Excess
It appears to me that the correct, apt description for...a striving beyond form...is not ‘counter-purposive’ or ‘formless’. For the benefit of a fitting characterisation of this important and essential phenomenon in all manifestations of the artistic sublime, I would like to posit...the new concept of ‘form-contrariness’ [Formwidrigkeit]... 
Arthur Seidl

Introduction
In his 1891 introduction to Vom Musikalisch-Schönen (On the Musically Beautiful) (1854), Eduard Hanslick states that “the beauty of a piece of music is specifically musical, i.e., is inherent in the tonal relationships without reference to an extraneous, extramusical context” (Hanslick [1854] 1986: xxiii). Recapturing his rigidly formalist statement, Hanslick also recalls that it had always been his “sincere intention to elucidate fully the ‘musically beautiful’ as the vital issue of our art and the supreme principle of its aesthetics” (ibid.: xxiii). Wagner, I have shown in the preceding chapter, could not have agreed less, but then Hanslick tried to eliminate his well-known opponent on his own grounds: Wagner’s “doctrine of endless melody” as employed in Tristan and Isolde, Hanslick claims, is nothing but chaos, “formlessness raised to the level of a principle” (ibid.: xxiii).

In a now little-known dissertation entitled Vom Musikalisch Erhabenen (On the Musically Sublime) (1887), Arthur Seidl would, however, contradict Hanslick on both counts: not the musically beautiful, but the musically sublime is the “vital issue” of music, not form but the resistance to form is what con-forms to the ‘essence’ of music. Exploring this idea of the musically sublime – which, as will be seen, essentially revolves around a Wagnerian disruption of sight that is caused by a disintegration of rhythmic regularity – I here pay special attention to Seidl’s suggestion of the term Formwidrigkeit to account for the artistic sublime in general and the musically sublime in particular. Literally translated, Formwidrigkeit would mean a countering of form. Seidl, however, uses the term all too restrictively to refer to a sensible form signalling something supersensible beyond itself: what Kant has called a negative presentation. Yet as I show below, Formwidrigkeit can also, and far more interestingly, be thought in more material or physical terms: as a sonorous excess breaking the coherence of a musical chord or sequence, as a physical excess defying muscular grasp in the performing of music, or as something other or unheard-of, breaking through existing rules of musical form.
Embedding these modalities of *Formwidrigkeit* in Romantic composition- and performance-strategies, I will explore the significance of the aesthetics of the sublime to Romantic revaluations of music and musical practice. Though in some cases this harks back to traditional concerns with the monumental, the form-contrariness typifying more experimental Romantic musical assays can in fact be seen to anticipate Jean-François Lyotard’s recent rereading of sublime art as breaking the law of ‘good’ form and denying itself the solace of the beautiful.

**Countering Hanslick**

It is well known that not long after the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche radically reconsidered his views on Wagner. No longer regarded as an ally but an adversary, if not a traitor, Wagner became for Nietzsche the composer who wrote dangerous music, making listeners forget and lose themselves in a quicksand of tones by means of a suspiciously monumental style. It is not the place to enter in detail into this complicated controversy here, yet it should be noted that in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* (1888, 1895) Nietzsche totally reversed his argument against ‘mimetic’ music put forward in imitation of Wagner in *The Birth*. While formerly he had made a case against a so-called ‘plastic rhythm’, he now makes a case against the absence of rhythmic regularity imminent to – in his view – Wagner’s unending melody. Thus, in “Wagner als Gefahr” (“Wagner as Danger”) he states disapprovingly that unending melody “seeks deliberately to break all evenness of time and force and even scorns it occasionally” – though, as Nietzsche will often observe, only on the incidental, small-scale-, never on the large-scale level. The result is a “complete degeneration of rhythmic feeling, chaos in place of rhythm“, whereby the listener is gradually deprived of any grip, any balancing stronghold (Nietzsche [1895] 1988: 422). Listening, as Nietzsche pictures this effect metaphorically, “one walks into the sea, gradually loses one’s secure footing, and finally surrenders oneself to the elements without reservation: one must swim”¹: one is, as he continues, “floating – no longer walking and dancing” (ibid.: 421-422, 422). No longer “dominated by any law of plasticity” this music wants only “effect”: it wants to intoxicate its listeners (ibid.: 422).¹

If Nietzsche thus denounces this grip- and orientation-breaking effect – an effect that he formerly would have considered a proper effect of an art that should not aspire to invoke the world of appearances, the world of forms and physical movements – Arthur Seidl would come to its rescue in his dissertation on the musically sublime. Here, Seidl takes Wagner’s music and the Beethoven essay as a starting

¹Perhaps this reconsideration of Wagnerian music drama in terms of a dangerous instead of delightful self-loss is not so much radically opposed to as already dormant within Nietzsche’s conception of the Dionysian and Apollonian blending in art. In this blending, we have seen, the visible, Apollonian forms and also the words sung on stage are to protect the listener from the overwhelming presence of the music heard. The danger of Dionysian music – which in *The Birth* still signals music *per se* – is in this way already implied in Nietzsche’s early defence of it.
point to formulate a specifically musically sublime in contrast to Eduard Hanslick’s idea of the musically beautiful. Like Wagner and the early Nietzsche, he will argue that music cannot be appropriately judged according to the norm of beautiful form, but rather to the formlessness associated with the sublime.

No doubt influenced by the polemic between Wagner and Hanslick, Seidl’s main objection against Hanslick’s theory of the musically beautiful – which Seidl nevertheless respectfully calls “an obstacle that one cannot get past” without having come to terms with it – is that it only applies to the Mozartian school (Seidl 1887: 1, my translation). Here, everything would stand “as fixed and concluded in itself”, the music being ruled by proportional metric symmetry and “plastic surveyability” (ibid.: 128). Seidl in this instance alludes to the Hanslickian notion of “tonal arabesques” [Tonarabesken] that “always mutually correspond with each other in their windings, connect with each other in ranks [Gliedern] and groups and...together always make up a specific tonal drawing, an accomplished, self-enclosed, finished musical painting: Limitation! – everything rests harmonically, firmly rooted in and on itself (as Hanslick has also described this...in a similar way)” (ibid.: 129). Such a process would be exemplified by Mozart’s music.

Yet what if music defies limitation, what if it does not conform to the idea of self-subsistent, neatly rounded forms? What if it strives toward the unbounded and, to this end, defies the easily graspable proportions of the beautiful? What if, as Seidl observes with respect to the Adagio of Beethoven’s Ninth, a music feeds on metric freedom and displays such an “extraordinary connection of...melodic phrases, the one already starting where the other stops”, without any kind of “satisfying ending” setting in, so that the whole cannot be easily grasped or overseen (ibid.: 128)? Hanslick’s theory of the musically beautiful, Seidl argues, would be “totally inadequate” to account for such music (ibid.: 130). Indeed, it would be founded on an outdated theory of music that is already in contradiction with even Bach, with Beethoven and most certainly with Wagner’s modern musical practices (ibid.: 130). Seidl’s main objective in

---

2I would like to thank Henk Borgdorff for pointing out to me, and providing me with, Seidl’s text.

3As Seidl quotes a Dr C. Fuchs: “The original source of the concept of the beautiful is undoubtedly and verifiably the visible, the plasticly or pictorially attractive, that which pleases the eye through the proportional nature of physical forms, through the richness and sensuality of colours” (Seidl 1887: 11). As such, the idea of the beautiful is illegitimately applied to music: the latter should be judged according to criteria more appropriate to its specific nature.

4Ironically, when Hanslick comes to speak of the arabesque he emphasizes its sublime effect, as its lines “expand and contract and forever astonish the eye with their ingenious alternation of tension and repose” (Hanslick [1854] 1986: 29).

5Compare this to Hanslick’s appreciation of Beethoven’s Prometheus-Overture to illustrate the effect of the musically beautiful: “there takes shape before the mind’s ear of the listener a melodic symmetry between the first and second bars, then between these and the next two, and finally between the first four bars as a single grand arch and the corresponding arch of the following four bars” (Hanslick [1854] 1986: 12).
proposing an alternative idea of the musically sublime will, as such, be to
counter the emphasis on musical proportionality in Hanslick’s central
statement:

The primordial stuff of music is regular and pleasing sound. Its
animating principle is rhythm: rhythm in the large scale as the
coproportionality of a symmetric structure; rhythm in the smaller
scale as regular alternating motion of individual units within the
metric period. The material out of which the composer creates,
of which the abundance can never be exaggerated, is the
entire system of tones, with their latent possibilities for melodic,
harmonic, and rhythmic variety. (Hanslick [1854] 1986: 28)

The Sublime in Music

Connecting the sublime with the musical, Seidl starts from the
Kantian distinction between the beautiful and sublime as well as later,
nineteenth-century elaborations on the topic by Theodor Vischer,
Wilhelm Wundt, W.T. Krugg, J.H. von Kirchmann and others (Seidl 1887:
17-37). Following Kant’s analytic – the problems that this raises will be
discussed later – Seidl defines the sublime feeling as a pleasure
mediated through a displeasure, an indirect pleasure, brought about by
something mighty or apparently immeasurable, too great for
comprehension. If, he states, “the beautiful pleases through its form, the
sublime only pleases indirectly on account of a certain formlessness”
(ibid.: 31). This, he adds, does not necessarily associate the sublime with
the ugly, in so far as a lack of proportionality would signal a lack of
beauty: “the ugly”, Seidl proposes quite significantly, “is the not yet
beautiful, the sublime the no longer beautiful” (ibid.: 31). The ugly is
beneath, the sublime beyond the beautiful, the former “has not yet
found its proper form” (and in suspicious nineteenth-century fashion Seidl
associates this with an animal, less-than-human state), the latter is above
all form – supersensible and to that extent super- or un-formable (ibid.: 31).
In this capacity the sublime provides, indeed, a “way out” of the
world of sensibility, of bright and easy forms, while the beautiful precisely
“likes to capture” the subject in this plastic world (ibid.: 33). As with Kant,
though Seidl here appears distinctively Hegelian as well, the emphasis is
thus on Erhebung through a painful encounter with something that
defies – yet in this way also stretches to its outer limits – the formative
power and comprehensive grasp of imagination.

As such, transcending the visible world of forms, and triggering the
mind to move past it, the “constitutive moments” of the sublime are
radically opposed to those of the beautiful: the latter feeds on
“regularity, symmetry, harmony, etc.”, the former on “amorphousness,
dis-proportionality, lawlessness [Regellosigkeit], asymmetry, disharmony,
etc.” (ibid.: 31). Here, however, Seidl also departs from Kant to the extent
that he tries to mediate between Kant’s extremely subjectivist and a
more object-oriented approach to the sublime. Basically, his
compromise is that an object can take such huge or mighty proportions
that it triggers or suggests an idea of absolute greatness or might in the
mind of the beholder. It is, in turn, this idea, born out of an interaction
between object and subject, which gives rise to a feeling of the sublime:
of something that transcends any known measure or standard. Thus,
paradoxically, “the object already incites in the subject the mood
[Stimmung] of the sublime through the particular nature of its shape
[Gestaltung], through its own form”: the object is an incentive for self-
transcendence (ibid.: 34).

Obviously, in this way Seidl can allow art – that which is shaped,
formed – into the sphere of the sublime, even if the latter can “be
contained in sensible appearance, shape, form, only as potentiality”, as
intimation (ibid.: 35). Theodor Vischer, Seidl remarks, had to this effect
already defined the artistic sublime in Hegelian fashion as the “formed
and formless in one” (ibid.: 45). Seidl himself proposes the term
Formwidrigkeit. Not unlike the idea of a negative presentation already
encountered in Lowth, Usher, and Kant, an available form is here said to
be in contrast or conflict with, in fact undermined by, the idea (of
something beyond form) that it gives rise to (ibid.: 44). This is a form that is
in fact in conflict with itself, that contradicts the senses in such a way
that it inspires the idea of something beyond itself, of, indeed, the infinite
(ibid.: 46). An idea, one could say, that refuses to be shaped: that
refuses to be born or incarnated, to show itself in its entirety to the
physical eye or announce itself in its entirety to the physical ear. In this
way, though wo/man-made and sense-bound, a work of art can still at
least suggest or simulate something that “transcends every standard of
sense” (ibid.: 45). The same, I have shown, was at stake in Burke’s
analysis of the artificial infinite: nothing in nature can ever be truly
infinite. Art can never present the infinite as such, but it can play a game
of make-believe as if it did as much.

With reference to music, Seidl points to the effects of excessive
loudness and speed, of sharp dissonances, and of a long-built
crescendo effectuated by an immense tone-mass. As for the last, the
effect is in some ways comparable to the effect that Kant describes in
relation to the great Pyramid of Cheops. Starting from a gradually built-
up crescendo produced by an even number of instruments, Seidl
observes the following. Inspired by the increase of sound, imagination is
here “incited to apprehend ever more, and to ascend ever higher. It
even rushes ahead of what is given, what is concretely available [in the
tones produced], progresses further and further on its own, and finally
loses itself in an indeterminable, infinite height, that is to say, progresses
up to an unbounded, omnipotent intensity, which leaves objective
reality far behind” (ibid.: 93-94). This means that a massive crescendo
effectively suggests, rather than concretely presents, a progression into
infinity: it gives rise to an idea and even a response exceeding its own
form. Imagination, after all, is said to proceed on its own, as if fired by
the intensifying movements of the music, into a realm that leaves the
actual sound-world behind. Unlike Kant, however, it seems that for Seidl
the sublime feeling is thus effectuated through an ever-increasing stretching of the scope of imagination, until it is lost in its own excessive activity, instead of a realization of a supersensible capacity of reason giving rise to the idea of infinity as absolute totality.

For Seidl, this play with Formwidrigkeit indicates that music here not so much presents but works the sublime as something absolute, beyond all measure. As the example of an over-heated imagination carrying off beyond the music heard already indicates, the sublime is here not intrinsic but secondary to the sounds produced: a side-effect of their increasing intensity, which incites the mind to continue this increase into infinity (ibid.: 95-96). Romantic critics and theorists of music, I have described in chapter 4, had already observed something similar. Here instrumental music, due to its semantic and also material indeterminacy, gave free reign to the power of imagination, yet never allowed it to come to a satisfying ending. The feel of the infinite, it will be recalled, here very much coincided with a process of infinite association and infinite interpretation.

The Sublime of Music

For Seidl, however, this interference of imaginative power is extremely problematic with respect to the possibility of a sublime that is, in his words, not external but internal to music: not a sublime in or worked by music, but a sublime of music, generated by a specifically musical impression. In what appears to be a most awkward rereading of the Kantian sublime, he basically proposes that the sublime can never be intrinsic to music when the power of imagination is actively roused or involved. As an associative and representational power, drawing its associations (in part) from the visible world of forms, the activity of imagination blocks – according to Seidl – the possibility of a specifically or ‘truly’ musical sublime. Thus, to his mind, an activated imagination still provides a link with the phenomenal world, the world of specifiable forms and appearances.

What this really means is that with the power of imagination as a mediator, the sublime is merely experienced by way of analogy in music. As Seidl has it, the listener here experiences the music as if she were experiencing something else, something that recalls a scene or event in the outside world – for instance, a violent storm or the heaving of a raging ocean. Though effective, this nevertheless means that

---

6 In accordance with Seidl’s thesis that the formlessness of the sublime can only be intimated from within the peculiar forms of art, it is this activity or movement of mind which would then produce a sublime feeling: a feeling of Überschwenglichkeit in having hurried on into a region where all comparative standards are left behind. All this wandering off, however, rather recalls the Nietzschean swimming and floating in a tone-world without grip or orientation than the Kantian failure of imagination in the face of a superior, intrusive power of reason. Indeed, one could say, Seidl here portrays an enthusiasm of imagination, an imagination moving beyond its proper, sensible bounds, that Kant rather likes to see restrained as much as possible.
something must be added to the music to create a sublime impression, that the music is used as a means to evoke some awesome natural scene. For Seidl however (and in this respect he echoes Hanslick's argument in relation to the idea of the musically beautiful), in order to bring about a specifically musically sublime experience, music should not be used as a means for an end. Indeed, it should not even be used as a means to evoke an idea of something so un-formable as the infinite, the music suggesting in its movements or dynamics an extension or intensification without end that inspires imagination to probe and stretch its limits.

Instead of such a musical mediation, if you will, of either a visual impression or a supersensible idea, Seidl would like to see the musically sublime as it were contained in a specifically musical impression – an impression, more specifically, of music's 'essence'. To this end, and as an alternative to an "associatively induced sublime", he proposes Wagner's suggestion of an un-architectonic music: a music that does not in any way recall the movements of the phenomenal world, a music that blocks out-sight and short-circuits the formative-associative activity of imagination (ibid.: 113). A music, one might say, that resists the forms of the visible world and is instead purely a music of the Will. Building on Wagner's Schopenhauerian notion of music as an immediate objectification of this Will, Seidl suggests that such an 'intrinsic' musical sublime – a 'truly' musically sublime – is conditioned by a rupture of what Wagner had already labelled music's (inordinately) plastic element: its rhythmic regularity. Thus, he states,

A music will answer to the specific character of its nature all the more, will, in this sense, fulfil its sublime calling all the sooner, the more...the absolutely rhythmical recedes behind its lively expression, and the less the tonally-embodied (infinite) realm of the Will, that dark area of the ‘thing in itself’, is ensnared in the ‘guilt of appearances’ by the medium of rhythm... It can, further, be all the more sublime the more it renounces, within the rhythm set, the even, the symmetric-overseeable, so that here the irregularity of a 5/4 or 7/4 beat can thus retain its precise meaning and motivation. As concerns melody, a...‘bel canto’ will ever more recall a [plastic, perceivable] line..., while by contrast the ‘unending melody’ – more correctly put, the free-floating, fluctuating melody of a Richard Wagner – will generally touch [the listener] with the character of that truly musical ‘sublimity’ [Erhabenheit]. (ibid.: 117)

The music of the deaf ‘seer’ Beethoven is an example (Seidl mentions the Allegro of the Eroica, and the Ninth Symphony), but also Liszt and Schumann (think, for instance, of the opening of the latter's Manfred-Overture). Clearly, and as with Wagner, the central issue here is not just a disruption of out-sight, but also the disruption of over-sight as topicalised in theories of the sublime from Lowth to Kant. In 1906, for that
matter, Ferruccio Busoni would continue the Wagner-Seidl argument, proclaiming that music can only be truly absolute in its liberation from the architectonic, from that which can be easily captured and overseen (Dahlhaus 1978: 43). Like Wagner and Seidl, Busoni here invokes the "revolutionary" Beethoven. If not as a rule then at least incidentally, the latter was as bold to leave "symmetric proportions" behind – Busoni mentions the introduction of the Hammerklavier-Sonata – and prefigure a free form that would answer to a new idea of absolute music: a music without pre-set rules and bounds, without plasticity, without the condition that, precisely, had defined absolute music in the conventional, nineteenth-century use of the term – "architectonic form" (ibid.: 43).

Problems and Prospects

There is, evidently, something highly problematic about Seidl’s thesis that the sublime of music – i.e. the musically sublime – can by definition be brought about in a disruption of rhythmic regularity. That, differently said, this disruption by definition occasions a disruption of (imaginative) sight and for that reason occasions a ‘purely’ musically sublime feeling. Admittedly, a break-down of rhythmic symmetry can undermine a listener’s sense of orientation, her ability to situate herself with respect to the music, in such a way as to trigger a blockage in the musical imagination to grasp the music as a meaningful totality. Indeed, it could excite the kind of Lowthian dizziness, in which the mind is caught in a boundless vortex, vainly trying to find a way out to locate itself. Yet, to state that all irregular beats, or all continuity-suspending fermata’s, automatically make for a musically sublime experience is too general a statement to become operative.

Another problem that Seidl’s theory of the musically sublime poses is that it represents the sublime feeling as a flight away from the world of sense: a leap into a ‘world beyond’ when, to speak with Wordsworth, the light of sense goes out and the mind’s eye turns inward. On the one hand, this can be traced to Wagner’s misunderstood notion of the Schopenhauerian sublime as a moment in which the subject lifts itself above and closes itself off from the sense-bound world, without any conflicting memory to its more earth-bound aspect. On the other hand, however, Seidl’s emphasis on transcendence is due to his adherence to the Kantian model of sublime experience as (conclusively) moving from the sensible to the supersensible. True, like Kant, Seidl emphasizes the pain of imagination. This would here amount to a pain occasioned by what Wagner already called a de-potentialisation of out-sight; an interruption of the visual-formative power. As a reward, however, the subject can transcend this pain in a complete forgetfulness, a complete letting go of the sense-bound world, during which, Seidl learned from Wagner, it would penetrate into the ‘essence’ of things (ibid.: 102-105).

In so far as this parallels the development that takes place in the Kantian sublime, with a subject evolving from a being of sense into a
being above or beyond sense, Seidl also expressly vouches for the sequential structure of sublime experience. There is, he admits, some confusion as to the sublime moment being a mixture of pain and pleasure or a transition from one to the other. Nevertheless, he decisively rejects the possibility of a simultaneous experience of frustration and elation, blockage and breakthrough in the same consciousness of the same individual (ibid.: 30). In this way, Seidl side-steps the contradiction that a Schopenhauer had located at the heart of sublime experience. Earlier theorists like Schiller had not failed to notice it either. Thus, Seidl observes, Schiller refers to the sublime feeling as “a mixture of suffering and joy” (ibid.: 29). Paul Deussen, I have already noted in chapter 1, would likewise conceive of it as a delight whereby, nonetheless, the feeling of terror still hovers in the “background” of consciousness (ibid.: 29). By contrast, Seidl likes to think of the pain of the sublime as an initial, provisional stage, followed and removed by a conclusive feeling of pleasure.

Thus, ironically enough, while eighteenth-century British theories of the sublime and music opened up a different perspective on the sublime feeling as an irresolvable, paradoxical combination of pain and pleasure at once, Seidl’s speculations on the musically sublime rather offer a return to the dominant, narrative model of the Kantian sublime. Still, and notwithstanding this, when attenuated somewhat, the issues raised in Seidl’s theory could be quite valuable as a starting-point to consider more closely the possible varieties or modalities of the musically sublime experience. Thus, I will show in the following sections, Seidl’s term Formwidrigkeit is highly instrumental to conceive of ways in which, firstly, the matter or sound of music, secondly, the physical act of musical execution, and, thirdly, the disruptive manifestation of the musically other or unheard-of, can be related to the shock of the sublime. Considering these possibilities one by one, I will also point out how each, in their very own way, can be embedded within specifically nineteenth-century practices of musical composition and performance.

**Sound**

With respect to the first, the sonorous matter of music, it is necessary to return to Seidl’s claim that the musically sublime can only be felt in a break or disruption of rhythmic regularity. Above, I have said that this is an all too general a statement to become operative: not all metrically free or irregular music, not all rests or fermata’s will by definition make for an experience of the (musically) sublime. Yet, Seidl’s Wagnerian claim could be made more functional and also more interesting when reconceived in the following way. This, as will be seen, centrally involves a rereading of Formwidrigkeit as a sonorous matter breaking through or refusing to be put into form, rather than a form giving rise to something supersensible – an idea of the infinite, a moral destiny – beyond itself.

Thus, first of all, when Seidl refers to a break-down of rhythmic symmetry as a condition of possibility of the musically sublime, he really
means to say that a breakthrough of the musically sublime at once divulges the “last, inner kernel of music”: the more ‘sublime’ (i.e. the less plastic) the more ‘musical’ music becomes (ibid.: 123). One can, of course, easily read this as part of a tendency in nineteenth-century aesthetics to associate the art of music per se with the category of the sublime. In so far – following Schopenhauer – as (instrumental) music is thought to be a direct embodiment of the Will, and the sublime is conceived in terms of the infinity, invisibility, and boundlessness of that same Will, music is already the most appropriate medium to trigger a feeling of the sublime.

However, Seidl’s Wagnerian conception of the musically sublime could also be interpreted rather differently, without reference to the supposed metaphysical ‘content’ of instrumental music. For instance, his claim that an absence of rhythmic regularity divulges the ‘kernel’ of music could be reread as an absence of so called syntactical musical parameters that allows the material, sensuous “grain” of sound to come forward. Even recently, John Shepherd has referred to this ‘grain’ of sound (its timbre or tone colour) as “the core of musical articulation”, and it will be helpful to consider his observations in some detail:

The parameters of frequency and duration, that which Meyer (1959) refers to as the ‘syntactical’ as opposed to the ‘sensuous’ in music, can be pinned down to the page in a way which amplitude and timbre cannot. The insusceptibility of timbre to analytic notation is particularly symptomatic. For timbre, more than any other musical parameter, appears to be the nature of sound itself...It is the texture or grain without which sound cannot reach us, touch us, or move us. It is the vibratory essence that puts the world of sound in motion... If rhythm and pitch can be regarded as durations and extensions of timbre, then rhythm and pitch as musical parameters are distanced from the core of musical articulation and come to contain and contextualise it in one way rather than any other (Shepherd 1991: 90)

Timbre, in Shepherd’s analysis, comes to figure as something like the thing-in-itself of sound: it is “the vibratory essence that puts the world of sound in motion”.7 Rhythm and pitch are, to that extent, secondary to sonorous articulation, giving shape or form, duration or extension, to the particular texture of sound. On this basis, one could say that there is a structural parallel between Seidl’s Wagnerian claim that rhythmic symmetry is not a primary aspect of music, but rather one imposed upon it, and Shepherd’s claim that rhythm is “distanced from the core of musical articulation”. In both claims, the musical ‘principle’ of music is related to something else, something elusive that resists specification in

7Sander van Maas (2002) has shown in relation to the music of Olivier Messiaen how an excess in the givennes of sound can point beyond the constitution of music in parametric coordinates. On this basis he has devised a different, phenomenological approach to sound in the analysis of music.
terms of individuation or notation. For Shepherd, this is the grain of sound, for Wagner, we have seen, it is likewise the colour of sound released from rhythmic rigidity.

Within this perspective, the sublime of music could be traced to a sonorous matter that somehow resists containment or contextualisation or, conversely, that somehow breaks through those (rhythmic) parameters that contain or contextualise it. Thus, for instance, the church-organ can be made to clamour in such a rich way that the tones it produces appear to disintegrate at their very sounding into a myriad of tonal particles. They cannot be taken together as one but tend to break one’s hearing apart. Consider, for instance, this dramatic moment in the Adagio of J.S. Bach’s Organ Toccata in C major, arranged for the piano by Ferruccio Busoni:

The shock here is not simply due to the sudden attack and sheer power of the chord, or its violent contrast to the intimate beauty of the preceding. Rather, it is due to what I would call a form turning against itself. A single sounded chord falls apart at its very attack, due to internal tensions or dissonances splitting it from the inside out, in a profusion of indeterminable echoes and resonances. Here, one can imagine a more or less amorphous, because indeterminable, matter breaking through the bounds of form – an excess of resonances usurping formal demarcations that facilitate the musical imagination – as constituting a sublime moment: a break or rupture momentarily interrupting one’s auditory stronghold. The ear cannot form this music in the sense of containing it all at once as an integral, clearly demarcated whole. And yet, while this Formwidrigkeit is felt as painful, the conflicting richness of the music also effectuates the opposite: a not altogether unpleasant sense of letting go, of being immersed in a sonorous excess.

Though not always this dramatically, such a disruption of tone colour within, or at the expense of, musically-formal determinants of pitch and rhythm can often be found in the piano works of Franz Liszt. As Charles Rosen has already described in great detail, Liszt clearly valued realization over conception, the sonic event, if you will, over structure or idea (Rosen 1995: 491-511). With Liszt, as Rosen puts it, the “piano was taught to make new sounds. These sounds often did not conform to an
ideal of beauty, either Classical or Romantic, but they enlarged the meaning of music, made possible new modes of expression” (ibid.: 492). This, as Rosen shows, even makes the apparently vulgar and banal central passage of the Hungarian Rhapsody no. 10 into a “dazzling” feast of unsuspected pianistic noises and tone colours (ibid.: 492). In so far as this mainly concerns the Lisztian glissandi, Liszt’s Totentanz equally offers a typical example of the piercing sonorous effects he could produce on the piano:8

In his Ästhetik des Klavierspiels (The Aesthetics of Piano-Playing) (1860), Adolph Kullak refers to the glissando (literally a gliding sound) as “purely decorative”, “outmoded” (with the exception of Liszt’s piano works, he adds), and “cheap” (Kulak [1860] 1905: 240). In the Totentanz, however, the glissandi are not so much decorative or incidental as instrumental and vital to the articulation of a process of dynamic intensification. This process sets in at the very beginning of Variation 2 (m. 75), gradually sliding out into the mm. 91-95 just quoted:

---

8The Totentanz was completed for piano and orchestra in 1849, revised in 1853 and 1859, rewritten again for piano solo between 1860 and 1865, and premiered in that last year in both versions at The Hague with pianist Hans von Bülow. I am here referring to the piano solo version.
As if a variation within a variation, mm. 83-90 both reflect and inflect mm. 75-82: the still (diabolically) playful sextuplets are changed into pounding triplets (the ‘trumpets’), the bass is lowered an octave and in a way inverted (the rhythmic movement being down-up instead of the other way around), and out of it emerge the glissandi like a frenetic, shrieking echo or resonance. More and more, in mm. 91-95, as the volume increases, it is the crating sound of the glissandi that starts to
dominate the music in wave-like movements. Their peculiar texture – and their sharp sonorous contrast to the (fractured) theme played in the bass – has no mere ornamental function here but rather defines this last part of the second Variation as a palette, if you will, of different sonorous varieties. More so, the sound of the glissandi cannot well be placed or contextualised as a recognizably pianistic sound, or any other familiar musical sound. Especially when, as indicated, played vibrantly, the glissandi are hard to determine in the hearing of it, appearing like a strange zooming sound that literally scratches in-between the chords.

Thus, to re-invoke the idea of Formwidrigkeit, it is not just an excess of resonance but a resonating otherness that obstructs the easy formation of a sound-image here. Interrupting the loud but nevertheless easily graspable bass-chords like a fierce wind blowing in and out, the glissandi cut through the music, continuously threatening to drown it out in their high, resonating intensity. Listening, the effect is once more of something erupting – a break in the (sonorous) context, if you will – and what erupts is an auditory matter that approaches the so called “dirty timbre” often encountered in twentieth-century pop music (Shepherd 1991: 152-173). Indeed, if I have described the sonic impression of the glissandi in terms of scratching, sliding or zipping in and out, it could be effectively compared to the intrusive, grating sound of scratching vinyl as heard in much Western pop-music of the 1980’s.

As such, and this also applies to Liszt’s later works such as Nuage gris (1881) or Unstern: sinistre, disastro (1880, 1886), with its peculiarly grinding and pounding sounds defining the music, Liszt forms a remarkable exception to what Shepherd and Wicke (1997) consider one of the dominant traits of the “functional tonal tradition” in Western music: the downplaying of “the role of timbre in sounds” and, in this way, of “the material presence of sounds themselves” (Shepherd and Wicke 1997: 154). In the above passage from the Totentanz, however, it is quite the opposite. The “tactile dimensions” of sound are here exploited to generate an effect that is constitutive of, not incidental to, Liszt’s variations on the Dies Irae plainsong (ibid.: 154). As such, too, Liszt’s disruptive liberation of the matter of sound from the constraints of agreeable form posits a typical counter-example to the dominant, Hanslickian idea(l) of the musically beautiful: not the lure of formal proportionality, but the interruption of sonorous materiality (a return of the repressed, one might say), not the containment of the beautiful, but the excess of the sublime here brings home music’s ‘vital issue’.

**Hands**

If such a sonorous excess, breaking through from the inside out, interrupts the parameters for a controlling, formative listening, Seidl’s notion of Formwidrigkeit could also be related to a material excess that obstructs per-formative activity: a notated chord or passage that literally contradicts or defies its physical realization. Think, for instance, of that twentieth-century current in musical composition called the ‘new
complexity’, with composers like Brian Ferneyhough, Franco Donatoni and, more recently, Rodger Redgate or Richard Barrett creating musics that demand an almost super-human skill and impossible endurance from its performers. Ferneyhough’s Carcieri d’invenzione (1982-1986) (based on the etchings by Piranesi), for example, presents a score that moves quite deliberately beyond perform-ability, partly due to its hyperprecise notation.

In so far as such music appears beyond (easy) appropriation, it could be related to the sublime to the extent that the sublime feeling, too, centrally revolves around a beyond-grasp. Though ‘grasp’ in this instance refers to a mental hold, the term basically connotes a physical hold, an actually seizing and closing the hand on something, implying an effort at physical mastery – as in clasping with the fingers or gripping with the hand or arm. A ‘beyond-grasp’ could thus, in this context, be quite literally understood as something that supersedes or transcends the reach of fingers, hand, arm – or at least something that enforces a painful stretch to reach beyond one’s (apparent) physical or anatomical limits.

The Fourth of Robert Schumann’s Nachtstücke (Nocturnes) in F major, op. 23, will illustrate the point:
Difficult may be not the most appropriate term here, yet especially the right-hand chords in mm. 18-21 require a stretch of at least 21 cm., moving way beyond the octave, that exceeds an easy, unproblematic (or uninterrupted) grasp. The trick would be to place the hands as flatly as possible on the very outer tips of the keyboard to stretch the fingers from F to A, G to B♭, E to G, or D to F. The effort to take together as one that marks the effort at comprehension in eighteenth-century sublime experience, is thus performed and experienced on a physical level here in the – moderately painful – effort to literally encompass at once, in one grasp, what appears beyond reach for your averagely shaped hand and fingers.

An example of more spectacularly muscular difficulties would be the climax of Chopin’s Etude in A minor, no. 11, op. 25:

Charles Rosen has observed in The Romantic Generation that the “very positions into which the hands are forced here are like gestures of exasperated despair. It would seem as if the physical awkwardness is itself an expression of emotional tension” (Rosen 1995: 382). Indeed, he continues later on, in “the etudes of Chopin, the moment of greatest emotional tension is generally the one that stretches the hand most painfully, so that the muscular sensation becomes – even without the sound – a mimesis of passion” (ibid.: 383). Or, perhaps more correctly, the muscular sensation here exemplifies (in Nelson Goodman’s sense of the term) emotional tension: the player physically performs an anguish that metaphorically translates into a distress or anxiety in emotional terms. Pain thus becomes a performative effect, suggesting an identity between what Rosen calls “physical realization and emotional content”:
the “hand of the performer literally feels the sentiment” that is to be ostensibly expressed – the hand of the performer experiences itself to the music in moving, aching itself according to it (ibid.: 383).

In so far as this amounts to the painful labour, the near-unsurpassable obstacles, that Burke and others have associated with the sublime, it also adds up on a most basic level with Seidl’s notion of Formwidrigkeit in music: a notation that literally contradicts the grasp and capacity of the hands and fingers which are supposed to perform it. Interesting, in this respect, is the taxing and often painful effort that much piano music from the earlier nineteenth century onward appears to require from its performers. Indeed, as Rosen observes, the “infliction of pain on keyboard performers begins...in the early nineteenth century with the accompaniment of Schubert’s Erlkönig, which seems to have caused the composer himself some problems to perform. Several Scarlatti sonatas are as difficult to play with accuracy as any work by Liszt, but none of them has ever caused physical anguish to a performer” (ibid.: 383). Liszt, of course, championed in transgressing the boundaries of pianistic execution, skirting as he did “the edge of the impossible in piano technique, the limits to what the human hand can be made to do” (ibid.: 493). Most notorious are, in this respect, the Paganini Etudes (especially in their 1838 version) and Transcendental Etudes (especially in their second, 1837 version, which is even rarely attempted today). Rosen also mentions the staccato octaves in the finale of the Hungarian Rhapsody no. 6 as presenting a “most famous danger to health”, but in Liszt’s “Orage” (“Storm”) from Les Années de pèlerinage I: Suisse (Years of Pilgrimage I: Switzerland) the wrist may easily suffer severely enough without the staccato in the ongoing scales of octavos in the left- and right-hand (ibid.: 383). Here is the Storm gushing before its final outbreak, increasing and abating quite impressively in the grand style:
The allegro molto presents at least half the obstacle here, and it is indeed the idea of excessive speed, as it were escaping from beneath one’s hands and fingers, that signals another instance of Formwidrigkeit: a tempo moving beyond the (apparent) limits of the physically possible or feasible, and in this way a moving against – or at least seriously probing – the performance capacity of fingers, hands, arms. The indication ‘prestissimo possibile’ (‘as fast as possible’) will, for that matter, recur repeatedly in nineteenth-century keyboard music (especially in what Rosen has called the basically Romantic idea of the Etude), pushing hands and fingers ever further, ever faster, beyond the physical pulse (Rosen 1995: 363). Here too, the “muscular exertion” required could be said to coincide with the high difficulty- and pain-degree of the sublime (ibid.: 382). Paradoxically, though, this comes down to an extreme effort to relax hands, wrist, and fingers, so as to increase the flexibility of the
former two, and the velocity of the latter. Relaxation, as Rosen puts it, “is the supreme form of technique and it is not always attainable” yet it does seem the available option to counter the form-contrariness of excessive velocity in complex musical structures, turning pain into pleasure (ibid.: 382).  

**Virtuosity**

One could also say that such extreme velocity obstructs the (average) reader of a musical score to easily project or imagine its sounding, or thwarts the listener to form a coherent sound-image. In so far as great speed already signals something potentially out of control, gotten out of hand, the relation between score and performance can here appear strangely contradictory: what is heard often does not at all seem to conform to what is or was read. When executed, the sounds, or so it seems, take on a life of themselves, simulating a gap between notation and sonorous realization. Indeed, when played slowly (think, for instance, of Chopin’s Prelude in F sharp minor, no. 8, op. 28, or the violent second movement of his Ballade in F major, no. 2, op. 38) the music often appears to offer something rather different from what is heard when played in the correct tempo. Conversely, excessive speed can frustrate an immediate grasp of music, simply because the sounds pass by all too rapidly to be fully absorbed, registered, and integrated in the hearing of them. Chopin’s Prelude in E flat minor, no. 14, op. 28, or the awkward, final movement of his Sonata in B flat minor, op. 35, are a case in point. In both instances, the listener cannot keep up, partly because s/he is allowed no breathing space, partly because the music

---

9Though, I will show below, the mastering of such excessive velocity (an overcoming, one might say, of Formwidrigkeit) would make nothing less than stunt-women out of nineteenth-century virtuoso-players, speeding up was nevertheless not just a matter of brilliant, technical or mechanical display alone in nineteenth-century musical practice. Indeed, there was something more at stake: a departure of instrumental music from mimesis. Thus, as Hans Georg Nägeli (the piano teacher and publisher from Zurich) observed in his *Vorlesungen über Musik* (*Lectures on Music*) (1826), velocity in contemporary instrumental music made possible an emancipation of music from the human voice: not a liberation from the constraints of words, but, in addition to this, a liberation from cantabile, from the song-likeness or, literally, sing-ability of music, for which the human voice had familiarly set the norm. As Nägeli puts it: “This increased velocity is, and also was, as soon as our piano-virtuosos accomplished it, the best antidote against the inhibition [Hemmung] of...song-likeness [Cantabilität]. When things go so fast, there is no more singing, no more miming of the human voice, which cannot reach this level of velocity” (Schmitt 1990: 88, my translation). This beyond-human level of velocity (which will, however, logically have an upper limit given the fact that it is executed by human hands) on the mechanical keyboard had, according to Nägeli, started with Beethoven. Beethoven, he says, collided with cantabile like an “artistic battlefield-hero...Not a human but a spiritual voice resounds in his music. This, however, is of a higher organism than that residing in the human voice” (ibid.: 35-36). Thus, the inhuman voice of the machine is conveniently transformed into a super-human voice of the spirit: no longer taking the voice as a norm, but rather contradicting it in resisting the possibility of sing-ability, instrumental music the instrument is made to signal something immaterial beyond of itself.
does not offer any clear, thematic or dynamic development, but instead rushes past assiduously, without alleviation.

In this way, excessive speed can render something miraculous to music. The apparent gap between notation and realization (in itself already signalling a certain Formwidrigkeit) can make the latter into something truly astonishing, like an effect without a clearly determinable or fully reducible cause. Perhaps, one could suggest, it was this magic that the virtuoso-performers of the nineteenth century were feeding on in their relentless attempts to expand ever further the force, grasp, and rapidity of the hand and fingers, overwhelming their audiences with one apparent improbability after the next. Alexander Dreyschock (1818-1869), for instance, one of the notorious keyboard showmen of the nineteenth century, practised so hard on speedy force in the left hand that he could play octaves as fast and clean as single-note passages (Schonberg 1987: 207). This more or less culminated in Dreyschock’s near-unbelievable Viennese performance of Chopin’s Etude in C minor, op. 10 – the famous Revolutionary Etude – with the left hand all in octaves in the required tempo. Wilhelm Kuhne, as Harold Schonberg observes,

who had heard the be-octaved Revolutionary in Vienna, tells how Liszt practiced a little one-upmanship. Liszt came to Vienna in 1847 and played, among other things, Chopin’s F minor Etude (op. 25, no.2). Then he played the first bar in octaves, slowly. Then faster, then still faster, just the first bar. Then he played the entire Etude with right-hand octaves in Chopin’s correct tempo. The Viennese public got the point. (ibid.: 208)

Strictly speaking, such shameless stunting seems to have little to do with Formwidrigkeit. Indeed, one could say, it signals the very opposite: an absolute mastery over all form, a conquest over any obstacle to perform, an overcoming of any difficulty posed in the execution or realization of keyboard music. Yet it is the very exceptionality of the achievement that – save for contending virtuosi – also signals its counterformativeness in being unrealisable to others. The virtuoso, differently said, familiarly embodied a beyond-grasp and beyond-all-standard, or at least a standard that was way beyond the level of your average keyboard-player, reminiscent of the beyond-reach of the sublime. Indeed, in their feasts of technical championship, the virtuosi of the nineteenth century literally contradicted what the hand and fingers could be thought to per-form, always exceeding expectations and transgressing the limits of what was considered to be physically feasible.

Small surprise, therefore, that famous performers like Sigismond Thalberg (1812-1871)\textsuperscript{10}, Liszt, Dreyschock, Carl Tausig (1841-1871) and

\textsuperscript{10}Thalberg was Liszt’s well-known rival to the crown of piano-virtuoso, culminating in a musical duel (commonly referred to as a battle between Rome and Carthage) on April 3, 1837 in the salon of the Princess Belgiojoso (Walker 1983: i, 239). The duel lacked,
many others – among them Clara Schumann (1819-1896), who did not very much like to stunt, the unsurpassable Sophie Menter (1846-1918), or Teresa Carreño (1853-1917) – were met with the awe and astonishment in Europe and America that had also befallen the ‘Man-Mountains’ Handel and Haydn in eighteenth-century Britain. Indeed, when Liszt performed in Leicester in September 1840, William Gardiner of the *Leicester Chronicle* represented him as a Longinian striker of the sublime, overwhelming his audiences with the unexpected and extraordinary:

> The performance of Liszt on the piano is truly astonishing. He attempts not to win your attention by captivating passages or pretty melodies: he begins incoherently, without any apparent design, as if a child dashes its hands on the keys. Presently, a degree of arrangement ensues, promising something like intelligent music, when, at once, he overpowers you, by a flash of the most exquisite, luminous tone...This Artiste should never be coupled with another performer on the same instrument. His imagination has not enough room to play. He requires the whole range to himself. Like Beethoven, he describes the grand evolutions of nature by the power of sound. He can raise a storm about him, which he finds in the *hurly-burly* of the instrument, so frightful, that he is obscured and lost; but as it dies away, he reappears through a mist decked in the most radiant of colours. The rapidity with which he showered down a succession of minor thirds, through all the semi-tones, from the top of the instrument to the bottom – resembled the fall of a cataract into an abyss – producing whirls of thunder, on the lowest depths of the scale. This stroke of sublimity was strikingly shown in the elevated aspect of his countenance. (Allsobrook 1991: 79)

Comparable to what early-nineteenth-century critics had written on Beethoven, Liszt does not ingratiate but overawes. And comparable to what Michaelis had written on the musical sublime, Liszt here produces the effects of violent nature through the whirling sounds of the keyboard, realizing it in such an overpowering way that he threatens to be swallowed by his own created storm. Just before Liszt visited Bath, for that matter, there appeared in a local newspaper of August 17, 1840, a celebratory poem by F. Champion raving rather dreadfully about Liszt’s impressive suggestive abilities at the piano. It had made the poet feel “the power of sound approaching pain/...In Liszt’s piano’s all-eclipsing power” (ibid.: 66).

Liszt was a master of paraphrase. Yet in so far as his performances would have paraphrased the effects of sublime nature, this was nevertheless primarily a matter of displaying near-impossible treats of

however, an outcome: Thalberg was made the “first”, Liszt the “only” pianist in the world (ibid.: 240).
keyboard-technique. One critic wrote for the *Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury* of September 4, 1840 about

> The power which Liszt possesses of dividing himself, as it were, into two, or sometimes even three performers: the feathery delicacy of his touch, at one moment, and its enormous forte at another...In that kind of sleight hand which addresses itself to the ear, we think he even transcends Thalberg...in seeming defiance of the restrictions of nature. (Allsobrook 1991: 83)

Thalberg, it should be noted in this instance, developed a so called three-handed effect which he in turn had copied from the British harp virtuoso Parish-Alvars (Walker 1983: I, 234). It boiled down to a technique that “brought out the notes of a melody in the middle of the keyboard with alternating thumbs while surrounding it with cascades of arpeggios, making it sound as if he had three hands” (ibid.: 162). Thalberg thus appeared like an extra-handed wizard, which not only Liszt but also Chopin – consider the counter-movements, cross-rhythms and arpeggio-like figuration of his Prelude in F sharp minor, no. 8, op. 28 – successfully attempted as well. The limits of what the hand could be made to do were here not merely pushed in stretching the hand beyond its normal reach, but also in stretching its internal grasp, creating a myriad of movements at the same time.\(^{11}\) It was, as such, not only the suggestive abilities of virtuoso music to simulate a violent natural event – a cascade, a storm – or an impressive scene that invoked the sublime. Rather also, in so far as such simulations may be termed special effects, a means for an end, it was the sheer technical magic of the special effects themselves that would have been conducive to the sublime: it was the Burkean-like astonishment felt in the witnessing of a performance apparently transcending the standards of sense, contradicting the very “restrictions of nature”.

**Machinery**

The fact, however, that performers like Thalberg or Liszt, assuming two or three alternating persons in one Faustian man, thus defied nature’s limits – and thus became something of a *Formwidrigkeit*

---

\(^{11}\) Liszt, for that matter, easily transposed concertos, symphonies, etc. to the keyboard, bringing out all the different voices, instrumental colours, and nuances at first sight, thus instantly transforming the keyboard into a full orchestra. Schonberg reports in this context how, in 1868, Edvard Grieg first met Liszt bringing with him one of his violin sonatas. Bear in mind, Grieg wrote “that in the first place he had never seen nor heard the sonata, and in the second that it was a sonata with a violin part, now above, now below, independent of the piano part. And what does Liszt do? He plays the whole thing, root and branch, violin and piano, nay more, for he played fuller, more broadly. The violin part got its due right in the middle of the piano part. He was literally all over the piano at once, without missing a note, and how he played! With grandeur, beauty, genius, unique comprehension. I think I laughed – laughed like a child” (Schonberg 1987: 176).
incarnate – also made for anxiety and horror. True, on the one hand, the acceleration of nineteenth-century keyboard performance, and the technical brilliancy accomplished with it, suggested something superhuman: the body seemed to surpass its own limitations in musical execution. Yet, on the other hand, and at the same time, instrumental music’s speedy move away from the human voice invoked something mechanical and radically inhuman. The machine, the keyboard, the technical means of effect took over increasingly from the voice, the ‘soul’, the traditional means of effect.

As Susan Bernstein (1998) has already amply shown, this ambiguity toward virtuosity, oscillating between the categories of the sublime and the monstrous, is voiced by Heinrich Heine in his famous music-reports from Paris of the 1830’s and 1840’s. Heine, who claimed that if the wind stood right one could hear a Dreysochck-performance in Munich all the way in Paris, typically both admired and feared the virtuosity that boomed during the earlier nineteenth century. With respect to Liszt, Heine’s admiration chiefly concerned his ability to transcend the material, bodily aspect of virtuoso piano-playing: of, so to speak, physical difficulties overcome. Thus, in 1837 Heine had already argued:

\[
\text{it is sufficient when a musician can express everything that he feels and thinks, or that others have felt and thought, through his instrument, and that all virtuoso tours-de-force, which only attest to difficulties overcome, are to be rejected as useless sound and to be relegated to the realm of the magician, the performer of horseback-tricks, the sword swallower, the balancing arts...It is sufficient that the musician has complete control over his instrument, that one completely forgets the material mediation [materiellen Vermittlens] and only the spirit is audible [vernehmbar]. (Heine [1837] 1964: 103, my translation)
\]

The virtuoso is associated with the stuntman, with the circus, with the tricks of the body that explicitly point to and thrive on risk-taking, on (dangerous or seemingly impossible) obstacles overcome, on a performance which is the body, its apparent limits and the way in which these limits can be tested, stretched, or transgressed. Indeed, Susan Bernstein has suggested, the chief nineteenth-century anxiety about virtuosity in music is that it fully exposed instrumental music’s physical, “material origins”. Here, “technique and the particularities of performance overshadow the [allegedly immaterial] musical message. The ‘mere’ instrument is brought into focus by the ‘mere’ player, who begins to dominate the picture with details of the concrete materiality of a body in direct contiguity with the thinglike qualities of an instrument. This aspect of musical performance highlights the hand instead of the script”, the body and the machine, instead of the ‘spirit’ (Bernstein 1998: 59).

For Heine, however, Liszt removes this disturbing focus on corporeality – which also clearly disturbs ruling conceptions of
instrumental music as an art of the otherworldly, the noumenal, the infinite – by apparently surpassing the vicissitudes of material mediation. In what seems to be a double magic trick, Liszt makes his audiences forget the idea of Formwidrigkeit and difficulties overcome. He makes them forget the physical effort (which signals physical presence) at stake in musical execution. In this way, Heine observes in 1841, he even makes them forget the piano: the body and the machine recede so that “music reveals itself” (Heine [1841] 1964: 115). This is what, according to Heine, accounts for the “spell” of Liszt’s concerts that would “verge on the incredible” (ibid.: 115).

If, however, this effect of a music that suppresses or detaches itself from the actuality of technical, bodily execution, is a special effect of Liszt’s supreme virtuosity – there was apparently nothing that he could not do at the keyboard – then this virtuosity nevertheless always threatens to collapse into the uncanny excellence of an automaton. As Heine observes on the issue in 1843, after having noted the benumbing and debilitating effect of the pianoforte’s pervasive presence in almost every Parisian household:

This booming keyboard-playing, and especially the triumphs [Triumphzüge] of the keyboard-virtuosos, are characteristic of our time, and in fact attest to the victory of machine over spirit. Technical ability, the precision of an automaton, the identification with the stringed wood, the sounding instrumentalisation [tönende Instrumentwerden] of human beings is now appreciated and celebrated as the highest. (ibid.: 143)

The performer becomes the mechanical instrument s/he is playing on, s/he becomes full of machinery, like an automaton programmed for precise, flawless execution, ever speedier, ever more complex, and ever more incredible. With the violin, Heine argues somewhat naively, the instrument is at least still in close proximity to the heart: “The violin is an instrument which has almost human moods, and which has, so to speak, a sympathetic rapport with the mood of the player: the faintest discontent, the slightest tremor, a breath of feeling, here finds an immediate resonance. This is probably because the violin is pressed so close to the breast and even perceives our heartbeat” (ibid.: 145). According to Heine, musical mediation is here still a matter of expression in its most literal and also its fullest sense: an ex-pression, an almost involuntary release from internal pressure in an outward, audible sound; an out-poring of hidden moods and feelings. With the pianoforte, however, mediation is more indirect: the player strikes a key, which strikes a hammer, which strikes a string, which makes the sound box resonate. It is a mechanical, not a sensitive, spontaneous ‘emotional’ procedure – even though the involuntary and automatic are ultimately not that wide apart.
Heine here fails to consider the crucial aspect of touch in piano-playing that finally (co-)determines the nature of a sound produced. Yet even regarding this, the anxiety brought about by the detached mechanism of the keyboard ultimately concerns an identification of the player with the instrument in terms of flawlessness. Mistakes, digressions, inconsistencies are human but, as Heine believes, machines do not make mistakes. In this way, the mental as well as physical accomplishedness – or in the well-known German term *Fingerfertigkeit* – that allows pianists like Liszt to dispel any impression of difficulties overcome, and to achieve the impossible without making any mistakes, becomes at once beyond-human (lifted above the ordinary standard) and inhuman. The very peak of human talent and ability in the field of music-making turns into its other, into the non-living, the mechanical and automatic. A neat distinction between the two here collapses, making for an uncanniness that recalls the nineteenth-century thrill of dolls and monsters brought to life, of vampires or un-dead and other figures that resist a definite classification in the categories ‘dead’ or ‘live’ matter, ‘programmed automaton’ or ‘free’ being. Oscillating between the superhuman and the inhuman, between transcendentalism and mechanicism, virtuoso performances may thus perhaps be said to invoke a technological sublime *avant la lettre*: a sublime that does not revolve around the indeterminacy associated with the infinite, or the realization of a higher moral destiny, but around the apparently boundless capacities of a man-machine, displaying ever newer and ever more fabulous technical possibilities without the slightest effort, electrifying (in Heine’s machine-age words) the masses through its “demonic nature” (Heine [1844] 1964: 164).12

Strange Sounds

In so far as Heine associated the virtuoso with the demon, this demonic aspect, eliciting not just awe but also terror in the audiences, would become a trade mark of Franz Liszt and his great example Nicolò

---

12No doubt he immediate consequence of what Heine considered to be the increasing mechanisation of pianistic execution was the pneumatic player-piano evolving into the *Pianola* that was introduced on the brink of the twentieth century in America by E.S. Votey for the Aeolian Co. (Loesser [1954] 1990: 577-582). The piano, and its execution, could now be literally pre-programmed, completely controlled, making for an instrument that to all appearances worked without a performer, or at least, as Arthur Loesser quotes from a 1891 newspaper article on a pre-Pianola player-piano, that “enables the cook to furnish music for her mistress’s guests with exactly the same technic that is required to mash up the coffee for their dinner delectation” (ibid.: 581). By the 1910’s the instrument was so improved that it could even copy shading and correct any possible false notes. There is, perhaps, little of the sublime and much of the banal here, yet (even disregarding Napoleon’s observations to that effect) this piano-automaton, playing without a player, the notes moving without somebody physically striking them, nevertheless aptly illustrates the uncanniness of the machine come alive – the machine performing itself in what easily appears, in retrospect, as a parody of the virtuoso pianist.
Paganini. The latter was haunted by a satanic aura impressed on him by the popular imagination, including a most persistent rumour that the famous fourth string of his violin was made from the intestines of his mistress whom he was supposed to have killed single-handedly (Walker 1983: I, 168). Paganini’s syphilis-wrecked body did much to reinforce this, but, the whole (necessary) visual spectacle aside, it was his stunning and singular technique that fed and sustained speculations on his alleged pact with the devil. More than Liszt’s pianistic tours-de-force, Paganini’s performances could not be immediately subsumed under existing categories. Creating new, frenetic sounds with his peculiar tuning, and displaying an unprecedented bravura, the effect typically was the kind of violent surprise and stupefaction that also characterised eighteenth-century experiences of the sublime. “Yes it’s him, it’s Mephistopheles,” James Johnson quotes a listener of Paganini’s concert at the Paris Opéra in 1831, “I saw him and I heard him play the violin” (Johnson 1995: 267).

The association with Mephistopheles here chiefly concerns a frightening yet also thrilling idea of self-loss due to Paganini’s apparently irresistible magic and magnetism. In 1833, Robert Schumann described it as follows:

When I heard [Paganini] for the first time, I believed he would open with a tone that had never been present before [mit einem nie dagewesen Ton]. Then he started so faint, so small! As he now casually, and hardly noticeably, threw his string of magnets into the masses, they staggered back and forth. Now the [magic] circle grew more wonderful, more intricate; the people huddled together more closely; now he drew up tighter, until one by one they melted together as one... (Schumann [1833] 1914: I, 15, my translation)

This massive seduction, effectuated through the magic of the unheard-of that freezes and literally captures an audience, for Schumann also typifies Liszt’s performances. Reviewing Liszt’s recital – the recital was a Lisztian invention – at Leipzig on March 17, 1841, Schumann observes how “the daemon began to stir...; first he played with the public as if to try it, then gave it something more profound, until he had enmeshed every member of the audience with his art and did with them as he willed. With the exception of Paganini, no artist to a like degree possesses this power of subjecting the public, of elevating it, sustaining it, and letting it fall again” (Schumann [1841] 1914: I, 479). In his remarks on Paganini, Schumann calls this power Verengung, a tightening of the rope, as if the artist were a mischievous sprite preying on and enclosing the public in his magic net. An effect, perhaps, comparable to the Nietzschean, Dionysian Rausch, whereby the audience is as it were tricked or even forced into a delirious self-forgetfulness.

According to Heine, however, Paganini did so at a price: in all his demonic power, Paganini’s sounds were “too shrill, the contrasts too
piercing, and his most grandiose sounds of nature often had to be considered artistic mishaps” (Heine [1844] 1964: 167). Paganini embraces the ugly and discordant, the disharmonious and disfigured, attacking rather than soothing the ear in the service of what Heine calls “the fantastic” (ibid.: 167). In half-malicious terms, Heine observes something similar about Hector Berlioz, primarily on the basis of the latter’s Symphonie fantastique, the Roman Carnival Overture and the colossal Requiem. Invoking a frightful, ancient other-world of giants, monsters, and fated civilizations, Heine casts Berlioz in a surreal world recalling the myths of Babylon and Nineveh:

Today [April 25, 1844] we shall begin with Berlioz, whose first concert served to open and inaugurate the musical season. Works not exactly new brought a fair reward of applause and even the slowest minds were carried away by the violence of the genius revealing itself in every creation of this great master. The beating of the wings in this music betray the presence of no ordinary singing bird; this is a colossal nightingale, a skylark of the size of an eagle such as existed in a primordial, lost world. Indeed, to me, Berlioz’s music in general has something primeval, if not straightforwardly antediluvian, about it, reminding me of animal species now extinct, of legendary kingdoms and sins, of piled-up impossibilities: of Babylon, of the hanging gardens of Semiramis, of Nineveh, of the wonders of Mizraim, such as we can see on the paintings of the Englishman [John] Martin. Indeed, if we look for an analogy in painting, then we see the elective affinity between Berlioz and this fantastic Briton: the same taste for the colossal and monstrous [Ungeheuerlichkeit], for the gigantic [Riesenhafte], for material immeasurableness. In the one, striking effects of light and shadow, in the other a fiery instrumentation; in the one a poor sense of melody, in the other a poor sense of colour; in both little beauty and no feeling [Gemüht]. Their works are neither Classical nor Romantic, neither reminiscent of Greece or the Catholic Middle Ages. Rather, they signal something higher, the Assyrian-Babylonian-Egyptian age of architecture, and the massive passion that it expressed. (ibid.: 159-160)

As with Paganini, Berlioz and his music cannot be easily integrated within existing meaning schemes. His music defies the two categories in which early Romantic critics and theorists had classified the arts: the ‘plastic’ dictum of ‘Greece’ and the supposedly idealist dictum of the Catholic Middle Ages. Like John Martin in the field of painting, Berlioz in fact appears to elude the category of ‘music’: little melody, shrieking

---

13Edward Lockspeiser has pointed out how Berlioz himself already invokes Martin’s Satan Presiding at the Infernal Council in his Les Soirées de l’orchestre (Evenings with the Orchestra). Berlioz here recounts a nightmarish vision he had the night after he visited the annual service of the Charity Schoolchildren at St. Paul’s cathedral in 1841: “I saw St. Paul’s Cathedral whirling around and I was once again within. By some strange
colouristic effects instead of harmony ‘proper’, little beauty, no feeling, but instead a massive, almost impersonal passion.

This, it could be suggested, offers yet another instance of *Formwidrigkeit* in nineteenth-century music. It is not just the matter or grain of sound breaking through the bounds of form, nor is it a physical excess, a music eluding the grasp and capacity of hands or fingers, or a performer defying what had seemed to be the bounds of sense. Rather, it concerns a contradiction or violation of prevailing forms, a breaking of rules and conventions, in the way that Paganini’s peculiar sounds would have defied the regular conception of ‘music’ as a sonic event: they introduce to musical sound what had been kept out of its polished domain, viz. the shrill, frenetic, piercing and painful. Liszt would, in fact, do quite the same in the opening of the *Totentanz* with its gruesomely stabbing, diminished triads that, played in the low bass, become especially jarring in the piano solo version.

Seidl, for that matter, already indicates a connection between *Formwidrigkeit*, the transgressing of ruling conventions, and the sublime when claiming that the latter does not pertain to harmonious sounds and fine shapes, but to the disharmonious, the formless, and, most of all, the rule-less (*Regellosig*). A similar connection between the sublime and (apparent) lawlessness, I have shown, already emerged in early nineteenth-century Beethoven-criticism. Indeed, Peter Gay has argued, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art the sublime would increasingly become “a rule for evading rules”, a rule for departing from the prevailing claims of the beautiful, a “legitimate justification for breaking the law”: a justification to invoke the new, and to make the gruesome and near-unbearable an integral part of art (Gay [1969] 1977: 304). Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*, especially the eerie opening timpani duet in thirds of the “Marche au supplice”, or the grotesque sounds of the “Songe d’un nuit de Sabbath”, and the horrendous *Tuba mirum* of his *Requiem* illustrate the point.¹⁴

Ungeheuer

Transformation the Church was changed into the abode of Satan. The setting was that of the celebrated picture [now known only as an engraving] of Martin. Instead of the Archbishop on his throne Satan was enthroned. Instead of the thousands of faithful and the children grouped around him, hosts of demons and souls in torment shot forth their fiery glances from the depths of the visible darkness, and the whole iron structure of the amphitheatre on which these millions were seated vibrated in a terrifying manner, filling the air with hideous harmonies” (Lockspeiser 1973: 28).

¹⁴In his *Treatise of Instrumentation* (1856) Berlioz is, for that matter, quite instructive and explicit on how to achieve dramatic effects of the terrible through musical sounds. He suggests, for instance, the use of sponge ends when playing the kettledrum to “produce mysterious, darkly menacing sounds” – and recommends it for the pianissimo kettledrum-passages in Beethoven’s C minor Symphony (Berlioz [1856] [1948] 1991: 380). Alternatively, he points to the dramatic effect of bells in the orchestra, which in Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots* creates “that ominous sound which spreads awe and horror” – and in Berlioz’s own “Songe d’un nuit de Sabbath”, together with the tubas and bassoons, invokes death and damnation in a typically sardonic way (ibid.: 385).
It should, however, be emphasized that in so far as such irruptions of the unheard-of signal an aesthetics of the sublime, works like the Symfonie fantastique or the Totentanz offer quite exclusively a so called ‘negative’ sublime: a sublime of the terrifying, monstrous, and chilling as it has come to be associated with Gothic novels and the phantasmagoric shows of the nineteenth century, with its panoramas, dioramas, nausoramas, and freak shows like the talking head. What, it could thus be proposed, Heine has in mind when positioning Berlioz’s music in the realm of the ‘primordial’ and immeasurable, in the hanging gardens of Semiramis and the awesome Pyramids of Egypt, is not so much the hypsos of the Longinian rhetorical tradition. Rather, it is the deinós that Burke had related in the Enquiry to the “terrible or respectable”, and the Latin stupeo as well as attonitus that he considered to be expressive of terror and astonishment at once (Burke 1990: II, sect. 2, 54). This is the sublimity of dread, of the shocking and ghastly, not only as regards ‘subject matter’ (madness, murder, death) but also as regards the disruptive manner of artistic presentation: a transgressing of prevailing artistic tastes and conventions to achieve that which, in Seidl’s phrase, opposes form.

Heine’s use of the term Ungeheuerlichkeit with respect to Berlioz and Martin is, in this instance, instructive. Literally translated, ungeheuer would mean the monstrous, gruesome, and unheard-of, something, we have seen, that cannot well be assimilated within existing meaning schemes due to its irrevocable otherness. As Rudolf Otto has, however, shown in Das Heilige (The Idea of Holy) (1917), the term has at least since Kant been (mis-)used and “rationalised” as the uncommonly great in terms of size (Otto [1917] 1997: 54, my translation). Conceived in this sense, the Ungeheuerere refers to the colossal as it is, indeed, manifested in Martin’s huge paintings, in massive works like Berlioz’s Requiem and the Te Deum that recall the monumental style of the music festivals during the Terror.15 Heine, in fact, also tends toward such a ‘rationalised’

15Indeed, in the Treatise of Instrumentation, Berlioz envisions a gigantic orchestra in the service of what he tellingly and explicitly refers to as the “monumental style”, surpassing by far the scope and capacity of even the Te Deum (Berlioz 1991: 408). Thus, complaining that the French government does much for the theatre yet little for music, Berlioz proposes to gather all musical forces in Paris for a music festival, with a hall especially built for it “by an architecture with a good knowledge of acoustics and music”, which will witness the birth of an orchestra of 465 instrumentalists and 360 chorus singers – including 120 violins, 30 harps, 30 pianofortes, and 12 pairs of ancient cymbals (ibid.: 407). Unprecedented not only in scale but also in composition, Berlioz predicts, this orchestra “could produce a wealth of harmonies, a variety of sounds, an abundance of contrasts surpassing anything heretofore achieved in art. It could create, above all, an incalculable melodic, rhythmic and expressive power, a penetrating force of unparalleled strength, a miraculous sensitivity of gradations, in the whole or in any individual part. Its calm would be as majestic as an ocean in repose, its outbursts would recall tropical tempests, its explosive power the eruptions of volcanoes. In it could be heard the plaints, the murmurings, the mysterious sounds of primeval forests, the outcries, the prayers, the triumphant or mourning chants of a people with an expansive soul, an ardent heart and fiery passions. Its silence would inspire awe by
interpretation of the Ungeheuere when using it in one breath with the colossal, gigantic, and materially immeasurable.

In a corrective rereading of the term, though, Otto claims that ungeheuer has to do with something more subtly disturbing. To this end, he first of all points out that the Greek deinós comes closest to the Ungeheuere in German, whereby deinós basically signifies the “uncanny [Unheimliche] of the numinous”\(^{16}\) of, briefly phrased, the radically other and mysterious, an unknowable secret inspiring fearful trembling and exerting an irresistible fascination at the same time, repellent and attractive at once (ibid.: 53). This “double-content” or “contrast-harmony” [Kontrast-Harmonie] of the numinous, Otto already indicates, has its aesthetic equivalent in the sublime [Erhabene]. Like most theologians, however, he considers the latter but a “faint reflection” of the issue under consideration (ibid.: 56). Nevertheless, if, according to him, deinós makes up the ‘negative’ or uncanny aspect of the numinous, it is the very same deinós that Burke addresses in his Enquiry with respect to the ‘negative’ sublime: a sublime that revolves less around the transcendent and self-affirming than the astonishing and frightening.

If, therefore, as an equivalent of the Greek deinós, the Ungeheuere specifically has to do with the awe and terror exerted by the numinous, then what precisely makes up its negativity? Basically, and as the term uncanny that Otto uses with respect to deinós already suggests, it is a disturbing estrangement. The German phrase nicht geheuer meaning ‘not in order’, creepy or sinister, Otto refers to the Ungeheuere as the fishy and strange, as something unfamiliar that one cannot quite place, explain, or define (ibid.: 54). In this way, one could say, the Ungeheuere refers to the more or less spooky and eerie aspect of something that resists grasp not necessarily because of its inordinate size but because of its disturbing resistance to familiar categories of representation. The Ungeheuere overlaps, in this instance, with Formwidrigkeit in so far as its otherness and not-in-orderliness contradicts the norms and schemas facilitating imaginative assimilation.

In this way, the Ungeheuere in music need not as a rule refer to the colossal or monumental style, easily lapsing into empty bombast. Rather, it has to do with the unnerving and uncomforting. Unnerving, not so much in the sense of frightening or terrifying an audience for an explicitly its solemnity. But its crescendo would make even the most unyielding listener shudder; it would grow like a tremendous conflagration gradually setting the sky on fire” (ibid.: 409). Berlioz transforms the orchestra and its colouristic effects into a landscape of the sublime: oceans, tempests, volcanic eruptions, primeval forests, and other scenes familiarly represented as inspiring awe and terror in their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century beholders.

\(^{16}\) I would like to thank Arjo Vanderjagt for pointing out to me the connection between deinós, the negative sublime, and the Ungeheuere as contrasted to the hypsos typifying the ‘positive’ sublime. This distinction could, in turn, be connected to the distinction made by John Baillie on the ‘mixed’ sublime, and the sublime pur sang, eliciting a solemn feeling of elevation alone.
dramatic purpose (as, say, in Mozart’s Don Giovanni), cunningly and effectively depriving them of a sense of comfort and confidence. Instead, and in so far as the Ungeheuere literally bears on something that is not in order, the unnerving and uncomfotting here refers to the effect occasioned by a music that somehow does not sound ‘right’.

**Uncanny**

Within the context of the nineteenth century, probably the most (in)famous instance of such a music is Chopin’s Prelude in A minor, no. 2, op. 28, with, as Jeffrey Kallberg puts it, its awkwardly “disjointed” figuration (Kallberg [1996] 1998: 153). The disjointedness, in this instance, chiefly concerns the dichotomy between melody and accompaniment: the design of the former, as Lawrence Kramer has shown in great detail, is incongruous and asynchronous with that of the latter, the harmonic progression in the bass more or less seeming to lead a life of its own (Kramer 1990: 77). Most obviously, however, the Prelude derives its eeriness from the obstinately repetitive and jarringly dissonant chords in the left hand that, due to the fact that the tonic is only fully revealed in the closing bars, remain indeterminable, inexplicable, and mysterious till the very end. Even to the untrained ear, it ‘hears’ as if something is withheld, never quite breaking through, creating a tension of unease and uncertainty that is not so much resolved as cut short abruptly in the closing cadence:
In this respect, and in so far as the Ungeheuere refers to the uncanny or Unheimliche of the numinous, Chopin’s Prelude more or less exemplifies what Sigmund Freud has called the coincidence of the Heimliche with the Unheimliche (Freud [1919] 1963: 51). This coincidence chiefly consists in the fact that the German heimlich has a double and contradictory connotation of, firstly, homely or familiar and comfortable and, secondly, surreptitious, suppressed, something kept from sight and tucked away: a secret (Geheimnis) behind the curtains that one cannot quite put the finger on. In this second connotation, heimlich easily collapses into the not-in-orderliness of the Ungeheuere and Unheimliche: something spooky, unfamiliar, or ‘not right’, causing unease and fright.

The Prelude, I suggest, makes audible this interrelation between the homely and uncanny. On the one hand, its harmonic movements are stealthy, secretive and concealed, as if hiding or keeping back something. This becomes especially clear in the sudden and disruptive silence in m. 19, breaking off the (already once-silenced) harmonic progression in the bass before it has had a chance to bring forward its full articulation in A minor. On the other hand, it is this strategy of evasion and suppression that renders the chords heard in the accompaniment so peculiarly strange and other: when hidden or suppressed, as the Freudian dictum goes, what would have been familiar or home-like (in this case literally the home key) becomes strange or unheimlich (ibid.: 70, 75). This not merely refers to the Prelude’s tonal ambivalence, manifesting itself at its most extreme in what Kramer calls the “harmonically undecidable chain of chords in mm. 11-14”. This chain, as
he explains, “represents an enhanced form of the most conspicuous feature of mm. 1-10, the grating nonharmonic dissonance of the accompaniment” (Kramer 1990: 81). Here, Kramer continues, the “dissonance can no longer be rendered coherent by subordination to an underlying harmony”, accounting for its alterity in the sense of eluding or defying a clear-cut, tonal-imaginative grasp (ibid.: 81).

Most significantly, however, when finally A minor does make itself heard in the closing, tonic cadence it sounds – or at least it does so to the average, untrained musical ear – odd and outlandish rather than home-like. In the context of the preceding, which now turns out to have been a long and winding journey home, ‘home’ (the tonic) is somehow also ‘strange’ or ‘other’: having been held back so persistently, it seems to intrude on, instead of having motivated, the music heard. Indeed, Kramer has pointed out, because the resolution of the six-four harmony in m. 14 is deferred so long (by way, indeed of the “A minor six-four chord of m. 15”, itself joining “the forces of destabilization”), finally the “newly achieved tonic quality of A minor is actually thrown into doubt” (ibid.: 82).

Of course, an in-depth technical analysis of the Prelude might indicate a deeper coherency, rendering the tonic cadence less strange or unexpected than it seems to be in the hearing of it. Yet the point is, to borrow a phrase from Kramer, that the Prelude “sound[s] abnormal, and cannot be made to sound otherwise”: that it somehow defamiliarizes music in its dominant, nineteenth-century conception, making for a basically unresolved confusion or indeterminacy that resembles the sublime feeling as I have tried to trace it in the preceding chapters (ibid.: 91). Such a defamiliarization (literally a making strange) is, I would suggest, crucial to the idea of Formwidrigkeit as a violating of established rules and norms in relation to the (musically) sublime: not only does it involve a breaking of familiar, accustomed ways of music-making, but also a breaking of a listener’s ability to form, frustrating the musical imagination in its attempts to automatically appropriate what has been heard. Indeed, in so far as Seidl, in this instance, pleads for a specifically musically sublime, works like Chopin’s Prelude in A minor (or, for that matter, Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde, or Liszt’s Nuage gris) illustrate the point: it is unnerving not because of the sordid or terrible ideas it would give rise to but because of its own, awkward and uncomforting sounds and movements that cannot be easily placed or integrated within familiar, musical meaning schemes.

The New

Perhaps at its most dramatic, such an estranging of music as ‘music’ in its ruling Western conception is Arnold Schoenberg’s free-tonal or, as he put it, pantonal music: a music avoiding keys and tonal centres, discarding traditional chord formations and melodic lines so that the listener’s orientation is most seriously undermined. However, apart from the fact that this newly dissonant music was already envisioned and
practised by composers like Liszt a few decades before, the unnerving or upsetting of traditional compositional modes to discover new and ‘fishy’ ways of musical expression was an essentially Romantic enterprise.\textsuperscript{17} Here, indeed, the fashionable preoccupation with the monstrous and grotesque allowed for a more or less unwarranted experimenting that, to recall Gay, links up with the aesthetics of the sublime rather than that of the beautiful: a breaking the law, a move against (familiar) form, to intimate what lies beyond it.

Illustrative and instructive, in this instance, are Liszt’s observations on the legitimacy of the musically ugly and discordant in an essay on Berlioz and his Harold Symphony (1855) that was co-written by the Princess Carolyn von Sayn-Wittgenstein. The artist, the argument here runs, “can pursue the beautiful outside the rules of the school, without fear that, as a result of this, it will elude him” (Liszt/Wittgenstein [1855] 1998: 117). There is a beauty apart from consecrated forms and conventions. Art does not cease to be art when a composer moves beyond established laws: when “certain rules of art and habits of hearing” are violated (ibid.: 118). With respect to Berlioz, such transgressions – as noted by his more orthodox contemporaries – typically concern the fact that his music “mutilates the ear” and that it produces effects which transcend musical comprehension (ibid.: 118). Yet, the Liszt-Wittgenstein combination retorts, is a disturbance of the musical status quo, no matter how much it may initially offend contemporary ears, no matter how far it may exceed existing ideas on good and acceptable form, not also a necessary factor in its ‘progressive development’? The verdict on Berlioz remains a verdict for “a more or less distant future” (ibid.: 118).

For if the musical works of Berlioz “violate the rules, in that they destroy the hallowed frame which has devolved upon the symphony”, or “offend the ear, in that in the expression of their content they do not remain within the prescribed musical dikes”, this is at least in part due to the fact that “admiration” on the part of the critics is, in this instance, “too often delayed by idle astonishment” (ibid.: 118). What this means is that a music countering prevailing forms and norms, or bypassing current conventions of musical hearing, is a music that cannot be judged or

\textsuperscript{17}As Alan Walker has shown, Liszt was in fact familiar with the idea of a so called ordre omnitonique, that he had derived from the critic François-Joseph Fétis during a lecture in 1832. Quite like “the Schoenbergian tone-row”, Walker comments, this ordre omnitonique was to “replace tonality. Liszt regarded it as a logical outcome of the historical process which from a ‘unitonic’ (tonality) moved to a ‘pluritonic’ (poly-tonality) and ended in an ‘omnitonic’ (atonality), where every note is, so to speak, a tonic” (Walker 1983: III, 440). Liszt, Walker continues, is even known to have worked on a treatise on modern harmony entitled Sketches for a Harmony of the Future, while in a letter to his pupil Ingeborg Starck he declared “with mock seriousness” that a twelve-note chord (C-D♯-E-F♯-G-B♭ – D♭-E-F♯-G-A♭-B) “would soon become the basis of harmony”, thus anticipating Schoenberg’s (albeit different) twelve-tone chord. (ibid.: 440, 443). Though the treatise has not survived, piano pieces like Nuage gris or The Bagatelle without Tonality (1885) which “hovers on the brink of atonality”, reveal Liszt’s intentions (ibid.: 445).
processed on the basis of existing categories. It is, quite literally, a music of the future, unгеhеuеr in so far as its unfamiliarity moves beyond a (culturally- and convention-bound) range of ordinary, perhaps even possible experience.

Almost a century and a half later, I will show in the next chapter, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard would – without being aware of it – reiterate the issue in his reflections on the avant-garde, the sublime, and what he was to call the shock of the new. As Lyotard typically claims, the rule-breaking art of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century avant-gardes dodges the grasp of a determining judgement: avant-garde works of art “are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged by a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories... Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for” (Lyotard [1983] 1999: 1015). Essentially формwidrig in their resistance or opposition to existing forms, norms, and categories of representation, avant-garde works announce themselves as works of the future in so far as the rules and categories on the basis of which they are to be judged are as yet unknown, unavailable. Here, according to Lyotard, the painter, choreographer, writer, poet, sculptor, thinker, or composer is “working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done”: s/he is probing something that has not yet been established, determined, or defined (ibid.: 1015).

Echoing Gay’s remarks on the artistic sublime, Lyotard relates this breaking of conventions and rules in order to “invent new rules of the game” (and thus to thwart expectations on the part of the public and the critics), to the aesthetics of the sublime (ibid.: 1014). Indeed, in so far as such unruliness gives rise to the kind of astonishment that delays understanding, the sublime is, for Lyotard, specifically related to the way in which an artwork irrupts and calls in question familiar ways of world-making (be it textual, pictorial, or musical), rather than to the subject matter it invokes. The defamiliarization of musical sounds and movements that I have described above comes, for that matter, close to what Lyotard has in mind: it is sublime not because of the terrible ideas it gives rise to, but because of the way in which it unnerves traditional ways of sounding and hearing.

Precisely this, I will explain in the next chapter, is what for Lyotard makes for a postmodern sublime: a sublime that moves away from the Kantian sublime to the extent that it no longer signals a supersensible destiny beyond or above, but a gap or irruption within the sphere of sensibility. It is no longer a sublime of transcendence but a sublime of immanence: it no longer lifts the subject in glorious and harmonious self-affirmation but questions and undermines ruling and unquestioned ways of presentation, be they artistic or otherwise. Indeed, and in accordance with later twentieth-century dictums, the idea of the supersensible is for Lyotard not just a “nostalgic” but in fact a dangerous, totalising “illusion”, enforcing a reconciliatory unity in all areas at all costs.
As I will show, in his perspective the sublime is precisely an instrument to subvert such totalising dreams: “The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one...Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witness to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences” – and subvert ‘grand’ or ‘master’ narratives (ibid.: 1015). The postmodern, for Lyotard, attests to the illegitimacy of traditional, all-encompassing ordering principles, truths, and systems in the field of science, philosophy, art, and criticism. Thus, as Luuk van Middelaar has recently put it, “[h]eterogeneity, incommensurability, plurality, dissensus, and conflict are the key-terms in Lyotard’s universe” (Van Middelaar 2000: 128, my translation).

This emphasis on conflict and difference raises the question if Lyotard’s departure from Kant’s precious supersensible destiny also, and by implication, allows the sublime feeling to be rethought in the manner of Burke and Usher as a self-conflicting feeling without end or resolution. Does, that is to say, Lyotard’s rejection of the transcendental also imply a subversion of the Kantian sublime moment as a moment of closure-in-transcendence – or a subversion of the possibility of any closure at all in the experience of the sublime? More pregnantly said, will Lyotard’s rewriting of the sublime as a no-longer-transcendental sublime contribute in any way to the critical formulation of an ‘alternative’ sublime? And does this rewriting have any bearing on music, whether directly or indirectly? It is these questions that will govern my account of Lyotard – the philosopher who is claimed to have retrieved the idea of the sublime from twentieth-century obscurity in the 1980’s and brought it back into fashion – in the next chapter.