed a factor in determining the performer's levels of responsibility (to the work, the composer, to self, and so on), it is by no means the only decisive factor. A more appropriate and full account of musical practice must, in my opinion, also recognize that countless interpretations are met on the way to performance and without any regard for performance, and that these are no less important from the point of view of responsibility and justice, even though they may be less visible. So in order to accommodate the changing history of the musical work we must establish a

philosophical framework that both acknowledges the performer as a witness to her own actions and is free of a strictly teleological conception of musical practice.

Music as a paradigm case of writing

I would like to propose here that the musical work, if we speak of it, is, because of *différance*, perhaps an example *par excellence* of a past that has never been present. The work itself is endlessly deferred through signs—ideas, symbols on a page, words, and sounds. The eternal and immutable work is that elusive past that has never existed in and of itself but has always only been glimpsed through detours and deferrals, putting off indefinitely the moment of its appearance in full. The difference between a Platonist approach and an approach issuing from a Derridean concept of writing is that while for the former the transparent representation of the work in performance is a practical impossibility, for the latter both transparent representation and the-work-in-itself are a structural impossibility. These two types of impossibility carry with them very different responsibilities: Practical impossibilities issuing from musical Platonism still demand treatment as though they could be overcome. Everything that can be done to reveal the work as it is in itself must still be done, and done out of respect for and interest in the work and the composer. However, from a Derridean perspective, the transparent representation of the work is structurally impossible because the work will never be, has never been self-identical. Its identity is constituted by its constant differing from itself and others. So performers are not simply asked to find and demonstrate objective certainties about the work; they are called not only to account

for what might be called the dominant reading—sanctioned by research and tradition—but also for the elements in the work that refuse to be assimilated to a dominant reading.

What can we say about a work that is never self-identical but which takes its identity from its difference from and division within itself? This description reflects the process of musical practice with uncanny accuracy. Platonist approaches appear to take works as entities that have materialized in their entirety in some instant of inscription. They make no reference, explicitly or implicitly, to the condition that composition itself is a process, like writing, and that works go through countless changes before and even after they have first been performed. We cannot assume that they even ever appear as self-identical to the composer. They appear this way and that, they are put away, they are completed hastily, they are left unfinished. Works are communicated—passed down, repeated—in visual and aural media. Scores are edited, amended according to scholarly research and performances real or imagined. Performances are developed through interaction with scores, scholarly research, and other performances. Each performance is bound to be different, and yet is still a performance of a work. Or, because I would like to avoid the implication of the ideal model that comes with the use of the word "of", is simply the work, in performance.

So what is the appropriate response to a work that is not itself at the same time that it is itself? That exceeds itself? How does a performer do justice to that whose

identity is always differing and deferred? "What is a success when the possibility of failure continues to constitute its structure?"[99]

In order to answer these questions, and to formulate an account of responsible performance practice, I will turn once again to the writing of Derrida himself, and to writers after Derrida who have dealt with what they call the ethics of reading. I have demonstrated the instability of the identity of the work and the substitutions effected within the Platonist account of musical works. The key element in my demonstration, as in Derrida's analyses of writing, is that the context of a musical work—and I use 'context' here particularly to refer to the context of the work's creation, its original context, since this is the context most frequently invoked throughout the philosophy of music—is never "absolutely determined or saturated."[100] It "contains a clause of non-closure; that is...obeys a *clôtural* logic according to which the limit that bounds, frames, encloses, and determines any context is necessarily interrupted by that which exceeds context."[101] What exceeds context is all of those meaning that are held in suspense by a given context but not excluded by all contexts. Writing is conditioned by the possibility of other contexts, "for it must, by virtue of its iterability, perdure beyond the present moment of its inscription and even after the death of its author."[102] When a composer writes, she too writes from within this condition, not from outside it. It is therefore impossible for her to control absolutely the chain of signifiers that she inscribes. Consequently, an ethics of performance should no longer be focused solely

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[99] Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' p. 324.
[100] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1992), p. 33.
[101] Ibid., p. 32.
[102] Ibid., p. 34.

on determining and realizing compositional intention, for this is not the only origin of what is written. Derrida writes, "the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from this place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and the entire system of utterances."[103] This statement hints at Derrida's approbation of the use of a dominant reading—which in the case of musical works tends, as we have seen, to be formulated by appeal to compositional intention—as the crucial first layer in any new reading. The case remains that "for the written to be the written, it must continue to 'act' and to be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, whether he is provisionally absent, or if he is dead, or if in general he does not support, with his absolutely current and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his meaning, of that very thing which seems to be written 'in his name'."[104]

A responsible meaning, then, must take account not only of compositional intention, but what exceeds intention and context, whose meaning cannot be discovered by appeal to the original and lost context but must instead be created in the present, which is always another present of inscription. Critchley writes: "In order for the present to be present, it must be related to something non-present, something *different*, and so not be present."[105] The musical performance obeys this formula in more than one way. First, the present (occurring) performance is related to other performances that have come before it and those that will come after, and second, the present performance is related presently to the work performed, which both is and is

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[103] Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' p. 326.
[104] Ibid., p. 316.
[105] Critchley, p. 37.

not constitutive of and constituted by the performance. To expand on this double relation further: According to Derrida, a responsible reading is one that takes account of the 'dominant' reading while at the same time deviating from it in a respectful and critical way. As with a literary text, a musical text (not just the written text in the traditional sense of the score, but also the written musical text insofar as the history of the work and its performances is always written) carries a dominant reading as one of its layers.

But, whereas I dare say that most re-readers of literary texts are likely to encounter the same printed words on multiple occasions and so not often be faced with subtleties of translation or editing that emerge from one edition to the next, re-listeners of musical texts (listeners hearing the same piece of music on multiple occasions) tend to be sensitive to changes in interpretation and to recognize differences even when they are unable to identify or articulate them specifically during the performance. The practicing musician, then, is a reader and a listener at once—integrating and interpreting a score, and witnessing that interpretation as it unfolds. The effect of *différance* conditions the musician's experience on yet another level by virtue of this structure of event and witness, of critical self-reflection that relates performance to score and score to past, present and future performances. One's identity as a musician is defined by this difference of the self from the self (the same *différance* that Derrida offers as an alternative cognizing of consciousness as self-presence), which might be passed off by some simply as a form of multi-tasking, but is actually far more deeply philosophical. For this critical self-reflection is a necessary component of responsible musical behaviour.

That the present performance is, as it occurs, also related to the work performed has ethical consequences as well, and furthermore reveals something about the nature of musical meaning. The performer, we have seen, is called upon to respond to what exceeds categorization in the work of music, to make a "decision of justice...[that] begins, it ought to begin, by right or in principle, in the initiative that amounts to learning, reading, understanding, interpreting the rule, and even calculating."[106] She must first analyze the validity of the rules that may apply (rules of performance practice, traditions of interpretation), and then their applicability to the specific instance before them in the singularity that is each individual musical work, and in each ethical encounter with the work, which is to say the entire continuum of her practice. This must be the first step because "if calculation is calculation, the *decision to calculate* is not of the order of the calculable, and it must not be so."[107] "Justice," writes Derrida, "always addresses itself to singularity, to the singularity of the other, despite or even because it pretends to universality. Consequently, never to yield on this point, constantly to maintain a questioning of the origin, grounds and limits of our conceptual, theoretical or normative apparatus," this questioning of rules, is not a mark of disrespect for justice of law, but one of sensitivity to its power.

Where this questioning leads to differences in interpretation and performance, the result is a testament to the richness of the musical work, to its refusal to be exhausted, its *différance*. J. Hillis Miller writes, in *The Ethics of Reading*, that "the value of a reading, against all reason, lies in its difference and deviation from the text

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[106] Derrida, 'Force of Law,' in *Acts of Religion*, Gil Anidjar, ed., (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 252.
[107] Ibid., p. 252.

it purports to read."[108] This statement radically opposes the Platonist viewpoint on musical performance, which seeks the maximum correspondence between performance (reading) and text (work), and judges performance based on the degree of correspondence rather than on the quality and justness of the deviation. The endless repetition of a single reading or the assertion that only a single correct reading exists that could fully constitute or fully reveal the true identity of the work (regardless of whether or not this has already taken place, which of course it has not) does not do justice to *différance*, to the work or to the performance. The alternative at hand here is that the meaning of the work, however 'meaning' is defined, hovers in the differences between performances; it can never be exhausted by a single performance.[109] This condition is not generally disputed by musical Platonists, but the same criticism may be made of them that Derrida makes of J.L. Austin, that in spite of recognizing that the account at hand is exposed to failure—failure, that is, to maintain meaning across a heterogeneous field of communication—they do not ask themselves "what consequences derive from the fact that something possible—a possible risk—is *always* possible, is somehow a necessary possibility. And if, such a necessary possibility of failure being granted, it still constitutes an accident."[110] Musical Platonism does not offer a satisfactory account of the myriad meanings that, in differing from one another,

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[108] J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 118.

[109] This statement applies to formalist accounts of musical meaning as well, for insofar as structural meaning too is revealed through performance, the manner of performance will cause certain structural elements to appear more prominently and others less so, and thus will affect, if not the fact of those structural relationships' existence, then the listener's perception and assessment of their relative architectural and musical importance.

[110] Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' p. 324.

even contradicting one another, identify a musical work; whereas a Derridean approach incorporates this phenomenon as a success rather than a failure of the structure of music and musical interpretation.

Musical practice as ethical practice

Having recognized *différance* as it appears in the structure of musical performance, we can begin to reconcile the inescapable responsibility and inevitable failure that come with it. One essential element in any reading or performance is the reflection of the text back to itself—the doubling movement that nonetheless is never pure or transparent to the original text—but beyond that, "reading is not subject to the text as its law, but to the law to which the text is subject. This law forces the reader to betray the text or deviate from it in the act of reading it, in the name of a higher demand that can yet be reached only by way of the text."[111] In an interview, Derrida describes the conditions of reading thus: "What goes for 'literary production' also goes for 'the reading of literature.' The performativity we have just been talking about calls for the same responsibility on the part of the readers. A reader is not a consumer, a spectator, a visitor, not even a 'receiver.' So we find once more the same paradoxes and the same stratifications."[112] Conceptualized in this way, reading is not a passive activity, one of simply taking in what another consciousness has offered, but an active process of both challenge and surrender to the text at hand.

Responsible musical practice should also exemplify this process. The endless differing of performances among them selves and of performances from the works they represent if the fulfillment of this 'law' of *différance*. This is not to say that just any performance that deviates somehow from the work can be considered responsible. Miller writes: "If the response is not one of necessity, grounded in some 'must', if it is

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[111] Miller, p. 120.
[112] 'An Interview with Jacques Derrida,' in *Acts of Literature*, p. 51.

a freedom to do what one likes, for example to make a literary text mean what one likes, then it is not ethical...but an ethical act that is fully determined by political considerations or responsibilities...[or] is subordinated to the epistemological, to some act of cognition,"[113] is also not ethical. In order for there to be justice, there must be freedom and choice, yet there must also be rules to challenge and limit that freedom. The performer must go through these detours in order to respond responsibly.

I would like to emphasize two points that emerged above: First, that deviation from the score is not just inevitable but desirable and illuminating, essential even to the musician's musical and personal growth—for all of this responsibility can be daunting—as well as to honouring and maintaining the work's vitality. Second, that clearly responsibility is not an issue that only becomes pressing by virtue of the potential public performance of any given interpretation. The call to responsible musical practice occurs at the first encounter between musician and work, lingers on throughout the process of going out from and returning to the work, and is then intensified when an audience gets involved. In many cases, the audience might be taken as a representative for the dominant interpretation of a work; they will come equipped with expectations and standards against which the performance will be judged. And while it might be granted that instances of deviation are perfectly acceptable in a practice room, when they occur in public they become much more controversial. Without wading into the debate over whether a performance constitutes a propositional-style assertion of how a work ought to be played, I will note that musicians are quite regularly expected to give performances that show the work in its

[113] Miller, pp. 4-5.

best possible light, whether this is due out of respect for the composer (especially if he is dead), the work itself, or some other motivation.

Yet as we have seen, once the *Werktreue* and similar ideals have been abandoned, the question of the best possible light becomes almost unintelligible. It becomes so, first, because the possibilities for variation between responsible performances have been opened, and second, because as a result of this opening and as a result of *différance* the 'light' in which the work is shown can no longer be located within a single performance, but hovers in the differences between all performances. I propose that this is a very positive development. No philosophy of music has the force to completely prevent inappropriate performances; justice is a kind of contract into which one enters with oneself in deciding to act responsibly to the best of one's ability, and virtuous though it may be, it is not compelling for everyone. However, it is no more just to formulate a philosophy that delegitimizes all challenging interpretations. By shifting the focus of philosophy of music from the end result to the process, and thus in effect re-framing 'end results' as moments in a continuum, the entire process itself becomes subject to scrutiny. This shift has two consequences: one, to heighten the musician's sense of responsibility outside a performance-oriented teleology, and two, to provide a safety net by judging performances not only on their success as performances, but on the integrity with which they were prepared. The *différance* of performances has an additional positive consequence in that it further

legitimizes in principle the practices of transcription[114], re-orchestration, and more experimental transformations of works with firmly entrenched performance traditions.

[114] The philosophical legitimacy of transcriptions is an issue dear to my heart as a trumpet player, because as a result of the late development of its chromatic capabilities (that is, when it evolved from a valveless instrument, which played only the tones of the harmonic series, to a valved instrument capable of producing all twelve tones of the chromatic scale), there is very little solo or orchestral repertoire composed specifically for it prior to the late nineteenth century. So, in order to extend our stylistic range and experience, trumpeters must shamelessly steal music composed for other instruments.

CODA: ONE MUSICIAN'S PERSPECTIVE (MINE)

To conclude my thesis, I will attempt to show how a Derridean approach reflects not only the structure of musical meaning, but also legitimizes what might seem to be philosophically dubious musical practices, by drawing some connections between the approach I have endorsed here and my own experience as a musician. I believe I should begin with the disclaimer that I cannot pretend that my experience is in any way exemplary or indicative of some greater trend; it is, by comparison with that of so many professional musicians, relatively limited and of course has largely been determined and conditioned by my own choices regarding whom I have studied with and what I have studied. I have been very privileged to encounter and engage with musicians of the highest quality, and I like to think that I have assimilated the best of what I have learned from them into my philosophy and practice of music. There is no limit to what one can learn, to the variety of musical experiences one can have, to the potential for musical growth, apart from self-imposed limits. Perhaps one of the greatest responsibilities of any musician is to oneself as a teacher—to direct one's own learning and experience in a rich, broad way and give oneself a wealth of musical, intellectual and ethical resources with which to approach one's musical practice. Any musician in whom there thrives even a seed of greatness never ceases to approach her practice with curiosity and a sense of adventure. At the most superficial level (perhaps a deceptively superficial level) of choice of vocabulary, Derrida's philosophy of writing harbours an affinity with musical practice insofar as it constantly invokes the concept of play. Play in turn evokes innocence and openness, and these qualities, though they are not directly referred to as such by Derrida himself, demand of the

reader or the musician a willingness first of all to participate in a game and second of all to embrace the game for what it is. Extensive ontological and epistemological theories of music such as musical Platonism risk taking their object too seriously, and if there is one thing that I would assert of all happy musicians it is that they all maintain, for as long as they remain practicing musicians, a sense of fun in what they do.

So, the first point of sympathy between theory and experience is this: Being a musician is always, and always should be, becoming a musician, just as meaning is always becoming itself in *différance*. By acknowledging the effects of *différance* on musical meaning and practice, we acknowledge not only the necessity of betraying the musical work through interpretation, but the responsibility to do so. Derrida's approach to meaning and to reading keeps in balance the two necessary acts of deviating from and returning to the work of music. The post-structuralist tradition of which his work is a part has been criticized as nihilistic and too free. Careful reading of Derrida, however, reveals that he is all too aware of the risks that come with absolute freedom and with absolute constraint, and that he recognizes justice and responsibility to happen somewhere in between. This is an important point: Along the journey of musical interpretation one must be willing to take detours, to appear to stray from one's prescribed route or to lose sight of one's destination, in order to reach the limits of interpretability. It is a failing of traditional philosophies of music that they do little to address the journey but concentrate on the destination instead. Perhaps this is out of respect for the musician as interpreter, evidence that philosophers, enthusiastic though they are about telling musicians what requirements the

interpretation must fulfill, are content to let the musicians figure out for themselves how to meet those requirements in a practical sense. Yet, the goals of interpretation—*Werktreue*, for example—are dealt with so severely that, in the absence of express written consent from the philosopher, one might be left with the impression that those detours are mere frivolities if they occur, rather than legitimate paths to musical understanding and expression. Such an attitude is ignorant of the fluidity of musical practice and assumes a simple picture of musical identity and meaning.

I will venture here to give a concrete example from my own attempts at musical interpretation. Several years ago, in a lesson with an unfamiliar teacher, I played the second movement of a baroque trumpet concerto in my characteristically reserved fashion, and was soon interrupted with a question: What would this movement sound like if it were a funeral march? I tried to make my next rendition funereal; I was interrupted again: What would it sound like if it were a lullaby? Then: What would it sound like if it were a children's playground song? What my teacher did in that lesson was ask me to stop playing the piece as I thought it should be played, maybe as I'd been told it should be played, proposed that this kind of radical deviation from what was probably quite a neutral performance might lead to insight into the movement's character. Although the second movement of that concerto is not a funeral march, a lullaby, a playground song, or any of the other musical types that my teacher listed that day, the experience of trying to interpret them in those ways was an experience of challenging limits, of opening the music to new possibilities, and of finding unexpected sympathies between the sublime and the ridiculous versions of that movement. My teacher remarked, sometimes to find out how to make music beautiful

you have to make it stupid first—beautiful is almost always found on the threshold of stupid.

The foregoing comment, I must point out, is not an isolated one. My studies were regularly punctuated by exhortations to stop trying to get everything right, to experiment with alternative interpretations, to ignore the markings on the page and just listen while I played and try to hear what needed to be done. Again, these instructions were given in order that I might take the music to its limits, to find its limits, and perhaps most importantly, to become mindful of the limits I had imposed on it, intentionally or not. They invoked the double responsibility and Derridean notion of justice discussed earlier with respect to reading—to examine the rules and then to experiment with breaking them, find points of weakness or manipulability. Furthermore, they demanded that I take full responsibility for my interpretation. For the upshot of the ethics of reading and interpretation endorsed here is that in making deviation from the text or the work a responsibility, a duty, we have also made the reader and the musician more responsible. That is, once the pretence of letting the work speak for itself is abandoned, the appeal to a transcendent outside performance loses its force as well. In straying knowingly from the dominant interpretation we are called all the more urgently to account for our choices.

I hope in this thesis to have challenged traditional ideas about musical identity and to have demonstrated that identity is not, and should not be, a fixed entity. The beauty of taking a Derridean approach to musical identity and performance is that it offers a framework for responsible musical practice without pretending to be capable of

offering a methodology. This appeals to me in particular as a musician, in which capacity I am often resentful of attempts to systematize, which always involves generalization, the immensely complex and challenging task of musical interpretation. The Derridean approach is founded not on an attempt to circumscribe the entire musical process somehow according to a formula for creation and re-creation, but on the understanding that the process cannot be circumscribed as such. It allows, I believe, one to look at music as a matter of *understanding* even when knowledge is precluded, and this is far more in line with my own intuitions about music than any approach that issues from a strong ontological or epistemological stance. As a result, it forms what I consider to be a more trustworthy resource for practical musical experience. It demands that the element of choice remain present are available, while also reinforcing the need to act mindfully and responsibly by making choices, "for only a decision is just."[115] It also reinforces (or simply forces) an attitude of humility toward the entire practice of music by "[deconstructing] from within all assurance of presence, all certainty or all alleged criteriology assuring us of the justice of a decision, in truth of the very event of a decision."[116] That is, it throws into question the justness of rigid application of rules, of appeals to knowledge of compositional intention, of any abdication of responsibility through invoking a higher power than oneself. It keeps the musician (not to mention the musicologist, the performance practice expert, and the critic) humble by at once reminding her that she must pass

[115] Derrida, 'Force of Law,' p. 253.
[116] Ibid., p. 253.

through "the test and ordeal of the undecidable"[117] and freeing her to respond to that test in a unique, perhaps unprecedented, way. It makes room for both the composer and the performer in performance, demands that the performer acknowledge her responsibilities toward the work and the composer while at the same time honouring her own creative capacity and asking her to have the courage to challenge tradition at the same time that she affirms it, "...for the countersignature signs by confirming the signature of the other, but also by signing in an absolutely new and inaugural way, both at once, like each time I confirm my own signature by signing once more: each time in the same way and each time differently, one ore time, at another date."[118]

Musical practice challenges and puts at stake a great number of identities; not only that of the works played, but also of the composers, performers and other performances. All of these identities continue to change with every interpretation of each work and every effort given along the way. At its most powerful, music can challenge and transform even the listener's identity as it reaches her mind and spirit. On a personal level, the creation of music challenges and transforms those who compose and perform it, taking them on journeys of self-discovery musical, intellectual, physiological, and emotional. *Différance* is not only manifest in all aspects of musical practice but is integral to it.

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[117] Ibid., p. 252.
[118] 'An Interview with Jacques Derrida,' pp. 66-67

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