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The Soul of the Phonograph: Media-Technologies, Auditory Experience, and Literary Modernism in the Age of COVID-19 †

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Abstract: The unpredictable duration of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates renewed reflection on our collective reliance on video platforms such as Zoom and YouTube for telecommunication and music listening purposes, which have virtually filled the gap left by widely cancelled live performances. The affectively close relationship we forge with these services today echoes a recurrent theme in literary modernism: the tendency to endow early mechanical sound reproduction machines such as the phonograph and the record player with quasi-human subjectivity, emotions, and agency. This historical topos, in turn, anticipates posthumanism’s fascination with the seamless interface between machine-intelligence and its human users. Thinking about these cultural continuities may help the Humanities articulate the crucial role of media technologies and literary discourses under exceptional circumstances.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; literary modernism; live music performance; posthumanism; sound media; technological reproduction

1. Listening in Times of Crisis

Critical paradigm shifts and new theories in the Humanities respond to social events, cultural upheavals, and political change, but they are also, inevitably, tinged by the personal experiences of scholars. Thus, especially in times of a horrendous crisis such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, it may be worth reflecting on the dual meaning of the “scholarly subject”—the intertwining of scholars as actors of intellectual agency with their topics, texts, artifacts, or media that they analyze in their work. For decades, my interest in literature, philosophy, and media technologies, mainly of the period of classical modernism, coexisted side by side with my activities as a nonprofessional organist/harpsichordist, an area where I focus especially on the repertoire of the late Renaissance and the Baroque.

Only in recent years did it occur to me that they might productively intersect, which has led to my current projects on the literary representation, philosophical analysis, and media-technological reproducibility of music and other sonic events. Why the two areas had remained separated for a long time and then fairly suddenly came together is a question that I have never been able to answer; as far as I remember, no revelation or crisis sparked my interest in exploring music’s literary and intermedial connections. Scholarly decisions, it seems, are not always rational and deliberate but can be driven

by unconscious motivations and desires that one may never figure out completely. What does seem obvious, however, is that the pandemic's disastrous effects on public health, the economy, and the culture of the performing arts, to mention only three areas, have intensified my inquiry into what musical significance might mean today when the intensified reliance on digital media, as I will argue, echoes a pervasive preoccupation with sound reproduction in literary discourses. If the tone of this essay switches between the personal and the scholarly-analytical, that is both unavoidable, given the discursive differences between the two modes, and intentional: Especially in times of crisis, I am more likely urged to reflect on my autobiographical motivations, tacit assumptions, and guiding interests when engaging in scholarly projects than in times of relative "normality," when I might find it easier to practice a more dispassionate mode of intellectual pursuit. If I am drawn to literary modernism's engagement with then emerging media technologies, such as film and phonography, it is because the self-reflexive mode of this cultural movement resonates with my own attempt to attain a bit more clarity about my scholarly endeavors.

At least in the United States, the cancellation of almost all public concerts, theatre, and opera performances and the subsequent dire financial losses suffered by many self-employed musicians and other members of the music industry during the COVID-19 crisis enormously, almost perversely, heightens the urgency of how we might think about the absence of live sound/music and the increasing reliance on the technological mediation of auditory experiences. Before the pandemic, we took the widespread availability of live music—"live" understood here as the real-time performance of music in a physically specific space simultaneously shared by musicians and audience—for granted, provided, at least, we had the money and time to attend such events.

Taking advantage of this privilege, many of us believed that live music in whatever genre, venue, and social context should be a self-evident right in no need of legitimation, provided it adheres to basic principles of artistic integrity and nondiscriminatory ethics. This open access of music for all relies tacitly on the cliché of music as a universal language, which translates the Romantic metaphysics of autonomous, i.e., nonprogrammatic, nonmimetic music, into the idealistic assumption that all types of music transcend geopolitical boundaries, national languages, or cultural differences. Of course, as proponents of the New Musicology have shown, this ideal is itself rooted in Eurocentric claims on universality and tends to overlook material circumstances of politics, race, class, gender, and economic disparity. However, the almost total reliance on internet-streamed music during the pandemic sheds new light on this issue: on the one hand, we entertain even more fervently, perhaps obsessively, the illusion that YouTube and other platforms open up an infinitude of music for everybody to choose from freely; on the other hand, not everyone has easy technological access—fast internet, mobile devices, high-quality earphones—to enjoy the auditory experiences provided by sonic cyberspace.

Moreover, music of whatever genre is marked by an affective immediacy and a preconscious appeal to the resonant receptivity of the human body. Often defying the analytical capabilities of our rational consciousness, this sonic presence in a live performance is experientially quite different from the effects of digitally mediated music. Before the pandemic, we had the choice between going to a concert or listening to a similar repertoire, or even the same performance, on our computers or mobile devices. This choice no longer being available, the virtual format of music has become, for the foreseeable future, the questionable norm in the new abnormal.

2. Zooming in

Enters Zoom, the popular videoconferencing platform. As I write, I enjoy participating, every Saturday evening, in the *Mic Night at the VC*, a Zoom-based event hosted by Valley Conservatory, a private music school in Huntsville, AL, where musicians gather to share their favorite song, instrumental piece, or improv in a congenial atmosphere of casual conversation and performance, and the entire event is live-streamed on Facebook. I am grateful for the opportunity to play Frescobaldi, Froberger, Scarlatti, or Bach on my small harpsichord to a sympathetic audience but cannot help reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of this kind of music-making. During these sessions, I am

often disappointed by how tinny our instruments and voices sound, and yet I feel there is something in the music—its aesthetic significance, affective sensuality, even spiritual substance—that transcends the media-technological shortcomings. What comes across, ultimately, is the diversity of human expression collectively shared, suggesting music's victorious defiance of the pandemic-induced despair, loneliness, and alienation.

In a perceptive and entertaining essay (Fry 2020), Naomi Fry draws attention to the particular atmosphere Zoom creates (or fails to create). She mentions the dating and relationship coach Marni Battista's advice to her clients using Zoom for the safe purposes of a virtual date "to mimic the atmosphere of a real date as closely as possible: to get dressed up, to order delivery from the same restaurant, to watch a movie together using Netflix's Party plug-in, which allows viewers to interact in a chat box throughout, or to visit an aquarium for a shared virtual tour." However, it seems to me, Zoom, like all other online communication applications, does this atmosphere-creating job largely on our behalf. Instead of authentically reproducing its users' originally intended or artificially staged atmosphere—the affective, bodily immersive situation spontaneously and intuitively sensed by its participants in the shared space of a building or natural environment of their choosing—Zoom creates its own virtual atmosphere for us. It does so by cutting up the sense of physical presence, emotional nearness, and intellectual community created by face-to-face meetings into an objectifying gallery of isolated head shots that now sadly mimics the COVID-19-induced social alienation in public life, even though Zoom promises to alleviate, rather than deepen, this condition.

The platform's algorithm seeks to minimize improvisatory spontaneity—sudden interjections, everyone speaking at the same time—by trying to give the forum to only one speaker at a time, even highlighting his or her picture with an illuminated frame, while the host can mute the other participants. Even when everyone is notified visually who is in the power seat right now, the varying qualities of the speaker's microphone and the other participant's loudspeakers or headphones distort the atmospheric timbre of speech dramatically. While the informational message might be conveyed clearly, the voice's individuality, its musical sonority, and its affective properties are likely to suffer. That's why it helps to have met the speaker prior to the Zoom conferencing in a face-to-face-situation, as remembering her or his voice or musical instrument from that encounter helps the listener to supplement the acoustic Zoom data by what one at least imagines to be the "real" sound. However, such hopes for telecommunicative authenticity are always threatened by instances of unpredictability in the shape of random appearances, intruding sounds, and, yes, the notorious Zoombombing. These occurrences disrupt our illusory trust that media of technological reproducibility always allow their users to maintain their communicative control as autonomous subjects. Perhaps platforms such as Zoom, in turn, may become quasi-subjects in their own right?

3. Kafka's Proto-Cyborgs

An answer to such a question is difficult to provide when addressing the issue from within the technological design and social horizon of relatively new media such as Zoom itself. Emerging media entice immediate and often rapidly expanding use, while their often unexpected possibilities and limitations emerge only after long-term consumption and extensive critical examination. For this reason, it is instructive to rely on historical examples, specifically on those given by modernist literary and media culture, which are able to shed light on our present situation. The fear, or hope, that media technologies assume quasi-human subjectivity and agency has haunted literary modernism since its beginning, largely because it had to cope with the emergence of newer audiovisual media such as photography, the gramophone, and film, which challenged the dominant role of the literary imagination and its writing practices (See Kittler 2003, pp. 215–446). As a result, modernism is haunted by a strangely self-divided discourse about the ontological status of technological sound media, which are consistently represented as being excessive, transgressing their original function of passively recording or transmitting the mere data of voices and music. In a letter of 22/23 January 1913 to his fiancée Felice Bauer, who worked in Berlin for the Carl Lindström Company manufacturing the

Parlograph, a phonographic dictation device for office usage, Franz Kafka writes: “Here, by the way, is a rather nice idea: a parlograph goes to the telephone in Berlin, while a gramophone does likewise in Prague, and these two carry on a little conversation with each other” ((Kafka 1973, p. 168); see (Goebel 2011, 2017, pp. 109–18)).

Central to Kafka’s life-long preoccupation with the intersection of modern media technologies and his own act of writing (see (Kittler and Neumann 1990)), the parlograph and the gramophone, while assuming an uncanny degree of autonomous agency, become the very content of the telephonic network, thus anticipating Marshall McLuhan’s dictum that “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” and that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 2017, pp. 19–20). On the surface, a joyful celebration of media-technological efficiency in the age of globalizing urban modernity, Kafka’s scenario cannot hide its problematic consequences. Self-regulating and self-legitimizing, this automated exchange of electric data through the electro-acoustic circuitry of robot-like machine intelligence functions independently of its human users, uncannily anticipating the closed circuitry of communication technology typical of today’s internet culture in the age of posthumanist theory, which, among other projects, launches a sustained inquiry into the subversion of the liberal human subject’s ideals of autonomy, self-transparency, and domination by the decentering interface between humans, technology, and animals.

As if to echo Kafka’s scenario, Stefan Herbrechter puts it succinctly, “When computers are networked with each other, they ‘communicate’ and take [sic] ‘decisions’ without human subjects getting involved in the process (which constitutes the ‘virtualization’ process that accompanies (digital) cyborgization)” (Herbrechter 2013, p. 150). Here, Herbrechter alludes to Donna Haraway’s coinage of the cyborg of the posthuman age, defined as a cybernetic hybrid of machine and organism. As a “condensed image of both imagination and material reality,” the cyborg, as Haraway stresses, “is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity,” features that make the cyborgs “oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence”; ultimately, the cyborg suggests that in the late twentieth century, “machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines” ((Haraway 1991, pp. 150–52); see also (Herbrechter 2013, pp. 98–101)). In this sense, literary modernism helps us understand posthumanism’s historical origins. This seems especially important since in transhumanism, posthumanism’s technologically more radical cousin, as Reinhold Münster showed in his critical survey of the Anthropocene, the transformation of humans into a cyborg effectively treats human beings as “nothing but malleable raw material, the natural natural and intellectual limitations of which could be expanded limitlessly” (Münster 2020). If Kafka’s sound machines imitate humans, they offer a kind of mirror image or supplement to this transformation, metonymically represented by the human voice being transformed into phonographic machine voices.

As Herbrechter proposes, “a critical posthumanism needs to link back to those critical discourses that run within and alongside the humanist tradition” (Herbrechter 2013, p. 62) because this tradition has always included aspects of internal self-critique. In other words, posthumanist visions of a rapidly approaching future must remember their own modernist prehistory. As Herbrechter stresses, posthumanist expressions are “symptoms” echoing the anxieties, desires, or psychoses of a “still predominantly humanist culture” ((Herbrechter 2013, p. 76); see also p. 85). In this sense, Kafka’s ambiguous scenario of self-communicating machines shows that posthumanism’s obsession with human-machine interfaces is deeply rooted in classical humanist modernism’s fascination with, and fear of, the prevailing sense that audiovisual media do not only help people communicate meaningfully with one another but may take on a ghostly, exhilaratingly, or frighteningly self-legitimizing autonomy that may ultimately displace not only the ontological difference between humans and machines but humanist values themselves, such as subjecthood, transparent communication, and reason.

4. Edison's Phonograph Speaks for Itself

Actually, the imaginary subjectivity and agency displayed by Kafka's telecommunication machines was already invoked by the early sound technology industry itself. Thus, in a poetically inflected monologue, the Edison phonograph proudly expressed not only its technologically innovative self-agency but also its own quasi-human affects. In an advertisement issued in 1906, the phonographic voice announces: "I am the Edison phonograph, created by the great wizard of the New World to delight those who would have melody or be amused.". The machine goes on to declare that its abilities are unlimited: "I can sing you tender songs of love. I can give you merry tales and joyous laughter. I can transport you to the realms of music. I can cause you to join in the rhythmic dance. I can lull the babe to sweet repose, or waken in the aged heart soft memories of youthful days.". The phonograph's faithful reproduction of a variety of sounds assures its role as a loyal friend, accompanying its users wherever they wish to go: "I will go wherever you want me, in the parlor, in the sickroom, on the porch, in the camp or to your summer home.". Preserving the voices of others in different times and different locales, the phonograph subtly appeals to its users' pleasure of hearing their own voices and those of others played back to them in a presumably authentic, familiar, and dialogic manner: "If you sing or talk to me, I will retain your songs or words, and repeat them to you at your pleasure. I can enable you to always hear the voices of your loved ones, even though they are far away.". Appealing to the nascent globalizing culture of border-crossing interconnectivity, the device can even speak in foreign tongues: "I talk in every language. I can help you to learn other languages" ([Edison Phonograph 1906](#)). Edison's phonograph, then, articulates its proud place in the age of mechanical reproducibility, marked by the telephone, the radio, the tape-recorder, and nowadays digital media, which share the acousmatic property (Pierre Schaffer's term) that they universally act as a stand-in, a proxy, for the absent or invisible origins of the virtual sounds they emit (see [Dolar 2006](#), pp. 58–81).

However, the machine, although purporting to have a human-like subjectivity, linguistic proficiency, and quasi-organic being, is keen on stressing its technological artificiality, thus simultaneously creating and deconstructing the illusion of having a quasi-human soul and body, while reasserting its industrial authenticity and commercial competitiveness: "I am made with the highest degree of mechanical skill. My voice is the clearest, smoothest and most natural of any talking machine. The name of my famous master is on my body, and tells you that I am a genuine Edison phonograph. The more you become acquainted with me, the better you will like me. Ask the dealer" ([Edison Phonograph 1906](#)); see also ([Kane 2014](#), pp. 180–82)). The human-machine hybridity of the phonograph is further highlighted not only by what the voice says but by how it sounds. The crackling of the recording indicates the considerable age of the worn-out cylinder, but the voice, speaking in a monotonous but kindly sing-song, is marked by an incantatory, almost hallucinatory timbre that projects authoritative self-assurance and a thoroughly endearing personality.

The phonograph's self-articulation as a quasi-human subject, endowed with its own voice, dialogic empathy, and affective personality, can be understood as a sublimating countermove to the machine's actual ontological status. As Friedrich A. Kittler showed ([Kittler 1986](#), pp. 27–30, 35–173), the phonograph and the gramophone mechanically register sound as the Real in Jacques Lacan's sense, i.e., as pure acoustic data outside of, or prior to, human subjectivity, symbolic language, and the visual imaginary. Thus, to continue Kittler's line of thought, meanings, emotional effects, and aesthetic values are not directly inscribed in the phonograph's grooves but are projected upon the sound data by the listener's interpretive imagination, which must (un-)consciously restore the human significance, and perhaps even, if driven by a nostalgic desire for nontechnologically mediated presence, the lost immediacy of a live concert or an actual human being's voice—even if such restoration is, ultimately, a self-sustaining fantasy.

In carrying out this act of rehumanizing the physical sound waves, the listeners must try to reconcile the ambience of their actual surrounding with what they believe might have been the bygone atmosphere of the original performance. Immersing oneself in the phonographic music or voices always entails this imaginative meshing of the listening act's here and now with what one senses may

have happened during the original speech situation or musical performance at a different place and time. The illusion of endowing the sound technology itself with a quasi-human ontology is essential to this act of subjectivizing and reanimating dead acoustic data.

5. The Vinyl Record's Retro Charm

Contemporary literature provides further examples for this kind of listening. In the crime novel *Murder in the Dark* (1981) by the Danish writer Dan Turèll (1946–1993), the nameless protagonist and narrator, a freelance journalist, finds himself in the role of a reluctant detective called upon to help solve a mysterious murder. Waking up to an unexpected phone call, he answers “Hello,” telling himself that this response was “not particularly congenial or inventive”; but still, it was Edison “who discovered it, so at least I was following in some notable footsteps” (Turèll 2013, p. 17). Thus, Turèll’s narrator is a thoroughly self-reflexive product of media-technological communication and reproduction, spontaneously seeing (and hearing) himself as a human copy of the historic phonograph that first recorded its inventor’s voice. Disorderly, cynical, and alcoholic, he ponders his filthy apartment, one room of which is filled with his books and records. Leftovers from his divorce, they are lying all over the floor, where they take on a spectral, quasi-animate aura: “They’re very nice about it—they won’t move without further orders.” The dissolute state of the apartment mirrors the narrator’s general aimlessness, alienation, and self-ignorance: “As far as I know, that’s what they mean when they call it a ‘home.’ ‘As far as I know’ doesn’t really say very much. If I had known a little more, maybe Helle [his former wife] wouldn’t have left me.” (Turèll 2013, p. 34).

At this moment, his record player, together with its vinyls, changes from a merely pragmatic, mechanical instrument of musical reproduction into an imaginary proxy of his own wasted life: “I really didn’t want to start thinking about Helle. Instead, I put on a Johnny Cash album and let him sing, in his melancholic manner, through my loudspeakers about my unhappy love. I figured if *he* sang what I was thinking, I could think about something else. On that front, a record player was quite economical—it cried for you when you didn’t have time to do so yourself” (Turèll 2013, p. 34). Instead of merely functioning as a passive sound wave reproduction machine, the record player’s metaphysical aura of quasi-human subjectivity and agency, like a sacrificial lamb, takes on the feelings of loneliness, loss of love, and regret that the narrator himself is unable to face. Rather than merely replaying Johnny Cash’s musical emotions, the device expresses human affects more authentically than the self-alienated narrator could ever bring himself to articulate.

The desire for humanizing the machine can take on explicitly nostalgic forms. Newer sound media aim to displace older ones, complicit with the capitalist consumer economy’s and the culture industry’s ideology of enforced obsolescence in the interest of presumably progressive innovation and the profitable trendy. Rachel Joyce’s novel *The Music Shop*, published in 2017, harks back to 1988, a time when the new CD format threatened to overtake the vinyl record player. The eponymous venue, located in a semidilapidated back street, has “no name above the door. No record display in the window.” Only a homemade poster announces: “FOR THE MUSIC YOU NEED!!! EVERYONE WELCOME!! WE ONLY SELL VINYL! IF CLOSED, PLEASE TELEPHONE.”. However, the phone number is barely legible—which doesn’t really matter, because Frank, the shop owner, is gifted with an inexplicably intuitive empathy that transcends the limitations of telephonic communication. For without fail, Frank is immediately able to figure out what type of vinyl-recorded music—“Classical, rock, jazz, blues, heavy metal, punk”—even the most casual customers secretly need to satisfy aesthetic and emotional desires that the listeners weren’t even aware of themselves (Joyce 2017, pp. 3–4).

Echoing the modernist discourse of giving quasi-human subjectivity and self-legitimizing agency to sound technologies, in Frank’s magic retro shop, “Vinyl had a life of its own. All you could do was wait” (Joyce 2017, p. 13)—wait, that is, for the sudden and surprising moment when this seemingly outdated technology finds its own ways of working as a miraculous proxy for direct human contact, the uninhibited self-expression of affects, and, most poignantly, the erotic desire and romantic love that Frank seems incapable of allowing himself. Although Frank cannot play any instrument or read

musical scores, he is able to listen for the half-buried, repressed, or forgotten strains of music that he detects intuitively in his customer's souls—as if Frank, trained to listen intensely to records, can also listen to the psychic phonograph of his customers. This happens only when he “let go of being Frank and inhabited a space that was more in the middle” between himself and the other person (Joyce 2017, p. 18).

It is Frank's human empathy, facilitated by the magic sensibility of vinyl records, that seems to justify the store owner's stubborn refusal to yield to the market-driven, more durable, and fashionable CD format that the sales representatives urge him to sell. “How could anyone get excited about a piece of shiny plastic?” Frank argues, “CDs wouldn't last; they were a gimmick, and so were cassettes.”. He even believes that the seemingly outdated format will outlive its competitors: “The future's vinyl,” he says triumphantly (Joyce 2017, p. 26).

Vinyls are better than CDs and cassette tapes, Frank thinks, not just because of the beautiful artwork and sleeve notes of the older medium, or the intriguing possibility of a hidden track with a “little *message* carved into the final groove,” or the “mahogany richness of the *quality of sound*” surpassing the sterile cleanness of CD sonorities. It is not even the “*ritual* of checking the record before carefully lowering the stylus” that makes vinyls so attractive. No—the true reason why vinyls are preferable is the visual and bodily journey that unites record and user: watching the needle move from one track to the next and flipping the record over to the other side is a sensuous activity, an intriguing way for the human subject to interface directly with the machine—“You had to *get up off your arse and take part*” (Joyce 2017, p. 51). Only when we, as users of technology and active listeners, make this kind of conscious effort, Frank thinks, do we acknowledge the “importance of music and beauty in our lives”—values that he connects directly to the physical vulnerability, inconvenience, and prescient untimeliness of the vinyl record (Joyce 2017, p. 52).

6. The Soul of Music

As these examples make clear, literary modernism persistently interrogates media of sound (re-)production and its own ambiguous relationship with them. Literary discourse uses its strategies of inventing imaginary scenarios subversive of standard interpretations of the actual, the conventional, and the predictable to inquire how media perform in historically changing contexts of culture, politics, and economics; how the materiality of technologies transmit or record various contents; and how media networks exert affective power over listeners that they never fully understand analytically.

In this way, literary modernism reasserts its ability to fantasize self-reflexively about the possibilities and limitations of media technologies in ways that go beyond the cognitive horizon of people's pragmatic media usage itself—even if machines are given a quasi-subjective consciousness and agency. Literary modernism's critical interrogation of sound technologies, then, is part of its persistently intermedial nature, its inherent tendency to interface with other, often competing, forms of cultural representation. In this network, the seemingly clear ontological difference between human consciousness and the machine becomes increasingly unstable. The literary tendency to endow recording machines with a quasi-human soul—Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* even calls the fancy new electric gramophone, ironically, “The German soul, up-to-date” (Mann 1995, p. 628)—can be seen as a defensive diversion, trying to subvert the alienating effects of technocratic progress by staging a deliberate reauratization of the machine. Fearing the dehumanizing effects of machine autonomy, literary modernism projects its own crisis of self-alienated subjectivity onto the presumably redemptive psyche of gramophones, record players, and other media of sound reproduction.

This endowment of the phonograph with a quasi-soul, which makes the machine appear to be like a human being while asserting its mechanical body, should not be dismissed as simply as another form of nostalgic mystification or regressive romanticism. Rather, soulful phonographs and their successors can have a productive effect because they create an immersive space of experience that is very different from visual perception. While seeing is predicated on the spatial distance between the human subject's consciousness and the ontologically distinct object, the experience of sound—whether as a live event

or mediated technologically—diffuses this distance, opening up continually changing, fluid, and transitory atmospheres of auditory events experienced by the listening subject as a disorienting but also liberating situation: “Immersed in sound,” Frances Dyson puts it succinctly: “the subject loses its self, and, in many ways, loses its sense” ((Dyson 2009, p. 4); for a critique of such theories, see (Sterne 2003, pp. 14–19)).

In deconstructing the ocularcentric illusion of the autonomous subject presumably in control of the visually recognized space around it, sound, from whatever source, emerges as the omnipresent, pluralistic, and widely dispersed testimony of what Dominic Pettman called the *vox mundi*. This diverse self-articulation of worldly voices forces human subjects to reflect critically on their presumably exceptional status while allowing them to listen more attentively to very different voices, including those of animals, environmental phenomena, and machines, without negating the ontological boundaries between these kinds of species: “Whether it is a mother listening to her daughter’s voice on the telephone, a dog listening to His Master’s voice on a gramophone, a lamp listening for the clap of a hand, or a microphone listening for specific shapes determined by an algorithm, there is a subjectively inflected object or operation ‘paying heed’ to its environment” (Pettman 2017, p. 74). Listening to these listeners listen to the world in their own unique ways, Pettman suggests, may ultimately enable humans to invent technologies “that are harbingers not of the soundscape of colonization, deracination, and displacement but of a planetary cohabitation, curiosity, hospitality, and/or heterogenous solidarity” (p. 75).

During the COVID-19 pandemic and its unforeseeable, long-term effects on society, such an auditory interconnectedness takes on special urgency. Yes, ultimately, the modernist discourse of endowing sound media with a quasi-human soul is little more than a metaphysical dream. However, dreams, too, have an important cultural function because they force us to reflect more deeply on the physical and actual—the reality of the here and now. The metaphysical discourse on sound media that I have sketched here relies on the implicit or explicit assumption of a fundamental resonance—an intuitive or reflective mutuality, attunement, and exchange—between media technologies and their human users, who experience the ontological boundaries between themselves and the machines as fluid, largely because the machines are heard as presumably sharing similar affects, cognitive abilities, and imaginations with the humans, even if this means that humans lose their sense of bodily materiality and presence.

In this sense, the discourse on the soul of the gramophone anticipates the posthuman discourse on the seamless interface between intelligent computers and human users. As N. Katherine Hayles argued, the posthuman, in privileging “informational pattern over material instantiation” and embodiment, postulates that “there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” ((Hayles 1999, pp. 2–3); see (Herbrechter 2013, pp. 42–43)).

Pursuing this line of argument, it might be opportune to reflect again on what the reliance on sound reproduction media might mean for our rediscovery of live music performances. Even if we do not replicate the metaphysics of modernist fiction characters who find themselves emotionally attached to the quasi-subjectivities of their phonographs and record players, we are now, during the pandemic, experiencing our immersion in telecommunication media in more totalizing ways than we had perhaps anticipated a short time ago. More than ever before, audiovisual media become much more than merely passive tools; they become our partners, our friends (if they help us alleviate our physical isolation) or foes (if they break down or if we get too obsessively attached to them), and, indeed, our very lifeline. I cannot think of another time when the collective yearning for digitally transmitted music was as intense as it must be now. Ironically, it is precisely the digital machinery, its software, and its institutional networks that update the Romantic metaphysics of music as a redemptive art lifting us, if only temporarily, out of our real misery into an imaginary realm of spiritual redemption.

However, this desperate attachment to media technologies, it seems to me, also highlights the need to commemorate, and, when the future allows for it, restore the possibilities of live performances

as an aesthetic experience, cultural institution, and financial livelihood of countless musicians. One can readily agree with Jonathan Sterne that a recording (or a live stream) is not merely the secondary, inferior copy of a prior, presumably more authentic original, but his conclusion—that hence “the original is itself an artifact of the process of reproduction” (Sterne 2003, p. 219)—reduces the live performance to a merely retroactive, quasi-nostalgic effect of technological reproducibility (see also Dyson 2009, pp. 72–82). On the contrary, it seems to me that our critical reflection on what sound reproduction machinery can and cannot do only enhances our understanding of the experiential uniqueness of the live performance as an event unfolding in an unrepeatable time, in a physically specific place, and in the material presence of the musician’s and the audience’s sensuously affective bodies.

In the contemporary media culture, as Lawrence Kramer suggested, the live performance, especially of classical music, may “be restored as the medium of the exceptional event,” characterized by “singularity,” “perceptual integrity, and sensory vividness,” working, in other words, as a counterforce or subversive supplement to digital reproduction and internet data dissemination. Under those auspices, “classical music may claim a renewed value not by invoking long-exhausted claims of transcendental expression, but by securing a space in which the infinity of the posthuman interface yields to the plenteousness of a simply human finitude” (Kramer 2013, pp. 50–51). That is exactly the reason why the live performance is so important. Alluding critically to the Romantic metaphysics of music, Kramer does not try to legitimate the live performance’s experiential presence and cultural value by associating it with any quasi-religious, redemptive transcendence, or the longing for the absolute. Rather, Kramer resolutely locates the live performance in our lived reality of media-saturated culture, in which the increasingly close interconnection between the human subject and machines focused on by posthuman theory underscores that music has always been inextricably linked with mechanical and later electrical/digital equipment—musical instruments and sound (re-)production. Thus, the live performance is certainly not more authentic—unique, truthful, and original—than recorded or live-streamed music accessible with state-of-the-art loudspeakers or earphones. However, live music’s experientially immediate and inherently fleeting intensity highlights the facticity of human finitude in an exemplary fashion, and no matter how close our friendship with the soul of gramophones, record players, and iPhones may be, that poignant sense of existential transitoriness can never be sublimated by the almost infinite repeatability of recorded music and its instantaneous accessibility to digital media. Certainly, there are other, and more urgent, matters that have been disrupted or put on hold by the COVID-19 virus: jobs, the availability of hospital beds, access to face-to-face instruction in schools and universities, and so forth. However, during the pandemic, the exceptionality of live classical music is not only a media-induced phenomenon but serves as an especially poignant marker, a cultural metonymy, of the overall time of exception introduced by the pandemic. Times of exception, however, because of their rapidly and unexpectedly changing circumstances, are difficult to understand from within their own historical horizon. That is why, as I have argued, looking back to historical representations of sound recording media by literary modernism may be instructive for analyzing the present: if sound media assume the status of quasi-subjects, proxies for repressed human affects, and substitutes for direct interpersonal contact, they uncannily anticipate our desperate clinging to digital technologies, not only as a replacement for live performances but as a way of sublimating our fear of social isolation, economic dangers, sickness, and death. In this way, the literary discourse on the soul of the gramophone may help us understand the decisive role of music and sound technologies in rapidly changing times of crisis.

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