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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

QUEER EFFECTS, WILDE BEHAVIOUR:

FREDERIC RZEWSKI'S *DE PROFUNDIS*

BY

MILTON R. SCHLOSSER 

An essay submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Music

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

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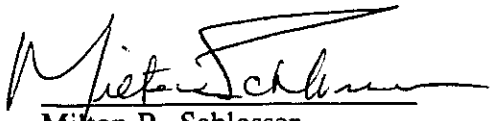

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, an essay entitled "Queer Effects, Wilde Behaviour: Frederic Rzewski's *De Profundis*" submitted by Milton R. Schlosser in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Music.

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Abstract

In 1895, Oscar Wilde was imprisoned in Reading Gaol for "indecent behaviour with men." The cultural, social, and political forces implicated in Wilde's incarceration are represented in American composer Frederic Rzewski's piano composition *De Profundis: For Speaking Pianist* (1992). A work in which the pianist recites selected passages from Wilde's letter from prison to Lord Alfred Douglas, *De Profundis* situates music as a socio-political text. As such, this work stands in direct opposition to discursive constructions of piano music as devoid of the political, the social, and the sexual. Further, *De Profundis* requires that the pianist perform a series of odd, if not embarrassing, effects. Queer effects, combined with Wilde behaviour, are woven together with text and music to constitute the queer body and the experiences of state discipline inscribed on the queer body. However, a factor complicates the analysis of *De Profundis* as a queer text: the characteristics of homosexuality--indeed, the term homosexuality itself--originate within pathological medicine as means to identify and punish the queer body. Consequently, the tracking of queer effects in *De Profundis* may serve unintentionally to perpetuate oppressive stereotypes. The difficult terrain on which issues of gender and sexuality are located necessitates that the first chapter examine issues around "homosexuality" and provide theoretical protocols allowing for the critical evaluation of sexuality and gender in musical texts. In particular, Lee Edelmann's analytic procedure *homographesis* is shown to de-scribe or erase differences intended to singularize the queer body for prosecution and regulatory purposes, thus affording the queer body diversity in its various manifestations. In chapter two, such diversity is seen

to result in differing receptions of Rzewski's *De Profundis* by queer performers and listeners as well as straight ones. *Homographesis* serves as the framework on which both chapters are structured, reflecting my premise that the analysis of queer effects in *De Profundis* will fail to be critical and ultimately sympathetic to the queer subject unless it interrogates dominant constructions of gender and sexuality.

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Introduction

'I'm afraid I can only advise you to live in some country that has adopted the Code Napoleon,' he said.

'I don't understand.'

'France or Italy, for instance. There homosexuality is no longer criminal.'

'You mean that a Frenchman could share with a friend and yet not go to prison?'

'Share? Do you mean unite? If both are of age and avoid public indecency, certainly.'

'Will the law ever be that in England?'

'I doubt it. England has always been disinclined to accept human nature.' (Forster, *Maurice* 184-85)

E.M. Forster's novel *Maurice* encodes the complexities and challenges of being a "homosexual" in a society "disinclined to accept human nature." Although Forster completed *Maurice* in 1914, he chose not to publish it during his lifetime to avoid public scandal; consequently, *Maurice* did not appear until after his death in 1970. In the concluding notes to this novel, Forster indicates that the inspiration to write *Maurice* originated on a visit to Edward Carpenter. Carpenter's friend George Merrill touched Forster's backside, just above the buttocks:

> The sensation was unusual and I still remember it, as I remember the position of a long vanished tooth. It was as much psychological as physical. It seemed to go straight through the small of my back into my ideas, without involving my thoughts. (217)

According to Forster, this experience inspired him to write a novel in which two men would fall in love and experience a "happy ending" (218). In *Maurice*, Forster challenges perceptions of homosexual relationships as doomed to failure and of homosexuality as a pathological neurosis. That the novel's inspiration is noted by Forster as coming through a single touch to his backside may be seen to reveal the close connection which exists between creativity and the body as an erotic site.

The music academy has been "disinclined" to acknowledge the relationships existing between creativity and the body. Until recently, musicological discourse has privileged notions which locate musical meaning as immanent in a musical work, attributable to genius, and discerned through analysis of form. Partly in reaction to the imposition of biographical elements in late nineteenth century writing, musicology has avoided descriptions similar to Sir George Grove's with regard to the opening movement of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*:

> . . . in this movement [Beethoven] unbosoms himself as has never done before. . . . We hear the palpitating accents and almost the incoherence of the famous love-letters, but mixed with an amount of fury which is not present in them, and which may well have been inspired by the advent of

> some material difficulties, or by the approaching fear that the engagement so passionately begun could not be realised. (151-152)

To the late twentieth-century reader, the above may appear too personal, full of conjecture and rather steeped in Victorian sentiment. But has musicology actually silenced biographical elements within the discussion of musical meaning? Standard music history texts such as Donald Jay Grout and Claude Palisca's *A History of Western Music* construct Beethoven's compositions according to three style periods which necessarily involve considerations of Beethoven's degrees of deafness. Yet, these texts avoid relating Schubert's struggles with syphilis in terms of compositional output. Similarly, heterosexual relationships like Robert and Clara Schumann's are worthy of examination, but same-sex relationships such as Benjamin Britten and Peter Pear's, Samuel Barber and Gian Carlo Menotti's, and John Cage and Mercier Cunningham's are not.[1] It almost appears that queer musicians might be best advised to move to other disciplines which have adopted the Code Napoleon.

Fortunately, recent scholarship within musicology has demonstrated interest in the relationships between music and sexuality. Benefitting from extensive research done by disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, musicologists are able to access theoretical protocols which provide for scholarly investigations around issues in sexuality and gender. Notably, the relationship between music and homosexual desire has become the focus of an area in musicology known as *queer musicology*. In the 1994 collection *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, scholars such as Philip Brett, Susan McClary, and Elizabeth Wood raise issues around music, gender, and

sexuality which permit biographical elements to inflect musical analysis. However, these writers differ markedly from their late nineteenth-century counterparts in that the "individual" is constituted as a social construction, shaped by the structures and influences of society. Devoid of nineteenth-century notions of genius and autonomy from the social realm, terms such as "composer," "performer" and "audience" are interrogated and deconstructed to reveal music's significance in the shaping of sexuality and social norms.

Contributions to research in the area of piano music and sexuality are starting to be more prevalent. Richard Leppert in *The Sight of Sound* focuses on the signifying potential of the piano as a "feminine" construction to evoke aspects of gender and sexuality. However, contributions on the specific relationship between piano music and homosexuality have yet to appear. In my judgement, certain issues have worked against the analysis of this relationship. The cult of the concert pianist, originating with the "great performers" of the nineteenth century, remains largely deferential to dominant culture in its efforts to maintain an elite status. Furthermore, the profession of piano teaching, in order to attract customers, stresses the piano as a moral (read: heterosexual) activity for young boys. Given my interests in queer theory, critical theory, and piano performance, I bring to discussions of the relationship between music and the queer body insights which help to interrogate assumptions held by concert pianists and to identify points of resistance offered by the piano profession. To questions of gender and sexuality, I bring my experience as a musical *performer*, a role which necessarily invokes emotions and physical gestures societally-constructed as "feminine" and "masculine."

As well, my views acknowledge the body as a site of training and discipline *and* as a site of erotic experience. Like Forster, I have had creativity initiated through the touch of physical matter--sound, instrument, body--against my body. That musical creativity and erotic experience of the body are linked together may come as no surprise to the pianist who finds him- or herself remembering the physical sensation of sound on the body.

In this essay, I contend that any critical analysis of music as a queer text begins with observing how differences are attributed to and inscribed upon the queer body by dominant culture. Such an analysis then proceeds to erase or de-scribe the queer body of these differences, finally allowing the queer body that which has been allowed only for the straight body: variety. The difficult terrain on which issues of gender and sexuality are situated necessitates that the first chapter examine complexities surrounding "homosexuality" as well as sexuality in general. As a condition developed by pathological medicine to assist in the prosecution of subaltern sexualities, "homosexuality" is problematic and regulatory in origins. Indeed, the queer body may be considered to be a text within discourse upon which differences are written and inscribed. Lee Edelmann's two-part analytical procedure *homographesis* tracks the differences ascribed to the queer body in order to reveal such differences as fictions of hegemonic orders. *Homographesis* serves as the framework on which both chapters are structured, reflecting my premise that the analysis of queer effects in music will fail to be critical and ultimately sympathetic to the queer subject unless it interrogates dominant constructions of gender and sexuality.

The theoretical protocols outlined in Chapter One facilitate the examination of the relationship between piano music and the queer body. Consequently, Chapter Two approaches a specific piano work: *De Profundis: For Speaking Pianist* (1992). Written by American composer Frederic Rzewski (b. 1938), *De Profundis* requires the pianist to recite selected passages from the letter written in prison by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas. Like many of Rzewski's other works, *De Profundis* privileges socio-political meanings. Although Wilde was incarcerated for "indecent behaviour with men," the passages which Rzewski selects from Wilde's letter reflect on the role and plight of the artist without directly referring to homosexuality. Yet, Rzewski's composition destabilizes the category of "concert pianist" and marks the pianist's body as a text of difference through acts of transgression: queer effects, Wilde behaviour.

E.M. Forster's inspiration for the writing of *Maurice* came through the *excess*, that is, the transgression, of a single touch to his backside, just above the buttocks. In Rzewski's *De Profundis*, the pianist experiences inspiration through touch, but it is a self-administered touch which is both erotic and punitive. Slapping parts of my body, including my backside, I create queer effects and Wilde behaviour to evoke the Wilde body and the attempts to punish and cure it of homosexuality. In composing a work for a speaking *and* spanking pianist, Rzewski transgresses musical norms, revealing the extent to which silences and regulations are imposed upon the pianist's body. That pianistic freedom is invoked in *De Profundis* through the portrayal of an imprisoned gay man is an act of excess or transgression; pianists are supposed to play "autonomous"

music--no words, no sex, no explicit language, no politics. The pianist's engagement in transgression parallels Wilde's view that "individualism" has less to do with essence than with transgressive desire and a transgressive aesthetic (Dollimore 629). If this paper seems unconventional in style, approach, and method, it may reflect my encounter with the transgressive aesthetics of Wilde and Rzewski in *De Profundis*: "The sensation was unusual and I still remember it, as I remember the position of a long vanished tooth" (217).

Note

1. For information regarding the Britten-Pears relationship, see Humphrey Carpenter's *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*. John Gill's *Queer Noises* refers to all three relationships (see 10-35).

Chapter One

Tracking the Queer

1. Super Heroes/Homo Eros

Matt: You want another beer buddy?

Caption: Buddy

David: Buddy?

Violet: What?

David: Your husband just called me buddy.

Violet: So?

David: You guys know I'm gay . . . right?

Caption: Gay

Matt: Oh.

Violet: Gay.

David: It's not a big deal or anything . . . is it?

Matt: No. [maybe]

Violet: No. [yes]

Caption: Queer

Violet: You're a homosexual.

David: Yeah.

Violet: Wow.

David: I didn't mean for it to be a big thing. I assumed you knew. I mean I *am* a waiter. (Fraser 51-52)

A gay waiter named David "comes out" to his bosses, Violet and Matt, a married straight couple . . . or does he? Found within Canadian playwright Brad Fraser's *Poor Super Man*, the scene betrays the revelation of identity as a process fraught with tension, contradiction, and contingency. David may be a *gay* waiter to Violet and Matt, but to the theatre audience, he is a well-off, controversial gay *painter* who has assumed di guise in his efforts to become "inspired" once more to paint:

David: I did my best painting when I was a waiter.

Kryla: I did my best writing when I was a virgin. Life's a barter system" (20).

Revisiting the role of waiter, the waiter/artist finds "inspiration" when he experiences attraction to Matt, his "boss" and soon-to-be lover. In a gesture reminiscent of Basil Hallward's in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, David paints the object of his desire. However, unlike Basil Hallward who refuses to exhibit his (single) painting because it divulges "the secret of [his] own soul" (Wilde 20), David mounts a show of (several) paintings which privilege the artist's homoerotic gaze in what Matt's wife couldn't help but recognize as The Pictures of Matt Nude. Through a painter's disguise, Matt has been dis-guised, has been revealed to be not only the object of same-sex desire, but also, a willing practitioner of its erotics. Matt is, according to his wife Violet, "a fucking fag" (161).

Who, if anyone, is to be pitied in this play of multiple and overlapping "coming outs," of blurred identities partly induced by comic book captions which intentionally create, in the words of the playwright, "a theatrical equivalent of the information we are inundated with in every day life" (10)? Poor Matt? Poor Violet? No, it's . . . poor Superman! How did the Man of Steel get his name attached to a play which, because of the theatrical presentation of gay sex and explicit language, premiered in 1994 only after the board of the Ensemble Theater of Cincinnati reconsidered their intention to cancel the show under threat of legal action and the possibility of public embarrassment? In a play which deals with the contradictions and illogic implicit in identity formation, including how sexual identity represents a complex manifestation and intersection of a series of "closets," Superman's life history is exemplary of a divided identity which is queer in its construction. Since his creation in 1938, Superman has been portrayed as an interplanetary all-American hero, championing the oppressed and helping those in need through incredible physical power. Yet, Superman is Clark Kent, a reporter at the *Daily Planet* in Gotham City--an alter ego which facilitates "belonging to a family, of not being alone in the world, [getting] to have family and friends" (Curtin 40). When Superman proposes to do away with his Clark Kent persona to assist in protecting his friends and family from harm, Lois Lane angrily reminds Superman that it is Clark Kent that she relates to, not Superman; to be Superman *without* Clark Kent is to choose not to belong, but rather, to disassociate and be queer. To put it another way, any man who dons revealing tights and a dramatic, *fire*-red cape to go out for coffee might deserve to be called a *flaming* queer[1].

A series of binarisms become evident which, while denoting difference in their constitutive parts, also inextricably link each binary half to the other: Clark Kent/Superman, relational/asocial, straight/queer, and moral/immoral. When anti-comics sentiments arose in the late 1940's because of violence depicted in crime comics, a moral tone was invoked in conveying disapproval that was to become even more pronounced in Senate Subcommittee hearings in the United States during McCarthyism in the 1950's. Specifically, comics were viewed as being "loaded with Communist teachings, sex, and racial discrimination" (Christensen 94). Fredric Wertham, an academic from this time given considerable hearing in the Senate proceedings, was to implicate poor Batman and Robin in promoting that grievously immoral and anti-American behaviour, homosexuality:

> Just as ordinary crime comic books contribute to the fixation of violent and hostile patterns by suggesting definite forms for their expression, so the Batman type of story helps to fixate homoerotic tendencies by suggesting the form of an adolescent-with-adult or Ganymede-Zeus type of love-relationship. (Wertham 190-91)

In this way, initial concerns about crime and gore comics eventually manifested themselves in the questioning of Batman and Robin's relationship and in the equating of these and other comic book heroes such as Superman with homosexuality.[2] To assuage Cold War moral panic, voluntary content regulations were instituted by American comic book companies. Such self-censoring activities help to divulge superheroes - Superman, Batman, Robin *et al* - as cultural symbols whose meanings are historically located, as

sites of ongoing contestation where identities may be simultaneously revealing ("coming out") and concealing ("stepping into").

The "closets" which Superman steps "out of" and "back into," noted by his frequent dramatic costume changes, serve to reflect the multiple positions individual subjectivities may necessarily inhabit and negotiate. Is it as outrageous as it first might appear to suggest that something about Superman is queer? My interest and analytical protocols proceed from my research on other super heroes, those known as "the great composers" and "great performers." Specifically, the censoring of queer activities and the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality in so-called historical accounts have produced, on the whole, a curiously dull approach to the lives of women and men. As Eve Sedgwick has outlined in *Epistemology of the Closet*, the binarisms implicit in postmodern society reflect an entanglement with the nineteenth-century binarism of heterosexual/homosexual (Sedgwick 92). To encounter the modern Superman within comic books, therefore, is to come in contact with a hypermasculinity (i.e., Man of Muscles) which betrays an anxiousness about *femininity* through its need to inscribe upon the male body marks which discursively delineate it as heterosexual, as *different* from the gay body. With an artistic pencil serving as the comic-book equivalent of a hypodermic needle filled with muscle-enhancing steroids, the cartoonist "bulks-up" Superman. But, because muscle culture is so closely associated with gay men and the gyms they may frequent, the definition provided by such hypermasculinity might extend only as far as the pectorals; a slippage between socially-constructed masculine and feminine identities occurs, creating a fissure in stereotypical gender characteristics. This

fissure creates a definitional incoherence in the masculine/feminine binarism, allowing for subjectivities relegated to "the feminine"--women and subaltern sexual identities included--a degree of representation within (masculine) discourse. Consequently, in terms of deconstructive analysis, muscles may not necessarily mean heterosexual and, as discovered from the lives of male composers and performers, wives and children may not preclude homosexual activity.

2. Are All Musicians 'Musical'?[3]

Violet: You saying all waiters are fags?

David: No. Just lots of them.

Matt: Why's that?

David: I dunno. The crazy hours aren't a problem when you don't have a family we enjoy working with the public we do well in subservient positions. I dunno.

Matt: Lotsa fags are hairdressers too.

Violet: And guys who arrange flowers.

David: And guys who design dresses and people who make furniture and painters and writers and composers and--well--anything in the world that's pretty--we made it.

Violet: Like mauve kale.

David: We didn't make mauve kale--we just accessorized it. (Fraser 52)

To address issues of sexual identity within music leaves one open to charges by musicologists of public mischief, of indulging in innuendo, of being a gossip queen. But, as Philip Brett suggests, isn't the word "musicology" a disguise of sorts, an attempt to lend "a sort of academic legitimacy to an activity which goes on in most cultures - thinking, talking, and gossiping about music and judging it" ("Are You Musical" 370)? That music and sexuality might be linked is problematic to dominant strands of musicology which, in positivistic fashion, construct music as transcending the constraints of sexuality, gender, class, and race. Until recently, musicologists have tended to avoid critical strategies which implicate music in larger social trends and forces. As the literary and social critic Edward Said states:

> . . . I am struck by how much does not receive [musicologists'] critical attention, and by how little is actually done by fine scholars, who, for example, in studying a composer's notebooks or the structure of classical form, fail to connect those things to ideology, or social space, or power, or to the formation of an individual (and by no means sovereign) ego. (xviii)

From a performer's perspective, the denial of music's involvement in social processes seems rather contradictory given the series of economic relations which govern and shape the staging of recitals. Further, the insistence on a musical work's autonomy

conveniently brushes aside long-held perceptions of music as a dangerous "feminine" art form; Plato, Aristotle, and St. Augustine, traditionally considered among the founders of Western intellectual thought, viewed music as morally suspicious (Brett, "Musicality" 11). As William Weber contends in discussing eighteenth-century musical taste, the ubiquitous presence of music in social gatherings, including those with sexual overtones, did little to improve the low intellectual position (gossip, anyone?) conferred upon music as "the *most* vulgar of the arts" (my italics; 190).

The status of music was to change dramatically in the nineteenth century. As John D'Emilio points out, the notion of "individual" identity which developed in the nineteenth century was fostered in part by the movement from interdependent familial units to individual wage labourers (470). The advent of copyright laws within industrial societies reflected such change, situating the composer/performer as an independent entity whose work resulted in "complete and discrete, original and fixed, personally owned units" (Goehr 206). Further, philosophical theories of transcendence colluded with the legalities of individual ownership to produce meaning as immanent within a musical work and as attributable to the *genius* of the composer (see 222). Consequently, lists of "great composers" and "great works" developed, facilitating music's rise in the intellectual estimation of the academy. In terms of sexuality, the identity of the composer/performer was shaped by discursive networks which were concurrently constructing the identity of the ideal man in the interests of newly-formed nation states;[4] as Michel Foucault reports, the proliferation of writings about sexuality served to regulate individual identities (Foucault, "From *History of Sexuality*" 93). In all, music as sensual seductress

was displaced in the nineteenth century by a neo-Platonic version of beauty, creating the context for the composer and performer as conveyers of transcendent truth and as models of respectability.

But can music be anything but queer? Brett insists that musicians have paid a high price for admission into the academy. Constructing themselves and music in ways to counter the "open secret" of queerness, constrained by both external and internal forms of homophobia, musicians enter into an agreement whereby the expression of emotions and desires are permitted as long as they are not named as "queer"[5]:

> All musicians, we must remember, are faggots in the parlance of the male locker room. Hence the immense investment by musical scholarship and by certain types of composition in competitiveness, rigor, masterfulness, and those qualities that reveal the castration anxiety that is so strong in our deviant profession. (Brett, "Musicality" 18)

The linkage between musical and sexual passions is tolerated as long as the subordinate status of the musician as a feminized Other is preserved. That musicians, including composers and performers, consent to their subordination is revealed by the vehement defense of artistic *autonomy* which they engage in. Sheltering themselves under the wings of those discursive powers which seek to regulate the dangerous, the sensual and the embodied, musicians negotiate their subordination and surrender. However, as Rose Subotnik summarizes with regard to Theodor Adorno's perspectives, the more "autonomous" a work of art is constructed to be, the more it "embodies the most profound social tendencies of its time" (15). The louder the insistence on artistic

autonomy, the greater the betrayal that this so-called autonomy is anything but autonomy; it is an *illusion* which is in constant need of negotiation, construction, and assertion. Just as nineteenth-century discursive networks created a deluge of information on sexuality in order to eradicate the "abnormal," so similar networks beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing in the twentieth century have cultivated through musicology an oversaturation of positivistic editions and analyses to eradicate the queer composer. Ironically, musicology--the queerest of the late arrivals to the modern academy--leaves no visible trace of the queer composer; in the parlance of the locker room, the faggots are killing the faggots.

Chronological tables of works, biographical dates, and lists of items such as composers' expenses are still on occasion cited as important in themselves, as safe depositories of meaning where music may be viewed in its best Victorian (dis)guise--masculine, sober, rational, and moral. Similarly, analyses which consist of formal and notational descriptions without interrogating the "natural" assumptions and premises behind such descriptive procedures are offered. To dis-guise music is to decenter naturalizations which effectively trivialize the significance of music as a social text and which serve to regulate and limit its meaning. Plato, in *The Republic*, contends that music is a potent force within society, able to arouse and embody desire;[6] he also views music and its sensual qualities as dangerous, as being in need of constant regulation. Constructed as, at best, a seductress and, at worst, a slut that provides pleasure *and* an STD, music is rescued from such philosophical musings by (is it a bird? is it a plane?) Supermusicology which, in wanting to legitimate himself and music, circulates

nineteenth-century notions of genius, greatworks, and, like Superman, hypermasculinity. But hypermasculinity facilitates the dis-guising of music in the reading of such masculinity as overstated, if not defensive, in its performativity of male gender. Anxious to be seen as "belonging" to the modern academy, musicology constructs itself and music as so exaggeratedly masculine (read: heterosexual) that, in its efforts to challenge gossip about its queer activities, it induces a painful priapism in itself. Poor musicology. To discuss music from the perspectives of queer theory (gay and lesbian studies) and critical theory must seem to "serious" musicology as giddy gossip and speculations about music and (its) sexuality. But then, as Brett remarks, "anything quite so serious as musicology is already self-defined as heterosexual beyond all hope of recall" ("Are You Musical?" 373). To conclude: is music queer? Does the Pope wear a dress?[7]

3. Doin' It with Style

Matt: Straight people make some nice stuff too.

David: Like what?

Caption: Television

Violet: Well . . .

Caption: Shopping Malls

Violet: Like . . . uh . . .

Caption: The Atom Bomb

Matt: Cowboy hats. Straight people made cowboy hats.

Violet: And Kentucky Fried Chicken.

David: Nope.

Violet: Colonel Sanders was a fag?

David: That's what I heard.

Matt: Get out!

David: I'm joking. Relax. (Fraser 52-53)

Wit, humour, irony: these have been used by queers and other minorities as means of survival in the midst of systemic oppression.[8] The above vignette from Fraser's *Poor Super Man* is the final portion of the scene in which David "comes out" to his bosses, Violet and Matt. Throughout the entire scene, the playwright uses humour to displace the dominant heterosexual subject. In this portion, Matt asserts that straight people have contributed to producing "nice stuff too." But a disruption occurs within the script as Violet and Matt struggle to name what these contributions are. Yes, say the captions as Matt and Violet are forced to *think* heterosexuality, straight "stuff" is significant - that is, if you consider television, malls, and bombs as works of art. Matt and Violet's momentary silence and consequent struggle for words may be seen to reflect the naturalness constructed around heterosexuality. In some respects, heterosexuality is *unthinkable;* what kind of circumstances would prompt heterosexuals to *think through* their sexuality? Self-identified as queer, societally constructed as *different*, an individual may come to such *thinking through* because of *not belonging*; by way of example, a queer person may be fired a from job because of her/his

orientation or assaulted for engaging in public expressions of intimacy which heterosexuals take for granted (hugging, kissing, etc.)

It is the trope of *thinking through* which I wish to turn to in the remaining sections of this chapter. Such a trope may be helpful in suggesting ways of mapping the relationships which exist between piano music, sexuality and gender, but I want to suggest that it is in the trope's potential to de-scribe the queer body where its greatest assistance lies. As a pianist, my body has been the focus of many years of study and practice. Through drill and repetition, I endeavour to produce the *effects* of "naturalness" and "spontaneity" and, in turn, to disguise the many hours of practicing necessary to produce such effects. A similar naturalizing effect is present in the production of musical style. The repetition of certain compositional techniques by a composer or series of composers may eventually facilitate the naming of a certain style (e.g., classical, minimalist), but these repetitions serve to create the illusion of a style's "essence," of characteristics which seemingly remain static and unchanged. That the assertion of identity in musical performance and style remains inextricably connected to the selection of certain repeated elements serves to relate questions regarding "naturalness," "spontaneity" and "essence" in music with those in gender and sexuality. If repetition can invoke style and identity, is gender a *performance*? Is the queer body merely a theatrical production? If so, who are its producers?

A possible approach to these questions is through the production of gender in musical performance where one discovers that male musicians, like Popes, do wear dresses on occasion. Commonly known as "drag," the phenomenon of "men imitating

women" exists within the performing arts, extending back to drama in ancient Greece and in the classical theatres of Japan and China. As Roger Baker outlines, the phenomenon of drag is encountered in choirboys within the developing theatre of England. These choristers participated not only within church worship, but also in mystery plays, forms of liturgical drama that moved beyond the sanctuary and into the streets:

> Women played no active part in the services and offices of the church, so the original acting was done exclusively by men, choirboys assisting the clerks and playing women's roles when required. When the plays were divorced from the church, their religious content plus the influence of the church on the life of the people ensured that the all-male rules applied. (Baker 26)

Through the presence of *castrati* or *evirati* ("emasculated men"), Italian sacred music during the Middle Ages was to reflect St. Paul's injunction for women to remain silent in church. Likewise, opera during the seventeenth century continued to reflect this prohibition with *castrati* assuming both female and male roles and achieving a celebrated status which was to continue through much of the seventeenth century[9]. Baker asserts that, even after the *castrati's* demise, their presence was evoked through the inclusion of male characters written for female voice, such as Cherubino in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (see 118). The historic role of the *castrati* in imitating women illustrates how female gender may originate from *male* sources. But given the patriarchal roots of Western society, can there be *any* originating female sources? Furthermore, because social roles have historically placed women in subordinate positions to men, is female

gender an inferior imitation of *male* gender?[10] Feminist critics, noting gender categories as constructed by (male) power structures and in the interests of those structures, situate traditional definitions of female identity as hostile to the feminist subject and, for writers such as Judith Butler, as sites of "necessary trouble" ("Imitation" 308).

Butler herself proposes a theory of gender which focuses on its *performativity*, a term adapted from speech act theory to indicate how gender is constituted through gestures rather than through essence or inner depth. Accordingly, Butler focuses on *how* anatomical features are used to create gendered identities, viewing penile-vaginal differentiation as an arbitrary indicator of difference no more and no less important than other differences:

> Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (*Gender Trouble* 33)

If, as Butler suggests, gender is a matter of style, of the repetition of stylized mannerisms, then the drag queens of classical music--*castrati* included--engage themselves in *imitating an imitation* for which neither an *original* nor *authentic* exists. Further, with gender norms seen as operating within a decidedly heterosexual matrix, Butler's theory of performativity finds the depth ascribed to heterosexuality as chimerical, as a creation of myth. In a practical application of her theory, Butler suggests that the imitation of heterosexual gestures and relationships by gays and lesbians

to deny, rather than to affirm, the *naturalness* of heterosexuality; in her own words, "gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy" (31). In this respect, gender and sexuality, like musical practices, become matters of style and repetition rather than essence and originality.

As Butler has noted, certain writers have interpreted her relegation of gender to style as an endorsement of subjective agency which is able to stand outside norms and ideological structures.[11] Such (mis)interpretations tend to highlight the debates held between culturalist and structuralist traditions with regard to individual agency. Butler insists that the feminist or queer subject is an agent within, not outside of, the normative power relations which structure the performative constitutions of gender and sexuality:

> [Performativity] is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged. ("Critically Queer" 22)

Such a caveat is important within queer criticism in music, as it provides the dialectical tension necessary to acknowledge the subject (composer, performer, listener) as both constrained by ideology and capable of resistance to it. Thus, music functions as a social text, reflecting societal forces as well as the socially-mediated inner life.[12] While music may be able to encode resistance to social norms, any resistance or subversion engaged in by subjectivities transpires by thinking *through*, rather than *outside*, the processes by which power is asserted. As Susan McClary has indicated in her analyses of music by

Beethoven and Schubert, the study of both normative narrative practices (e.g., sonata-allegro form) and counternarratives in the context of social processes reveals music to be engaged in "shaping notions of gender, desire, pleasure, and power in nineteenth-century culture" (McClary, "Constructions" 228; see also *Feminine Endings* 129).

4. Oppositional Reading: De-scribing the Queer Body

Caption: Superman

Kryla: The last surviving member of his race. A small deco rocket ship hurtling away from the exploding planet of Krypton. His tearful parents watching the rocket disappear into the sky as their world crumbles around them. Cities shatter. Continents crack and heave. Oceans boil. An entire planet--an entire culture--an entire people wiped out by some unforeseen, capricious trick of nature--except for this infant boy streaking toward Earth. Alone. Unprotected. His only chance of something resembling a normal life depends on his ability to integrate with us patently inferior Earthlings. *What a very male story*. (my italics; Fraser 101)

I have responded to questions regarding the constitution of gender and the queer body by placing subjectivity within the confines of discourse, where essence is not pre-existent but is given the appearance as such through forms of performativity. Specifically, in responding to the question of who produces the queer body, I have attempted to display a network of producers unable to remain isolated from the influence of dominant heterosexual discourse. Serving as a metaphor for both (super)musicology and music, Superman may be seen to performatively constitute (hyper)masculinity which, in its excess, projects societal anxiety over male identity as a site of sexualit*ies*. But if this is the case, what is the effect of my use of the terms such as "queer" and "gay?" Am I not merely reproducing dominant discourse in its need to create "the homosexual," an identity category created by pathological medicine to aid in the prosecution of homosexuals in the nineteenth century? Given the regulatory intent of the term "homosexual," what is the effect of other terms such as "queer," "lesbian," "gay," "dyke," and so on? What are the nuances, multiplicity of meanings, contradictions, and regulatory effects of these terms when used by individuals who identify themselves by these terms?

My approach to music as a "queer" text is intended to underscore, rather than downplay, the contestation and negotiation which occur over these terms, including between so-called "queer" subjectivities. To this end, my thinking throughout this paper has been informed by Lee Edelmann's suggested use of the term "queer" not to endorse gay identity, but rather to signify "a resistance to the logic of regulatory identity" (13). In his attempt to de-scribe the queer body, Edelmann proposes *homographesis*, a two-part

analytical framework.[13] The first step of such an approach is to observe how the queer body has had differences attributed to it, forcing it to be "read" as a text and marked as such within discourse. The need to create differences within male identity marks the male subject as a site of contingency and, consequently, as a site of anxiety. In its second part, *homographesis* seizes on this anxiety which serves as an acknowledgement of definitional crisis and instability and insists on "multiplying the differences that desire can apprehend in ways that menace the internal coherence of the sexed identities that the order of heterosexuality demands" (14). Thus, *homographesis* is able to offer that which traditional discourse has precluded for "homosexuals": multiple subject-positions. The insistence on multiple subject-positions allows for the tracking of political effects produced by queer desire. In his analysis of AIDS, Edelmann regards the stance of some queer activists as aping homophobic discourse in the vilification of "passive," seemingly "unmanly" positions. While an advocate of political activism, Edelmann notes that queer rhetoric often castigates those who refuse to become involved in assertive (read: insertive) roles, thus providing a link to discursive formations which construct anal intercourse as passive and disempowering ("taking it as a woman"). In an ironic gesture, Edelmann argues for a "passive agency" which allows the seemingly apolitical to produce political effects. Subversive desire itself can be constituted as so offensive to the heterosexual imperative that, even when an apolitical stance is taken, such desire is perceived as a political act for social change.

The importance of desire within the political realm is echoed by Ross Chambers who insists, in the context of reading, that desire is able to produce "not fantasy, but

reality itself" (xii). Reflecting Michel de Certeau's notion of individuals as consumers or renters "who know how to insinuate their differences into the dominant text (de Certeau xxii), Chambers points to the seemingly apolitical act of reading as able to provide degrees of resistance to individuals through the potential for irony or (mis)reading:

> [Irony is] the production of a meaning that is not said, a (mis)reading that thereby appropriates the discourse of power--working the irony of that (mis)appropriation --and makes it available to mediate "other" effects than those of power. . . . (Chambers xvi)

Queer readings of musical works foreground how desire in music may be read in a subversive fashion. To consider the slow movement ("Adagio cantabile") from Beethoven's *'Pathetique' Sonata, Opus 13*, as representative of queer desire represents a (mis)appropriation of a work (and composer) which society claims as heterosexual. Yet, the compact disc *Sensual Classics, Too* features this work and others by canonic composers as articulations of queer desire; the queer reading of these canonic works is flagged by the disc cover which features the erotic embrace of two men. Indeed, this cover may be seen to mediate the listening experience, thus revealing musical listening to be influenced by factors other than sound itself. The appropriation of musical works by queers serves to disrupt momentarily normative meanings and power relationships. In this sense, listening to music is able to create *shifts* or changes in queer desire by serving as the means whereby political leverage and opportunities for non-violent disruption are gained. As Chambers notes, these shifts may not eliminate oppressive

social structures, but they are able to modify them (xv). As a pianist interested in non-violent social change, I am intrigued by the notion that desire expressed in music contains the potential to be (mis)read, to double-back and destabilize the heterosexual imperatives that music is often used to reinscribe. That irony is a politically potent tactic in the oppositional reading of music is underscored by hostile reactions to questions about Schubert's sexuality. That irony is an analytical tool often missing from positivistic musicology is exemplified in Rita Steblin's supposed "proof" of Schubert's *heterosexuality* through, of all things, a sketch which shows him making music with women at the piano (Steblin 13).[14]

Music's ironic capabilities, including those with queering potential, may be discerned through the analysis of music listeners and practitioners. In discussing the reception history of Oscar Wilde's works, Kevin Kopelson outlines how considerations of meaning must invoke a series of readership coordinates which highlight the historical specificities of the author and readers (39). Specifically, Kopelson argues that literary works by Wilde are not equally subversive, thereby addressing what Kopelson sees as a tendency in criticism to assume that the works of gay and lesbian can easily be subsumed within a Foucauldian "reverse discourse" scenario. This tendency fails to allow for differing authorial strategies as well as the differences in reception that a single work may incur:

> . . . any analysis of the subversiveness of Wilde's strategies, any analysis of the nature of his intertextual interventions, any analysis, that is, of a single "type" of reverse discourse, must proceed tentatively. It must

> discriminate among the various contexts in which the intervention (the reverse discourse) appears, and it must always ask itself: "Subversive for what readership(s)?" (39)

By way of example, the application of such analytical concerns to music allows for the queer purchasers and listeners of the compact disc *Sensual Classics, Too* to differ in their reactions, perceptions, and contexts or subject-positions. In summary, my premise is that if an analytical approach allows for multiple subject-positions, readings, and receptions, then the relationships between performers, works, composers, and listeners contain the potential to de-scribe the queer body and to represent varying degrees of oppositionality.

5. Coda: Picturing Desire, Queering the Pianist

Shannon: David, you're overdue for another show.

David: No, Shan - I'm overdue for another life.

Shannon: What's that mean?

David: I don't know. I just . . . wish I was someone else. Not someone else. Me. But more me. Different me. Whatever. It's the painting that counts. Not the showings. He makes me want to paint him--capture him. Understand him.

Shannon: Be him?

Caption: Normal

David: Sometimes. (Fraser 111-112)

On the wall against which my parents' upright piano stands, a picture hangs of a woman playing the piano. A Safeway reproduction of one of the "great masterpiece" paintings, the picture was purchased during my early years of piano lessons and has remained hanging in its prominent position despite my music certificates, trophies, and recital photographs which have threatened to overwhelm it at times. Because the piano in the picture resembles my parents' piano and because of the picture's proximity to what has become known by my siblings as the *Shrine to Milton*, I jokingly entitle the painting "Me Before The Operation." When I was growing up, this picture seemingly summed up everything that I was (fortunately) not; after all, it was of a woman in floor length dress, hair up, looking somewhat abstracted. I, on the other hand, was a boy: trousered, brush-cut, serious in my musical pursuits, and being repeatedly reminded by my (female) piano teacher that men, *not* women, succeed as pianists. I desired to succeed, to be better than "woman." Yet, the desire which was to captivate me in listening to music and in its performance was more than a little queer; I wanted to be, *like this woman*, an object of male desire.

This picture serves to encapsulate tensions running through gay male identity at the piano. To the extent that piano playing has generally been constructed as a womanly pursuit, I am part of a "feminine" profession. Moreover, I am part of a "feminized" construction which desires men and wants to be desired by men. The intersection of these fissures in male identity provides for specific opportunities to explore the utterly

constructed statuses of male gender and heterosexuality as *originals*. As a gay male pianist, I performatively constitute gender and sexuality in an ironic fashion; music and physical gestures which listeners may describe as "masculine" (read: heterosexual) are called into question by their very production by a queer body. Indeed, I may be seen to de-scribe the queer body, to reveal it as a production of hypermasculine anxiety, through my ability--indeed, need--to instantaneously produce emotions and states of being which have been societally-constructed as "masculine" *and* "feminine." Does this make me a cross-dresser or professional female impersonator? What about straight male pianists? Such questions may come as no surprise to choirboys and fans of Superman who know gender and sexuality to be matters of style, good fashion sense, and the queer desire to perform.

Notes

1. The scenario of Superman proposing to do away with his Clark Kent persona occurs in the July 1995 issue (*The Adventures* 10-11). While some may argue that it is Clark Kent who is the more "feminine" compared to the hypermasculine Superman and his phallic rising/flying gestures, my reading is predicated on the notion that homosexuality is used to connote difference within hegemonic constructions of sexuality. For Lois Lane, it is Superman who connotes difference while Clark Kent, bumbling as he may seem, places Superman within the human family where he lives "happily ever after:"

> The fact is, people will always treat Superman differently. You *need* a secret identity. It's what *protects* you from people . . . and it's what you to people. Under that costume you're *Clark Kent* - - you'll *always* be Clark Kent. *You* can't live without him . . . and neither can *I!* (19)

Notably, the scenario of "going for coffee" is played out in the comic issue in question. Indeed, it is the seminal activity which prompts Superman not to eliminate his alter ego Clark Kent; Superman's social awkwardness and the awkwardness of being Superman in social situations are revealed (see 16-18).

2. The projection of concerns around Batman and Robin onto other comic book characters is made explicit by Wertham. He states that "male and female homoerotic overtones are present also in some science-fiction, jungle and other comic books" (190). Further, Wertham sites a young man whose sexual desires included being loved by someone like Batman or Superman (192).

3. The term "musical" has been used as a code word by gay men for "gay" (see Brett, "Musicality" 11). Hence, the question "are all musicians 'musical'?" is used here as an euphemism for "are all musicians 'gay' or 'queer'?"

4. See George Mosse's *Nationalism and Sexuality* for a detailed discussion of the shaping of sexuality in the nineteenth century.

5. This reflects, in summary fashion, major points established by Philip Brett in his article "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet" (17-18).

6. I am referring to the discussion in Book III of *The Republic* concerning the use of modes. The Greeks had very specific opinions on the use and power of music, including the association of the Dorian mode with manliness (see *The Republic* 196, note 3).

7. This rhetorical answer is attributable to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who, in the context of attempting to demonstrate how the "keepers of a dead canon" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 51) deliberately refuse to acknowledge that central canonic figures were engaged in same-sex activity, poses the following:

> Has there ever been a gay Socrates?

> Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?
> Has there ever been a gay Proust?
>
> Does the Pope wear a dress? A short answer . . . might be that not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare, Proust . . . . (52)

8. For a detailed discussion of how "ordinary" features such as these are able to provide forms of resistance within society, see Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

9. An important exception to the popularity of the *castrati* occurs within London. Baker partly attributes this to a "lurking sense of sexual unease" (113) within the London public which differentiated it from most of Italian society.

10. Traditional Christian theology has situated woman (Eve) as from the rib of an originating male source (Adam) who, as the head of the woman, is an imitation of an originating male Yahweh. Greek and Roman societies were characterized by a decidedly male class structure.

11. Butler's response to (mis)interpretations of her performativity theory is found in her article "Critically Queer." Eve Sedgwick has also critiqued some of the applications of Butler's theory which fail to limit the amount of agency available to subjectivities in their production of gender (see Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity").

12. I am indebted to John Shepherd for his instruction and writings which have contributed much to my understanding of how music is able to signify both personal and socio-cultural meanings (see Shepherd 183-85).

13. The remainder of this paragraph serves to summarize Edelmann's analytic procedures involved in *homographesis* (see Edelmann 10-14).

14. In a fatal moment of homophobia, Steblin fails to differentiate between "making music" and "making love" (see Steblin 13). Like straight men, gay men are able to have close friendships with women without the relationships necessarily including "making love." The issue of *Nineteenth Century Music* in which Steblin's article appears contains other readings lacking irony. Together, the question Steblin and some others need to entertain is this: could Schubert and these women simply be gossiping about all the cute men at the market they'd love to get their (piano) fingers on?

Chapter Two

Queering the Pianist: Frederic Rzewski's *De Profundis*

1. The Wilde Piano Bench

> **Algernon:** Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?
>
> **Lane:** I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.
>
> **Algernon:** I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately--any one can play accurately--but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.[1] (Wilde, *The Importance* 357)

A shrewd observer of social behaviour, Oscar Wilde may be seen to outline in his writings the significance of the piano as a locus of feminine identity within nineteenth-century society.[2] While the cult of the (male) keyboard virtuoso declined in western Europe after the middle of the nineteenth century, the role of the (female) piano *amateur* continued to flourish within domestic circles (Plantinga 12-13). In the previous century, the playing of keyboard instruments was a sign of *gentility* in young women. In the nineteenth century, the playing of the piano was to continue this legacy; however, conscripted as an inculcator of Victorian sensibilities, the piano also became a sign of *respectability*. In service of such a moral imperative, the piano comes under scrutiny in

the writings of Wilde; irony, wit and mockery serve to situate the piano as an encoder of complex and contradictory social meanings. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde's depiction of Algernon idly playing the piano may be seen to indicate the ability of males to engage in such a "feminine" activity. Yet, Wilde ultimately confirms the piano as a *feminine* discursive construction; Algernon differentiates "sentiment" from "science," Fantasy from "Life," and, consequently, the feminine from the masculine. Further, the piano is revealed as a site where the erotic and exotic are conflated, proving themselves too beguiling for the likes of Lady Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

> I adore [music], but I am afraid of it. It makes me too romantic. I have simply worshipped pianists--two at a time, sometimes, Harry tells me. I don't know what it is about them. Perhaps it is that they are foreigners. They all are, ain't they? Even those that are born in England become foreigners after a time, don't they? It is so clever of them, and such a compliment to art. Makes it quite cosmopolitan, doesn't it? (46)

The dangerous, seductive qualities ascribed to the piano allow it to be read as a text on which exotic sexualities, including queer desire, are inscribed. In the lecture *The House Beautiful*, Wilde admonishes that "the revolving stool should be sent to the museum of horrors, and a seat large enough for two players be substituted" (921). For Wilde, the piano bench outlines music as a social activity between two people and, as such, the bench may be seen to contain the potential to be the *seat* of desire (pun intended). The linking of the Wilde piano bench with desire produces a queer irony; Wilde is noted by critics as the modern prototype of homosexual identity (Sedgwick,

Epistemology 132). Is the piano bench the modern prototype of homosexual activity, a recently-constructed seat on which queer desire may situate itself? Such a question in the context of literary criticism may not seem inappropriate; Wilde's sexuality was openly scrutinized in the latter years of his life. But within the context of the music academy, can the same question be asked? Given musicians' collusion in the phenomenon of the "open secret" which permits societal tolerance of homosexuality as long as relationships *appear* "professional", the piano bench as an embodiment of the Wildean "love that dare not speak its name" is enough to send most musicians scurrying back to retrieve the revolving stool from the museum of horrors.[3]

My consideration of the Wilde piano bench occurs during the centenary of Wilde's imprisonment in Reading Gaol for "indecent behaviour with men" (Ellmann xv) and after a series of performances I have given of a piano work based on his prison experience.[4] Specifically, American composer Frederic Rzewski's 1992 piano composition *De Profundis: For Speaking Pianist* focuses on Wilde's incarceration. Likened by the composer to an oratorio in which eight sections with text are each preceded by an instrumental prelude, *De Profundis* requires that the pianist speak selected passages from Oscar Wilde's letter from prison to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas. The use of text within a solo piano work challenges notions of classical music as "autonomous," as transcending the constraints of sexuality, gender, class, and race. In general, Rzewski's compositions contest this presumption, situating music as a socio-political text; Rzewski's social conscience interacts and combines with European compositional techniques, his interest in "popular" idioms, and his keyboard virtuosity

to create an eclectic style which pianist David Burge describes as "human realism" (228).[5] In Rzewski's acclaimed set of variations *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* (1976), a few-extra keyboard effects are employed in order to relate aspects of the Chilean resistance movement. In *De Profundis*, an even greater variety of such effects is employed to relate the thoughts of an imprisoned gay writer.

But can the word "gay" or another queer identifier be used in the context of Wilde? As Jonathan Dollimore notes, Wilde took exception to essentialist notions of identity, including sexuality (631). With Victorian society's clear demarcation of gender and sexuality along moral lines, Wilde's analyses of social conventions employ an *inversion of binary opposites* which attempts to thwart the imposition of identity categories, insisting identity to be of "surface" rather than "depth," of "style" rather than "essence" (633). Yet, Wayne Koestenbaum counters that while Wilde resisted essentialized notions of identity, he also constituted them on his own (subversive) terms (178). Koestenbaum asserts that Wilde could not have written *De Profundis* without knowing that such a love letter detailing the circumstances around his conviction and incarceration would necessarily find audience with a *gay* readership which longed for "textual gayness," a readership Wilde serves to create:

> [Wilde] invented a reader who finds palpable gayness by unearthing Wilde's spirit --his figure--from the text's letter. Though essentialist, this postulated "gay reader" never abandons historical knowledge, never forgets that an actual man, Oscar Wilde, did two years of hard labour in prison; this reader (whether holding a work of Wilde's or a later gay

> text) is always searching for "Oscar Wilde" as the origin of an imprisoned indecency that contemporary gay men must recognize as their own. (178)

As a performer of Rzewski's *De Profundis*, I have been intrigued by the "readerships" or listeners which have attended my performances and by the reactions of straight and gay listeners.[6] Although the word "gay" is not spoken and Lord Alfred Douglas' name is never said, it is a combined literary-musical work which cannot escape the question of *why* Wilde was incarcerated and, as such, has the potential to appeal to gay audiences and become a site of "palpable gayness." Because of the public hostility to queers in the province of Canada in which I reside and in which most of my performances have occurred to date, my *thinking through* Rzewski's *De Profundis* is framed by the cost of the political intervention which is made by being "a speaking pianist" on the topic of an imprisoned gay writer. In a sense, Rzewski's *De Profundis* conflates the piano bench and the prison bench, forcing the pianist to performatively constitute queer desire *and* represent the experience of state-sponsored violence designed to cure/punish the queer body.

In the next section of this chapter, I will describe the queer body in terms of characteristics which weave themselves through Rzewski's *De Profundis:* excess, sexual fantasy, madness, and sorrow. My analytical approach is intended neither to be exhaustive nor definitive, but rather, to attempt to integrate Lee Edelmann's *homographesis* in the discussion of this piano composition. Such an approach to analysis consists of a double operation which begins with the tracking of characteristics which identify the queer body as *different* (Edelmann 13-14). Given the history of the queer

body as a site of state-sponsored violence, my approach in *De Profundis* necessarily focuses on the specifics of the Wilde body and how the description of such a body necessarily invokes the terms and conditions of the penal institution. By marking the Wilde body as a production of penal discourse, the second operation of *homographesis* occurs; it seizes the inconsistencies and fissures which accumulate around male identity and allows for the queer body to be de-scribed. In other words, queer effects and Wilde behaviour will be seen to embody queer desire as well as the effects of incarceration, thus destabilizing heterosexual male identity through its potential to be read as queer. In the third section of this chapter, *homographesis* will be inflected by Kevin Kopelson's readership coordinates of 1890's/1990's and straight/queer (Kopelson 39) in an effort to provide a historical specificity to my arguments and to address issues concerning the work's reception and differing degrees of oppositionality which may occur. In summary, the contention from *my* seat of desire at the piano bench is that queer effects, combined with Wilde behaviour, are woven together with text and music in Rzewski's *De Profundis* *both* to describe and de-scribe the queer body.

2. Benching Queer Identity

Wilde's letter from prison is published and known by the title *De Profundis*; however, its original title *Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis* [*Letter: In Prison and In Chains*] reveals the specific conditions under which the letter was produced. Renowned for his epigrammatic brilliance and keen social insights, Wilde was at the height of his

career--the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* was enjoying tremendous success--when charges of sodomy were laid against him. That these charges were to be upheld by a court of law attests to the success of a historically-specific discursive network to regulate sexuality through an unprecedented detailing of the body and its materiality:

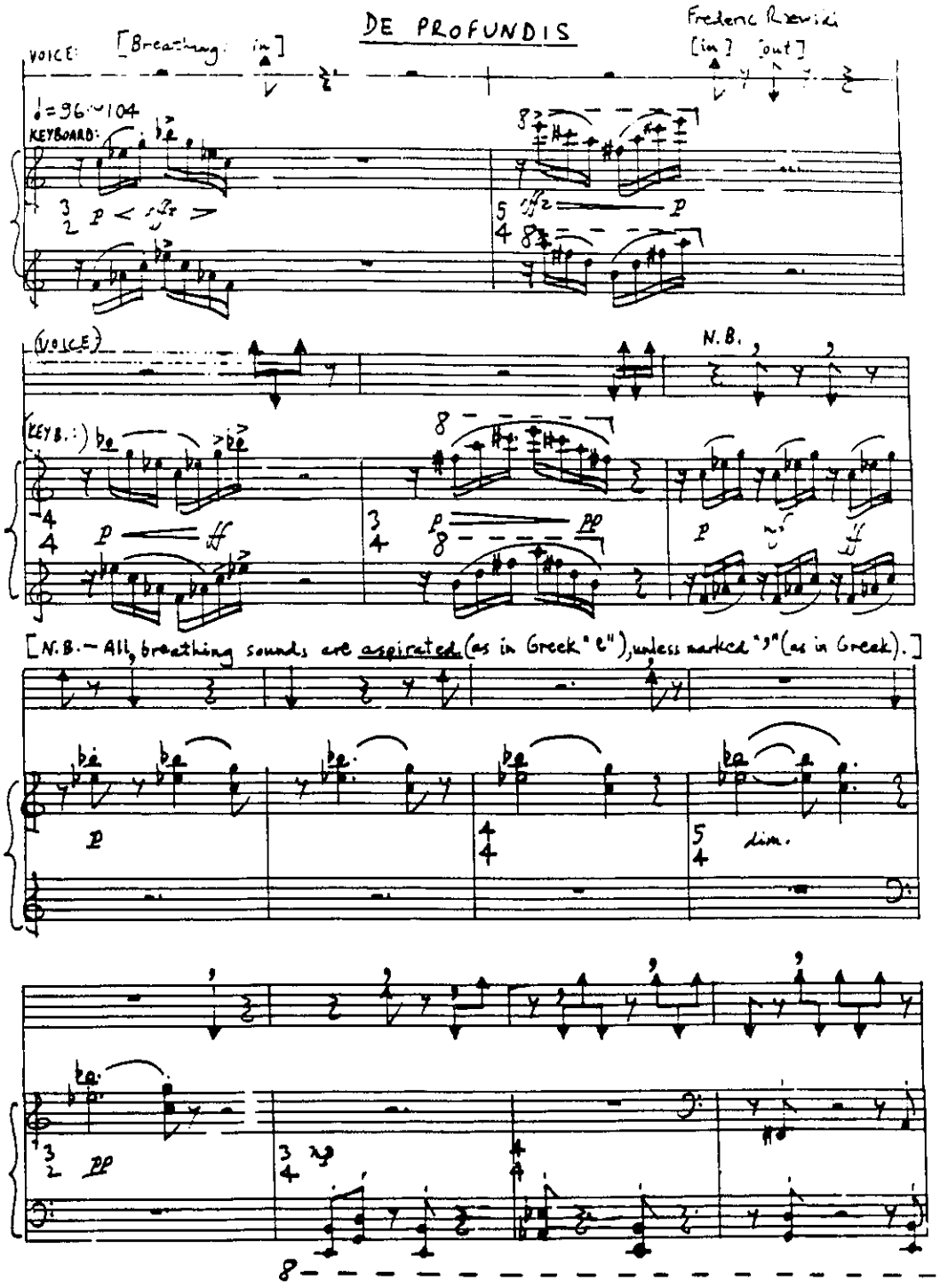
> . . . the Victorians managed to win for themselves the reputation of the most sexually, and indeed physically, repressive society in history by bringing the body ever more fully into discourse. (Gallagher viii)

Flamboyant, effeminate, aesthetic, prone to excess: these characteristics not only have been used to describe Wilde, but also the characteristics of the "homosexual" as established by nineteenth-century medical discourse. The marking of the queer body in these terms and others served to increase the chances of conviction and the lengths of sentencing penalties in late nineteenth-century England through the production of queer *visibility* (Mosse 28-29).

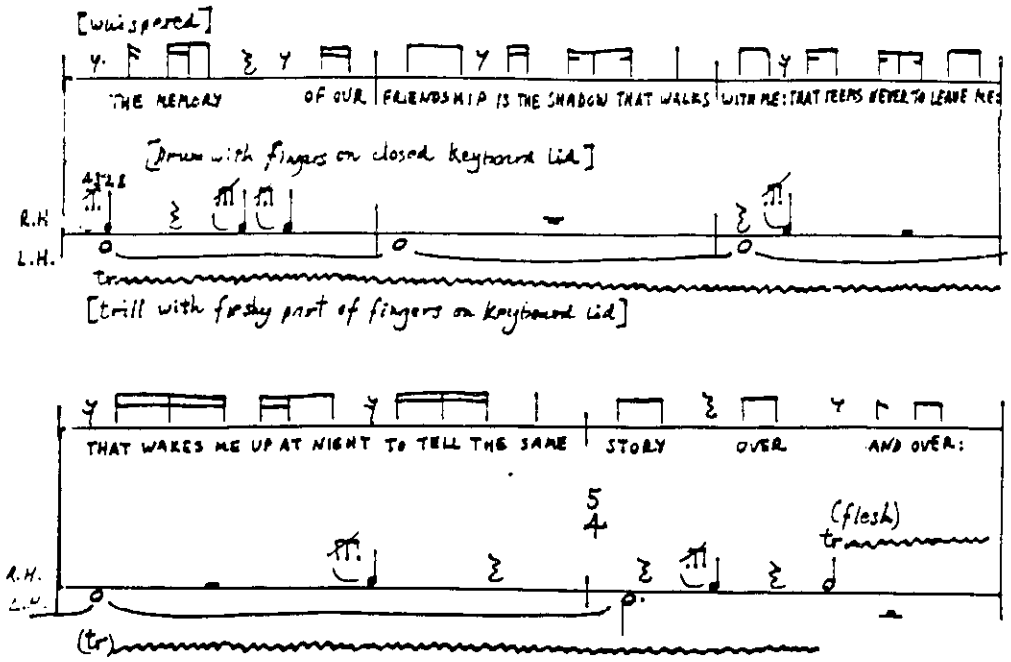
If the judicial system was unfavourably disposed to the likes of Wilde, the penal system was equally merciless and severe. Wilde's sentence to two years of hard labour was served under contemporary regulations of solitary confinement, meaning that Wilde's days unfolded with little variation: waking at 6 a.m., oakum picking or another repetitive labour until 5:30 p.m., lights out at 7 p.m.[7] The text which opens Rzewski's work is Wilde's statement "People point to Reading Gaol and say, 'That is where the artistic life leads a man.' Well it could lead to worse places" (see Appendix). Ironically, due to the silence of solitary confinement and the monotony of meaningless work, there were few worse places to be. Indeed, Regenia Gagnier summarizes the

mental effects of solitary confinement on prisoners of all sexual orientations over the past hundred years as the following: "disruptive outbursts against the system, sexual and other fantasies, rehearsing of dialogues from previous times, and the specific reconstruction of local life outside" (351). Gagnier points to the Wilde imagination as an antidote to insanity, serving as a means by which resistance to institutionalized control and regulation occurred. In the prelude which begins this work, the effects of breathing, grunting, and groaning disrupt the normative semiotic universe of so-called classical music (Example 1). But do they create an *excess*, a *flamboyance* suggestive of the queer body? The answer may be yes, but Gagnier's listing of disruptive outbursts as a mental effect of solitary confinement serves to de-scribe the queer body by potentializing the heterosexual body to disrupt and puncture the deafening silence of the prison cell as well.

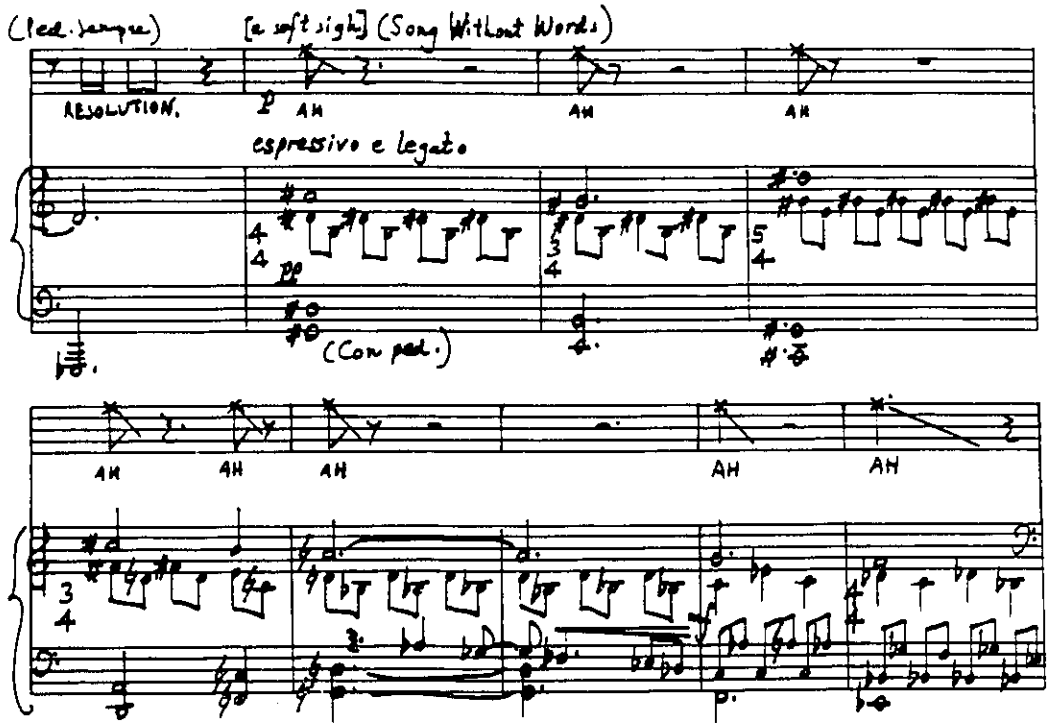
The extent to which the imagination is able to resist the effects of isolation is exemplified in the sixth section of Rzewski's work (Example 2). Whispering the text, the pianist drums first on the piano, then proceeds to strike various parts of the body to reflect Wilde's contention that "there is nothing that happened in those ill-starred years that I cannot recreate in the chamber of the brain which is set apart for grief or for despair" (see Appendix). The physicality of the effects used in this section - scratching, slapping, stroking - graphically orient the audience to the ability of the imagination to recreate and embody *queer* desire; after all, it is Lord Alfred Douglas he is remembering. Phantasmagorical in its recreation of detail and physical sensation, this section represents the imagination as that which provides agency to queer subjectivities overwhelmed by enforced monotony and extreme forms of isolation. Queer desire is



Example 1: opening prelude, *De Profundis*



Example 2: the beginning of section six



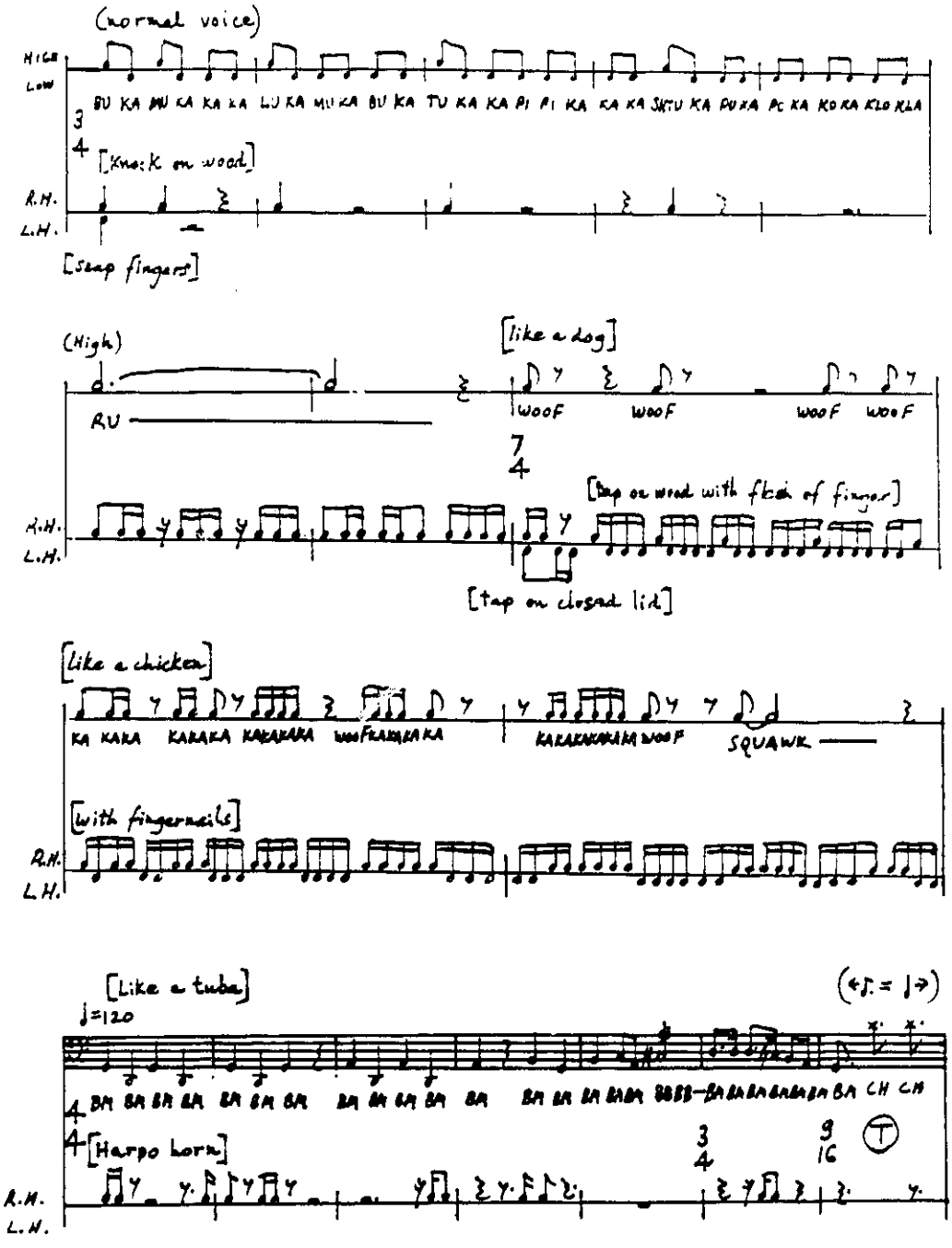
Example 3: the beginning of the prelude to section six

further described in the prelude to section six in which a gentle, undulating pattern is interposed with "soft sighs" (Example 3). These sighing figures, in accordance with the composer's written instructions, begin in the normal register and end in falsetto, a register usually associated with males imitating the stereotypical "female voice character" (Sundberg 50). Rzewski parenthetically entitles this section "Song Without Words," invoking the solo compositions of the same title written by Romantic composer Felix Mendelssohn. Marketed to middle-class women, Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words* were often assigned titles at publication which would be constructed as "feminine" (e.g., night, dreams, memory, regret, lost happiness). While Mendelssohn refused to outline specific meanings in these piano works, it was not because he viewed music as abstract or autonomous.[8] Rather, music was too definite, being both a cognitive and physical act; as Richard Leppert states, music for Mendelssohn was "sensual/emotion, embodied and physical. . . . Naming is redundant, for the subject is always already 'known'" (214). The "known" subject of the prelude to the sixth section, Wilde's transgressive desire, may be seen to be expressed in this, a *Song Without Words* which, in requiring the male voice register of falsetto, doubles as a drag queen's *Torch Song With Sighs*.[9]

To proceed to de-scribe the queer body in terms of *De Profundis'* sixth section may be viewed as an attempt to disassociate the queer body from queer desire. Isn't my goal to claim queer desire rather than demonstrate it to be the same as heterosexual desire? Isn't my intention to situate the queer subject as a *viable* subjectivity? The goals of an analytical approach using *homographesis* are, indeed, to claim queer desire as well as to provide viability to the queer subject. However, such goals are reached through

a process which acknowledges the queer subject's inability to step outside dominant discursive formations. Oppositionality is gained through doubling back on heterosexual definitions of queer desire. Thus, as Gagnier has pointed out, sexual fantasy is not exclusive to Wilde, but rather is endemic to all individuals kept in solitary confinement. It is important to privilege queer desire, but to do so in a way which sets it apart or as "different" from (heterosexual) male identity tends to replicate rather than resist dominant discursive strategies, strategies which seek to enforce *difference* in the interests of power structures. To describe the use of falsetto as representative of the Wilde body *may* be true, but to limit drag queens to queers fails to seize the delicious definitional incoherence which erupts around male identity and *difference* when those other "feminine" cross-dressers come out of the closet: heterosexual males.

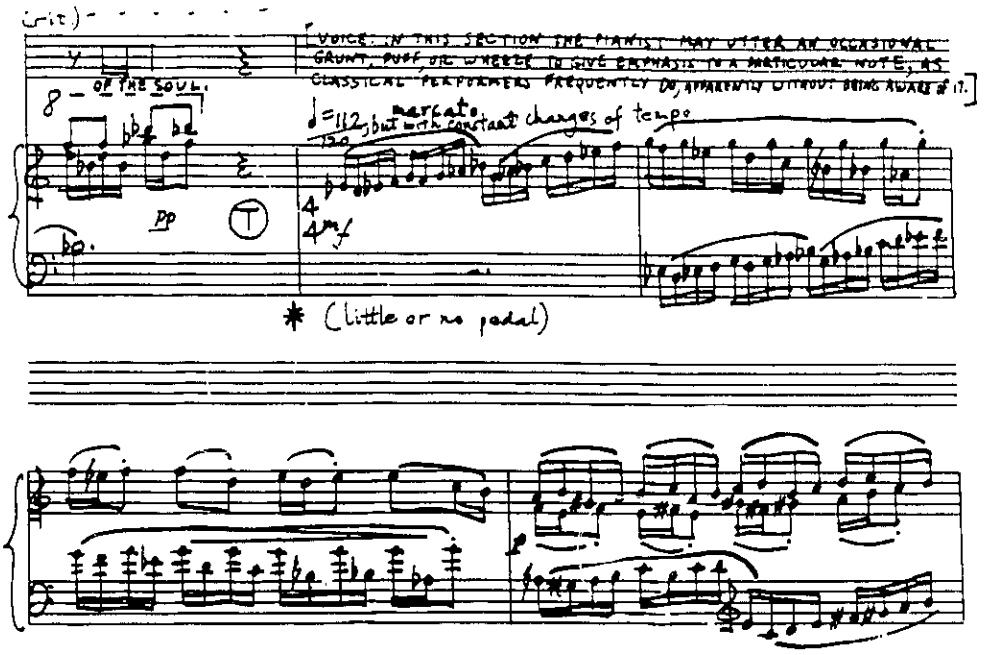
The so-called "feminine" within society--women and homosexuals included--were construed by nineteenth century medical discourse as prone to nervous disorders and insanity. The prelude to section seven is seamlessly attached to the prelude and text of section six, linking the feminine "Song Without Words" to an ensuing barrage of queer effects: nonsense syllables, imitations of animals and musical instruments, the slapping of various parts of the body (Example 4). Has the imagination gone Wilde, so to speak? Are we witnessing the links among madness, women, and music as outlined by McClary (*Feminine* 81)? A certain amount of ambiguity seems to be purposefully created by Rzewski, suggesting that the imagination gone Wilde *may* be mistaken for craziness. As Mosse points out in the context of the ideal male identity circulating in the nineteenth



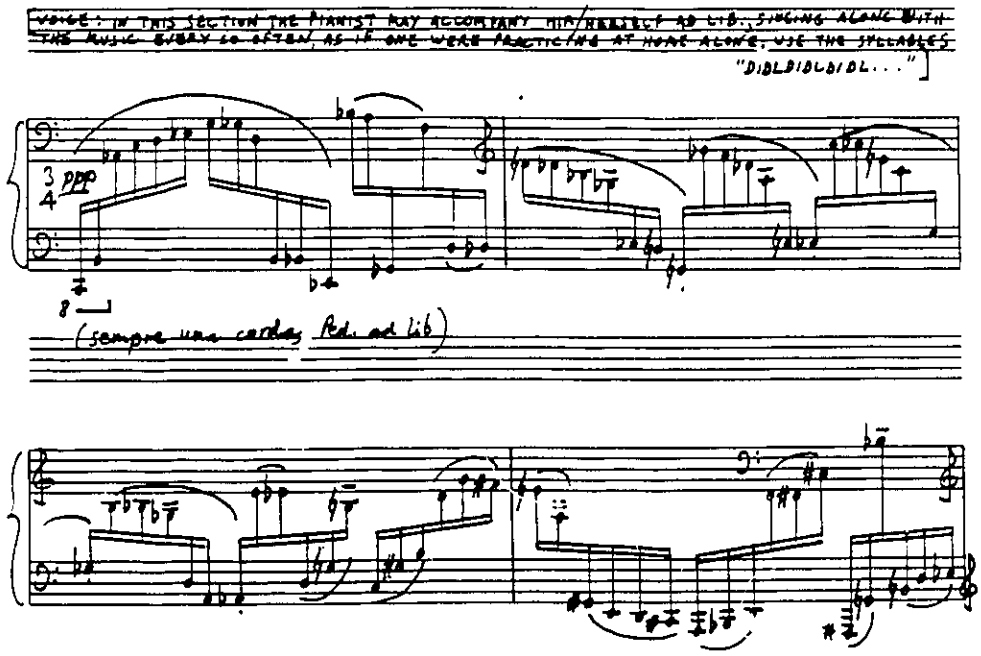
Example 4: the beginning of the prelude to section seven

century, the medical profession enforced ideas that one abnormality led to another; the masturbator's passion for secrecy led to homosexuality which led to various forms of insanity (11). However, the potential for solitary confinement to produce insanity fails to provide the proof that such madness is particularly *queer*. Intriguingly, as the text then clarifies within section seven, it is the Gods who "are strange," bringing us to ruin through what in us is "good, gentle, humane, loving." Rzewski, in what amounts to as an act of de-scription, creates the appearance of insanity to point out that actually, as the satirical film title suggests, "the Gods must be crazy."

The isolation and monotony of solitary confinement were to shift Wilde's aesthetic stance. Bruce Bashford outlines how Wilde's theory of criticism in his dialogues on criticism, "The Decaying of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist," initially situated form as the enabler of expression, releasing into social space the private and personal (395). A variety of forms is seen to be needed, facilitating new discoveries and new perspectives (398). But the monotony of prison life eliminates any sense of variety of form and, as Wilde says, "motion is no more." Rzewski may be seen to reflect Wilde's altered aesthetic view in the prelude to section four (Example 5). Exploiting a fugal style of writing, Rzewski presents a single theme or subject which is then restated a number of times. For Wilde, suffering is the single theme which returns again and again. Other than the fluctuation and "fleeing" of the moods of suffering, there are no motion and variety within prison.[10] These are further illustrated in the prelude to section five (Example 6). Written in a style which exploits perpetual rhythmic motion and the slightest of dynamic nuances within an extremely quiet context, Rzewski's work may be



Example 5: the beginning of the prelude to section four



Example 6: the beginning of the prelude to section five

seen to create, in the words of Wilde, those "varying modes of anguish" which have become markers of time and signifiers of identity.

Is Wilde's preoccupation with suffering a gesture of self-pity bordering on narcissism? In the context of the musical work, Rzewski accompanies Wilde's comments on suffering with texturally sparse and rhythmically static piano figuration. Forlorn, abandoned, Wilde sees himself as a victim in his fall from fame to infamy. Is this the quintessential experience which every mother fears for her gay son? Is this what it means to be gay? Certainly, in the context of Wilde's life, such a disastrous experience was not imagined, but real. But to situate suffering as an inevitable consequence of being "homosexual" parallels attempts to situate death from AIDS as an inevitable consequence of being "gay." To de-scribe the queer body of suffering, then, is to place suffering within the realm of social oppression and not merely as the cause of some inner angst. In a move which may serve to deconstruct the societal conflation of "homosexuality" and "suffering," Wilde posits sorrow as that which facilitates expressiveness for the artist and allows for self-development. Indeed, Bashford postulates that sorrow replaces form in any expression theory attributable to Wilde at this time (399). Sorrow is seen as the purest and most sensitive of the emotions, that which removes masks and strips one of all that is seen to imprison or encumber the soul, including identity. Wilde sees the transformative power of suffering as embodied in Christ with whom Wilde becomes fascinated as "the supreme Individualist" (400). Ironically, state-sponsored violence designed to cure the "gay" body has worked to bring about its self-realization.

3. Site-Reading Music

In the above section, I have intended to demonstrate that the queer body is identifiable within Rzewski's work and is able to encode queer desire and experience. However, I have also attempted to situate the queer body as a production of penal conditions and discourse which necessitates that both straight and queer prisoners undergo the mental effects of solitary confinement. Queer effects and Wilde behaviour, in the context of the prison, are able to produce a definitional crisis in male heterosexual identity by the ability to inscribe upon the heterosexual body *bench*marks normally reserved for queer identity. In highlighting such definitional instability, my aim has been to locate music as a complex social medium capable of reflecting multiple subject-positions as well as multiple readings/receptions which may or may not reflect the original intentions of the composer--that is, presuming that the composer even exists. With Roland Barthes' theoretical proposal of the "death of the author" in favour of the "birth of the reader," the author/composer is revealed as a construct, as a mythical entity incapable of producing a unified, focused text:

> . . . a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is only one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as we hitherto said, the author. (148)

Foucault investigates the space emptied by the death of the author through a genealogical approach, outlining the complex ways in which the author's proper name is employed by

discursive systems to create knowledge and represent other persons, works and objects ("What is an Author" 113). The intent of such a genealogically-based examination is not to leave the author as dead, but to readmit the author as a subjectivity stripped of mythical powers and able to be situated within critical inquiry. Thus, the decentering of the author/artist/composer may be seen to facilitate analytical clarity, helping to focus on her/his importance "as constituted in language, ideology, and social relations" (Wolff 136).

The readership coordinates of 1890's/1990's and straight/gay help to elicit aspects of readership or listener differences in terms of the reception of Rzewski's *De Profundis*. As previously mentioned, Wilde wrote his letter as a love letter; Richard Ellmann asserts that its origins supposedly lie in being an answer to the silence of his lover Lord Alfred Douglas. The letter thus draws "its force from its author's sense of being neglected" (511). Given that Wilde's text serves as the basis of Rzewski's musical work, what is the relationship between Rzewski and this love letter? In particular, what attracts Rzewski to this queer text? Is the composer gay? This may or may not be the case; however, Rzewski's socialist political inclinations as they surface in this work and others serve to highlight his attempts to place *all* artists in the role of social and political *provocateurs*.[11] The passages that Rzewski selects from Wilde's letter reveal the plight of the artist as a place of journey where sorrow and suffering are placed within the social realm and are not simply manifestations of inner anxiety. While Rzewski seems more concerned with situating the artist/composer within social processes than specifying how such engagement may be manifested, he indicates a willingness to acknowledge the queer

body as a site of artistry, a site which he is willing to be associated with in terms of socio-political critique.

As a pianist, I am intrigued by Rzewski's privileging of the political in his own playing. A noted pianist, Rzewski has performed and recorded *De Profundis*, a work which reflects his virtuosic piano style and, as previously mentioned, his growing experiments in including non-keyboard sound effects.[12] In addition, however, my interest in *De Profundis* relates to the *queer* body and its identification with Wilde as a locus of societal disapproval. A straight pianist may identify with Wilde's plight and may experience society's disapproval, but the political ramifications of the queer pianist's performance may differ considerably. A queer pianist may run the risk of reprimand from an employer for the performance of this work. A straight person may experience a similar threat, but given that her/his orientation falls within prescribed "moral" behaviour, the straight body as a queer text generally is allowed a provisionality or opportunity for lapse which is precluded from the queer body as a queer text. Whether queer or straight, the pianist experiences political engagement through the seemingly apolitical effects of pleasure and playfulness. Within *De Profundis*, the pianist not only realizes passages of formidable technical difficulty, but also, the humour of Wilde's text and Rzewski's instructions to be "humorous." The many queer effects the pianist is obligated to realize--grunting, imitating animals, slapping the body--may be experienced as pleasure and sensuality, as an *excess* of physicality normally required of the classical pianist. One of the challenges which I first faced in performing such a work was the necessity to both affirm the role of the "concert pianist" and allow for its destabilization

within the work. As a creation of discursive networks rooted in nineteenth-century notions of "respectability," concert pianists are taught not to grunt, whistle, hit themselves, or speak while performing. Rzewski transgresses musical norms, thereby forcing the pianist and audience to recognize the silences and regulations which are imposed upon the classical pianist's body. Thus, the pianist may experience her/his own body in this piece in a way which serves to mark the body as a subversively-read text.

The performer of Rzewski's work, however, is both freed from regulation and highly implicated in the perpetuation of a distinctive power relationship. Rzewski's score is detailed, with all musical effects specified with regard to their occurrence and rhythmic duration, including the spoken text. In other words, very little seems left to the discretion of the performer. In this respect, Rzewski seeks to construct a relationship similar to as found in a traditional piano work; the pianist is expected to "follow the score." With the inability of music notation to inscribe most musical characteristics such as timbre, nuance, rubato, etc., the pianist, despite the massive authorial intervention by way of prescriptive notation, is still left with many performance-related issues to interpret. However, given the control Rzewski seeks to maintain over the pianist, some of his gestures take on highly-charged homoerotic aspects. For instance, when I am slapping myself, is it I slapping or is it Rzewski? While I may be seen to be reflecting the discipline imposed upon the queer body within prison and society, there is also a pleasurable aspect to discipline which is accessed through the erotics of sado-masochism. Is Rzewski engaging in some spanking fetish? Do I enjoy it? As I have discovered in performing this work, audiences delight in the voyeuristic role which they assume in the

prelude to section seven.[13] In this section, I hit myself on a variety of places, including my "ass" (Rzewski's term), and call out "bum" five times. The chuckles which audiences tend to emit at the repetition of the word "bum" may be a release of tension which has built up through a section which exacts the administering of pain/pleasure onto the pianist's body. The spectacle of a publicly "spanked" pianist underscores the disciplining of the performer's body which composers engage in--a disciplining which goes unrecognized due to the naturalization of this (consensual) relationship.

Readings of *De Profundis* by performers are mediated by Rzewski's seeming intention to write for a particular gender of performer. As I have previously indicated, Rzewski requires the performer to sing in falsetto, a term reserved for male vocal technique. Is the performer of this work necessarily male? While it is not impossible for a female performer to also move between vocal registers to create a similar effect, a male performer would seem to be indicated by Rzewski's role as composer/performer, the presence of gender-specific terminology ("falsetto"), and Wilde's gender. Whether or not this is true, some interesting questions surface when one considers a female performing this work. How would female pianists generally respond to being required by a male composer to slap themselves in public? Of course, the same question could be put to male pianists with similar variations in reaction. Perhaps more importantly, how would an audience view a woman hitting herself? The latter question provokes consideration of how gender mediates our understanding of musical gestures; the assaults which continue to be perpetrated primarily against women by men frame a female performer's enactment of hitting herself within a distinctive, male-dominated power

relationship. Given the plight of women and queers under patriarchal power, the projection of Wilde's identity onto the female performer's body raises a possible performance scenario which could have a dramatic impact on both straight and queer listeners.

In considering the different receptions and readings of subversiveness experienced by listeners, Kopelson's readership coordinates of 1890's/1990's and straight/gay serve to continue the second operation of *homographesis* by providing for different queer subject-positions. In his evaluation of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Kopelson notes the presence of a sentimentality which prompts Gore Vidal to ask: "Must one have a heart of stone to read *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* without laughing?" (qtd. in Kopelson 46). Kopelson regards the Victorian predilection for invoking sentiment through feminocentric as well Christocentric scenarios as a challenge for contemporary readership to relate to; for straight and queer readers, Wilde's scenarios of tragedy and his feelings of self-pity and victimization take on a "dated" sentimentality bordering on artificiality. However, these "dated" characteristics would have allowed *De Profundis* in its initial receptions to serve as a "reverse discourse," intervening in dominant Victorian culture through the language and sentiments of the 1890's. In a recent presentation of this work at a conference, I was confronted with a gay audience member troubled by the sentimentality of the text, by its tragic and pathetic qualities. While I have understood *De Profundis* as Wilde's movement through self-pity, the reaction by this listener reveals how, for certain queers, this work may invoke an experience of marginalization with which they themselves do not associate.

In relating his experiences as a teacher of modern lesbian and gay history, Henry Abelove details how students prefer to be described as "queer" rather than "gay" or "lesbian."[14] Citing a qualitative difference in this term, Abelove notes that students raised on the concepts of Foucault and the notion of a decentered self often have difficulties in seeing "their kind" positioned at the margins of society, as part of an ongoing struggle against systemic discrimination (47-48). Preferring to see themselves as "present and central" (49), these queer students question tropes of marginalization, preferring to focus on cultural productions (e.g., Cole Porter songs) which have been central to society:

> . . . they are interested in destabilizing identity in virtually every sense in the past as well as in the present, and they want the performance of that destabilization to be always primary. In the end, they sometimes imply or even say to me--and I have to tell you that I find this reaction of theirs painful--that the lesbian and gay histories I assign are not their history. (54)

The feelings of ambivalence which occur in some queer listeners may relate to Abelove's perception that queer students tend to view themselves as "artists, performance artists especially, and that they slide into or towards performance in almost all circumstances" (48). Such a view of queer performativity cultivates a sense of agency unaffected by societal shame and structural oppression; as the argument goes, queers are agents capable of choosing and changing their self-representations. In her critique of performativity as a site of unlimited agency, Sedgwick suggests that queer perceptions

of "present and central" may be but one part of the subjective picture, given that shame plays such a structuring role in the constitution of some queer subjectivities ("Queer Performativity" 12-15). In the end, however, whether the queer listener is able to identify with Wilde's suffering or not, different reactions to *De Profundis* by queer listeners confirm "homosexual" identity as necessarily problematic, involving multiple subject-positions imbricated with trajectories of class, race, gender, and the like.

Straight audience members are similarly complex and lack uniform subject-positions. Some exhibit a "queer" reaction to Wilde's sentiments on suffering, preferring representations of queer identity which are "central and present." Others respond positively to its statement of the role of the artist, or more subversively, connect Wilde's comments on the role of the artist as flowing from his experience as an incarcerated homosexual. Although I have had no hostile reactions on the part of audience members to performances of *De Profundis*, I am aware that the queer topic would prevent certain individuals and groups from attending. In general, straight and queer listeners have reflected back to me positive reactions to Wilde's mystical desire to transmute all of life's experience into a process of self-development. At the end of the half-hour work, the speaking pianist details how, despite an onslaught of tragedies, Wilde sees his movement from fame to infamy as "a beginning. . . a wonderful beginning." The confidence with which the pianist is instructed by the composer to say these words provides a counterpoint to the discursive network which endeavoured to construct Wilde, the "homosexual," as tragic and pathological. Yet, the sparseness of the music, the distinct lack of *excess* in terms of sound, and the conflicted nature of the text seem to

provide for both straight and queer listeners anything but a "happy ending." At the end of the work, it is left to audience members to sort out the confusion resulting from a series of interrelated conflations: the recital hall and the prison cell, the piano bench and the prison bench, and the pianist and the pansy.

4. The Tenses of Queer Excess: Speak/Spank/Spunk

> One must have a piano I suppose but it is a melancholy thing, and more like a dreadful, funereal packing-case in form than anything else. (Wilde, *House Beautiful* 920)

The linking of queer desire and the piano bench proves to be a provocative entry into the study of music and its relationship to gender and sexuality. The history of the piano constitutes, in many respects, a social history of the nineteenth century; the site of the keyboard as an inculcator of *respectability* for young women serves to delineate music's role in the structuring of gender and social relations. Constructed as "feminine," the piano becomes a place of sentiment, of social gossip, of exotic desires. That queer desire may be seen to be articulated at the piano is underscored by the association of "feminine" melancholy with both the piano and the "homosexual." Indeed, Wilde's description of the piano as "a melancholy thing, and more like a dreadful, funereal packing-case in form" resonates with descriptions of the homosexual beginning in the late eighteenth century. In *The Outline of Forensic Medicine* (1796), Johann Valentine

Müller describes the sodomite as being characterized by red eyes, weakness, depression, dishevelled appearance, and a tendency for the head to droop; further, he links the traits of the sodomite to that of the masturbator, both being the results of "bad thoughts and bad nerves" and leading to state treason, insanity and aspirituality (Mosse 29). As the wax figures of J.F. Bertrand's late eighteenth century Parisian museum were to attest, masturbators suffered from exhaustion--most figures were depicted near death--caused by both the physical act and excessive sensuality (12). Homosexuality, constituting an *excess*, becomes linked with masturbation as a place of melancholy and death. Thus, Wilde's description of the piano as melancholic together with other "feminine" terms of *excess*--sentimental, romantic, exotic--tends to confirm a connection between the piano bench and queer desire.

Frederic Rzewski's *De Profundis* invites such a connection through its insistence on privileging the queer body through pianistic *excess*. Queer effects and Wilde behaviour serve to outline queer desire and the effects of regulatory measures on it. But as I have sought to demonstrate through the analytic procedures of *homographesis*, the tracking of the queer body through music must proceed tentatively, conscious of how regulatory forces implement and perpetuate the identity category of "queer" as a means of enforcing constraints on the queer body. As an example of how *not* to proceed, one can look to most music departments which, intending to redress the exclusion of women from the canon, develop and implement courses dealing with the music of women. These courses, when they fail to problematize and interrogate the concept of "woman," serve to silence women's voices; essentialist notions of gender and sexuality mixed with

positivistic musicology leave little room for the feminist subject within the music academy. To de-scribe the queer body, then, is both to view it as a complex cultural production and to insist on the diverse ways that it can be apprehended.

Is the modern piano bench capable of queer excess *and* diversity? Fortunately, the modern piano bench is adjustable, being able to accommodate the diverse body sizes and playing positions. As I have discovered in adjudicating piano classes at musical festivals, the modern piano bench is capable of excess, seating two people and facilitating the playing of piano trio repertoire if the bench is large enough. That ensembles of two or more pianists at one piano prove to be the popular "spectacles" at music festivals indicates how naturalized the piano has become as a solo instrument. Yet, as I watch and listen to three people playing the same piano, I witness excess and diversity: bodies separate and entwine, mistakes are reproached through not-so-discrete elbowing, differing personalities commingle and jostle, and serious intent mixes with humour and giggles.[15] Viewed in this manner, the piano invites speculation about its use in the nineteenth century. Pianists might have talked as they played. Perhaps they gossiped, sighed, and fantasized. Sometimes, men who desired each other may have played duets and kissed while seated on the piano bench. Frederic Rzewski's *De Profundis* provokes the consideration of the piano as a continuing site of excess and diversity, of social engagement and erotic exchange. Stripped of Victorian sensibilities and the cult of *respectability*, the piano bench may be seen once again as the seat of pianists who speak, spank, and have spunk.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge and thank Kevin Kopelson who, in a conversation, reminded me of this opening scene from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

2. For an insightful discussion of the relationship between the piano and women in the nineteenth century, see Richard Leppert's chapter "Sexual Identity, Death, and the Family Piano in the Nineteenth Century" as found in *The Sight of Sound*, 119-51.

3. By way of example of the "open secret" phenomenon in music, I would like to draw attention to the entry for Benjamin Britten in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* which portrays Peter Pears as the tenor "whose individual artistry was to inspire many of [Britten's] greatest operatic roles and song cycles" (Evans 293). Other than a few cursory references in the context of compositional dedications or recitals, Peter Pears is not mentioned again. While Pears and Britten appear together in a photograph (297), they appear, not surprisingly, "working" together. Britten and Pears were to be lovers over the course of thirty years (Aldrich 4; Brett, "Musicality" 19). That Britten and Pears were to remain in the favour of the British establishment, including the royal family, attests to the discrete silence which governed the status of their relationship despite its acknowledgement.

4. Significantly, Oscar Wilde was welcomed back to the literary establishment when his name finally joined the roll-call at Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey on February 14, 1995.

5. The most updated resource on Rzewski's piano music is David Burge's *Twentieth-Century Piano Music*, 228-34. Burge's discussion predates the composition of the *Sonata* (1991) and *De Profundis* (1992).

6. To this point, I have performed this work in its entirety twice: Augustana University College, Camrose, and the University of Alberta, Edmonton. As well, excerpts were performed as part of a lecture at the 1995 *Feminist Theory and Music 3* conference at the University of California, Riverside.

7. For a detailed examination of the prison system and conditions in operation during Wilde's incarceration, see Regenia Gagnier's "'De Profundis' as 'Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis': A Materialist Reading of Oscar Wilde's Autobiography."

8. Mendelssohn writes that what music expresses to him "is not thought too *indefinite* to be put into words, but, on the contrary, too *definite*" (269-70).

9. A torch song is a genre popular with some gay men. Set in ballad form, the torch song usually evokes a forlorn sense of desire.

10. The use of the fugal form in the context of "fleeing" moods is significant, given the origins of the term fugue from the Latin *fugere*, meaning "to flee."

11. In his only departure from Wilde's *De Profundis* excerpts, Rzewski includes within the prelude to section seven the following quotation from Wilde's *The Soul of Man under Socialism*: "There is such a thing as leaving mankind alone; there is no such thing as governing mankind. All forms of government are failures" (1181).

12. Rzewski's performance of *De Profundis* is included on the CD entitled *De Profundis* (Hat Hut Records Limited, 1994). This recording also includes his *Sonata* (1991).

13. The provocative manner with which I am required to perform these actions helps the audience to recognize my body as a site where pain/pleasure is produced not only by the composer, but also by me.

14. I would like to thank Henry Abelove for both alerting me to his article "The Queering of Lesbian/Gay History" as well as providing me with a copy.

15. Philip Brett presented a paper on the relationship between duet playing and queer desire entitled "Piano Four Hands: Schubert and the Performance of Gay Male Desire" at *Bordercrossings: Future Directions in Music Studies*, a conference held at the University of Ottawa in March 1995.

Conclusion

> May music escape, for good, the fate of presumed straightness. May music at last be subject to the critic's seduction. (Koestenbaum, "Queering" 1)

An analysis of the relationship between music and sexuality which allows for complexity and contradiction contains the potential to be sympathetic to the queer subject. Sexual identity--straight, queer, bisexual--is characterized by tension, contradiction, and contingency; the binarisms which characterize Western culture are unable to represent the diversity of sexualities which are present, let alone how an individual may assume more than one sexuality in a lifetime. Furthermore, although the act of "coming out" serves as a political intervention within heterosexist culture, such an act may serve to reinforce the regulatory effects of identity categories if its political effects are assumed to be universally beneficial and applicable. Within Fraser's *Poor Super Man*, the artist/waiter David may initially "come out" to his bosses, but he does so at the expense of another part of his identity which he chooses not to privilege. Given the tendency in recent critical theory to view the "individual" as a social construction, any identity may be seen as a production which necessarily conceals more than it reveals.

Insights of critical theory have but recently surfaced within musicology. These inflections help to reveal the protocols of positivistic musicology as rooted in nineteenth-century notions of "genius," "great works," and "great performers" which construct music as autonomous from the social realm. Most musicians, however, are attracted to

music because of its social aspects (performance, teaching, status), making the stance of autonomy archaic if not irrelevant. Traditionally, music's social aspect has marginalized it within intellectual discourse. Consequently, constructions of musical meaning as eluding social mediation seem defensive and ridden by anxiety. Using the metaphor of Supermusicology, one may characterize the efforts of musicology to "save" music from its status as "feminized" Other as proof of musicology's own anxiety over its "male" identity being perceived as queer.

To *think through* issues of identity, therefore, is essential to the musicological enterprise if it is going to engage in critical reflection. To consider gender as performative, that is, as a matter of style rather than essence, is to extend into another area what musicians already know: that musical style is fluid, open to change, and unable to trace its origins to a single work or influence. But to relate this musical knowledge to gender and sexuality constitutes a challenge to heterosexual norms. If musicians note gender and sexuality as matters of style, they risk losing their artistic/economic status within society which they negotiate in return for maintaining discretion in public about sexuality and gender. The identity of the "musician," therefore, reveals itself like other identities to reflect social forces; any sense of an "inner life" must be balanced by the acknowledgement of intense social mediation characterizing the "individual." Implicated in the social realm, the musician via critical interrogation is forced to "come out" from the *social* closet.

Because of its social orientation, music has been marginalized as the most vulgar of the arts. Yet, within critical theory, the marginalized identities within society are

those which serve to reveal how power is enforced and how resistance occurs. Thus, writers such as de Certeau and Chambers track the seemingly "apolitical" effects of activities such as cooking and reading to encode resistance to dominant structures and produce effects which prompt social change. Music is present throughout our society. We listen to music as we drive, cook, shop, clean, and sleep. Considered to be ever in "the background," music in its most prevalent use is naturalized as "apolitical" and unimportant. However, the apolitical may be seen to produce political effects. This is demonstrated in how music is purchased and marketed. Minorities as consumers appropriate and subvert dominant meanings. Gay men who become opera queens exemplify how music can be a site where normative meanings are momentarily disrupted. Compact discs which recycle canonic works as "queer music" are means by which ownership of cultural symbols is contested. Music's ironic capabilities are not revealed primarily in the intent of the author, but rather, in its listeners.

Edelmann's analytical procedure of *homographesis* insists on multiplying the ways queer desire can be apprehended. Thus, queer identity is provided with the ability to reflect individuals who inhabit different positions in society according to the trajectories of race, colour, economic status, gender, and the like. From Edelmann's protocol, the thesis of this essay is developed: that a critical analysis of music as queer text necessarily involves de-scribing the queer body of differences intended to singularize it for prosecution and regulation purposes. This, in turn, provides multiple subject-positions for queer identity. The examination of Rzewski's *De Profundis* which ensues highlights the importance of why queer and critical theories are important to the

musicological enterprise; many "readerships" or listeners are involved who read the work in differing degrees of subversiveness. This situation is underscored in the different receptions which may be found among its queer listeners, some of whom find Wilde's Victorian sentiments on the virtues of artistic suffering as morbid and unreflective of their "center and present" political persuasions. Both straight and queer listeners may be attracted to the work for its "queer content." Others may be attracted to the work for its comments on the role and plight of the artist.

From my seat of desire at the piano bench, I contend that queer effects and Wilde behaviour are woven together with text and music to describe and de-scribe the queer body. Rzewski selects texts from Wilde's letter which may be summarized by the following: excess, sexual fantasy, madness, sorrow. These happen to be characteristics attributed to the queer body by pathological medicine in the nineteenth century. Yet, as Gagnier points out, these characteristics are also those produced by solitary confinement. In effect, *De Profundis* is a queer text in that Wilde's queer desire may be read into the musical effects which Rzewski produces to reflect these themes. As I have shown, some listeners may not read this work as a "queer" text. However, I also have demonstrated that the transgressive behaviour which the pianist engages in this work prompts a re-evaluation of societal norms--the role of the pianist, for instance--which also includes gender and sexuality. In other words, the listener of *De Profundis* becomes witness to transgressive acts which redefine "individuality" at the piano, in the prison, in music, and in terms of sexuality and gender.

The protocols employed in this essay allow for further discussions in the relationships between music and the queer body to occur. If the terms which identify individuals and objects are seen as precarious and as glossing over contradictions and complexities, music escapes "the fate of presumed straightness" and becomes "subject to the critic's seduction." Further, to view a musical work as a queer text is not to limit music and its meaning to queers. There are no "queer" chords as such. But this is not to say that society does not assign meanings to particular musical structures. Musical meaning is constructed by society and, in turn, individuals and groups within society continue the process of meaning construction, appropriating and subverting dominant meanings.

Based on Wilde's love letter while incarcerated for "indecent behaviour with men," Rzewski's *De Profundis* reminds us of why Wilde was imprisoned. Although Wilde does not directly name Lord Alfred Douglas within the letter, he identifies the relationship he had with him in every possible way to both reveal *and* conceal same-sex desire. Rzewski queers the pianist, inflecting a transgressive desire and aesthetic into the "respectable" role of the professional musician. If anything, the composer reveals with more specificity that which Wilde, writing to a Victorian public through censoring prison officials, can't name. As Mendelssohn indicates, music may be seen to describe that which words sometimes can't, including the Wildean "love that dare not speak its name."

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Appendix

The text of Rzewski's *De Profundis* is as follows:

1. People point to Reading Gaol, and say, "That is where the artistic life leads a man." Well, it might lead to worse places. Mechanical people to whom life is a shrewd speculation depending on calculation always know where they are going, and go there. They start with the ideal desire of being the parish beadle, and they succeed in being the parish beadle and no more. A man whose desire is to be something separate from himself succeeds in being what he wants to be. That is his punishment. Those who want a mask have to wear it. But with the dynamic forces of life, it is different. People who desire self-realisation never know where they are going. They can't know. To recognize that the soul of a man is unknowable, is the ultimate achievement of wisdom. The final mystery is oneself. When one has weighed the sun in the balance, and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens, there still remains oneself. Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?

2. We are the zanies of sorrow. We are clowns whose hearts are broken. We are specially designed to appeal to the sense of humour. On November 13th, 1895, I was brought down here from London. From two o'clock till half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at. When people saw me they laughed. Each train swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the grey November rain surrounded by a jeering mob. For a year I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time. In prison tears are a part of every day's experience. A day in prison on which one does not weep is a day on which one's heart is hard, not a day on which one's heart is happy.

3. Morality does not help me. I am a born antinomian. I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws. Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at. Reason does not help me. It tells me that the laws under which I am convicted and the system under which I have suffered are wrong and unjust. But, somehow, I have got to make both of these things just and right to me. I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me. The plank bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes, the harsh orders, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame - each and all of these things I had to transform into a spiritual experience. There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul.

4. I have no desire to complain. One of the many lessons that one learns in prison is, that things are what they are and will be what they will be. Suffering is one very long

moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle their return. With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain. For us, there is only one season, the season of sorrow. The very sun and moon seem taken from us. Outside, the day may be blue and gold, but the light that creeps down through the thick glass of the small iron-barred window is grey. It is always twilight in one's cell, as it is always twilight in one's heart. And in the sphere of thought, no less than in the sphere of time, motion is no more.

5. We who live in prison, and in whose lives there is no event but sorrow, have to measure time by throbs of pain, and the record of bitter moments. We have nothing else to think of. Suffering is the means by which we exist, because it is the only means by which we become conscious of existing; and the remembrance of suffering in the past is necessary to us as the evidence of our continued identity. Between myself and the memory of joy lies a gulf no less deep than that between myself and joy in its actuality. So much in this place do men live by pain that my friendship with you, in the way in which I am forced to remember it, appears to me always as a prelude consonant with those varying modes of anguish which each day I have to realise; as though my life had been a symphony of sorrow, passing through its rhythmically linked movements to its certain resolution.

6. The memory of our friendship is the shadow that walks with me here: that seems never to leave me: that wakes me up at night to tell the same story over and over: at dawn it begins again: it follows me into the prison yard and makes me talk to myself as I tramp round: each detail that accompanied each dreadful moment I am forced to recall: there is nothing that happened in those ill-starred years that I cannot recreate in that chamber of the brain which is set apart for grief or for despair: every strained note of your voice, every twitch and gesture of your nervous hands, every bitter word, every poisonous phrase comes back to me: I remember the street or river down which we passed: the wall or woodland that surrounded us, at what figure on the dial stood the hands of the clock, which way went the wings of the wind, the shape and colour of the moon.

7. The gods are strange. It is not our vices only they make instruments to scourge us. They bring us to ruin through what in us is good, gentle, humane, loving. Love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world. If the world has been built of sorrow, it has been built by the hands of love, because in no other way could the soul of man reach perfection. Far off, like a perfect pearl, one can see the City of God. It is so wonderful that it seems as if a child could reach it in a summer's day. And so a child could. But with me and such as me it is different. One can realise a thing in a single moment, but one loses it in the long hours that follow with leaden feet. We think in eternity, but we move slowly through time. And how slowly time goes with us who lie in prison I need not tell again.

8. I hope to live long enough and to produce work of such character that I shall be able at the end of my days to say, "Yes! this is just where the artistic life leads a man!" For the last seven or eight months, in spite of a succession of great troubles reaching me from the outside world almost without intermission, I have been placed in direct contact with a new spirit working in this prison through man and things, that has helped me beyond words: so that while for the first year of my imprisonment I did nothing else, and can remember doing nothing else, but wring my hands in despair, and say, "What an ending, what an appalling ending!" Now I try to say to myself, and sometimes when I am not torturing myself do really say, "What a beginning, what a wonderful beginning!"