Drastic Criticism, Gnostic Criticism, and Brahms's Fourth Symphony

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Drastic Criticism, Gnostic Criticism, and Brahms’s Fourth Symphony

A Thesis
Presented to the Wells School of Music
Department of Music Theory, History, and Composition
West Chester University
West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of
Master of Music

By
Sean Wood
May 2020

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Dedication

To Rosie, and to the memory of Bill and Nancy Quinn.
Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank Dr. Jordan Stokes for supervising this project. Dr. Stokes’ incredible range and depth underlie much of what is good in these pages. I also thank him for making himself available above and beyond what was required to help bring it to completion.

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This thesis bears two dedications because I do not see any way I could exclude either dedicatee. Both were an integral part of how this degree came to be and how it was finished. The first dedication is to my wife, Rosie. We got married in August 2018, about a third of the way into this degree. She intuited that it might be good for me to apply to this program, and she was, as usual, right. Thanks to her, my life is completely different and better than it was when I started.

The second dedication is to my grandparents, Bill and Nancy Quinn, both of whom passed away during my completion of this degree. Much of my love for music and my earliest musical experiences came from them. They were West Chester residents, and this degree offered an unexpected opportunity for me to spend time with them before they died.
I would also like to thank my parents for their support, St. Agatha-St. James Parish and Martin Saints Classical High School for employing me during this time, and the WCU Graduate School for providing assistantship funding.
Abstract

In her 2004 *Critical Inquiry* article “Music: Drastic or Gnostic?,” Carolyn Abbate argues that much writing about music avoids music’s “exceptional phenomenal presence,” its “drastic” effects (a term borrowed from philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch). Such writing, she argues is “gnostic”; that is, interested in uncovering social, cultural, or philosophical truths beneath that “exceptional phenomenal presence.” Gnostic criticism is where music can become prey to nefarious philosophies; shorn from the context of performance, it can become whatever the critic wishes it to be. This indictment trains much of its focus on the work of Theodor W. Adorno, whom she regards as one of gnostic criticism’s modern forefathers. In this thesis, I explore her argument as it pertain to Johannes Brahms’s Fourth Symphony, which has occasioned both drastic and gnostic responses. After an introduction, I summarize her argument, present an overview of the symphony, and describe Adorno’s “gnostic” reading of the piece as outlined in his 1934 essay “Brahms aktuell.” Next, I examine the method of drastic criticism Abbate outlines at the end of her essay and use these methods to study a 1973 film of the piece by Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic. Finally, I outline some of the critiques that Abbate’s article has received, both gnostic and otherwise. My general conclusion is that drastic criticism leads to a more complete engagement with the piece, despite the gnostic criticism’s sometimes-penetrating insights and drastic criticism’s challenging paradoxes.
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.............................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 2: The “Drastic or Gnostic?” argument........................................................................ 11

Chapter 3: The context and structure of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony ................................. 24

Chapter 4: Adorno’s “Brahms aktuell” and the Fourth Symphony ...................................... 29

Chapter 5: What is drastic criticism?....................................................................................... 50

Chapter 6: Drastic and gnostic collisions in Karajan’s 1973 film ........................................ 61

Chapter 7: “Fascinating Fascism” and other critiques............................................................... 71

Chapter 8: Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 81

Works Cited and Consulted ..................................................................................................... 84
List of Musical Examples

Examples 1-3, uses of C in the Fourth Symphony .................................................................37

Ex. 4, end of development into rhythmically-augmented recapitulation .........................39

Ex. 5: Brahms, Sym. 4, mm. 45-53 .....................................................................................42

Ex. 6: Tragic Overture ..............................................................................................................63
List of Figures

Fig. 1 - Formal functions in Brahms, Symphony No. 4, i, exposition........................................38

Fig. 2 - Shots from Karajan and Niebeling’s *Pastoral Symphony* film (1967)......................61

Fig. 3 - typical camera angle in the Brahms Fourth film.........................................................64

Fig. 4 - Sequence of shots in recapitulation, correlated with score...................................68
Chapter 1: Introduction

In the well-known conclusion of the second chapter of *Philosophy of New Music* (1949), Theodor Adorno writes:

[New music] has taken all the darkness and guilt of the world on itself. All its happiness is in the knowledge of unhappiness; all its beauty is in denial of the semblance of the beautiful. No one, neither individuals nor groups, wants to have anything to do with it. It dies away unheard, without an echo. Around music as it is heard, time springs together in a radiant crystal, while unheard it tumbles perniciously through empty time. Toward this latter experience, which mechanical music undergoes hour by hour, new music is spontaneously aimed: toward absolute oblivion. It is the true message in a bottle.¹

Consider this with the very-different peroration at the end of Vladimir Jankélévitch’s *Music and the Ineffable*, published 11 years later:

…silence is the desert where music blossoms and […] music, a desert flower, is itself a sort of enigmatic silence. […] Everyone understands the voice that takes us prisoner, and does so, moreover, where there is nothing to understand, no conclusion to be drawn - and yet the voice tells us of our fate. Isaiah said of solitude: it will flower like a lily, sprouting and growing everywhere; it will be in effusions of joy and praise; the glory of Lebanon will be granted it, the radiance of Mount Carmel and of Sharon. And what the prophet Isaiah says about solitude, I will in turn repeat about silence. Silence, too, will exult, and the roses of Sharon will blossom in its bare soil. The sands of silence will cover the tumultuous waters; the arid desert of silence will be peopled with murmurs and the sound of wings, with ineffable music. In solitude, where Fevronia once dwelled, as in the joyous din of daily life, we can sometimes hear the bells - the babble of bells from the City of Silence, which resound almost imperceptibly, in the depths of night.²

While both of these passages confront the meaning of music in a disenchanted world, they do so in radically different ways. Adorno’s gaze is into the void: the expression of the “knowledge of


unhappiness,” the condition of “absolute oblivion” is the only ideal left to which music can aspire. “Absolute oblivion” also seems to appear in the Jankélévitch passage (“there is nothing to understand, no conclusion to be drawn”), but it is of a wholly different kind. Jankélévitch’s void is paradoxically a place where self-awareness blooms: “solitude will flower like a lily, sprouting and growing everywhere.” Where Adorno aestheticizes the absence of meaning, Jankélévitch (perhaps confusingly) conceives of a sort of presence within absence - the void is mysteriously accompanied by music.

In these passages, a radical difference in rhetorical style between the two thinkers is readily apparent, as are differences in their metaphysical outlooks. In front of these and many other dramatic oppositions between the two, it may seem tempting to keep their bodies of thought separate from one another, to regard them as useful on two totally separate planes. On further examination, though, the sheer force of the contradiction between the two proves difficult to ignore. To take one example, Jankélévitch calls musical development a literal “mirage,” while development of musical material is one of the linchpins of Adorno’s music philosophy. Richard Taruskin memorably staged the opposition between the two (and heavily leans toward one of them) in his dust-jacket blurb for Abbate’s English translation of Music and the Ineffable:

Imagine! A philosopher who meditates on listening to music, not its ontology; who does not cast composers as heroes and villains; who does not expect music to prophesy the future, or tell us how to live, or solve our political problems; who is allergic to gassy Teutonic grandiloquence (indeed to Germans tout court). Welcome the anti-Adorno; he has been too long coming to English.

Taruskin’s comments occurred in the context of his response to the “new musicology” of the 1980’s and 1990’s, which is one of the main historiographical agendas in his Oxford History of

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3 Ibid., 16.
Western Music. In his introduction to the first of two volumes dedicated to twentieth century music (vol. 4), he situates Adorno as the primary culprit behind the common conception that musical meaning is readily accessible:

It is an old vice of criticism, and lately of scholarship, to assume that the meaning of artworks is fully vested in them by their creators, and is simply “there” to be decoded by a specially gifted interpreter. That assumption can lead to gross errors. It is what vitiated the preposterously overrated work of Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, and what has caused the work of the “new musicologists” of the 1980s and 1990s - Adornians to a man and woman - to age with such stunning rapidity. It is, all pretenses aside, still an authoritarian discourse and an asocial one. It still grants oracular privilege to the creative genius and his prophets, the gifted interpreters. […] The historian’s trick is to shift the question from “What does it mean to “What has it meant?” That move is what transforms futile speculation and dogmatic polemic into historical illumination.4

Taruskin’s pivot to “what has it meant?” is different from what Jankélévitch proposes in Music and the Ineffable, but his manifesto presents a movement away from methods of musical exegesis that seek to decipher, which much resembles Jankélévitch’s chief concern.

“Music is no cipher; it is not awaiting the decoder,” declares the opening line of Carolyn Abbate’s introduction to her translation of Jankélévitch’s best-known book in English, Music and the Ineffable.5 She continues,

Music is, as Jankélévitch says, “drastic,” not “gnostic”: works are made, brought into being by labor, and it is in the irreversible experience of playing them or listening to them that the “meaning of their meaning” is given voice. Attempts to ascribe limited, specific social or symbolic meanings to music in retrospect represent - though only at their worst - a morose refusal to accept one’s existence in time and a manifestation of anxiety: of the desire not to be transmuted or transported by what Jankélévitch calls […] charme.6


5 Jankélévitch, Music and the Ineffable, xiii.

6 Ibid., xviii.
What Abbate presents in this paragraph is unpacked in grander terms in her 2004 *Critical Inquiry* article “Music: Drastic or Gnostic?” This virtuosic, bold, and provocative piece of cultural commentary presents Jankélévitch’s philosophy as a major challenge to conventional methods of musicology. In particular, it criticizes the tendency to locate “limited, specific social or symbolic meanings” in music (the “gnostic” tendency, following Jankélévitch’s terminology) and to value those more than the dramatic power of the musical experience (the “drastic”). The primary culprit behind this tendency is, in no uncertain terms, Adorno, who is a focal point of criticism throughout the second half of the article. Given the prominence of the article and the wide variety of responses it has occasioned, it is fair to say that the impasse between Adorno and Jankélévitch’s music philosophies is a fundamental conversation in musicology.7 The lively colloquy on Jankélévitch’s philosophy of music in the 2012 issue of the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* is but one example: while some scholars, like Steven Rings, express admiration for Jankélévitch, several others, most notably James Hepokoski, have harsh words for Jankélévitch’s claim that music is unreachable by explanatory discourse.

Abbate’s article will serve as framework for what follows; I will give sustained consideration to her argument in the following chapter.

**Drastic, gnostic and Brahms**

From the beginning of her essay, Abbate asks the question of what it is that we love in the experience of musical beauty:

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What does it mean to write about performed music? About an opera live and unfolding in time and not an operatic work? Shouldn’t this be what we do, since we love music for its reality, for voices and sounds that linger long after they are no longer there? Love is not based on great works as unperformed abstractions or even as subtended by imagined or hypothetical performance.\(^8\)

Following her interest in what exactly one loves about a musical experience, in this thesis I will turn my investigation of Adorno and Jankélévtich toward a piece of music that I love, which is Brahms’s Fourth Symphony. Adorno and Jankelevitch are two philosophical roads out from this experience - one glorifying it, the other inferring deep social truth from it.

While I proceed primarily out of desires to understand a beloved piece of music more deeply and to face Abbate’s questions, there are particular advantages to focussing on this symphony. First, it is one of the few pieces of music that Adorno mentions by name in his only sustained commentary on Brahms, the short essay “Brahms aktuell” (1934), making it a prime example of gnostic criticism. The length of this contribution - 4 pages - is highly disproportionate to the importance Adorno seems to ascribe to Brahms. Adorno cites the composer as a vital link between the first experimental outbursts of Romanticism and the full integration of individual expression and musical architecture that he hears in Arnold Schoenberg’s music, and cites the Fourth Symphony as a prime example of this synthesis.

Gnostic responses of this nature have in fact followed the symphony since its beginnings, and range from the frustrated (Eduard Hanslick, at Brahms and Ignaz Brüll’s first piano reading of the first movement: “for this whole movement I had the feeling that I was being given a beating

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\(^8\) Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 505.
by two incredibly intelligent people") to the starstruck (Elisabet Herzogenberg, Brahms’ friend, called it “music to be read with a microscope, for a minority of specialized minds”).

The other advantage is that Brahms’s music, particularly his symphonies, have been a reliable source of “drastic” experience for over a century. In 1897, conductor Felix Weingartner wrote:

I mostly hear praise of the tour de force of using the old form of the passacaglia as a movement of a modern symphony. Certainly that is astounding, but […] I cannot get away from the impression of implacable fate which imposes an ineluctable downfall on a great man or a great people. In spite of all struggle and efforts at defense, destruction is foredoomed; it approaches with inexorable steps. The conclusion of this moment seared with deeply moving tragedy is a veritable orgy of destruction, a frightful counterpart to the paroxysm of joy at the end of the last symphony of Beethoven.

A few more recent examples include: “The most beautiful Brahms symphony out of the four symphonies he wrote is the one you just heard, or just played, or just conducted,” said conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin in a 2014 interview. New Yorker music critic Alex Ross concludes his 2010 book with a tribute to late Brahms, nothing that Brahms’s late piano intermezzi are what he wants to hear when he dies. And in a 2019 lecture at the American Musicological Society Annual Meeting, William Cheng said that the searing beauty of James Levine’s recording of

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13 Alex Ross, Listen to This (New York: Farrar, Strous and Giroux, 2010), 312.
Brahms’s Third Symphony made him ask whether some sort of forgiveness might be possible for the disgraced conductor.\textsuperscript{14}

All of this makes Brahms’s music an ideal focus. What is less-than-ideal about it is that Jankélévitch studiously avoided writing about Brahms and about the whole Germanic tradition in which his music belongs. A French Jew who was active in the Resistance, Jankélévitch

never forgave the Germans and could not return to their art, their philosophy, or their music. His colleagues made their peace with Germany and re-embraced its intellectual traditions, burnishing their reputations in embroidering upon those traditions for a new generation. Jankélévitch seldom spoke the names again and then almost exclusively with a certain scorn.\textsuperscript{15}

His silence on German music, therefore, is anything but trivial and goes deeper than simple cultural preferences. To what extent he implicitly argues that German aesthetics are inherently corrupt is a matter of debate. In spite of this, though, Abbate’s article enjoins listeners to respond to \textit{all} music with a special attention to the drastic. As the passage quoted at the beginning of this section indicates, Abbate clearly sees in Jankélévitch a provocation for all music-lovers. To make this explicit, later in her article she gives particular attention to performances of Wagner’s \textit{Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg}, a work which has widely-acknowledged anti-Semitic connotations. In doing so, Abbate is gesturing toward the relevance of Jankélévitch’s proposal to repertoire which is ostensibly alien to it. One of my aims, therefore, is to continue this act of extension. Along with Abbate, I believe that Jankélévitch’s questions are larger than his concerns about German culture, valid as they may be.

\textsuperscript{14} William Cheng, “Gaslight of the Gods” (presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, Boston, MA, 1 November 2019). Levine, the music director of the Metropolitan Opera for 40 years, was accused of sexual abuse by 4 victims in 2017. The Met found these allegations credible in an internal investigation and fired him in 2018.

\textsuperscript{15} Abbate, \textit{Music and the Ineffable}, xvii.
In the next chapter, I summarize and analyze Abbate’s argument in preparation for what follows. Next, I take a critical look at Adorno’s “Brahms aktuell” to test whether Adorno is as gnostic as Abbate claims. There are certainly obvious reasons to think so - it draws extremely concrete links between the construction of Brahms’s music and a specific interpretation of history. Brahms’s technique, he argues, contributes to the process of music turning inward upon itself in the face of the rise of capitalism. Brahms is a concrete stepping-stone toward atonal music, which he regards as the only valid artistic response to capitalist domination. Adorno’s extrapolation of a social, political meaning from Brahms’s technique impossibly contrasts with what Abbate and Jankélévitch argue are the meanings of musical experiences.

Finally, I approach the Fourth Symphony from a drastic lens. I do this through a summary of Abbate’s theories of the drastic and a corresponding reaction to Herbert von Karajan’s 1973 film of a performance of the piece with the Berlin Philharmonic. This film gave me a number of drastic experiences: it successfully captures the sensory overload of being in an orchestra, it shows the players in intense concentration, and calls attention to Brahms’s Fourth Symphony as a phenomenal sequence of sounds, irrespective of its “social or symbolic meaning.” From wonder at this performance, I proceed to consider the many criticisms that have been levelled at drastic criticism, in particular the way such experiences can be twisted toward nefarious political ends. These “politics of the drastic” are the most interesting point of comparison with Adorno. While some see the potential for hero-worship and fascism in a drastic approach to music, Abbate sees drastic experience as a site of life-giving potential, where new meanings can constantly proliferate. Both of these positions merit consideration alongside Adorno’s gnostic political conclusions.
An important question arises in the midst of this investigation: while Abbate effectively
deconstructs the notion that the musical work, outside of its incarnation in performance, is a
worthy object of speculation, it is important to ask what remains in the wake of this insight.
What can be said to remain from the work, and does anything remain that is of value? It seems
worthwhile to grapple with works in their complexity and flaws rather than to avoid their
difficulties, and this is one way in which my interpretation qualifies her theory.

But in spite of the imposing challenges imposed to drastic criticism by Adorno and
others, I argue that it is the more coherent critical stance. Adorno’s political speculations make
for an impressive intellectual edifice and a somewhat-effective tool for hearing Brahms’s music,
but it fundamentally turns away from the phenomenal presence of music, which is a serious
problem. “Gnostic satisfactions,” Abbate writes, “can become pale,” impressively constructed as
they might be.16 I also side with one of Abbate’s most controversial and incisive arguments,
which is that gnostic critics can exploit their distance from the musical experience to introduce
foreign ideological baggage, while the drastic experience of music resists such reduction when it
is observed faithfully. Jankélévitch’s ideas highlight values that are fundamentally more lasting:
the experience of the listener over the intention of the composer, the indescribable “charme” of
musical experience, music’s fundamental ineffability. While a Jankélévitchian way of reading
does not come without its embarrassments, Abbate rightly says that it is far more of an

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16 Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 534.
embarrassment to pretend as though the power of music simply does not exist or is not the true reason why we engage with music at all.¹⁷

¹⁷ As Abbate notes, the conflict between drastic and gnostic has been framed by literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht as the conflict between “presence culture” and “meaning culture.” Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2004, 79. Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 531.
Chapter 2: The “Drastic or Gnostic?” argument

Abbate’s essential argument is that enchantment and love are real factors of the musical experience, and perhaps the most important factors of all. This verges on a massive cultural paradox: our involvement with music usually proceeds from important and decisive experience with it, but such experiences are brought up with relative infrequency. In particular, the rhetorical posture of much writing about music avoids the elephant in the room - “music’s exceptional phenomenal existence.”

The terms “drastic” and “gnostic” are direct translations of Jankélévitch’s drastique and gnostique. Jankélévitch’s use of the latter term is in the familiar sense, meaning “relating to knowledge, especially esoteric mystical knowledge.” The term’s connotation of “esoteric mystical knowledge” is almost certainly a reference to Gnosticism, an early Christian splinter group that taught that a select minority of enlightened believers had privileged insight into religious matters. Jankélévitch’s use of the term, therefore has deliberate resonances of esotericism, mysticism, and an enlightened elite. Abbate draws out the implications of each of these.

While Jankélévitch’s use of drastique relates to the common meaning of “likely to have a strong or far-reaching effect; radical and extreme,” his application of the term extends further:

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18 Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 533.


composing music, playing it, and singing it; or even hearing it in recreating it - are these not three modes of doing, three attitudes that are drastic, not gnostic, not of the hermeneutic order of knowledge?  

While the drastic-gnostic binary could be conceived as the dichotomy between music as experience and music as text, Abbate stresses that it is not so simple, particularly in the case of the drastic:

> drastic connotes physicality, but also desperation and peril, involving a category of knowledge that flows from drastic actions or experiences and not from verbally mediated reasoning.  

In a way, then, the word “drastic,” which initially seems to be separated from its normal English meaning in Jankélévitch’s “composing, playing, singing, hearing,” actually circles back to it through Abbate’s explanation. The “drastic” is a sort of knowledge engendered by shock, one that is “radical and extreme.” Abbate has a whole host of vocabulary for it: it “transfixes and bewilders,” it can be “devastating, physically brutal, mysterious, erotic, moving, boring, pleasing, enervating, or uncomfortable, generally embarrassing, subjective, and resistant to the gnostic.”

Michael Gallope sources the drastic-gnostic distinction to that made between “quiddity” and “quoddity” in Jankélévitch’s *Philosophie première* (1954), itself derived from the work of Henri Bergson. “Quoddity” comes from the Latin *quod*, or “that,” what Gallope calls its

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22 Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 510.

23 Ibid., 512.

24 Ibid., 514.

“indescribable and contingent existence as a specific fact.”26 Quoddity concerns events in their irreducible complexity and resistance to discourse. Gallope translates quoddity as “thatness,” referring to the fact that an event has taken place, not to its qualities or categories. It is a synonym for “the drastic.” Quiddity, on the other hands, comes from the Latin “what,” and refers to description and categorization. The “whatness” of an event would be a description of what it is like. Gallope rightly notes that both things are essential for Jankélévitch - quoddity can only be mediated through quiddity.27 Nevertheless, it is Jankélévitch’s emphasis on the quodditive that is the focus of *Music and the Ineffable* and “Drastic or Gnostic?”

Abbate’s article is essentially an argument for a drastic mode of understanding music, but it accomplishes this mainly through negation; most of it is concerned with defining and refuting gnostic modes of understanding (which she generally refers to as “hermeneutics”). She presents a helpful typology of gnostic approaches early in the essay. First describing an experience she had performing a Mozart aria, she asks herself whether gnostic questions are really of interest in the moment of performance:

> Where exactly is the Enlightenment subjectivity in these notes? Is the regime of absolute monarchy reflected exactly there in that phrase? Does this arpeggio represent Idamante’s secret sexual agitation, and exactly how?28

Instead, the phrases that come to mind are “doing this really fast is fun” or “here comes a big jump.”29 Such a thought-experiment begins to reveal what the drastic and gnostic look like - the

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27 This is very commonly misconceived by Jankélévitch’s critics. See Berger, “Musicology According to Don Giovanni.”

28 Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 510.

29 Ibid.
gnostic locates zeitgeists (Enlightenment subjectivity), political realities (absolute monarchy), and precise narrative detail within musical structures; the drastic concerns the fundamental passivity in front of performance and what arises from it. To complete this illustration she adduces examples of gnostic readings from eminent sources: Susan McClary describing the way in which the harmonic structure of the *Unfinished Symphony* “reports Schubert’s homosexuality” and Lawrence Kramer describing certain effects in Schumann’s *Carnaval* as an example of mirror tropes in nineteenth-century culture. These readings extract an intellectual product from the musical experience. Moreover, they relegate “music’s exceptional phenomenal existence” to the place of a mere support for intellectual or social arguments. Such readings use music to bedeck hermeneutic conclusions with “acoustic aura and sonic gift-wrap,” thus making them seem extraordinary and incontrovertible.

Within hermeneutics, she distinguishes two types: “low” and “soft.” Low hermeneutics is simplistic reduction of music to a machine that spits out easily-classifiable data about its time period, its composer, its listener. It “see[s] immanent supra-audible content in musical artifacts from the past,” and seems to describe in a particular way the interpretive style of McClary and Kramer quoted above. Soft hermeneutics, on the other hand, would be that which acknowledges that “such content [is] a product born in messy collisions between interpreting subject and musical object.” Practitioners of it would not assert that meanings are embedded in music per se. She later adduces Richard Taruskin and his methods as an example of what soft hermeneutics

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31 Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 518.
would look like. Taruskin employs music analysis, “biographical facts,” “political history,” and “scenario analysis” to arrive at conclusions such as “Stravinsky’s music is the sonic trace of a ‘stripdown’ from humanism to biologism in early twentieth-century Europe.” The qualities that differentiate “soft hermeneutics” from “low hermeneutics” are perhaps visible in Taruskin’s “Why You Cannot Leave Bartók Out,” a 2006 address arguing against the exclusion of Bartók from the Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music. He diagnoses the problem here as a lack of respect for “mediation and reception.” This renders the volume oblivious to the way in which the reception history of Bartók’s oeuvre is an important illustration of the “buffeting the arts and their practitioners have suffered in the turbulent political environment of the twentieth century.” Soft hermeneutics shifts the focus toward the multiple perspectives of reception, while low hermeneutics attempts to read the composer’s code.

Though practitioners of soft hermeneutics have a greater respect for the multiplicity of meanings in a musical work, both low and soft hermeneutics make a fundamental mistake, which is “determining and summoning authority, not leaving open or withdrawing.” Though many scholars offer disclaimers about the lack of definitive authority in the interpretations that they

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32 Ibid., 520.

33 Ibid., 519. I would argue, in slight tension with Abbate, that the intertwining of music and social reality in Taruskin’s historiography is not necessarily opposed to its ineffability, but it is complicated. A partial response to Abbate’s claims here can be found in Taruskin’s “Review: Speed Bumps,” 19th-Century Music 29, no. 2 (2005): 185-295


35 Ibid., 269.

36 Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 516.
offer, this does not compensate for the fact that a certain non-musical meaning is ascribed to a certain musical configuration:

The decipherer’s habit is ineradicable from musical hermeneutics. Neither dialectical foreplay, nor the soft caveat, that, as Kramer puts it, “meaning is not the cause of interpretation, but its effect” or that “what is objectively ‘present’ in the work…is not a specific meaning but the availability or potentiality of meanings,” can compensate for statements wherein a specific import is indeed ascribed to some aspect of or configuration within the work […] In other words, you cannot hide the nature of the hermeneutic act, no matter how eloquent and well-meant your framing disclaimers.37

For Abbate, formal musical analysis is subject to the same charge, an aggressive and challenging stance. Though scholars who practice music analysis and those who interpret social data in music can sometimes be in opposing camps, both domesticate the “labor and carnality of performance.”38 For her, formalism is simply another form of the hermeneutic impulse, which is to translate the unsafe relationship between performer and listener into a safe and distributable form, ignoring the unruly nature of the musical experience. Although some scholars, like Ruth Solie, describe music analysis as a “placeholder for an unmediated musical experience,”39 Abbate takes a much harder line, calling formalism essentially a “flight from music as performed.”40 Just how hard a line she is presenting here will merit further discussion later; it is one of the positions in the article that has been most debated and criticized.

Although Abbate’s argument might be seem to tend towards a mystical, spiritualized view of the musical experience, she subverts this potential reading by presenting the gnostic as

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37 Ibid., 527. The quotations are from Kramer, Musical Meaning, 118.

38 Ibid., 514.

39 Ibid., 530.

40 Ibid., 531.
the greater locus of spiritualized and misguided music-philosophies. Jankélévitch’s spiritual view of the musical experience is actually born out of its concrete reality in performance.\footnote{1} Hermeneutics, on the other hand, involves a departure from that concrete reality, preferring to take refuge in concepts that are essentially contingent, constructed, and liable to error. Her chief proof for this is Wagner’s “Judaism in Music,”\footnote{2} which takes the reading of concrete social meanings in music to its ugliest extreme. This is just one example of how the “clandestine mysticism” in musical hermeneutics tends to use musical analysis to make social or intellectual arguments seem unassailable:

Hermeneutics fundamentally relies on music as mysterium, for mystery is the very thing that makes the cultural facts and processes that music is said to inscribe or release seem so savory and interesting.\footnote{3}

The most extreme form of “clandestine mysticism” is what she calls a belief in the “cryptographic sublime,” which is the belief that music contains exceptional revelations about supra-musical reality which cannot be found anywhere else. Her descriptions of the cryptographic sublime are what make it clear that to her that Adorno is the dominant influence on modern gnostic criticism. The following passage both neatly juxtaposes Jankélévitch and Adorno and encapsulates Abbate’s reading of Adorno’s philosophical tendency and influence:

\begin{quote}
\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item The concreteness implicit in Jankélévitch’s view of the musical experience also leads to a particular attention towards the more ephemeral aspects of performance. Such ephemera are an important factor in Abbate’s attempts at a “drastic” musicology. Musicology’s interest in ephemera, most prominently discussed in a 2015 \textit{Representations} forum on “quirk historicism” (no. 132 (2015): 61-129) could be seen as proceeding from the influence of “Drastic or Gnostic?” Abbate’s extraordinary “Sound Object Lessons” focusses in a particular way on the attention to ephemera that is logical implication of Jankélévitch’s approach to music. \textit{Journal of the American Musicological Society} 69, no. 3 (2016): 793-829.
\item Richard Wagner, \textit{Judaism in Music (Das Judenthum in Der Musik) Being the Original Essay Together with the Later Supplement,} by Richard Wagner; Translated from the German and Furnished with Explanatory Notes and Introduction by Edwin Evans Senior (England: W. Reeves, 1910).
\item Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 522.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
\end{quote}
Jankélévitch, sardonically, imagines the hermeneutical stethoscope, a scientific instrument to be placed on a musical work in the right place in order to hear important information. But when (in 1928) Adorno described Schubert’s music as a seismograph, an exemplary move was made toward the technomysticism that is now commonplace.\footnote{Ibid., 527.}

Her tone toward Adorno is quietly aggressive: “Consider the seismograph, a suave metaphor,” she writes before dismantling the “seismograph” conceit - it involves a translation from one medium to another, interpretable only by the enlightened.

Although Adorno is the ringleader of text-decoders, Abbate does note that he is not utterly oblivious to the ungraspability of the musical experience. In a passage from the Schubert essay (alluded to in the above quotation), he writes:

\begin{quote}
In irregular jerks, like a seismograph, Schubert’s music transcribes a qualitative change in humankind…we cannot read it, but it sets ciphers of the reconciliation that will finally come before our failing, tear-filled eyes.\footnote{Ibid., 528, footnote 52.}
\end{quote}

Adorno recognizes here that being moved is central to the musical experience - his sensitivity to musical beauty cannot be denied, no matter how many pernicious motives are ascribed to him. At the same time, her criticisms of this passage ring true. Adorno’s passage essentially says that Schubert’s music contains a code that will eventually be cracked; the thrust of it is supra-musical. Adorno might be adducing the “tears” just to anticipate the criticism of musical hermeneutics as too-definite, and this is Abbate’s reading of the passage: a piece of “belletristic legerdemain”\footnote{Ibid., 528.} that obfuscates the fact that Adorno’s writings are “rich in decryptions of musical texts.”\footnote{Ibid., 528.}
Abbate, following Jankélévitch, theorizes that practitioners of the gnostic have varying degrees of resistance to the drastic for various reasons. The fact that the direct experience of music can “act upon us and change us,” is for some an object of fear; it can cause what Jankélévitch calls a “grudge against music,” symptomatic of “certain antihedonistic pathologies.”

This grudge can have profound consequences:

Prescribing a critical distance from the performance experience, ever since Brechtian estrangement, has seemed to guarantee liberal credentials. yet this can foreclose much that is of value, both intellectually and morally, in encountering a present other at point-blank range.

The hermeneutic impulse often comes from the desire to defend the other, to rescue marginalized voices. However, if the musical experience is bypassed, it can eliminate authentic encounters between others.

In addition to foreclosing the potential moral advantage of the drastic, the gnostic also forecloses the many possible meanings which music can have. In performances, the possible meanings of music proliferate and speak to one another, a possibility that is neutralized by hermeneutics’ “determining and summoning authority, not leaving open or withdrawing.”

The lack of openness to possible meanings, in Abbate’s view, circles back to a moral problem:

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48 Ibid., 532.

49 Ibid., 532.

50 A memorable passage by Elaine Scarry, cited by Abbate: “The banishing of beauty from the humanities in the last two decades has been carried out by a set of political complaints against it. But…these political complaints against beauty are themselves incoherent. Beauty neither makes us inattentive towards justice (because, far from distracting us from the phenomenal world, it makes us more aware), nor in being stared at, or listened to, does it wreak damage either upon the beautiful object or the individual who apprehends it.” Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 57, 68.

51 Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 516.
[A] coherent stance might mean not saying what musical configurations mean without simultaneously signaling a deficit in seriousness or without proposing too many alternative meanings at the same time. Why repay the freedom we are given by putting the gift-giver in a cage, doing so continuously or without regrets, without wondering what this activity may say? Such statements anthropomorphize musical works, making them into living things towards which we must develop an ethical position. They are not, of course, but the way we cope with them may reflect choices about how to cope with real human others or how not to.\textsuperscript{52}

In other words, confidently attributing a single meaning to a musical work leads to the notion that a musical work is something that can be judged and then accepted or rejected. If this notion is extended to human beings, the implications are threatening - judging, accepting, and rejecting “real human others” is precisely the work that the worst totalitarian regimes do.

The most aggressive incarnations of the hermeneutic approach, she writes, are those which claim that a respect for music’s ineffability is tantamount to a fascistic irrationalism, a claim that is fiercely articulated in, for example, James Hepokoski’s contribution to the Jankélévitch \textit{JAMS} colloquy. There, Hepokoski calls Jankélévitch’s philosophy a “rearguard, regressive posture”\textsuperscript{53} which aims to silence the “probing, confrontational voices of rational modernism.”\textsuperscript{54} Hepokoski’s view comes from the admirable belief that the gnostic is the realm of civilized, rational discourse, which is a safeguard against abuses of power. “Such anti-intellectual positions,” writes Hepokoski of Jankélévitch, “did not have an entirely savory history in the twentieth century, and liberal thinkers might well greet them with wariness.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 517.


\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 226.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 226.
James Currie amplifies this particular criticism of Jankélévitch’s ethics in his contribution to the same colloquy, “Where Jankélévitch Cannot Speak,” arguing that his use of injunctions to silence actually mirrors a kind of censorship. While acknowledging the presence of real openness and modesty in Jankélévitch’s oeuvre, he finds other moments at which such modesty is lacking, leading him to conclude that Jankélévitch is basically inconsistent in his ethical injunctions to silence:

I would argue that the symptomatic distortions that derail the ethical coherence of Music and the Ineffable arise from Jankélévitch’s attempt to defend the identity relation between, on the one hand, a certain conception of reserved modesty in human utterance and, on the other, the laudable or ethical responsibility and sensitivity that it supposedly embodies. For one quickly notices that the structure of this identity relation between modesty and ethic is contradicted by the refusal of such relations elsewhere in the text. And the text provides no advice or theoretical justification for why this is the case; we just have to accept the text’s whims, something that for this reader, at any rate, seriously discredits the integrity of it as a philosophical work, even if, at times, it makes it a seductive as a kind of cryptic-driven literature […]

The main instance in which Jankélévitch contradicts himself, Currie argues, is in his “assertion of an absolute and inviolable difference” between German music and other music; his text in effect behaves as if “Germany is not here.”

Abbate’s response to these formidable criticisms would be that the safeguard against abuses of power and ideological mistakes is an embrace of the variety and life-giving potential in performed music:

Music is ineffable in allowing multiple potential meanings and demanding none in particular, above all in its material form as real music, the social event that has carnal effects. The state engendered by real music, the drastic state, is unintellectual and

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56 247-251.
57 Ibid., 248.
58 Ibid., 248.
common, familiar in performers and music lovers and annoying non-musicologists, and it has value. When we cannot stare such embarrassing possibilities in the face and find some sympathy for them, when we deny that certain events or states are impenetrable to gnostic habits, hence make them invisible and inaudible, we are vulnerable. For, denying mystery, the perplexing event, the reticence such things may engender, means being prey to something that comes to call at its nocturnal worst, as coercive mysticism and morbid grandiloquence.59

In other words, the acknowledgement of the drastic can become a source of freedom, because otherwise, one becomes vulnerable to “coercive mysticism and morbid grandiloquence.”60

All of this is an effective identification and criticism of the gnostic tendency, but this is the easy part of this argument to make. The difficult question is how to speak about the drastic, or whether we should speak about it at all. Abbate’s proposal might seem to be calling for a sort of measured silence, but on closer examination, this cannot be the case. *Music and the Ineffable*, after all, consists of tens of thousands of words about music. Moreover, the way that Jankélévitch writes show that this silence is not the response he advocates. Jankélévitch devotes much time to the elaborate description of music, and even expresses a certain kind of admiration for analysis.61

The question, then, is not one of whether one can speak about music, but of what the aim of this language, this writing on music is. If the language’s intent is to bypass the sensuous and bewitching musical experience and reveal a supra-musical truth, then it is disingenuous. However, if the language acknowledges and works in tandem with this experience, there is an unlimited number of things to say about it. Steven Rings, in analyzing Jankélévitch’s

59 Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 534-535.

60 Ibid., 535.

61 Here, I refer to Steven Rings’s citation of Jankélévitch’s admiration for an analytical study on Fauré by Dommel-Diény; Jankélévitch says that her technical analysis makes us feel the “absolute calm” in the piece’s “whispers.” Steven Rings, “Talking and Listening with Jankélévitch,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, no. 1 (2012): 219.
descriptions of music, describes the way in which language has a “deictic” function; it points out features of the musical experience that intensify the listening experience of the reader.\textsuperscript{62}

Literary critic Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, in his work differentiating “presence culture” from “meaning culture,” provides similar indications of what a critical discourse that acknowledges the drastic might be like.\textsuperscript{63} Such a discourse would incorporate “philosophies of action, labor, and techne”\textsuperscript{64} and would be able to confront “the movement, immediacy, and violence” of present phenomena.\textsuperscript{65}

I will leave sustained consideration of how Abbate goes about a drastic form of criticism to my later chapter on the drastic and the Fourth Symphony. To summarize them in brief: her drastic readings are brief, enigmatic, and take second place to her theorizing about what precisely the drastic is. All of them could be described as having a deictic function. Interestingly, and contrary to the way Abbate is often characterized, her descriptions focus on “collisions” between the drastic and the gnostic, rather than exclusively on the drastic. What is currently of most importance, however, is Abbate’s critique of the gnostic, as this is starting point for my consideration of Adorno’s “Brahms aktuell.”

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 218-23.

\textsuperscript{63} Gumbrecht, \textit{Production of Presence}, especially 91-132.

\textsuperscript{64} Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 531.

\textsuperscript{65} Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Form Without Matter vs. Form as Event." \textit{Modern Language Notes} 111, no. 3 (1996): 586-587, as quoted on Abbate, 531.
Chapter 3: The context and structure of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony

To situate the conversation between Adorno and Abbate, a few notes on Brahms’s Fourth Symphony and its context are necessary.66

Brahms worked in pairs with his symphonies: No. 2 (1877) premiered just over a year after No. 1 (1876), and No. 4 (1885) premiered one year and ten months after No. 3 (1883). Each pair of symphonies contrasts in mood - the first in C minor, the second in a sunny D major; the third in F major, the fourth in E minor. The E minor symphony more than fulfills its role as the “dark” member of a Brahms symphony pair. Unlike the C minor symphony, which concludes in a blaze of C major (undoubtedly channeling Beethoven’s Fifth), the E minor symphony never breaks through to the realm of affirmation. Instead, it contracts as it progresses: while the first movement is an expansive minor-key movement analogous to the first movement of the C minor symphony, the last movement is a strict passacaglia on a chorale theme likely based on from Bach’s “Nach dir Herr verlanget mich,” BWV 150.67 To show this trajectory in further detail, I present a brief outline of the symphony’s progress:


I - Allegro non troppo (E minor): The symphony opens with an in medias res effect, plunging directly into its elegiac main theme constructed out of a chain of descending thirds (mm. 1-18). After a lengthy and affectively varied exposition (mm. 1-144), the development begins as if it were an exposition repeat (m. 145), a technique that is interestingly echoed in the second and third movements. While the development, (mm. 145-246) contains moments of high drama, it is ultimately sapped of all its energy, melting directly into the recapitulation, which is rhythmically augmented by two at its outset (mm. 246-393). As I will note below, there are several other instances of rhythmic, harmonic, and textural blurring in the rest of the symphony. Like its famous minor-symphony counterpart, Beethoven’s Fifth, the recapitulation tends toward the tonic major before swerving back into the tonic minor for a ferocious coda (mm. 394-end). This movement is the focus of Adorno’s praise in “Brahms aktuell,” and therefore the focus of my own comments.

II - Andante moderato (E major) - The second movement looks forward explicitly to the variation form of the final movement, including several variations on a long theme (mm. 5-15) in its modified use of sonata form. This theme is preceded by a brass/wind introductory motive in C major, one of the most open articulations of the C-E tonal polarity that informs much of the symphony and is a focal point of Adorno’s observations. The theme itself is saturated with what Schoenberg called “developing variation” - its logic comes more from the manipulation of

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a dotted rhythm in real time than from a tangible phrase structure (see especially m. 7-10). Developing variation also characterizes the movement’s second theme, which begins at m. 41: its first three notes are previewed repeatedly by the orchestra in mm. 39-40, and it tails off into a lengthy exploration of a brief rhythmic motive first articulated in m. 48. At the end of the exposition, the opening theme appears (m. 64), mirroring what happens in the first movement at the same place in the form. This statement of the opening theme, however, is already the beginning of the recapitulation, though this is concealed by the fact that there is a development-like episode in mm. 74-87. Continuing the theme of blurring seen at the opening of the recapitulation of the first movement, the final statement of the theme is interrupted by a harmonically- and timbrally-misty episode from mm. 106-109.

III - Allegro giocoso (C major) - This mercurial movement might perhaps be best read as a symphonic mad scene before the apocalyptic fourth-movement passacaglia. The opening theme, initially in C-major and simple duple meter, pivots suddenly to Eb major and compound meter in m. 10, swings back to C major in m. 14, and avoids a cadence with new material in mm. 17-21 before a rousing return to the opening material at m. 35. Eccentricities and interruptions proliferate as the movement continues. Like its predecessors, it also features the use of a “false” exposition repeat (m. 89), hints of variation form through the continual reappearance of the opening theme (mm. 1, 35, 89), the use of harmonic and rhythmic blurring (mm. 47-49), and a disjunct statement of the first five notes of the passacaglia that will merit further comment below (mm. 317-326)

69 For a comprehensive overview of Brahms’s use of this technique across his oeuvre, see Walter Frisch, Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
IV - Allegro energico e passionato (E minor) This passacaglia, a set of 30 variations on an eight-measure ground-bass, is famous for a number of reasons: first, for its technical wizardry, which synthesizes an ancient musical form with a brilliant variety of modern orchestral timbres, harmonic sleight-of-hand, and a simultaneous application of both sonata-form and passacaglia procedures; and second for its profound denial of the standard symphony-as-affirmation trope. While last movements are often the place of experimentation and formal “breakthroughs” in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century symphonic repertoire (see Beethoven’s Ninth and its progeny, especially the Mahler symphonies), Brahms rejects all of this in his last movement. It is both a riveting, original symphonic climax and a capstone statement of the Brahmsian ethos - new possibilities in old forms through technical brilliance. Walter Frisch calls it “the most extraordinary symphonic movement written in the post-Beethoven, pre-Mahler era;” Alex

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70 It has relatively few companions in its minor-to-minor trajectory; the most notable one would be Tchaikovsky’s despairing Sixth Symphony.

71 It is interesting to compare Brahms’s decisions in the last movement of the Fourth with his decisions in the last movement of his other minor-mode symphony, the First. “Though there is no direct evidence, it may well have been the composition of the finale that held up the completion of Brahms’s First for […] many years. […] Scholars have often pointed to a ‘finale problem’ in the post-Beethoven symphonic era, when many composers felt the need to make their finales not the last-but-equal movement among four, but the real goal or climax of the symphonic process. In this respect the paradigms to be either imitated or avoided, but not ignored were the end-weighted Fifth and Ninth Symphonies of Beethoven.” Brahms seems to have opted to imitate these symphonies in his First, and “ignore” them in his Fourth. Frisch, Brahms: The Four Symphonies, 58.

72 The Fourth as an anti-Ninth is a well-established tradition in the criticism of the symphony. Giorgio Pestelli devotes significant attention to this theme, writing that the Fourth’s Finale rejects the “Finale as an expressive category.” (“On the finale of Brahms’s fourth symphony,” Brahms-Studien 15 (2008): 129.) In his article, Pestelli refers to a number of ways that the Finale has been read as a form of tragic denial. Summarizing Hans Joachim Widmann’s 1981 article on the symphony, he writes: “surrendering to the strict rules of the variations on a basso obbligato, Brahms moved away from himself; effusion becomes conciseness, familiarity withdraws into impassibility, romantic subjectivism disappears, and Brahms sets out […] toward modern objectivity” (“Brahms’ Vierte Sinfonie,” Brahms-Studien 4 (1981), 47). He also notes that Kenneth Hull (“Allusive irony in Brahms’s Fourth Symphony,” in Brahms Studies 2, edited by David Brodbeck (University of Nebraska Press, 1998)) and Robert Ricks (“A Possible Source for a Brahms Ground,” The American Brahms Society Newsletter, March 2005) pinpoint death allusions in the chaconne.

73 Brahms: The Four Symphonies, 140.
Ross calls it a “Götterdämmerung in nine minutes, an apocalypse in strict time, musical history stripped to the bone.”

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74 Ross, *Listen to This*, 311.
Chapter 4: Adorno’s “Brahms aktuell” and the Fourth Symphony

Adorno’s comments on Brahms are, in the words of Margaret Notley, “frustratingly brief.” His aphoristic comments on it are as provocative as they are incomplete; “Brahms aktuell,” or “Current Brahms” is the only significant document in the Adorno oeuvre on the composer, and it only recently appeared in English translation in Nicole Grimes’s 2019 book *Brahms’s Elegies: The Poetics of Loss in Nineteenth-Century German Culture*. In short, Adorno’s argument in the essay is that Brahms is particularly important for modernist composition because he resolved a conflict that had emerged in the 19th century between freewheeling musical exploration and the demands of musical form. Put another way, Brahms found a means of integrating mid-19th-century harmonic and melodic experimentation - found, he says, in Schumann - with the “grandness” of sonata-form construction found in Beethoven, a process that he pithily describes as “the objectification of the subjective.” The “objectification of the subjective,” he argues eventually fully realized in the music of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern. One of the only specific pieces that Adorno mentions as exemplifying this is “the

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incomparable first movement of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony.” In this chapter, I will attempt to bridge the gap between Adorno’s enigmatic analytical prophecies and the Fourth Symphony as we know it, finding some of them quite accurate, some of them less so, and all - accurate or otherwise - provocative. I will also determine to what extent this is a gnostic reading, and to what extent that might be problematic. In the process, I indulge tendencies that Abbate considers

77 Ibid., 253. Literature on this first movement is diverse, and has one interesting point of intersection with Adorno’s ideas.

A number of writers speculate about the latent presence of variation form within the first movement, a prefiguring of the fourth movement. Raymond Knapp devotes extensive space in his Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1997) to observations about the use of “variational technique” in the first movement, and Jonathan Dunsby in Structural Ambiguity in Brahms (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981) and Christian Martin Schmidt (Sinfonie Nr. 4, e-moll, op. 98 Einführung und Analyse von Christian Martin Schmidt (Munich and Mainz: Goldmann/ Schott, 1980)) make similar observations. The latter supplies a full diagram of the “variations” in the first movement, numbering six. While not exactly claiming for the presence of variation structure, David Osmond-Smith (“The retreat from dynamism: a study of Brahms’ Fourth Symphony,” in Brahms: biographical, documentary, and analytical studies, edited by Robert Pascall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)) notes the way in which the recapitulation echoes the exposition as a “fierce affirmation of stasis” that looks forward to the finale.

It is unlikely that Adorno is referring to a latent variation technique in the movement, because so many of his other comments in “Brahms aktuell” have to do with harmonic and motivic process. Moreover, the musical aesthetics articulated in the first chapter of Philosophy of New Music seem at first glance to be opposed to the “fierce affirmation of stasis” that Osmond-Smith describes, emphasizing instead the progress of musical logic. The comparison between those who claim a variation process in the movement and Adorno’s concept of the piece, however, could be a fruitful enterprise, with many implications for the expressive meaning of the symphony.

78 Adorno’s tendency to make broad and unsubstantiated analytical claims about music has been noted by Max Paddison, who provides a relatively convincing explanation for this practice: “Adorno has a tendency to make sweeping generalizations about the structure of a work, and not to support points made with systematic analysis. His impatience with detailed analytical work should not be seen as hostility to technical analysis in general (he was, in fact, very insistent on the importance of the activity, as the section entitled ‘Analyse und Berg’ in his book on the composer, and his talk ‘Zum Probleme der musikalischen Analyse’ clearly indicate). It is more a symptom of his approach overall, in that his writing is characterized by an extreme form of ellipsis, leading his critics - Schoenberg among them - to complain of willful mystification. That is to say, in the interests of a terse style and densely structured text, Adorno omits what could be regarded as essential expository or explanatory material, and this often results in difficulties in understanding precisely what he means. In his musical analyses leaps are sometimes made, points are not followed through, and there are some vaguenesses and inaccuracies. Frustrating as these features might appear, they are not such a high price to pay if insights into the music itself are forthcoming. Given the value of Adorno’s larger emphasis on the contextualization of music, the idiosyncrasies and shortcomings of his technical analyses can be allowed some indulgence.” Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music (Cambridge University Press, 1993),169.
deeply problematic - namely, formalism and the reading of social meaning into music - in an effort to test her argument.

“Brahms aktuell”

Though he would move to America later that year, Adorno had been living in Frankfurt in 1934, where Notley says it is certain⁷⁹ that he had heard Schoenberg give an early radio broadcast of his famous essay “Brahms the Progressive”⁸⁰ the previous year. While Schoenberg’s wide-ranging and often personal essay reads very differently from Adorno’s, the two have markedly similar objectives. Chief among them is the idea that Brahms is one of the most authentic progenitors of serialism, which both regard as the definitive form of contemporary music.

The concrete impetus for “Brahms aktuell” was a comment from musicologist Alfred Einstein in the then-recently-published New Music Lexicon, which described Brahms as “the least influential of all the masters” for the modernist composer.⁸¹ Adorno sets out to debunk this claim, mostly because Einstein’s remark implicitly misinterprets the meaning of modernism. The simplistic fascination with the new has very little to do with Adorno’s definition of modernism; rather, it concerns the continuation and fulfillment of historical tendencies. It is in this ancestry of 20th-century modernist composition that Adorno is interested and in which he claims that Brahms plays a crucial role.

Another implication of Einstein’s view is that Brahms’s music is sonically beautiful but otherwise outdated - a viewpoint that is still familiar today. Adorno argues that while Brahms’s

⁷⁹ Notley, Lateness and Brahms, 78.
⁸⁰ In Style and Idea, edited by Dika Newlin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950).
⁸¹ Quoted in Grimes, 250.
sound-world is indeed outdated, this matters little, for his technical achievements mark a crucial step in the evolution of music: “The time will come when future Brahmsian performances that realize…[constructive principles], and not […] autumnal colors, will be uncovered.”82 This division is one of the places where Adorno’s gnostic tendency of mind is most plainly visible.

Adorno details these “constructive principles” in several ways. Brahms’s significance starts, he argues, from the innovations of Schumann

[Brahms’s] essence is not so easily recognized, but it is all the more effective as a secret. […] It was the Schumannesque, that melodious homophony, that for the sake of song and harmonic discovery had softened the seriousness of the grand Beethovenian sonata construction by means of subjective expression, and transformed its contrasts into lyrical Liederspiel, and its tectonic repetitions into the gyrating, obsessive behaviour of the trapped self.83

In other words, Adorno is claiming that Schumann’s music explores new expressive ground, but that exploration comes at the cost of form. In this colorful description of Schumann’s innovations, the rhetorical power of the sonata becomes weakened into directionless self-reflection. Brahms, he argues, remedies this alienation of musical subjectivity (“song,” “harmonic discovery,” exploration) from objectivity (architecture, form, etc.). Adorno’s language on this is both curious and provocative - note the images of “reflection,” “deliberation,” and “immersion”:

After the Schumannian sacrifice, in Brahms the objective spirit of the sonata deliberates upon itself, as it were. […] The unmediated recourse to Beethoven is not possible in the name of Schumann’s subjectivity and its altered musical material; the chromaticism of the New Germans and Chopin, which has still not found its great success in the theatre of the mature Wagner, seems, meanwhile - in the area of sonata form - to be a mere


83 Ibid.
intensification of the Schumann situation. The dynamic way through [...] is one of immersion. [Brahms’s] music examines its material - that of the high Romanticism of Schumann - profoundly in its self-motivation until it becomes objectified: objectification of the subject. What is achieved in Wagner through a dynamic tempest is achieved in Brahms through stubborn insistence. His results, however, have a more lasting quality, a lasting quality precisely for the ensuing compositional practice: the less they stick to the exterior surface of the sound phenomenon, the less they are exposed to wear and tear as a kind of “stimulus.”

Brahms, therefore, consists of an important step toward modern music and offers the most durable way forward of any nineteenth-century composer, especially in the area of form. His music is not content to let new harmonies exist merely as novelty, but “reflects” upon these new harmonies and in so doing generates a new kind of sonata form. Adorno merely asserts this, sparing himself the trouble of actually describing the novelty of Brahms’s form. But he is right all the same, as I will demonstrate in due course.

Adorno does offer a few brief musical specifics, but stops short of pointing out anything in an individual Brahms piece. First, he goes into detail about what the “examination” of exotic Schumannian harmony might look like:

the harmonic discoveries of Schumann [are] dissolved from their expressive isolation, and the harmonic structure then determined anew according to them; they form autonomous scale steps, which in turn make the meaningful, chordal distribution of balance capable of lengthy expansion [...]  

Next, he says that in this extended harmonic world, the simple repetition of motives (found, for instance, in the first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth), is obsolete; it does not do justice to the new complexity that has entered the musical vocabulary. Yesterday’s

84 Ibid., 254.
85 Ibid., 254
86 Wagner fails in this regard, according to Adorno; his exact sequences are simplistic.
Developmental techniques become the more liquid technique that Schoenberg christened “developing variation,” which Adorno defines as “something unremittingly new from the old or familiar, without permitting a […] coincidental note.” I would mention here that the connection made here between developing variation and harmonic experimentation is one of the difficult points in the essay - how does an extended harmonic vocabulary necessitate the use of developing variation? Could simple, repetitive techniques not be used with a more expanded harmonic vocabulary? I bookmark this question for my analysis of the Fourth Symphony below.

The last detailed point that Adorno makes is that Brahms’s command of these various techniques shows an “absence of naïveté.” Unlike the Romantics, who he argues are interested in newness more or less for its own sake, Brahms “examines” these new harmonies and extends their consequences into the form of his pieces. Many Romantic composers, in Adorno’s severe view, engage therefore a form of non-progressive aestheticism; Brahms, instead, is more logical and responds more deeply to his material, making him a greater contributor to the development of musical technique. An interesting parallel emerges here between these thrill-seeking Romantics and the false definition of modernism that Adorno criticizes at the beginning of the essay. It might be said that in Adorno’s view of music history, in both the nineteenth and twentieth century, there is a layer of the musical community that is concerned with novelty at all

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87 Ibid., 252.
costs - both, he would say, engage in “the merry alacrity to award innovation.” But true 

musical progressivism, Adorno seems to argue, involves the deepening awareness of musical 

material that is apparent in Brahms’s music. 

At the end of the essay, Adorno writes that Brahms’s recasting of sonata form in an age of 
increased harmonic possibility reaches an apex in the first movement of the Fourth Symphony - 
he describes it as a challenge that has not been met by any composer in the twentieth century. It 
is now our task to verify this. 

**“Brahms aktuell” and the Fourth Symphony** 

The harmonic point that Adorno makes - the use of subordinate scale degrees to create 
“the meaningful, chordal distribution of balance” and “lengthy expansion” I find to be quite 
apparent in the piece. It is evident from even a cursory look at the score that the symphony 
repeatedly articulates C, C-major chords, and C-major-related harmonies, which is of course a 
“subordinate” scale-degree area in E minor, the symphony’s home key. This key area is used 
both as a constant harmonic coloring and as a means of creating an innovative tonal structure. 

While C is arguably a mainstream scale degree in the key of E minor, it is atypical as a major 

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88 Interestingly enough, Jankélévitch makes similar conclusions about this tendency in modern music; although the conclusions he draws from this are different: “A brilliant musician can in fact be an innovator without strictly speaking being an inventor. In such cases, those who expect “great discoveries” will be disappointed. Let there be no doubt: the rapacious need for novelty, so characteristic of the escalating modernist auction, entails the idea that a musical act is a thing, in which case, music is no more than technique, technique alone. And just as technique is the consequence of an indefinite process of perfection - with each automobile or kitchen appliance show ushering in what is new and improved in comparison to last year’s - so perpetual progress shall be the law of music. Farther, faster, more powerful! In this arms race, each new music shattering its predecessor’s records, offers itself as the last thing in modernity; and each musician forcing predecessors into the category of the unfashionable and outmoded, claims the patent on the invention. In an era where pastiches of “scientific investigation” have become quasi-universal, musicians owe it to themselves to become “researchers” just like everyone else. But what they looking for, in the end? A previously unknown chord? A new musico-atomic particle? It is a safe bet that a decline in inspiration translates into this thirst for innovation. Scriabin was a genuine “researcher because he was inspired as well. And vice versa, those with nothing to say attached exaggerated importance to novelties of vocabulary.” Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 108.
harmonic area in a minor sonata-form structure; and the extent to which Brahms refers to it is striking and unusual. Though he does not ultimately seem to regard the use of bVI as something with great philosophical and aesthetic import (as Adorno does), Frisch also comments on the use of bVI:

Like the three preceding symphonies, the Fourth has a special color or quality-analogous to what Verdi referred to in his own operas as a ‘tinta’ - imparted by certain harmonic and thematic features that span all four movements.89

The use of C can be first seen in a motivic detail at the opening of the piece that is quickly turned into a harmony (Ex. 1). The first pitch in the melody that is not part of an E minor triad is the high C in the violins (m. 2). Correspondingly, the bass moves to a C in m. 5, making it the first truly non-tonic harmonic region in the piece. The centrality of C is quickly underscored in bars 7-11 (Ex. 2); the violins obsessively repeat C with dynamic swells. We see it again at the poignant and somewhat out-of-place outlandish C over a B7 chord in m. 18 in the oboe (Ex. 3) and the motion to the C area in the midst of the explosive string melody in m. 49, as well as in several other places.

In addition to its frequent colorings of the piece’s surface, C reaches further into the piece’s structure, to the point of taking on a greater significance than the secondary-key area in the sonata form, which is B major (see formal chart, Fig. 1). The transitional and secondary-theme spaces in this movement are somewhat up for debate. Some place the second group at the prominent, passionate theme that begins with a horn-call at m. 54; others place it at the arrival of B major in m. 95, because that is the key that actually closes the exposition. Given the unstable, ambiguous nature of the secondary-key area, and the repeated articulation of C, which recurs like

89 Brahms: The Four Symphonies, 116-117.
an obsession, it becomes fair to say that C vies with “true” secondary key of the movement for pride of place, and it seems to win this battle as the rest of the symphony unfolds. This is the first major indication that I find of the way in which Adorno “recasts” and “reconstructs” sonata form in the light of new harmonic territory, especially of his wording of “the distribution of balance.”
And just as Adorno claims, these alterations in the form are highly related to the expressive content of the piece. The choice of C is not a strictly intellectual one, but one that has a great deal of “subjective” meaning. First, the widespread use of C undermines tonic-dominant tension, which underscores the sense of blurring, decay, and groundless circularity that is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Large-scale formal function</th>
<th>Local function</th>
<th>key</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 1 to m. 18</td>
<td>first group</td>
<td>first thematic statement</td>
<td>Em</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–43</td>
<td></td>
<td>second thematic statement</td>
<td>Em &gt; Bm (inflected with C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44–53</td>
<td></td>
<td>end of first group</td>
<td>Bm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53–56</td>
<td>transition</td>
<td>horn call</td>
<td>Bm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57–72</td>
<td></td>
<td>second transitional theme</td>
<td>Bm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72–94</td>
<td></td>
<td>developmental episode</td>
<td>unstable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95–107</td>
<td>secondary theme</td>
<td>single thematic statement</td>
<td>BM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107–137</td>
<td>closing group</td>
<td></td>
<td>unstable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>137–144</td>
<td>coda</td>
<td></td>
<td>BM</td>
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communicated at other moments in the symphony (see the previous chapter). This is most apparent especially at the recapitulation of the first movement, where the opening of the symphony is rhythmically diminished by two and overlaid with mysterious rustling in the strings (Ex. 4). This moment is itself preceded by a total shutdown of activity in the development; the development freezes over rather than heats up. The orchestral score makes this even more clear - the whole-note seventh chords in the first and second system are passed between string and wind choirs, evoking a sense of labored breathing. There is also another striking moment of

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90 This example is taken from Otto Singer’s solo-piano reduction of the score. In Brahms: Symphonien für Klavier zu 2 Händen (Leipzig: Peters). 119-145.

91 Note the very similar passage at the end of the development of Beethoven’s Fifth, first movement.
“blurring” at the end of the second movement: the arrival on the final E-major cadence is prepared by an F-major chord over an E pedal (bar 116).

Second, it points the symphony's harmony in a "plagal" direction, underscoring the image of ritualized tragedy that is fully articulated in the last-movement chaconne. The plagal cadence is, of course, traditionally linked to religiosity (the cadence of choice for “Amen”), and so in a minor key can be heard as funereal. The last cadence of the first movement is plagal, which facilitates a reading of the movement as a meditation on decay. Brahms later used descending thirds very similar to the ones in the symphony as an organizing principle in “O Tod” (O Death), a song from the *Four Serious Songs*. As an aside, the dynamics of religious faith, death, and their reflection in music is a worthy subject of investigation in this symphony. The final chaconne is of course derived from the chaconne that concludes Bach’s cantata “Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich,” (“For you, Lord, I long”).

While the use of descending thirds as an organizing principle is an impressive intellectual and compositional feat, it carries with it a sonic affect that complements the other content of the symphony perfectly. This “redistribution of balance” is therefore a “meaningful” one.

It seems, therefore, that the use of C is an expressive liberty, reminiscent of Schumann, that is encoded both into the piece’s surface and structure. Here, Adorno’s harmonic points seem to be more or less clear.

Adorno’s other claim is that this new, expanded harmonic palette is incompatible with simplistic forms of development. On the surface, this claim is unclear - is there anything about expanded harmony that requires a new mode of melodic construction? There is certainly an interaction between expanded harmony and developing variation here, although in the end, I find
that the necessity which Adorno claims for the link between the two is not quite evident in this score.

Some of what he says, though, does find substantiation in the score. As is well-documented, for example by Leonard Bernstein in his *Infinite Variety of Music*\(^{92}\) and by Frisch in *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation*, the Fourth Symphony contains developing variation on a remarkable level. Bernstein attributes the afore-mentioned “blurred” recapitulation to an act of melodic development: “Brahms has not just begun a reprise, but has sneaked us into it, without our being aware of it, *through a development*. Always his method is that of change, growth, metamorphosis.”\(^{93}\) Frisch focusses his attention to developing variation on the later movements, noting in particular the way in which the bass-line of the fourth-movement theme is previewed in a registrally-disjunct form near the end of the Scherzo:

> In the last statement of the main theme [of the third movement] (bar 311), there is a grotesque parody of the forthcoming chaconne theme. An exact transposition of the first five notes of that theme, A-B-C-D-Eb, is subjected to enormous registral displacement. When the finale begins - after about a minute - Brahms sets about restoring dignity and logic to the theme. He returns it to a single register and completes it by raising the sharpened fourth to a fifth and resolving that pitch to the tonic.\(^{94}\)

To my own ear, a particularly beautiful example of developing variation takes place mid-way through the second-movement exposition, where a severe string figure is transformed into the magnificent second theme (bars 39-41).\(^{95}\) As can be seen from these examples, Brahms

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\(^{93}\) Ibid., 265.

\(^{94}\) Frisch, *Principle of Developing Variation*, 143.

\(^{95}\) Frisch, *Principle of Developing Variation*, 142-144.
particularly seems to enjoy using the same melodic material to convey radically-different affects in rapid succession.

In the first movement, this use of developing variation does intersect with the heavy use of the key area of C that I have identified earlier. See, for example, my Ex. 2 where a C-A third is obsessively outlined by the violins. This is both an articulation of the harmonic touchstone of C and a development of the opening material - the turn figure that we see here at m. 9 simply fills in the descending thirds that make up the piece’s main melody. Here we see Brahms both articulating a harmonic area that will become important and making an effort to present it as the outgrowth of a dynamic process of development. A similar interaction is visible in Example 4. Here, the explosive violin theme here is decisively rearticulated and extended on a C major harmony (heavily underscored by the lower strings in m. 49) (Ex. 5). The movement’s musical discourse, much of which is determined by developing variation, therefore, does show some
intriguing links to its harmonic discourse.

However, the necessary link that Adorno describes between these two things may in fact be an assumption - the link between developing variation and harmonic richness does not, in my view, go beyond these few intersections. Even the magnificent transformation mentioned above in the second movement is harmonically simple - a twice-repeated, standard prolongation of a dominant chord under scale degrees 5, 6, and 7.

There is, something worth retaining about these observations on the links between developmental and harmonic processes in the piece. The movement’s high level of developing variation creates a musical world of constant flux and changeability - normal musical repetition is often eschewed in favor of forward motion (see, for example, the first 18 measures). On the other hand, the way in which this process repeatedly arrives in the area of C creates an impression of circularity. This contradiction between progress and circularity eventually becomes explicit in the symphony’s last movement, which is in fact a study in the paradox between progress and circularity. Adorno’s observations, therefore, imperfect as they might be, lead in the direction of one of the key aspects of the piece, which is the conflict between flux and stasis.96

Adorno’s essay thus provides many elucidating comments about Brahms’s music. The harmonic innovations that Adorno describes are in fact quite visible in the piece, and there is a

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96 Max Paddison makes note of the role of movement and stasis in Adorno’s musical philosophy: “The tension between movement and stasis, which constitutes one of the paradoxes of the musical work, also constitutes its processual character. This internal dynamic of the work, having severed its ‘ties with the empirical world’ also constitutes its polemical and critical character over against the empirical world. There is something in the art work, Adorno maintains, which ‘in an unconscious way expresses its desire to change the world.’ For example, the reconciliation of conflicting forces which characterizes the Classical (and to some extent the Romantic) work both distances it from the world and at the same time acts as a criticism of the real world.” Paddison, *Adorno’s Aesthetics*, 191.
way in which they seem to regenerate and recalibrate traditional sonata-form key structure in the light of new harmonic illuminations. While the link between this harmonic innovation and developing variation that Adorno describes is less convincing, it nevertheless points in the direction of a key insight. Adorno’s analytical predictions, therefore, mostly come true, and where they fall short they remain provocative.

_A gnostic reading?_

It is fair to ask at this point how gnostic this analysis is. It would be reasonable at first glance to think that Adorno’s observations are merely subject to Abbate’s charge of formalism, but a further examination of his claims and their wider context in his thought make it clear that this is an act of decoding on several levels.

The claim that Brahms’s music is a vital step in the history of music indicates that musical technique has a life of its own, a reality beyond performance. The claim that musical technique evolves over time is something that Jankélévitch repudiates in his conception of music as essentially drastic.

Let there be no doubt; the rapacious need for novelty, so characteristic of the escalating modernist auction, entails the idea that the musical act is a thing, in which case, music is no more than technique, technique alone.97

Jankélévitch’s comment interestingly resonates with Adorno’s argument against the “merry alacrity to award innovation.” Both philosophers share an aversion to simplistic, novelty-seeking modernism. Their alternatives to it, however, could not be more different. For Jankélévitch, the authentic perspective regards music not as a thing but as an experience, while Adorno argues for

97 Jankélévitch, _Music and the Ineffable_, 108.
an “immersion” in and response to the musical material. Adorno’s argument therefore could be conceived as an essentially supra-musical, gnostic one on these terms.

Furthermore, the philosophy of music that underlies “Brahms aktuell” is in fact inherently one that decodes. It is clear from the first chapter of Philosophy of New Music that he regards artworks as fundamentally inseparable from social reality. In his view, art resists forces of domination; Adorno conceives of the artwork as having a concrete social effect. From the outset of the book, this link between art and its social context is clear: criticizing the codification of modern music into certain stylistic tendencies (“neoclassicism,” “serialism,” etc.), he writes that art objects contain the power to “catalyze change,” a power that is neutralized when they are thought of as mere products of certain schools of thought. The codification of music into systems of thought that are then expounded in music is a bourgeois mode of thinking - these systems of thought are commodities that can be easily replaced. If art is too closely linked to them it can become a replaceable consumer good. When the art-object is pushed away from its capacity to “catalyze change” - in other words, to have a social meaning - then it begins to lose one of its chief reasons for existing. What he appears to have in mind in this instance is again the interest in style rather than substance, the “merry alacrity to award innovation” - undoubtedly an implicit criticism of Stravinsky and his followers. The art that he advocates - of which Schoenberg is the prime exemplar - does not catalyze change through adopting and then expounding upon a style, but rather through the integrity of its musical logic, which he would argue is a form of resistance.

The value of an artwork, and concurrently its capacity to catalyze change, derives not from the way in expresses this or that school of thought, but from the immanent force and logic of the musical material itself. Adorno smoothly integrates musical and social analysis in this manner; this is what can make “Brahms aktuell” appear as a work of purely musical analysis when, in fact, it is not. “Musical continuity,” he writes, “is the true basis of meaning in a composition.”99 Later in Philosophy of New Music, he writes that art is under threat if it loses interest “in principles inherent in the individual work.” Because of this, true modern music is “simply in itself and for itself”; it is not concerned with marketing itself to society, because society has been overrun by corrupt forces of domination. In Adorno’s reading, then, Brahms contributes to the increasing of introspection in the history of music; his music is a step towards the state of being “simply in itself and for itself.” In other words, the reading presented in “Brahms aktuell” is in fact quite a social one, even though Adorno’s terminology there is essentially musical, not social.

This solipsism and isolation of modern music toward which Brahms’s music points is worth briefly examining, partly because Adorno’s descriptions of it in Philosophy of New Music are reminiscent of certain things in “Brahms aktuell.” In the dire circumstance of late-capitalist exploitation and the disenchantment of the world, the forceful expression of humanity’s alienation is the most useful thing that art can do; it must “establish the validity of the hopelessly alienated.”100 Put another way, the role of authentic music is to be an uncompromising mirror for society’s absurdity:

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99 Ibid., 9.
100 Ibid., 28.
In modern art, the intimidated conscience, seeking to escape from total enlightenment, finds the door bolted. Art today, insofar as it is at all deserving of substantiality, reflects without concessions everything that society prefers to forget, bringing it clearly thereby into conscious focus.\textsuperscript{101}

The expression of futility in modern art is part of its purpose; once art becomes free from power structures “it begins to circle aimlessly, imprisoned within itself, released from every element of resistance, upon whose permeation it was solely dependent for its meaning.”\textsuperscript{102} Even the lack of an audience for modern art is part of its value: “the loneliest language of the artist lives from the paradox of speaking to men precisely by virtue of its isolation, and of its renunciation of the power of communication once inherent in this language.”\textsuperscript{103} The lack of an audience is a statement on the condition of society; an actor on a stage in an empty theater is a greater social truth than a the fake communal experience of a traditional concert: “art is able to aid enlightenment only by relating the clarity of the world to its own darkness.”\textsuperscript{104} The hardness and uncompromising nature of modern music is part of this function, and here is where Adorno’s language recalls that in “Brahms aktuell.” “Advanced music has no recourse but to insist upon its own ossification without concession to that would-be humanitarianism which it sees through, in all its attractive and alluring guises, the mask of humanity.”\textsuperscript{105} The “ossification” (or “reflection/sinking/immersion,” to use the terminology of “Brahms aktuell’) presents an alternative to “the mask of humanity” in other forms of art.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 20-21.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 20.
Notley’s *Lateness and Brahms* does much to situate Brahms’s music and Adorno’s comments in the social context of late nineteenth-century Austria, grounding Adorno’s theoretical and high-flown theories about the artwork and society in concrete history. In the process, she confirms the way in which Adorno’s ostensibly musical analysis is also a social one. She rightly clarifies that Adorno’s urgent calls to separate Brahms’s logic from his tone is a direct commentary on the late-capitalist milieu in which Brahms wrote. She cites a passage from Adorno’s *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* that makes this clear:

> That Brahms…bears the mark of middle-class society’s individualistic phase is indisputable to the point of triteness. The category of totality, which in Beethoven still maintains an image of a proper society, in Brahms fades increasingly into a self-sufficient aesthetic principle of organization for private feelings: that is the academic side of him.

Within this context, though, Brahms’s “logic” makes for an authentic response to the advancement of capitalism. “Brahms aktuell” stages a kind of battle between destructive historical forces and the artwork, a battle which Adorno seems to believe is won in the Fourth Symphony. While Brahms himself likely conceived of this on strictly musical, aesthetic terms, his work nevertheless has a social significance. “To wit,” Notley writes, “Brahms acknowledged the musical problem, if not the broader societal emphasis on the individual from which it derived, and made it central to his work.”

She both confirms the presence of social factors in Adorno’s reading of Brahms and makes those factors more concrete.

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106 Notley explains this phrase thus: “A work such as the first movement of the *Eroica* Symphony expresses a Utopian moment in music and social history. Reflecting the optimism Beethoven and others felt after the collapse of feudalism in France, theme and form stand in perfect equilibrium: the needs of individuals and society as a whole might be reconciled, or so it seemed.” Notley, *Lateness and Brahms*, 81-82.


108 Ibid., 73.
At many levels, then, Adorno reads meanings into the piece that go beyond the sensory experience it provides in performance. He is eager, in fact, to disparage this experience. Though this might be unsettling, the philosophical conclusions he makes here are rich, and the political meaning he assigns to Brahms’s musical technique is worthy of consideration. Those sympathetic to the notion that the avant-garde is the location of true artistry and true political engagement would be aligned with him. However, his dismissal of Brahms’s sound is too facile. What sort of meanings follow from the sensory experience of the fourth, and what might be its philosophical and political implications?
Chapter 5: What is gnostic criticism?

Abbate’s complex and occasionally-ambiguous attempts at drastic criticism merit sustained parsing. As mentioned above, she presents three versions of what she considers “drastic” modes of understanding music. The first concerns a performance of multimedia artist Laurie Anderson’s *Happiness* (2002), in which Anderson revisits certain anecdotes from her life. It deals especially with the 9/11/2001 destruction of the World Trade Center. At a certain moment, Anderson bangs her teeth together, and aided by the sound of contact microphones on her head, it makes a terrifyingly loud noise. Through other references in the work to the World Trade Center, Abbate recognizes that Anderson is referring to the sound of bodies hitting the ground captured in the documentary *9/11*, directed by James Hanlon and brothers Jules and Thomas Naudet. In this moment, then, a bit of gnostic knowledge appears and adds a powerful layer of meaning to the piece; “secret knowledge of a hidden signified” amplifies the resonances of the performance.

In light of this, Abbate asks what it might be like if someone saw a recording of the piece at a point in the distant future. If that future audience would not have seen *9/11*, they might not understand the reference, and therefore find this moment in Anderson’s performance perplexing. Even if a scholar were to come and explain the reference, the recording would likely still lack the force it had in 2002, when the audience would have all collectively experienced 9/11, lived through the cultural milieu that it produced, and associated that reference with real memories and psychological states.

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109 Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 534.
Even were the scholarly explanation to be effective, the fact that it would be a recording would still create a certain level of distance:

The very fact of recording - as any future audience can experience this event [...] only via its repeatable surrogate - does that not alter a basic alchemy, making the event an artifact, handheld and under control, encouraging distance and reflection?\textsuperscript{110}

Removed from its original context as a live performance (it should be noted that performance pieces like Anderson’s are especially wedded to a live format), the piece more easily becomes a work, or “artifact” as Abbate puts it, which lends itself more to hermeneutic treatment than live performance. We will return to the necessity of live performance for drastic understandings of music later.

The explanation would also foreclose the ability for new meanings to arise. The frightening, terrible sound may be capable of generating a powerful response in viewers who do not have the explanation of what it refers to:

What may be left in Laurie Anderson’s recorded sound is a remnant whose force approaches the force once predicated on a rare amalgam - live presence and secret knowledge - but do so precisely because the secret knowledge has been lost, as has what was once alive.\textsuperscript{111}

Practitioners of hermeneutics often unwittingly prove that sounds can generate new meanings free of their original context. When historical performances claim to show the “real” way an established masterwork is meant to be performed, they highlight the fact that a work has been long-known and -loved by audiences for reasons in spite of the fact that most performances are “wrong.”

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 534.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 534.
Abbate’s suggestion here is a layered one. First, gnostic knowledge can add significantly to the power of performance. Contrary to what many of her critics allege, she never disavows the value of outside knowledge, nor does she disavow its capacity to make a concrete difference in performance. She focuses specifically on opera performances in this section of the essay precisely because music’s ineffability and extra-musical content collide; her intention is to examine the interplay between the drastic and gnostic:

Would attending to performances entirely damp down the gnostic? […] No. The experience of musical performance is generous, above all in opera or music theater […] where verbal and visual aspects furnish a simultaneous ground under the sonic circus, the ground where these other strata shape one’s sense of a music that cannot be detached from them. For this reason […] I want to turn to three operatic performances […]

Elsewhere, she describes performances like that of *Happiness* as situations that “put drastic and gnostic attitudes on a collision course.”¹¹³ That Abbate acknowledges and grapples with the complex interplay of drastic and gnostic within musical experience is something that her critics often misconstrue. Karol Berger, for instance, misreads her as utterly obsessed with the moment and unable to acknowledge the presence of extra-musical factors at work in spectatorship:

It is simply not the case, as Abbate seems to think, that in experiencing a performance we are, or could be, completely absorbed in the present and can avoid substituting what is absent but imagined for the real sounding presence. To live only in the present […] is an abstraction, an unattainable utopia.¹¹⁴

A clear look at Abbate’s descriptions of drastic experience, however, quickly refutes this conclusion: in all of them, the drastic and gnostic “collide.”

¹¹² Ibid., 533.
¹¹³ Ibid., 535.
¹¹⁴ Berger, “Musicology According to Don Giovanni,” 497.
At the same time, Abbate’s “collision course” wording does imply a certain antagonism between drastic and gnostic. Within the context of live performance, Abbate seems to think that the gnostic can do little harm. However, when works are turned into artifacts, the tendency for the gnostic to take over, to attribute meanings, and to limit the freedom for new meanings to arise becomes greater.

Her two other examples of “drastic knowledge” come from separate nights of a Metropolitan Opera run of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in December 2001. Her first experience was realizing that tenor Ben Heppner had lost his voice at the very opening of the first version of the Prize Song in Act I. Heppner, however, went on singing, in spite of the fact that he had a full evening of heldentenor performance yet required of him. She describes the way in which, as Heppner sang, the evening became increasingly focussed on his “extraordinary raw courage and sangfroid,” and less on Wagner’s work:

> Now the other performers seemed, somewhat psychotically, still to inhabit their roles in Wagner’s jolly Nuremberg, while Heppner became a unique human being in a singular place and time, falling from the high wire again and again.\(^{115}\)

She writes that the spectacle became Heppner’s singular demonstration of moral courage, which, indeed, produces knowledge of a fundamentally different kind. Perhaps one could call this drastic knowledge.\(^{116}\)

What, then is “drastic knowledge”? It could first be defined as a kind of spectacle wherein the performance takes on an equal or greater value than the work being performed. Watching Heppner’s performance on this particular evening may have been more akin to watching a

\(^{115}\) Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 535.

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 535.
sporting event than watching a musical performance. Sporting events are nearly all performance: the raw success or failure of the athletes constitutes most of the spectacle.

In a broader sense, this drastic knowledge also concerns a person-to-person encounter between performer and spectator, rather than the more abstract connection between spectator and work or spectator and absent composer. Abbate considers such encounters to be one of the chief artistic and ethical benefits of attention to the drastic:

Prescribing a certain critical distance from the performance experience, ever since Brechtian estrangement, has seemed to guarantee liberal credentials. Yet this can foreclose much that is of value, both intellectually and morally, in encountering a present other at point-blank range.\textsuperscript{117}

Witnessing Heppner’s performance results in a moment of real human empathy and real drama—the spectator cheers for Heppner as they witness his struggle against obstacles. By contrast, interacting with Wagner’s \textit{Die Meistersinger} in the abstract—thereby missing the human element of performance, unfolding in real time—might result in critical insight but little more. And it is the gap between impassive, self-assured critical commentary and authentic empathy and attention that is one of the focal points of Abbate’s criticism.

This “split where the performance drowned out the work” had after-effects three nights later. Watching the curtain rise on Act 3, Scene 5, Abbate writes

I experienced a momentary optical hallucination, a genuine neurological misfire. I saw stage figures not as they were, in Technicolor Germanic finery, but shrouded in black with white faces and tragic eyes under bright white lights.

\textsuperscript{117}Abbate, 532. Abbate’s emphasis on the irreducibility of person-to-person encounter has resonances in the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas: “The encounter with the other consists in the fact that despite the extent of my domination and his slavery, I do not possess him. He does not enter entirely into the opening of being where I already stand, as in the field of my freedom. It is not starting from being in general that he comes to meet me. Everything which comes to me from the other starting from being in general certainly offers itself to my comprehension and possession. I understand him in the framework of his history, his surroundings and habits. That which escapes comprehension in the other is him, a being.” \textit{Basic Philosophical Writings} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 9.
On one level what had happened was that secret knowledge had decided to restage the performance for me. I know the literature on *Meistersinger*. I know Wagner’s essays, and I know the opera’s reception history in twentieth-century Germany. Finally, I know the claims that above all in the music, in the non-signifying discourse whose secrets are for that reason so much more important, something appalling is given voice. But what triggered the neurological restaging, the necessary condition for the gnostic mentality to appear as a hallucinatory symbol, was the earlier performance, where, in someone obsessed by Heppner’s courage, the drastic attitude had prevailed. The second performance would not have fractured had my experience of the first not been so radically attentive to what was taking place, so inattentive to Wagner’s *Meistersinger* and what its music means or conceals.\(^{118}\)

In other words, Heppner’s performance had produced in her an intensified attention to the drastic, so much so that she had forgotten Wagner’s work and its disturbing connotations. Abbate’s knowledge of the work’s common hermeneutic interpretations had become so distant from her way of experiencing the work that they only appeared as a hallucination. There are complexities here that are unresolved: is this hallucinatory appearance of the gnostic a new possibility for gnostic knowledge? Is it an appearance of gnostic knowledge that is not tied to the act of interpretation? Or separately, is it the gnostic appearing as a drastic experience? The chief ambiguity here is whether, when such a thing takes place, the gnostic knowledge is still circumscribed within the sphere of the extra-musical, something that I do not believe Abbate wholly resolves.

Despite this particularly challenging illustration, it is possible to delineate a few principles that guide an attention to the drastic: live, embodied performances are best, because they discourage reflection and interpretation. Gnostic knowledge is an unavoidable (see the description of the second *Meistersinger* above) and often rewarding (see the description of Abbate’s experience at *Happiness*) part of the musical experience, but one that if leaned on too

\(^{118}\) Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 535.
heavily might shut down new “the sonic circus.” The drastic mode of understanding is more concerned with performance than with works, because within the context of performance, “encounter with a present other at point-blank range” is more possible. Such attention is also capable of banishing upsetting subtexts and of taking the viewer beyond a simplistic and narrow-limiting way of interacting with music. Recall Abbate’s question:

Why repay the freedom we are given [to respond to music] by putting the gift-giver in a cage, doing so continuously or without regrets, without wondering what this activity may say? Such statements anthropomorphize musical works, making them into living things towards which we must develop an ethical position.119

This last point is a focal point of criticism of this article - see in particular my previous discussion of James Hepokoski’s response in Chapter 2.

There are two ways, however, in which my exploration of the drastic and the Fourth Symphony differs from Abbate’s descriptions of drastic experience and which deserve explanation. The first is the question about the difference between work and performance clearly enunciated in her writing above. Her experience of Ben Heppner’s performance might seem to make it nearly unimportant that Wagner’s Meistersinger is in the room. A very similar experience, one might argue, might take place while watching Heppner perform the role of Tristan, Rodolfo, or any other strenuous tenor part. However, upon further thought it seems to be the case that drastic experiences both mute the presence of the work and rely on works to come into being. The dissonance between Abbate’s expectations and the reality of the evening and her knowledge of what the role of Walther requires both add to her drastic experience, and both of them derive from the presence (at times, merely spectral) of Wagner’s Meistersinger in the room. Another form of gnostic knowledge clearly at work in Abbate’s experience is the

119 Ibid., 517.
wealth of experiences she brings with her to this *Meistersinger*. She knows the opera’s plot already, she knows how to recognize a tenor’s vocal health and what might challenge it, she has a musicologist’s awareness of the ins and outs of opera. All of these have an influence on the drastic experience; were someone from a totally foreign musical culture to witness this performance, an experience like Abbate’s might be utterly inaccessible. Likewise if the work performed was a new work, where an audience member would likely most be concerned with apprehending the story and main features of the work. This points ahead to one of Hepokoski’s objections to Jankélévitch, who he believes is oblivious to his own cultural contingency: “one might […] ask the counter-Jankélévitchian question of whether one ever approaches the captivating force of music in an unmediated way, as an isolated and independent subject emancipated from external constraints, free to recognize on one’s own terms the ineffability believed to be really there. Whose ineffability are we talking about? The framework for any experience of aesthetic plenitude is significantly determined by one’s immediate culture or at least mightily inflected by cultural expectations, training, education, and social modes of production and reception.”

I am in full agreement that performances of the same work can often offer radically different experiences, but at the same time, something - much, in fact - remains similar from performance to performance. Abbate’s observations expose certain complexities and flaws of the work-concept:

Love is not based on great works as unperformed abstractions.\(^{121}\)

\(^{120}\) Hepokoski, “Ineffable Immersion,” 230.

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 505.
…when real performances (invariably recordings) are cited they are often being summoned for an endorsement. Thus some performer’s rendition, some director’s staging, is deemed revelatory when it corresponds to one’s own or some historically sanctioned reading of the work, but ill-conceived or offbeat when failing to do so. Ask these questions when musical performances are discussed: Is a sonic and visual reality, all its physical force and sensual power, being hauled in to provide a pedigree for a conclusion about meaning or form, with the abstraction - the musical work per se - being the true object of interest and acclaim?122

She does much else to effectively deconstruct the notion that the musical work, outside of its incarnation in performance, is a worthy object of speculation. However, there is not much in the article about what might actually remain in the wake of this insight, a question that seems inescapable. What can be said to remain from the work, and does anything remain that is of value? This question will be in the background of my comments below.

The other question concerns the fact that I will make use of films here rather than live experience, which is Abbate’s clear preference. This is done primarily because I believe Abbate’s argument is for a large-scale philosophical reorientation in light of music’s “exceptional phenomenal presence,” and is not a simplistic admonition to only experience music live. It is necessary to briefly substantiate this before continuing with my analysis.

*Live or filmed performances?*

It’s true that Abbate certainly makes no bones about her preference for the live experience, writing that a drastic approach entails seeking a practice that at its most radical allows an actual live performance (and not a recording, even of a live performance) to become an object of absorption.123

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122 Ibid., 509

123 Ibid., 506.
As mentioned above, the live performance “solicits attention more for the performers and the event and far less for the work than is perhaps generally admitted.”\textsuperscript{124} Recordings, on the other hand can be edited and sanitized on the production end, and stopped, started, and perceived with varying degrees of audio fidelity on the listener end. As mentioned previously, recordings also increase the likelihood of treating a musical work as a decipherable text.\textsuperscript{125} The interaction between different musical works within the start-to-finish concert experience is also often sacrificed when listeners experience recordings, and this is not to mention the fact that the dynamic of the “encounter with a present other at point-blank range” is severely muted when watching or listening to a recording. The value of such encounters over their digital and textual substitutes can be at times quite obvious: it is the reason why one often learns more about a piece of music in a seminar than in one’s own study, and it is the reason why listening to a piece of music with another or on the recommendation of another is often a totally different and better experience than a solitary quest for musical enlightenment.

However, Abbate is not as concerned with a narrow-minded insistence on live performance as she is with critical discourses that assert a false form of control over musical experience. She herself makes this distinction. Such critical discourses are comfortable with the metaphysical and abstract and uninterested in the delivery systems that bring music into ephemeral phenomenal being.\textsuperscript{126} Such delivery systems include not just live professional performance but amateur performances […], practicing and rehearsing, playing in the studio while the machines are listening, as well as mechanical

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 512.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 513.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 513.
musical devices, and of course recording and sound technology as acoustic delivery systems.\footnote{Ibid., footnote 23.}

Live music certainly carries the greatest drastic potential, but drastic experience is not limited to it. There would in fact be a number of slippery slopes in a rigid, live-performance-only ideology. Although such an ideology might present the live experience as an unadulterated opportunity to focus on the music, anyone who has attended a live performance knows that attention can wander as easily there as anywhere else. Moreover, there are varying degrees of closeness to the music itself that are possible in the carnal experience of music. If a live performance of a piano concerto is better than listening to a recording of it, wouldn’t it also follow that it would be even better to be sitting onstage next to the orchestra? Or perhaps better to be in the orchestra? To be the soloist? Instead, a sensible point of view recognizes that there is always some degree of distance between the source of a musical sound and the perceiver, even within the concert hall. To systematize and schematize the drastic so that it only belongs in one place seems to contradict the main thrust of Abbate’s proposal, which is an attention to music’s “exceptional phenomenal presence,” which can occur in a variety of circumstances.

In light of what I take to be this fundamental broad-mindedness of the article, I believe that it is permissible to use a recording. Recognizing the fact, however, that the “labor and carnality” of performance are vital and under-appreciated components of musical experience, I have turned to a filmed performance of the symphony.
Chapter 6: Drastic and gnostic collisions in Karajan’s 1973 film

The film,\(^{128}\) conducted and directed by von Karajan in early 1973, is part of a Brahms cycle filmed in collaboration with cinematographer Ernst Wild. It raises similar questions about political meaning and its relevance for performance - it could be described as another “collision of the drastic and gnostic.” The film itself appears to be influenced by Hugo Niebeling’s better-known experimental films\(^{129}\) of Karajan and the Philharmonic performing Beethoven’s Sixth, Third, and Seventh Symphonies. The film of the Sixth (1967), which was a critical and popular success, features rapid cuts, heavy use of close-ups, panning across the orchestra from the

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conductor’s podium, superimposed shots, experimental use of lighting, strange camera angles, repeated attention to Karajan’s face (Ex. 5). For a time, von Karajan seemed to be convinced that filmed orchestral performances were the future of classical-music recording, at one point stating that they would replace conventional sound recordings.\textsuperscript{130}

There were essentially three sources of awe for me\textsuperscript{131} in watching this performance. First, the film very successfully communicates the sonic, visual, and tactile overload that accompanies playing in an orchestra. The film activated my own powerful memories of performing Brahms’s music in an orchestra. Second, it calls attention to Brahms’s Fourth not so much as a masterpiece of motivic and tonal construction, but as an exceptional sequence of sounds. Here, my experience resembles Abbate’s description of playing the Mozart aria.

1) “Orchestral immersion”

I once played the first violin part in Brahms’s \textit{Tragic Overture} in a high-school youth orchestra. It was in particular the chords pictured in Ex. 6 that were always thrilling, and which instantly made Brahms one of my favorite composers.

The huge stack of notes in the first chord actually conveys something of the sensory experience that I remember, as do the scissor-like motions in the passage. This moment was mobile, physical, and wild, and it is at the root of any subsequent inquiries I have made into Brahms’s music and biography.


\textsuperscript{131} The use of the first person here is not cavalier. It is primarily a response to Abbate’s very explicit challenge to do so: “This first person, this I who isn’t going to forget, must be willing to walk onstage once what counts is the live performance that once took place, experienced only by those who were present. That is the reason why casting one’s lot with performance and the drastic has seemed so difficult; there is no place to hide” (“Drastic or Gnostic,” 536).
An essential part of this memory of that moment is visual. The strings play these chords in unison; the whole string section executes the dotted rhythm at once, and the synchronized movement of the bows was a spectacular sight. The sense of that motion is a part of my memory of this passage. Karajan’s film zeroes in on this visual dimension of the symphonic experience; he also experienced this link between the visual and the physical that is a part of the orchestral experience and made an effort to render it cinematically. An example of this would be the camera angle shown in Fig. 3, which is one of the most common ones in the film. It looks at Karajan in profile out over the first violin section. At climactic violin moments, the focus shifts from Karajan’s face (pictured here) to the violin players, vividly showcasing the enchanting, electrifying movement of the bows.

Another means by which Karajan accomplishes this is through a heavy use of closeup shots of individual instruments (not instrumentalists), which has a number of effects. The first and most simple one is that the screen is very often filled with movement, which evoke sense of being surrounded by movement that accompanies playing in an orchestra. The second is that this technique often allows the viewer a chance to see directly the source of a particular melody, which somehow aids awareness of what the sound is. One of Karajan’s film team members
described that their goal was to “intensify the sound of the instrument, using the image.” At times this can turn into visual counterpoint, as the film cycles through multiple instrument shots in time with the music. The camera is also often positioned within the orchestra, under Karajan’s baton. Two angles in particular stick out in this regard - the first is over the shoulder of the basses, the second is from somewhere within the violin section to Karajan’s right and looks up at him on the podium. These shots, too, make an attempt to evoke the experience of being within the orchestra, and are Karajan’s way of zeroing in on that blend of the visual and sonic which was once so powerful for me.

These techniques of “orchestral immersion” also include a sense of being conducted. In particular, it is interested in the experience of being conducted by Karajan, which some have noted works like hypnosis. Remembering a performance of Ravel’s Boléro, Philharmonia Orchestra flautist Gareth Morris recalled:

He hardly moved. As you know, Boléro works by a simple additive process. With the eyes closed and the hands barely chest-high, Karajan gave us the beat with a single finger, and even that barely moved. With each new addition, the hands moved fractionally higher. It was a form of hypnosis, I suppose. What we sensed was the power

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of the music within him, and that was bound to affect us. So with each slight lift of the hands the tension became even greater. By the end of the piece, the hands were above his head. And the power of that final climax was absolutely colossal.133

The sense of working through minimalistic gestures and a form of hypnosis was clearly on Ernst Wild’s mind in filming the Fourth. Karajan’s gestures prove to be more mysterious than precise - they provoke the question of what he is thinking rather than making an extravagant display of embodied musical interpretation. Metropolitan Opera music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin, in 2019 interview, noted the dynamics of hypnosis and enigma in Karajan’s conducting, even while repudiating it:

I mean, we’ve seen great videos of Karajan, for example - always his eyes closed. It’s beautiful, but it means that the musicians have to go to him. I like, as a conductor, to do the opposite - go to the musicians. And for this, I need to create eye contact.134

The relative importance of the conductor and orchestra in this film are up for debate; what is clear, however, is that the film successfully communicated to me that immersion in the sensory world of the orchestra which is one of my most powerful memories.

2) “Innocence and immediacy of succession”

There are a number of ways in which the film calls attention to the piece as an exceptional series of sounds. A notable example occurs is from 9:05-9:30, which corresponds with m. 278-320 of the score, about a third of the way through the recapitulation of the first movement. When watching this, I experienced what Jankélévitch describes as “the immediacy and innocence of succession.”135 One of the main ways I remember the experience of playing in

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133 Quoted in Osborne, *Herbert von Karajan*, 276.


an orchestra was an inner monologue that said something like, “wow, this part!” “and then this part!” - similar to what Abbate describes in playing the Idomeneo aria. Pieces that I liked the most were pieces that were able to multiply this sensation, at their best piling exciting moment upon exciting moment.

The orchestra seems to be having this experience in the clip. For reasons that are difficult to render in words, Brahms’s recapitulation is extraordinary. In almost every performance of the piece I have seen, the recapitulation is usually what brings fire out of the orchestra, and this is certainly true in Karajan’s performance. Brahms’s score in this passage is a particularly brilliant script for an electrifying performance: the abrupt transition from the restless first-theme material into the passionate, metrically- and harmonically-unmoored string theme in m. 289, the yet-still abrupt transition from that theme into the timbrally- and metrically-contrasting horn call which begins the transitional material. Timbres, rhythms, and articulations contrast with one another in rapid-fire, and combined with the way the symphony’s preceding events have prepared these events, result in an explosive thirty seconds.

The film’s use of visual cues enhances this experience. In his own explications of the drastic, or what he calls “presence culture,” Gumbrecht makes much of the role of deixis, or “pointing out.” Speaking about a radically different context, that of university teaching, he writes:

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136 This is in spite of the fact that the recapitulation is a very strict, unembellished repetition of the exposition material. Other than the standard tonal adjustments, nothing is altered until the coda. It is a particular wonder of musical construction that the recapitulation is always much more explosive in performance than the exposition. Does it come from the way the development plays out, its arresting of all motion, so that the recovery of motion in the recapitulation sounds new and fresh? It is difficult to say. What is apparent is that this is a very concrete illustration of the difference between music in performance and music as text. It is also an argument for Brahms’s Fourth as a masterpiece because of its succession of sounds, the way that its musical events play out as a temporal sequence, not because of its motivic resonances or hidden harmonic schemes.
good academic teaching is a staging of complexity. It is drawing our students’ attention toward complex phenomena and problems, rather than prescribing how they have to understand certain problems and how, ultimately, they must deal with them. In other words, good academic teaching should be *deictic*, rather than interpretative and solution-oriented.\(^{137}\)

At its best, Karajan’s film offers a kind of visual deixis - the reactions of the players, the shots all intensified my awareness of what was happening in the musicians and drew me into that experience. Figure 4 shows one way in which this plays out. The film shows the violins during the first score excerpt (m. 281-85). The synchronized motion of the bows is the main visual event. This is followed by a quick cut to the basses, calling attention to the way their line functions like a brake on the motion that precedes it. When the string theme arrives, there is a rapid cut to a shot of Karajan that is exhilarating. The drama of Brahms’s musical events, the sense of sweat in the room, Karajan’s intense, immersed face - all of these things made for compelling musical cinema.

*A collision of the drastic and gnostic*

At the same time, of course, the camera’s concentration on Karajan has troubling connotations, particularly given the fact that the film is directed by Karajan himself. The film *Karajan: Maestro for the Screen* (2009), which documents Karajan’s interest in filmed orchestral performance from 1957 until his death, is a largely unflattering portrayal that emphasizes his narcissism and near-pathological need for control over every aspect of his orchestral films. The filmmaker Hugo Niebeling once seated the orchestra in a filmed performance of the “Eroica” in a totally-unorthodox set of three columns of tall risers, which he said was meant to symbolize the symphony’s emphasis on the triad. Karajan, however, re-edited some of the shots to focus on his

\(^{137}\) Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 128.
Fig. 4: Sequence of shots in recapitulation, correlated with score
own head in profile. Such moments prompt one to treat Karajan’s riveting presence on the podium with some trepidation - are we simply watching an egomaniac pay tribute to himself? Is the film a reflecting pool?

To a certain extent, absolutely. One need only look as far as the opening shot of the Fourth film, which starts out from Karajan’s face and slowly zooms out, perhaps representing Brahms’s elegiac theme as Karajan’s inner sonic monologue.138

Other information about Karajan’s manner of making his films, about his relationship with orchestral players, and about his questionable political affiliations during the Nazi era are even more troubling. Karajan, of course, became a Nazi in 1935. Though he never professed a strong ideological affinity with the Party, fell out of favor with Hitler as World War II progressed, and was not accused of any crimes during his denazification hearings, he nevertheless made several questionable decisions - for instance, conducting a concert for the Nazi “Party Day” on 29 June 1935, and divorcing his part-Jewish second wife Elmy Holgéroef in 1942.

One could easily connect this Nazi history with his authoritarian way of leading an orchestra and his closed-eye technique. Attention to the drastic, however, adds a complexity to the picture that is worthwhile, if only to amplify the paradoxes in a such a figure. If one takes his fascinating conducting demeanor in part as an immersion in the drastic, a real, moved response to a beautiful event in front of him, one then encounters the immense paradox of his persona.

Karajan was capable at once of complicity with evil and also an immense sensitivity to sound, an

unparalleled awareness and love for the beauty of orchestras. To admit that both things can live within one person is to grapple with the human moral contradiction, and such awareness is a useful thing: first of all, it is a reminder that we, too, are paradoxes; it is also a reminder that evil can often inhabit figures who are immensely charismatic and capable of immensely beautiful acts. To leave such paradoxes open seems to me to be one of the chief values of Abbate’s approach. To remain with the “drastic” in Karajan’s conducting facilitates a keener awareness of moral duality, while to flatten the experience of his conducting to “evil on account of his politics and authoritarian manner” or “good on account of its sonic beauty” may perhaps be damagingly naive. Attention to the drastic has results in an ethics that does not reduce people to this or that, but faces and grapples with their complexity. To recall Abbate, simplistic interpretations of music and musical figures can leave the door open for problematic possibilities:

    when we deny that certain events or states are impenetrable to gnostic habits, hence make them invisible and inaudible, we are vulnerable. For, denying mystery, the perplexing event, the reticence such things may engender, means being prey to something that comes to call at its nocturnal worst, as coercive mysticism and morbid grandiloquence.  

139 Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 535.
Chapter 7: “Fascinating Fascism” and other gnostic critiques

A provocative gnostic challenger to these notions is Susan Sontag’s 1975 essay “Fascinating Fascism,” which is mainly a review of The Last of the Nuba, a book of photographs of an African tribe by Leni Riefenstahl. Riefenstahl’s position as an artist can be likened to Karajan’s in certain ways - she directed the very famous Nazi-propaganda film The Triumph of the Will (1935), but is widely admired for her artistry, that film included. Her links to the Nazi Party, however, run far deeper; while Karajan went along with the Party for what seem to be opportunistic reasons, Riefenstahl’s artistic powers in Triumph of the Will are fully directed toward amplifying and rendering powerful the Nazi agenda. While Sontag’s essay is situated in the more wildly paradoxical territory of Riefenstahl’s legacy, the dialogue between her insights and Abbate’s is still revealing.

While the essay recognizes the sensory beauty of Riefenstahl’s art, it argues that beauty and fascination can be hand-in-hand with dangerous forms of deception. It keeps Abbate’s paradox between drastic and gnostic alive, but it turns away from the notion that the drastic is primary and somehow capable of rehabilitating broken works and people. It is a call to vigilance against the aesthetics of Fascism in the face of what she perceives as an ebbing of such attention. Citing the way in which many find Riefenstahl’s works beautiful, and on that ground can forgive her Nazi past, she instead argues that her aesthetics in the ‘70s are the same as they were in the ‘30s, and that both things are fascist.

She provides a specific and chilling link between Abbate’s spurning of the gnostic and a specific event in Nazi history:

when Goebbels officially forbade art criticism in November 1936, it was for having “typically Jewish traits of character”: putting the head over the heart, the individual over the community, intellect over feeling.\textsuperscript{141}

Fascist art, on the other hand, is Dionysian, orgiastic - in other words, drastic:

Fascist aesthetics […] flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, and extravagant effort; they exalt two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude. The relations of domination and enslavement take the form of a characteristic pageantry: the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; the multiplication of things and grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader figure or force. The fascist dramaturgy centers on the orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets. Its choreography alternates between ceaseless motion and a congealed, static, “virile” posing. Fascist art glorifies surrender; it exalts mindlessness: it glamorizes death.\textsuperscript{142}

If one likes, one could draw parallels between Sontag’s dazzling litany, Abbate’s description of the drastic: “devastating, physically brutal, mysterious, erotic, moving, boring, pleasing, enervating, or uncomfortable, generally embarrassing, subjective, and resistant to the gnostic.”\textsuperscript{143}

The parallel lies in the resonances of violence and domination that is present in both passages.

Further, it seems impossible to deny that there are certain resonances between Karajan’s film and Sontag’s list.

However, there are boundaries that can certainly be drawn between Fascist aesthetics and the drastic - ones to be vigilant for, but boundaries nonetheless. It certainly seems to be true that fascism harnesses the submissiveness that results from many musical experiences and leads it into evil. But is that submission, which seems to be fairly inextricable from music, is always evil? Arguing that this it is would in fact negate the experience of many music performers and

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{143} Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?,” 514.
listeners. Quotes about “losing track of time,” “forgetting oneself” are commonplaces in descriptions of music making and listening. Sontag’s quote, as forceful as it is, could by extension be taken as an indictment of a whole region of musical experience - that dealing with experiences of losing control. In his essay in the Jankélévitch colloquy, Michael Gallope argues that music’s ineffability need not necessarily lead to a certain metaphysic, political platform, or set of cultural norms:

I suspect that if we were to approach question of the ineffable with more than Jankélévitch as our interlocutor, we would come to think of metaphysical speculation about music’s inconsistency to be a curiously enduring problem one confronts when conceptualizing the meaning of music. Far from leading us on the path to simple answers, it may be that music’s ineffability flourishes in a multitude of cultural vocabularies, warranting scrutiny and analysis from historians, theorists, and anthropologists of music who have an appetite for breaking down and studying speculative intellectual gestures.

Gallope would likely maintain that while submissiveness to the musical experience can certainly be hijacked by manipulative ideologues, there is an aspect of submissiveness that is rectifiable, and moreover a potential subject of dialogue between diverse cultural viewpoints. Rather than deny or avoid the power of music, a coherent stance might look critically at the way in which Fascist aesthetics contort the experience of ineffability.

James Currie’s critique notes a related intersection between Jankélévitch and fascist aesthetics:

convincing arguments have been made for seeing in the cool restraint of neoclassicism, which often falls easily within Jankélévitch’s musical canon, complicities with the very fascist politics that Jankélévitch’s own musicalized value system is self-evidently meant to prohibit.


Currie is referring here primarily to the link drawn in Adorno’s *Philosophy of New Music* between Stravinsky and fascist politics. Adorno’s essential argument there is that Stravinsky’s music tends toward a total suppression of the human - self-preservation through self-extinction. Referring to the *Rite of Spring*, Adorno wrote:

> This severity, the ritual exorcism of the soul, compounds the illusion that the result is not anything subjectively produced, reflecting a human being, but rather something existent in itself. In an interview that was resented for its reputed arrogance but that very precisely expresses his motivating idea, Stravinsky said of one of his later works that there is no need to discuss its quality: it is simply there like any other thing. The air of authenticity is bought at the price of insistent soullessness.146

Interestingly, the alternative that Currie may be hinting at here is the “objectification of the subjective” - Adorno regards Brahms’s music as a form of composition that is perhaps anti-fascist because it contains a surfeit of subjectivity. Even more interestingly, this allegation of fascism is the complete opposite to Sontag’s - where Sontag points to the orgiastic as fascist, Currie and Adorno point to this “soullessness” as the culprit. In a way the two might be reconciled into a maximally negative take on the Jankélévitchian proposal - it encourages the glorification of the sublime that destroys the individual and plays into the hands of the powers that be.

One must again raise the question, however, of whether this is really Abbate’s view. As I argue in my introduction, Abbate has refashioned Jankélévitch’s proposal into a more universal call to embrace repertoires of all kinds. With such a move, the link between neoclassical fascism and the drastic becomes tenuous. To my mind, her proposal is more subject to Sontag’s criticisms than Currie’s; the cool soullessness Currie finds in Jankélévitch is not one of her emphases. There are several points of contact between “Brahms aktuell” and “Fascinating Fascism.”

146 *Philosophy of New Music*, translated by Hullot-Kentor, 129.
Sontag seems to find silence in front of Riefenstahl’s orgiastic, sensory art to be the problem; her article is meant to break this silence. Adorno similarly calls upon art to mobilize itself against domination, which he thinks Brahms does through his technique. Sontag regards the categorical denial of any link between the aesthetic and the political, a major plank of Jankélévitch’s music philosophy, as dangerous.

**Other criticisms**

A related realm of critique is directed against Jankélévitch’s lack of originality. As these criticisms often operate in tandem with the deeper political critique outlined above, it is worthwhile to investigate these and respond to them.

A basic counterargument, less overtly political than Sontag’s but often raised by those with political hostilities to Jankélévitch’s agenda, is that Abbate’s argument is not new. Paeans to music’s wondrous, indescribable presence are as old as music itself. However, I believe that her proposal has a particular shape that differentiates from other discourses of sublimity and that its provocative full-frontal confrontation of the ineffable is seldom grappled with by her critics. Something remains from her proposal, in spite of the convincing links that one could draw between it and similar thoughts.

Such links are indeed legion. Sontag’s famous “Against Interpretation” (1964) argues for more or less the same way of relating to art, summarized most easily by its famous last line: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”147 Going further back into history, the nineteenth-century cult of absolute music takes off from similar intuitions:

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Music reveals an unknown kingdom to mankind: a world that has nothing in common with the outward, material world that surrounds it, and in which we leave behind all predetermined, conceptual feelings in order to give ourselves up to the inexpressible.\textsuperscript{148}

Judith Lochhead makes the link between Jankélévitch’s music philosophy and the nineteenth-century “sublime” more explicit, referring in particular to Kant’s definition of the sublime in his \textit{Power of Judgment} (1790) and its aftermath in Romantic aesthetics:

The sublime arises in the faculty of Judgment when we experience something either so large or so overpowering that it appears “unbounded” or “formless.” Such an experience comprises both pain and pleasure. The pain arises from the awareness of our inability to take account of the sensual experience by means of the “higher” faculty of Reason. The pleasure arises from the awareness that we possess a faculty of Reason that triumphs by transcending our empirical existence and perceptions since we are aware that we have no concept or idea to take account of the overwhelming in sensuous experience.

After Kant, the experience of the sublime became central to Romantic writings on aesthetics […] In the sublime, the triumph of reason is subordinated to the failure of the imagination to take account of the unboundedness of sensuous experience. Art addresses this failure by giving sensuous expression to the sublime and hence it overcomes the divided faculties of reason and imagination. Aesthetics turned from the eighteenth-century questions of taste, beauty, and the sublime and toward a solution of sorts to the problem of the divided faculties. Necessarily ineffable, art now has a function: sensuous revelation of “truth, reality, the transcendent.”\textsuperscript{149}

This understanding of truth through the sublime, she argues is essentially an \textit{a priori} assumption:

Understanding of the absolute knowledge of reality occurs in musical experience only as an indeterminable feeling. Such an experiential understanding operates in the same register as mystical experience, both requiring unquestioning belief. There are no secrets in such experiential understanding, just faith.

Thus, Jankélévitch’s aesthetic remains fixated in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{150}


\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 234.
In addition to this astute attribution of Jankélévitch’s philosophy to the tradition of the sublime, Lochhead also traces his ideas directly to Henri Bergson. Taking this connection further, James Hepokoski dismisses Jankélévitch’s whole body of thought as “largely orthodox Bergsonism—intuition, duration, becoming, doing, motion, flow, vitalism […] and the like.”

There is, however, a particular shape to Jankélévitch’s proposal, despite the fact that many want to situate it as one of the hymns to music’s ineffability that can be found in every historical period. In describing Jankélévitch’s moral thought, Michael Gallope helps to give shape to a proposal which critics have tried to sand down:

In Forgiveness, Jankélévitch explains that a true act of forgiveness does not simply acknowledge the transgression one has incurred. In order to truly forgive someone, the forgiver must overcome the “gnostic” or quidditive specters of self-interest, rationality, justification, calculation, and retribution in order to harness a fidelity towards the quaodity of the “pure event” by wagering a “gratuitous gift” to a real personalized other in excess of all intellectual understanding. This faithful act of discontinuity, this “sudden decision,” this “instantaneous event,” does not lead to a theophanic presentation of divine grace, but rather forces an aporetic “disappearing appearance”—for the total generosity intentionally required by the forgiver is strictly unpresentable: “Absolute selflessness . . . [that metaphysical reservoir for all true acts of forgiveness] is rather an ideal limit and an inaccessible horizon that one approaches asymptotically without ever attaining it in fact.” Consequently, no propositional or theological dogma can ensure an ethical result: rather, philosophy becomes a loquacious and faithful handmaiden to the act of decision itself. No presentation of forgiveness as such is thinkable; “only an apophatic or negative philosophy of forgiveness is truly possible.”

Gallope rightly presents Jankélévitch’s emphasis on aporia not as a shapeless, generic form of art-religion, but as a fidelity to the experience of reality, which at times is irreducibly mysterious. This hearkens back to much that is said in Abbate’s article: such an attitude is more objective and carries a greater ethical potential than hermeneutics, which she argues is the true locus of

distortion and self-justification (recall her writing on Wagner’s “Judaism in Music”)\textsuperscript{153}. Gallope acknowledges with Lochhead that there are certainly connections between Jankélévitch and the nineteenth-century sublime, but stops short of agreeing that such connections extend to the point of “absolute knowledge”:

I do not understand Jankélévitch to be enjoining us to an experience of “experiential reality” or “absolute knowledge” — rather, I see him as committed to a practice of fidelity premised on the impossibility of accomplishing such tasks.\textsuperscript{154}

In my view, Gallope’s clarifications do much to work against the notion that Jankélévitch’s proposal is not unique and that it is metaphysically questionable. The criticism of Abbate’s lack of originality, so often raised by those with deeper political objections to the discourse of ineffability,\textsuperscript{155} is weakened by his observations.

\textit{Confronting the ineffable}

These many critics of Jankélévitch usually prefer taking aim at his weaknesses while sidestepping his provocation toward the ineffable. A striking example of this is in Hepokoski’s article:

While not discounting the directness of music’s impact as performed — which must remain an elemental reality for any considered reflection, one might ask the counter-Jankélévitchian question of whether one ever approaches the captivating force of music in an unmediated way, as an isolated and independent subject emancipated from external constraints, free to recognize on one’s own terms the ineffability believed to be really there. Whose ineffability are we talking about? The framework for any experience of aesthetic plenitude is significantly determined by one’s immediate culture or at least

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\textsuperscript{153} See pg. 16 above.

\textsuperscript{154} Gallope, “Fidelity to Inconsistency,” 238, footnote 66.

\textsuperscript{155} Hepokoski’s “Ineffable Immersion” likely is the strongest exemplar of how these two criticisms work together.
mightily inflected by cultural expectations, training, education, and social modes of production and reception.\textsuperscript{156}

Hepokoski’s question here is a good one, but the gesture toward the ineffable here at the beginning is questionably brief and evasive. The paragraph essentially says that “it should be noted that music is powerful” before rapidly turning the focus elsewhere. In my view this falls directly into the hands of arguments that Abbate makes and does not answer them sufficiently: doesn’t music’s “impact as performed” determine almost everything about the desire to talk about music? And culturally-contingent as the ineffability experience might be, might ineffability of some sort or other be a common experience across cultures? Though his take on Jankélévitch is mostly critical, James Currie does much greater justice to Jankélévitch’s insights:

> What Jankélévitch can sometimes help us to appreciate is that engagement in [gnostic criticism] can dilute music down into being the mere effect of that which brings it forth, as if, to draw out ethical implications, children were to be but solely the reproduction of parents (and thus completely screwed). As he rightly points out, “No cause is entirely the cause, and no effect is exclusively an effect.” There is always a life-enhancing excess, something that is epitomized for Jankélévitch by music, and denoted by the term.\textsuperscript{157}

Lochhead makes similar gestures as Hepokoski toward the ineffable without much of a follow-through. “Engagement with the particular sounds that produce [sensations] and how they relate to individual taste is necessary”\textsuperscript{158} This is another cautious, scientific, and distant acknowledgement of music’s ineffability that stops short of further investigation. Later describing Jankélévitch’s way with words with some admiration, she says that such writing prompts considerations “not how words can worship music at a distinct remove, or remain

\textsuperscript{156} Hepokoski, “Ineffable Immersion,” 230.


\textsuperscript{158} Lochhead, “Can We Say What We Hear?,” 234.
utterly heterogeneous to musical life, but how words are implicated in a broader notion of how music affects us as listeners, performers, and creators”\footnote{Ibid., 235.}

The dissenting contributions to the Jankélévitch colloquy is rife with critical barbs against Jankélévitch’s grandiloquence, his moralizing, his contradictions, his lack of originality, and his vague poeticisms, but all of this belies a real fear of the ineffable. This is what makes Abbate’s argument compelling - not its formal perfection or perfect premises, but its willingness to enter territory that is both essential to our understanding of music and an object of real trepidation for many. While such a stance has connotations of submissiveness and power that may trouble, I believe, with Gallope, that they fundamentally emerge in faithfulness to the musical experience.

To conclude, then, the drastic is subject to many criticisms, in particular the allegation of fascism found in Sontag’s “Fascinating Fascism,” but something about Abbate’s proposal survives all of these, defending the ethical value of the drastic. While Adorno’s argument is admirable in its awareness of injustice and its commitment to molding an image of art that resists it, there is more space, simplicity, and pluralism in Abbate’s approach. The chief obstacle to writing about the drastic may in fact be embarrassment - such a thing is difficult to do, and impossible without some degree of vulnerability. Such vulnerability, however, may not be as irrelevant to serious inquiries about the nature of music as they may have once seemed.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to point out a few themes of this inquiry into these two different modes of criticism. The first is that the drastic and gnostic stances each carry significant political implications. While Abbate and Adorno’s essays ostensibly function at the level of musical commentary, there are evidently major cultural and political concerns embedded in them. It is perhaps appropriate that Abbate’s article appeared in a non-musical journal - it is a proposal about music with unusually wide implications.

The second is that I believe my inquiry generates new perspectives on each of its main figures. First, Jankélévitch’s insights (through Abbate) can be successfully investigated with German music. Second, Brahms is not simply an academic composer, but a maker of physical and wild sounds. (Even Brahms’s use of repeated motives and developing variation often takes on a physical, audible quality; one can hear Brahms morphing a melody in real time. The technique of developing variation, linked as it is to a gnostic mode of criticism, could be seen as a drastic technique). Third, Adorno’s remarkable rhetorical force and cultural authority loses some of its grip through an examination of drastic experience.

Finally, in a particular way, this inquiry deals with a passing but consequential facet of Abbate’s proposal, which is the dismissal of formalism. Though this is basically an aside in her argument against gnostic reading, it is a serious condemnation of a whole tradition of musicological scholarship. Craig Ayrey’s caustic response to “Drastic or Gnostic” in a 2006 issue of *Music Analysis* illustrates the extent to which practitioners of musical analysis feel attacked by Abbate,¹⁶⁰ Jankelevitch and the whole intellectual tendency that they represent. To a

certain extent, scholars like Ayrey have a point - the condemnation of formalism is done quickly and is arguably un-nuanced, especially considering how sweeping Abbate’s indictment is. And arguably, musical analysis is also a form of deixis. At its best, it is aware of its insufficiency for communicating a musical experience. In this light, Abbate’s dismissal of formalism can be seen as overly harsh. On the other hand, Ayrey raises argument after argument against “Drastic or Gnostic” without ever allowing much space for the drastic rhetorical power of Abbate’s argument, or the apparently-foreign notion that music might do things to us that we cannot control, and that those things are difficult to explain. It is a refutation of the drastic on gnostic terms.

Though I side with many of Abbate’s claims in the end, I do not believe that formalism is useless. I side with her claim that formalistic insights are often passed off as the “real meaning” of the music and are at times positioned in ways that aggrandize the omniscient interpreter and belittle the lowly music-lover. Such things could be said of “Brahms aktuell,” whose rhetoric at times takes on the tone of prophecy. But this does not mean that formalistic insights are useless. The observations in “Brahms aktuell” - about the encoding of subordinate scale degrees into the tonal structure of the first movement and his arrival at the paradox of movement and stasis that pervades the piece - carry a certain thrill as ideas, and have some tangential links to the listening experience. The use of the bVI scale degree and its dispersion across the movement, as Frisch notes, does give a certain audible color to the work which is especially evident in the opening theme.\footnote{See again Brahms: The Four Symphonies, 116-117.} Movement and stasis are to some extent audible in the fourth-movement passacaglia.
These links, however, are essentially spectral. They are real, but the lion’s share of their satisfaction resides in knowing that they are there rather than experiencing them directly.

Giorgio Pestelli very accurately formulates the real-but-subordinate role of gnostic insights in Brahms’s music, such as motivic connections or large-scale tonal plan:

Global connections of this sort are unquestionable, and generally typical of Brahms’s late production that goes ever deeper into the secrets of his art. However, it has to be noted that many of these connections are prey to the analysing eye rather than the listening ear, in a similar fashion to those figures, invisible from a distance, that the Gothic architect multiplied for the joy of whoever would wander about the topmost levels of a church recording similarities between spires and steeples, gargoyles and spouts.162

Gnostic experiences are, however, subordinate to drastic experiences, because they are born from them and they make an effort to return to them. What remains foremost in my memory of Brahms’s music are the chords from the Tragic Overture, their sound, feeling and sight. Such surpluses of beauty are what drive gnostic inquiry and keep it alive.

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Works Cited and Consulted


