

The impetus for compiling this issue followed from my encounter a few years ago with Nathaniel Mackey's 1986 epistolary jazz novel, *Bedouin Hornbook*. In a series of letters addressed to a friend called "Angel of Dust," Mackey's protagonist, N., recounts his travels as multi-instrumentalist with the Mystic Horn Society, later renamed the Molimo m'Atet. N.'s facility at rendering musical experience in crystalline verbal images is virtuosic, even uncanny. At the same time, he is prone to an almost dorky interpretive prolixity. (When we meet N., he has just started a group called the Deconstructive Woodwind Chorus. They haven't played yet, but they've had "an interesting series of discussions about *duende* . . .") For instance, in *Djbot Baghostus's Run*—sequel to *Bedouin Hornbook*, and the second of four volumes in Mackey's ongoing cycle, titled *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*—N. comments on a performance by his bandmate, Djamilaa:

Her impersonation of Nancy Wilson began to break down. . . . My own guess at the time was that a curious compound play of identity and difference had intervened. Djamilaa's faltering reproduction of Nancy Wilson's voice seemed to obey a namesake negative dialectic and a nominal near-identity with Aunt Nancy [another member of the band] rolled into one.

This is a not untypical example of N.'s theoretical riffing. These ruminations on music, at once insightful and comically strained, spurred me to consider recent critiques of musicological hermeneutics. In Carolyn Abbate's influential 2004 essay "Music—Drastic or Gnostic," for example, we are told that rather than painstakingly trying to extract supposedly latent meanings from musical works, we might do better to turn toward temporally fleeting sensations and intensities that attend actual experiences of listening or performing. Although the ostensible target of Abbate's polemic is a specific mode of exegetical musicological discourse, she almost suggests that we stop writing and speaking about music altogether. At the very least, Abbate's essay does not provide much guidance about how language might be employed in discussing the "drastic" dimension of musical performance, which, she writes, "involv[es] a category of knowledge that flows from drastic actions or experiences and not from verbally mediated reasoning." This use of "drastic" was borrowed from philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, whose great 1961 meditation on music (translated into English by Abbate) is titled

*La Musique et l'Ineffable*. A little over a decade after the publication of that book, Roland Barthes—friend and occasional chamber music partner of Jankélévitch—suggested in his much-cited essay “The Grain of the Voice” that while music should not necessarily resign us to silence, the moment it is treated as a subject of criticism we inevitably fall into a predicative mode reliant on that “poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective.”

But the presumption implicit in all this—that among all phenomena, music poses a unique challenge to verbal description—is far from self-evident. (I recall music theorist Joseph Dubiel beginning a semester-long course in tonal analysis with the following remark: “People often say that music is a particularly hard subject to write about. I don’t know. What’s easy to write about?”) To me, Mackey’s work signified a two-pronged rejoinder of sorts to this line of thought. First, before conceding so much of musical experience to the realm of the ineffable, we might work as hard as N. to hone our words (adjectives included). Second, the many kinds of meaning that have been ascribed to music may not reside in the music as such, nor fully correspond to the moment-to-moment experience of listening, but the presumption of meaning and the corresponding interpretive act are nevertheless themselves a part of the plane of experience.

Certainly, Mackey’s novel does not pretend to resolve the great tensions between presence and meaning that arise in writing about music. And I do not think the incisive polemics against the tyranny of hermeneutic-linguistic reductionism can be discounted. Nevertheless, upon reading *Bedouin Hornbook* I keenly felt that to better think about music and its complex relationship with language we might do well to pay more attention to the literary styles, forms, and genres we employ in our writing about it. The guiding editorial intention behind this issue, then, is to thematize this relationship with an eclectic body of texts that experiment with linguistic form. Hence: “Experimental Writing About Music,” a special issue of *Current Musicology* which I am pleased to kick off with an excerpt from Mackey’s forthcoming fifth volume of *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*.

What do I mean by “experimental writing about music”? I am reminded that Bruno Latour once wrote that there were four problems with the “Actor-Network Theory” that he had helped elaborate and which subsequently became a trendy catchphrase within academia: namely, the words “Actor,” “Network,” “Theory,” and, finally, the hyphen. I do not wish to imply any meaningful parallel between that well-established contribution to sociology and this as yet unread issue of *Current Musicology*, but I would like to take a note from Latour and try to clarify the present use of these terms in order to preclude some misunderstandings.

In recent writing on the arts, few words verge on meaninglessness more than “experimental,” and, alas, this issue may do little to rectify this. By placing the pieces collected here under the rubric of the “experimental” I do not wish to inscribe them within a now semi-canonical “experimental tradition”—although some certainly have connections to that by no means unambiguous historical concept. Rather, I use the word to concisely indicate that the diverse array of exceptional pieces published here depart from the stylistic norms of contemporary academic writing. In one sense, this is an overly context-dependent justification. (Since this is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, does that mean any text appearing in it that does not read like a standard article or book review is experimental?) But it is, anyway, the case that many of the contributors included here are academics of one kind or another, and that academic style constitutes a background against which their pieces can be taken to represent a self-conscious experimentation with form.

While the pieces included here should not be preemptively tethered to any single tradition, they have not extricated themselves from tradition altogether. In fact, as I suggest in the overview that follows, these texts draw upon all kinds of written genres spanning centuries. As creative attestations to the many ways that music has been written about, I believe the pieces in this issue may provide some perspective on the possibilities, constraints, and contingencies of any given style.

At this point, the reader should feel free to skip the rest of this somewhat lengthy introduction and dive in!

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## Experimental

The ideas underpinning the compilation of this issue owe a significant debt to the work of Benjamin Boretz, Elaine Barkin, and J. K. Randall. For decades now, these composer-theorists have been exploding conventions of musical analysis in a body of verbally dexterous, philosophically penetrating, and at times visually striking writings: first in the pages of *Perspectives of New Music*, and more recently in *The Open Space Magazine*. I am pleased to be able to acknowledge this enduring movement with the inclusion of a selection of pieces (older and more recent) by all three. Decades on the scene, they are still innovating. Randall, for instance, may be in his twenty-third year of retirement, but one could scarcely imagine a more inventive contribution to a new “genre” or medium (e-mail) than his “To Astonish the Roses: 7 e-mails to Walter Branchi.” (All the author’s

characteristic humor is on display. To grab an excerpt almost at random, “ROSES #3” begins: “Dear Walter, Let’s back up to the Sound of all that crap in my room (ATCRIMR). Clearly the locus of my psychic integration is my own idiosyncratic head, whatever may have accumulated in my room.”) Also included are responses to this trio by younger writers. Dorota Czerner calls her “Listening in Poppies” a “dia-phonetic poem,” written in “parallel” with the poet’s experience of some of Boretz’s piano music, but not intended as a representation of it. (This again raises the matter of predication mentioned by Barthes, a topic I will return to toward the close of my introduction.) Scott Gleason’s “Improvising *Compose Yourself*” begins in a vein of erudite scholarship, with a brief contextualization of the work of Boretz and Randall. But then the text suddenly mutates. As if he has become infected by his subject matter, Gleason adopts elements of Randall’s linguistic–philosophical–typographical style in a performative meta-analysis of the latter’s landmark text, *Compose Yourself—A Manual for the Young*.

Another figure whose dual influence on postwar experimental music and experimental writing can scarcely be overstated is John Cage. (And here, the term “experimental” might be invoked with greater historical precision.) The conceptual vistas that Cage’s work have opened up may be detected throughout this issue, but nowhere more clearly than in the excerpt from Joan Retallack’s *Errata Suite*—a polyphonic text composition in the shape of the five-line music staff. Retallack writes that her piece is an “homage to Cage; an exploration of phonemic sound and silence as it plays itself out in the procedural music of fortuitous chance, fortuitous error.”

The reader will notice that many pieces in this issue exemplify a playful disposition toward typography, orthographical convention, and other visual properties of language. One of the most elaborate and conceptually challenging manipulations of typographical layout is found in Michael Gardiner and Jon Sakata’s “In Memory, Theory: Concluding Unscientific Postludes,” designed by Binu Tulachan. The authors carry out what could be called a “critical obituary” for the discipline of music theory through four distinct types of “serialized writing” placed side-by-side. These four kinds of writing are: “1) the authors’ thoughts on musical networks 2) examples of networks drawn from other disciplines 3) poetic graffiti 4) an inspection of Louis Couperin’s F major harpsichord suite.” Taking inspiration from Leibniz’s conception of a universe comprised of monads that “reach out confusedly to infinity” as they form ever-new aggregations, Gardiner and Sakata write that each of the four series should be considered as “a monad that can be blended or cross-referenced with the others (or not), following one’s appetite.”

Other pieces featured in this issue are inadequately described by the term “writing.” In *Igor’s Goriest Tune*, for example, Elaine Barkin plays with cartoon-y captions, musical notation, and illustration. Barkin’s piece seems to suggest that notating music, writing (about music), and drawing (about music?) are all forms of what she calls “doodling,” and perhaps only imperfectly distinguished from one another. If this last lesson constituted one of the recurrent themes in avant-garde musical scores of the last half-century, it was also presaged in some way by some of the classics of musical analysis—Heinrich Schenker’s famous “graphic” analyses come to mind. Brian Alegant’s “A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Road Maps as Analytical Tools” is a particularly valuable contribution to this analytic literature. In his piece, Alegant describes the pedagogical utility of what he calls a “road map”: basically, a representation of one’s hearing of a musical work that might employ some combination of “text descriptions, symbols, staff notation, rhythms, colors, and shapes.” Alegant also includes nine road maps by former Oberlin students.

All these verbal-graphical fireworks notwithstanding, an approach to writing informed by an overtly poetic or visual sensibility was by no means a necessary (nor, I should add, sufficient) condition for inclusion in this volume. A broader aim of this issue was to provide a venue for a diverse array of exceptional pieces that might not easily fit into already existing scholarly publications. I was, then, especially pleased to receive Daniel Albright’s wonderfully quirky essay, “Nonsense and Unmusic,” accompanied by the warning that the piece is “seriously experimental in so many different ways that it may be publishable in no journal on the face of the earth.” But once again, the departures from academic or scholarly stylistic norms in this issue do not exclusively draw on an avant-garde or experimental tradition of writing and might instead bring to mind a wide range of historical precedents. I will proceed to introduce the remaining contributions to this issue with glances at a few of these historical forms.

## Writing

A quintessentially twentieth-century format that engendered much innovative and sometimes unusual writing on music was the record liner note (now in decline for obvious reasons). For his 1963 album *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*, for example, Charles Mingus solicited an essay from Edmund Pollock, his psychologist. Other jazz records of the era were accompanied by criticism of an exceptionally high standard—by the likes of Martin Williams, Leroi Jones (later, Amiri Baraka), and Whitney Balliett. Notably, Michael Ives observes that his remarkable set of vignettes (published here) about a trio of jazz musicians, although “informed by the

absurd sophistications of Ronald Firbank (whose dialogic exchanges call to mind the snare drum accents of Roy Haynes) or the underground classic, *A Nest of Ninnies* (Ashbery–Schuyler) . . . means to serve as something like a parodic homage to that dandy of jazz writing, Whitney Balliett.” And indeed Ives’s trio, quite evidently afflicted by a “fondness for cannabis and an addiction to refined banter,” easily enfold all these precursors in their theme-and-variations conversation. A typical scene: the trio sits around coming up with substitute captions for a newspaper photo of Vladimir Putin.

“Vladimir Putin tames wild pony,” Gibbs said, “with help of local boy while traveling on one foot in the mountains of the Siberian Tyva region, referred to as Bambi, Russia.” “Vladimir Putin seen boiling root vegetable,” I followed, “while reading Pushkin aloud to local boy and pony in the foothills of the Siberian Toyota region during his unusual junket.” “Vladimir Putin,” Klaus said, pushing the pinner toward Hayes, “force feeds pony in the mountains of the Tuva recreation sector while local boy bathes with a sponge his slick flanks in the steely waters of the Khemchik.”

They go on.

Record liner notes have also been a place for musicians and composers to publish their thoughts, and to make public their often less well-known verbal artistry. For the notes to his 1966 *Unit Structures*, Cecil Taylor published a text in which the surreal, Burroughs–esque biological–mystical imagery almost rivals the album’s musical compositions in inventiveness. The creative writing of a composer like Taylor (or Cage, or Boretz, etc.) should alert us to the centrality of writing for numerous musicians. This may partly stem from the “conceptual” drift of much music from the last half-century or so, but seminal earlier examples should be recalled: Schumann’s adoption of semi-imaginary personae (with names like Florestan and Eusebius) in his work as a music critic, or Wagner’s voluminous corpus of socio-aesthetic writings. (The latter’s lengthy exposition of a metaphysical, music-centered philosophy of history might be seen to have its twentieth-century successors in Karlheinz Stockhausen’s seventeen-volume *Texte zur Musik* and Anthony Braxton’s three-volume *Tri-Axium Writings*.) It is with this rich tradition of composer-writers in mind that I introduce the contributions to this issue by two of the most original composers of recent decades, Anne LeBaron and Marianthi Papalexandri–Alexandri.

LeBaron’s “Composing *Breathtails*” is a collection of thirty fragments that trace the development of her piece *Breathtails*, for baritone, shakuhachi, and string quartet, on an original text by Charles Bernstein. Her essay is at once a highly informative glimpse into one composer’s creative process

and an exquisite piece of prose. Bernstein's text is included here not only as a useful accompaniment to LeBaron's, but as a piece of writing that, while not "about music" per se, is profoundly concerned with sound and audition—in its fragmentation of words into phonic particles ("eth/ettle/on/etern/ut/nly . . .") and in its sustained thematic investigation of breath: "Breath is the door/ from life to death / on the border of/ hearing I hear not hearing/ on the border of / death and life/ hear not hearing." (Bernstein has edited a volume of essays on sound and poetry titled *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, and is co-director of PennSound, the premiere archive of recorded poetry and conversations with writers.) While the aforementioned contributions by Mackey and Randall depicted one side of a conversation about music (the former fictive, the latter presumably real), the series of letters between Berlin- and Stuttgart-based composer Papalexandri-Alexandri and Belfast-based musicologist Gascia Ouzonian gives us both sides. Thus we have the pleasure of learning about an important body of new music through the questions and instigations of an especially perceptive interlocutor.

Indeed, dialogue forms are adopted by numerous authors featured in this issue. In addition to the three examples mentioned above, we have philosopher Achille Varzi's dialogue between "Ali" and "Babba" on the problems that musical "covers" pose for the ontology of music, and music theorist Alexander Bonus's impressively researched dialogue between a "Master Alejandro" and a "Doctor Bueno" on the subject of musical time. Although both pieces stage conversations between imaginary characters, their use of the fictive register belongs more to the tradition of a mode of rhetorical argumentation—namely, the Platonic dialogue—than to that of narrative literature. That said, one should not ignore the interweaving of rhetorical, narrative, and representational levels in interpreting the argument of Plato's dialogues. Likewise, the experimentation with different modes of philosophical writing that has long been evident in Varzi's work—including fictions and forays into the realm of philosophy for children—is not wholly ancillary to the substance of his contributions in contemporary logic and metaphysics. Varzi's *Insurmountable Simplicities: Thirty-Nine Philosophical Conundrums*, written with Roberto Casati, begins: "Perhaps not all the stories that follow are true. They could, however, be true, and the Reader is invited to ponder this."

Emily H. Green's "Memoirs of a Musical Object, Supposedly Written by Itself: It-Narrative and Eighteenth-Century Marketing" also plays with the semblance of fiction. Green discusses the significance of a now obscure eighteenth-century score by imitating the form of an "it-narrative," a predominantly eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century genre in which

objects and animals narrate their wending passages through human society. It–narratives have garnered much attention over the last two or three decades, unsurprising given the concurrent proliferation of discourses in the humanities about “materialities,” objects, and things. Indeed, Green invokes some of these recent fields, such as Bill Brown’s Thing Theory. But what does her essay gain by taking a peculiar form when it could be transformed without much trouble into an excellent “normal” scholarly essay? The piece concludes with a rhetorical flourish (“The Object’s Final Thoughts”) in which the moral is stated outright for any reader too dense to interpret the allegory unaided: “The goals of the it–narrative—to give voice to the material in order to understand the human—are likely not new to you; as I retreat to the solitary vacuum of the Beinecke collection, it may be time for you to make your investment in them more apparent.” But the question remains: other than providing considerable amusement, what does aping an it–narrative really do for her theoretical argument if it can just be stated outright?

I won’t pretend to speak for the author, but I’d like to offer a couple thoughts. Green’s play with the it–narrative form implicitly points to intriguing connections between recent materiality studies and the philosophy of historiographic representation. Doesn’t the idea of objects speaking for themselves bear a certain affinity to the style of nineteenth-century historical discourse in which, as historiographic theorists like Hayden White and Reinhart Koselleck have observed, everything transpires as if history were narrating itself? (“I would like to efface myself entirely,” Leopold von Ranke wrote, “and allow only things to talk. . . .”) But while this nineteenth-century historical realism operated precisely by concealing its own rhetorical and linguistic techniques of representation, Green’s comic play with narrative voice obviously calls attention to its formal artifice. Indeed, the piece’s stated intent to “give voice to the material” notwithstanding, Green’s adoption of a genre of imaginative literature complicates the matter and points to a salient qualification of this project that is only ambiguously and even evasively treated in much of the recent discourse on objects and things: namely, the bandying around of phrases like “object agency” or questions like “What do objects want?” remains a metaphorical discourse that too often only partially admits or apprehends its own figurative language (or worse, passes itself off as radical precisely by evading the concerns of tropology).

By way of moving on to other pieces in this issue, I’d like to mention one last element of Green’s essay: the opening “Dedication.” It begins: “To the Nobility, Gentry, and Public at large . . . .” Borrowed from an actual early nineteenth-century it–narrative (*The Life and Adventures of Toby the*



*Sapient Pig*), the dedication raises a question that might be asked of any writing: What kind of audience is this text addressed to? Or retrospectively: What kind of an audience did a given text actually assemble? Such concerns occupy a prominent place in studies of literary style and genre, and especially in recent decades have led scholars to ask how texts have functioned in the construction of the “public” spheres integral to “modernity.” Perhaps no genre of writing has brought the connection between the concepts of style, public, and modernity to the level of self-awareness as explicitly as the “manifesto.” While this issue includes no manifestos—see, however, Gascia Ouzonian’s “Soundspace: A Manifesto,” written with Sarah Lappin—it does feature a related genre that is similarly disputatious and, at least originally, public-oriented: “theses.” In his “Eleven Theses on Sound and Transcendence,” Brian Kane combines liberal quotation from diverse sources (perhaps a nod to Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History”) with the serial assertions typifying the “theses” genre. Thus, Kane’s argument about the interlocking histories of the metaphysics of sonic transcendence and the division of the sensorium is structured as an intertextual web of propositions and critiques.

In “Ambient Drone and Apocalypse,” Joanna Demers also juxtaposes numerous texts drawn from the history of Western philosophy and literature (Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Boethius, and Hegel, among others). But while the theses style that Kane adopts required that he subsume these sources within an apparently non-subjective, almost axiomatic discourse, Demers’s rumination on recent electronic drone musicians, environmental destruction, and the apocalyptic imagination is essayistic and personal. In one passage, Demers abruptly cuts off an overview of various failed military campaigns in Afghanistan with a new paragraph beginning: “When I was eleven years old, I spent two weeks at a summer soccer camp on Catalina Island.” The essay’s tending toward a solipsistic inwardness is not an extraneous stylistic quirk, however, but follows from Demers’s observation that the image of universal destruction implicit in the idea of apocalypse is already presaged in the contemplation of one’s own death.

A further variation on the private/public interplay that permeates the history of writing might be found in Jake Marmer’s series of poems featured here, which represent (or “reimagine”) the author’s personal experiences of a communal ritual. Marmer tells us in his preface of a tradition of mostly wordless Chassidic songs, sometimes employing nonsense syllables (“a sort of somber scat”), called “nigunim.” He quotes a Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who was said to have stated at the climax of a sermon: “And even to this, too, there’s an answer. But that answer is necessarily a song.” Yet Marmer’s answer to his experience of listening to nigunim takes the form of writing.

In the poet's "attempt to reimagine the sensation of locating oneself inside a nigon" we return, once again, to the porous boundary that would separate the utterable and the ineffable.

## About Music

If these introductory thoughts have danced around an old form/content argument—with all the deficiencies attending that distinction—this charge might already be leveled at the volume's title: "Experimental Writing About Music." Indeed, perhaps the most misleading word in respect to certain pieces featured here is not "experimental," "writing," or "music," but the preposition that holds the phrase together: "about." It hardly seems the right term, for example, to denote the relationship between Retallack's *Errata Suite* and music. Retallack's text, after all, resembles a kind of music more than a discourse about music. In fact, the *Errata Suite* was performed under the title *Variations I for John Cage* (for two voices, motion sensitive microphones, with a wall installation of the text staves). In his 1978 text *Language, As a Music: Six Marginal Pretexts for Composition* (not included here), Ben Boretz sought to break down the distinction between music as a potential object (the "about") of semantic reference and music as a part of language's being. On the first page we read: "What is about, is also of, also is : / within :." It belongs to the conceptual level of this proposition that it must also be demonstrable on the level of immanent form, and it is to Boretz's credit that he invented a musico-linguistic poetics that seems to convincingly enact its own meanings. Thus, when we get a kind of recapitulation of the statement above in the concluding passage, the sixteen intervening pages of extraordinary rhythmic-phonetic-philosophy have transformed it (in my reading, anyway) from a speculative assertion to a retrospective, almost self-evident observation:

To be a language, now; to be a music,  
now; to be an utterance within, now; to be  
within a worldnow, irreducibly reshaded; to be  
an image of now; to be metabounded, nowhere;  
to be: of; to be: about; to be: now; to be: is: to mean.

To Boretz's lines we might add something J. K. Randall said in conversation with Dorota Czerner (quoted in Gleason's piece):

[W]hen we talk about musicalizing words that means to some people getting rid of their dictionary meanings—out of the way, deal with them for their sonic value. Well, to me, their dictionary meanings are precisely part of their sonic value. . . . to me the sound of grammar is one hell of a sound, and that I don't want to get rid of.

Of course, the meeting of music and language is nothing new. And their many points of confluence, found in innumerable cultures and dating to antiquity, is such that even the word “confluence” is in danger of misrepresenting the relationship by presupposing the stable existence of these concepts as autonomous categories in the first place. Nevertheless, this assertion hardly dissolves the tensions between what, for pragmatic, everyday purposes we continue to designate as music and language. I believe the productive potential of these tensions is well attested to by the imaginative and eclectic body of writings collected here.

I should add that Latour eventually revised his position and decided that he liked his phrase, “including the hyphen.” Whether my silly phrase “experimental writing about music” has any usefulness I’ll leave to the judgment of the reader. It has no bearing on the value of these superb pieces by so many talented writers. I would like to thank them. I should also acknowledge Brent Hayes Edwards, who introduced me to some of the work that inspired this project. Finally, I’d like to thank the “special editorial board”—comprised of Paula Horner, Will Mason, Joshua Navon, Lauren Flood, Galen DeGraff, and Thomas Fogg (this issue’s assistant editor)—who took on the difficult task of finding suitable criteria to assess the many submissions. In typesetting this volume Fogg and I have tried to strike a balance between our usual house style and the idiosyncrasies of each piece.

*David Gutkin*