

Lyotard on Postmodern Music

Ashley Woodward

ABSTRACT

This paper delineates the idea of postmodern music as it is found in the writings of Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard's concept of the postmodern in general has informed debates about what "postmodern music" might be, but his own writings on music have not been given their due weight in such debates. While he never defines such a concept explicitly in his writings, it may be extrapolated from them. In the essay "Music and Postmodernity," he draws an analogy between the liberation of humanity in socio-political modernity and the liberation of sonic material in musical modernity. While Lyotard does not quite make this explicit, the implication is that for him, an event analogous to the well-known "end of metanarratives" which signals the transition to postmodernity is evident in the history of music. Just as the development of the Enlightenment project has resulted in a breakdown of the narratives of the emancipation of humanity, so too the successful liberation of sound in musical modernity has led to the explosion of a coherent narrative of musical "progress," instituting something like a musical postmodernity. Instead of any idea of general eclecticism following from this, however, Lyotard is clear about the stakes of postmodern music (as of all art): those stakes concern the aesthetic of the sublime and mean searching for "the inaudible" in the audible through any and all means of experimentation on sonorous matter. The upshot is that while Lyotard endorses a kind of heterogeneity in his approach to postmodern music, he denies the loss of all critical stakes which is often thought to attend such a position.

KEYWORDS

Jean-François Lyotard
Postmodern Music
Poststructuralism
Sublime
Timbre



Our ears are deaf to what sound can *do*. We must give back to the act of listening the power to open itself to the inaudible.

— Lyotard¹

1

As in other areas, the term “postmodern” has been used in musicology to mean a variety of different things: the music of a particular historical period, the end of experimentation and return to traditional forms of composition, a pastiche of old styles, a breakdown of the distinction between “elite” and “popular” musics, a concern with the politics of marginalized identities, and so on.² One of the mostly widely accredited authorities on the meaning of the postmodern is Jean-François Lyotard, whose characterization of the postmodern as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” has often been invoked in discussions around postmodern music.³ Lyotard was something of an amateur musicologist and devoted at least six essays solely to music in addition to numerous scattered remarks on the topic throughout his prolific writings.⁴ However, remarkably, only Lyotard’s general theory of the postmodern — principally as it is found in his book *The Postmodern Condition* and not his own writings on music — has significantly informed debates about the meaning of postmodern music.

My aim here is to rectify this by clarifying what “postmodern music” would mean for Lyotard. It is possible that his idea of postmodern music has not been more widely acknowledged because he never uses the term “postmodern music” or makes explicit what such a term might mean within his philosophical perspective. The *question* is clearly raised in his essay “The Inaudible: Music and Postmodernity,” but even there an explicit answer is not forthcoming. However, as I shall argue here, it is possible to reconstruct what postmodern music would mean for Lyotard by “joining the dots” between a number of his essays on music and general aesthetics. As we shall see, for Lyotard the meaning of postmodern music may be intimately linked with an aesthetic of the sublime.

2

Let me begin with two brief methodological points which guide my reading of Lyotard's aesthetics, including his writings on music. First, while Lyotard is frequently characterized as a post-structuralist philosopher, when it comes to aesthetics, it is better to think of him as a "post-phenomenologist." By this I do not refer to the North American school of phenomenology represented by philosophers such as Don Ihde in association with whom the term "post-phenomenology" has also been used.⁵ Rather, I mean to designate the way in which Lyotard takes up themes and concerns from the phenomenological tradition but develops them beyond the scope of that tradition in a manner similar to those of other roughly contemporaneous French philosophers: Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, or Jean-Luc Marion for example might also be described as post-phenomenologists. Lyotard's rich and diverse aesthetic concerns inscribe an arc which begins and ends in a critical encounter with Merleau-Ponty, especially the celebrated essay "Eye and Mind."⁶ More significantly, the "unpresentable" that Lyotard consistently identified as being at stake in the arts may be approached via phenomenology but not elaborated by it since by definition the unpresentable does not appear phenomenally.⁷ In this sense Lyotard's aesthetics pushes phenomenology to a point where it ceases to be phenomenology. Yet in a way this is simply the exercise and elaboration of a paradox inherent in phenomenology from the start. Since Husserl, phenomenology was never really content to describe appearances but sought through a kind of transcendental reasoning to identify the conditions of possibility for such appearing: consciousness in Husserl, Being in Heidegger, the flesh in Merleau-Ponty, life in Henry, etc. Typically, the conditions of the given are posited as not themselves being given. Thus Lyotard distinguishes in a work of art the given *presentation* — that which appears, which makes itself known to perception and thought — and the *unpresentable*, the elusive condition that enables what is presented to be art rather than an object of knowledge and to give rise to an aesthetic response. In music, as we shall see, this means — and I quote Lyotard — that "what is at stake in musical pieces that merit the name of opuses [is] the enigma of letting appear, of letting be heard" and that "[w]hat is audible in the opus is musical only in as much as it evokes the inaudible."⁸

Second, my reading is guided by what I would like to call “Lyotard’s doubt.” This terminology is inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s well-known essay, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” and Lyotard’s elaboration of this theme in his essay, “Freud According to Cézanne.”⁹ *Grosso modo*: Cézanne’s continually shifting style through at least four “periods” may be explained by his doubt that there is any style which can adequately render the visual in painting.¹⁰ Lyotard’s aesthetics also seems to have its “periods”: most notably an earlier Freudian “libidinal” period and a later Kantian “sublime” period. Like Cézanne’s amorphous styles, Lyotard’s shifting philosophical approaches may be understood as motivated by his doubt that any philosophy can adequately render the kinds of issues he seeks to think, including questions about music or art in general. This methodological point helps us to understand an aspect of Lyotard’s work which is otherwise in danger of causing confusion and frustration. Not only do Lyotard’s philosophical approaches change throughout his career — e.g., from Freud to Kant as a primary point of reference — but the value accorded to terms shifts as well. Each of Lyotard’s terms is of course complex, but it seems that within each of his philosophical periods, certain terms indicate presentation while others indicate the unrepresentable. What can seem disconcerting is that as Lyotard’s thought develops, terms previously indicating the unrepresentable move over to the side of presentation while new terms are summoned for the unrepresentable. For example, after *Discourse, Figure*, “figure” begins to refer to discourse or structure; and while “desire” is the term exploited for its indeterminacy in Lyotard’s work of the 1960s and 1970s, by the 1980s it is rendered in terms of “intrigue” in opposition to unrepresentable “presence.”¹¹ What this indicates is simply that, according to Lyotard, no term can adequately render “the unrepresentable” — as soon as it is described and thought, it is too “presented,” and something less familiar must then be introduced to indicate the unrepresentable. With these methodological points in mind, let me turn to the elaboration of Lyotard’s philosophical reflections on postmodern music.

3

Lyotard inscribes the stakes of a musical aesthetics into the problematic of modernity and postmodernity in the essay “The Inaudible: Music and Postmodernity,” written in 1991. The argument proceeds by way of an analogy. Lyotard reiterates his well-known thesis on postmodernity as the “end of grand narratives,” then asks whether we may consider something analogous to this event to have occurred in music. Lyotard defines *the modern* as the period marked by the credibility of a philosophy of history — called a “grand narrative” or “metanarrative” — which posits the progressive emancipation of humanity as its goal. In this sense, *the postmodern* marks the loss of credence given to this idea of historical progress. According to Lyotard, the legitimation of projects has largely ceased to appeal to the progress of human freedom. Instead, in the contemporary developed world, projects are seen as legitimate when they manifest an increase in the efficiency of the capitalist, technoscientific “system.” This increase in efficiency is the only good now recognized, and the multiple ideologies of “progress” have been supplanted by an ideology of “development.” “The postmodern condition,” Lyotard writes, “is that of human beings when they are caught in this process, which simultaneously develops their powers and demands their enslavement.”¹²

Lyotard draws an analogy with music by suggesting that “[t]he history of western music may be thought of globally as the *emancipation of sound*.”¹³ He takes his bearings here from Theodor W. Adorno’s *Philosophy of New Music*, where the latter writes that “with the liberation of the material, the possibility of mastering it has increased.”¹⁴ Lyotard’s suggestion is that all experiments and innovations in the history of western music have questioned the necessity of the rules which thus far have governed the ways in which sounds are selected, manipulated, and composed in order to be considered music within that tradition. Such rules include the principles of pitch, timbre, rhythm, melody, harmony, and so on. But experimentation reveals that such rules are conventional and contingent, and the only necessity of music is its *material*: sound or sonorous matter, “the vibration of the air with its components, frequency, duration, amplitude, color, and attack.”¹⁵ With this observation, Lyotard suggests that scientific research on

sound — as in acoustics and psychophysiology — may converge with new technological means of treating and synthesizing sound and the rule-breaking experiments of composers and musicians to liberate sound from the conventions of musical tradition and multiply its possibilities.¹⁶

While Lyotard does not explicitly specify as such, it is easy to see that this story would be a *modern* way of understanding music: the grand narrative of “western art music” as the emancipation of sound. As Derek Scott explains, musical modernism frequently subscribed to a teleological narrative of development: “Modernists have continually seen works as ‘pointing forwards’ to others, thus reinforcing a sense of self-determining progress in the arts ... the dominant grand narrative for musical modernism was that of the evolution and dissolution of tonality.”¹⁷ What he has in mind here of course is the atonalism of Arnold Schönberg and his followers.

Lyotard’s question then is whether we can speculate that there would be something analogous to the *postmodern* in music, an event which would call into question the credibility of this grand narrative of the liberation of sound. He states that the question is a little naïve, and this is perhaps why he does not quite give it an explicit answer. Yet the answer he implies is not too difficult to reconstruct, and this is what I will do in what follows. In doing so, I will demonstrate how Lyotard’s reflections on the questions of musical modernity and postmodernity necessarily intersect with his reflections on the aesthetic of the sublime.

4

Lyotard stakes a claim for the predominant value of the aesthetic of the sublime in relation to the avant-garde arts in a series of essays published in the 1980s, and this aesthetic serves to clarify his understanding of the modern and postmodern in the arts. His essays devoted to music from this period make little direct reference to the sublime, but music is included in the general aesthetics of the sublime he outlines elsewhere.^{18,19} Lyotard argues that with the avant-gardes, the aesthetic of the beautiful can no longer be understood as illuminating the stakes of art. Instead, such stakes

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are linked with the aesthetic of the sublime. Some of the main lines of reasoning he provides are as follows.

First, he argues that avant-garde art departs from the aesthetic of the beautiful because the beautiful assumes a common taste shared by the public, which theoretically realizes itself in the feeling of pleasure universally produced in those who experience the work. The sublime by contrast assumes no such “common sense” of taste. The publics of avant-garde art “are prey to unforeseeable feelings: they are shocked, admiring, scornful, indifferent.”²⁰ What is at stake is no longer producing a shared feeling of pleasure in the members of the public but surprising them.²¹

Second, Lyotard argues that “sublime” is the most appropriate description of *indeterminacy*, which was popular as an aesthetic technique among avant-garde artists. These artists recognized that rule-following — which after Aristotle was called “poetics” — is not sufficient for the production or appreciation of aesthetic effects. Lyotard writes:

The predominance of the idea of *techné* placed works under a multiple regulation, that of the model taught in the studios, Schools and Academies, that of the taste shared by the aristocratic public, that of a purposiveness of art, which was to illustrate the glory of a name, divine or human, to which was linked the perfection of some cardinal virtue or other. The idea of the sublime disrupts this harmony.²²

Third, Lyotard argues, the task of the avant-gardes after technical means of representing reality were perfected — namely by photography, film, and presumably also phonographic recording — is to present something other than what can be represented according to the traditional “rules” of representation. He associates “the unrepresentable” with the Idea in Kant: a concept without an object which can be presented as an example. According to Kant’s aesthetics, we experience the sublime in aesthetic phenomena that suggest but cannot fully represent the Ideas of reason: “the absolute” as such is just such an Idea for Kant. Similarly, writes Lyotard, the task of the avant-gardes is to “present the unrepresentable”: in painting, the invisible in the visible; in music, the inaudible in the audible. Lyotard insists that “[t]he sublime, and not the beautiful, is the sentiment called forth by these [avant-garde] works.”²³

In particular, Lyotard associates this movement away from realistic representation with minimalism and abstraction. According to him, artworks which come under these headings move away from a primary concern with *form* and towards a concern with *matter*. (As will be discussed below, this is specified by a concern with color in painting and timbre in music.) In Kantian aesthetics, the beautiful emphasizes the predominance of form as a shared basis of judgments of aesthetic taste while the sublime involves a crisis in the imagination's ability to present forms. The implication is that the experience of the sublime involves a kind of "formlessness." Lyotard writes:

As the idea of a natural fit between matter and form declines (a decline already implied in Kant's analysis of the sublime ...) the aim for the arts, especially of painting and music, can only be that of approaching matter. Which means approaching presence without recourse to the means of presentation.²⁴

Kant did not think that a work of art itself could be sublime, only represent sublime objects: storms, mountains, and so on. In extending his reinterpretation of Kant, Lyotard develops the notion of an *immanent sublime* in which the absolute or infinite is associated with matter in the work of art. In the work there is an "absolute" insofar as there is an indeterminate aspect of the work, not given by relations between elements — as "absolute" implies "without relation." In order to understand this appeal to an "absolute" as an absence of relations between elements, it is instructive to recall that Lyotard's trajectory in aesthetics began with a critical rejection of structuralist aesthetics, which understands everything in terms of such relations.²⁵ According to Lyotard, this absolute, this "matter," is given by color in painting and timbre and nuance in music. As he emphasizes in his writings on the painter Barnett Newman, the sublime is *here, now*: it is the work itself in its materiality.²⁶ This immanence of the sublime is what Lyotard emphasizes as the mark of postmodern art in his most well-known aesthetic distinction between the modern and the postmodern, made in the essay "Answering the Question: What is the Postmodern?". The modern is sublime but nostalgic; it presents the fact that there is an absent, transcendent absolute. But the postmodern gives an immanent absolute; it presents the unrepresentable in the work itself.²⁷ The differences between the two are often subtle, and Lyotard even suggests that works may contain

elements of both modern and postmodern aesthetics. Yet in general, the difference seems to rest on the quotient of experimentation evident in the work: the modern sublime is evoked by works which draw attention to the limits of traditional modes or representation, indicating negatively that a transcendent absolute exists but cannot be represented; by contrast, works which exhibit a postmodern aesthetic experiment with new modes of presentation, introducing an “unpresentable” element into the presentation itself. In literature, Lyotard names Proust as an example of the modern sublime and Joyce as an example of the postmodern.

The unpresentable is difficult for the mind to think, and Lyotard deliberately uses paradoxical terms to indicate it. In his writings on music, “the inaudible” is signaled obliquely by appeal to literary references (Kleist, Quignard) and even a spiritual one (Swedenborg).²⁸ Yet the “unpresentable” is not quite so mysterious as it might seem. It is nothing mystical, as Lyotard insists, but rather indicates what it is in art that *moves* us; something which cannot be identified in or reduced to “ordinary perception,” to our knowledge of what the artwork is or represents, or to our understanding of the rules or principles governing its composition and effects.²⁹ This is why Lyotard insists on using terms such as “invisible,” derived from Merleau-Ponty, and “inaudible,” suggested by Varèse. At least in one important respect, the unpresentable is *affect*, that which moves the body and makes it feel not a recognizable emotion but unknown or unspecifiable feelings. Moreover, the unpresentable is a state of *matter* and not immaterial or spiritual in a metaphysically transcendent sense. Lyotard writes: “The inaudible and the invisible do not belong to a supra-sensible substratum that escapes entirely the normal condition of space-time-matter ... the inaudible is a gesture in the space-time-matter of sound, and it gestures toward a ‘presence’ that is not presentable.”³⁰

5

For Lyotard then, the meaning of the postmodern in the arts is linked to a modality of the aesthetic of the sublime, which insists on the immanence of the absolute in the matter of the work. Although it is not explicitly stated, it

is not difficult to draw out the theme of the sublime in Lyotard's essays on music from the 1980s. We have seen that for him, the sublime is recognizable in arts which move away from form towards matter. In music, he argues, the sublime is evident in 1) the way that music seeks to escape temporal form, and 2) timbre as the matter of music. The first point identifies a general principle or logic which operates on two levels: it is the principle of form in western music, which operates according to repetition. One level is that of the audible experience of music and concerns its composition. On this level, Lyotard identifies musics which have what he calls a narrative form: they have a beginning, middle, and end, and they express and evoke recognizable moods, emotions, and feelings. As examples of "narrative" types of music, Lyotard indicates "the musical poem, the symphony, the sonata, the *lied*."³¹ By contrast, Lyotard will associate the aesthetic of the sublime with all kinds of experimental musics which defy such narrative form. At a more profound level however, Lyotard argues that what is at stake in music—what gives rise to aesthetic feeling and makes it an art—is a "pure, punctual presence" that escapes from the repetitions which constitute the audible by giving it consistency and form.³² This level concerns the constitution of the audible as such and evokes the paradox of "the inaudible," which is not directly experienceable but is that which in audible sound evokes aesthetic experience. Lyotard approaches this difficult idea of a "pure, punctual presence" and tries to argue for it in a number of ways, which include the references to Kleist, Quignard, and Swedenborg mentioned above; but let us summarize the point via his more strictly philosophical, Kantian approach.³³

For Kant, space and time are the two basic forms of intuition, according to which objects are presented and become perceptible. Music does not require space in order to be perceived; but it is *par excellence* the art of time.³⁴ Kant understands "the given"—that which we perceive through the senses—as a manifold: for him, the term "matter" designates this "pure diversity" before any ordering, before form. In order to perceive objects, the mind must engage in an activity of synthesis, which gathers together the manifold and imposes on it a form. In this way, the manifold can be presented as a sensible object and offered to the understanding for categorization. Time is a form which allows the presentation or appearing of the perceptible through retention and repetition. In order for something to appear even for an instant in perception, there must be at the bare minimum a "microsynthesis" of the manifold, a grasping and comparing of different

elements of the manifold, which requires a repetition because “past” elements must be repeated in order for such a comparison, such a synthesis, to take place. In short, Lyotard posits that what gives the aesthetic feeling of the sublime in music may be theorized as escaping from repetition and the form of time and understood as “a pinch of manifold” so small that it is imperceptible to consciousness, unexperienceable, taking place below the threshold of perception.³⁵ Sound in this immediate present would escape from the form of time and be something monstrous, unformed, unrepresentable. To use a term that is common in Lyotard’s work, an inaudible sound would be a sonic *event*: that is, an occurrence irreducible to the systems of meaning, both perceptual and cognitive, that we try to capture it in.³⁶

Lyotard further associates the capacity of sound to produce such an event with matter understood as *timbre*, the tonal quality of a sound which differs for example when the same note is played on different instruments. Timbre is one of three main aspects of sound and the most difficult to determine precisely or understand rationally. The other two aspects, pitch and volume, are relatively easy to understand in terms of objective quantitative measure and graded scales of subjective experience. Simply put, pitch largely corresponds to the frequency of sound waves, and different pitches are heard as higher or lower in relation to each other. Volume is measured physically as intensity, “the energy transmitted by the sound wave across unit area per second” and perceived by the listener on a comparative scale of louder or quieter.³⁷ It is possible to analyze timbre in terms of the physical aspects of sound, but it is a far more complex matter. Timbre is influenced by many factors in the production of sound, including the harmonic spectrum of the tone (its overtones), the starting transients (the time in which the sound vibration develops), the envelope shape (the changes in amplitude of the sound wave), and the formants (acoustic resonance factors) affecting the sound. These last include the physical parameters of the ear and brain receiving the sound, which differ between individuals (deafness across a certain range, etc.), and as Charles Taylor and Murray Campbell note, “the result of all this is, of course, that the wave that is finally perceived by the brain may be very different from the one that started out from the basic vibrator.”³⁸ Subjectively, timbre is even more difficult to “rationalize” since it concerns quality rather than quantity. The convention is to describe timbre as the “colour” of a tone, yet as Isabella van Elferen has noted, this is a synaesthetically confused metaphor, which describes sound

with a properly visual concept.³⁹ Timbres are typically described using such synesthetic metaphors; timbres may be called “warm,” “red,” “grainy,” “clean,” etc. This elusive aspect of timbre led Romantic music theorists such as Johann Gottfried Herder and E.T.A. Hoffmann to associate it with the infinite and indeed with the sublime.⁴⁰

For Lyotard, timbre is exploited as a “site” of the inaudible in sound, of the sonic event, by virtue of its indeterminacy. In short, he believes that there is in timbre something irreducible to the well-known parameters of perception and rational analysis, and this something is the “*je ne sais quoi*” which is responsible for our aesthetic feeling of music. He emphasizes the importance of timbre in avant-garde musics:

It is clear too that from Debussy to Boulez, Cage or Nono, via Webern or Varèse, the attention of modern musicians has been turned towards this secret passibility to sound-timbre. And it is also this that makes jazz and electronic music important. For with gongs and in general all percussion instruments, with synthesizers, musicians have access to an infinite continuum of sound-nuances.⁴¹

This focus on the inaudible in music, understood as the unrepresentable given in the present instant and the matter of timbre, explains why Lyotard links the aesthetic of the sublime with music. This idea of the inaudible is also what allows us to characterize his philosophy of music as post-phenomenological: in music, the inaudible is what gives the given — the audible — but is not itself given. In the later essay “Music, Mutic” (1993), using vocabulary typical of this later period, Lyotard describes music as a gesture made *in* space-time-sound, which makes a *sign* of the inaudible.⁴²

In the passage quoted above, Lyotard uses the special term “passibility” to describe the kind of state required in order to be receptive to sonic events in music. Passibility is a state which involves both passivity and activity or ability: the state is passive insofar as it requires us to be open to the unexpected and drop our expectations and anticipatory interpretations of what will be given to us in sensation and feeling — but active insofar as it requires careful attention directed toward such openness. “Passibility” also enfolds the meaning of “passage” as it is a state in which one opens one’s sensibility as a passage through which the event may be registered on the receptive mind or “soul”: “a passage to the events which come to it from a

‘something’ that it does not know.”⁴³ Lyotard compares this state with the kind of free-floating attention required in the psychoanalytic exercise of “free association.”⁴⁴ It is only through such a state of receptiveness that the inaudible in the audible might be “heard.”

6

Before we can conclude with a clear summary of what postmodern music would mean for Lyotard — a meaning that we have seen is linked with the aesthetic of the sublime — we must note that a significant complication is introduced into Lyotard’s understanding of the sublime around the same time as the “Music and Postmodernity” essay was written. This complication is one which has only recently been made readily and clearly available with the 2009 publication in French and English of his contemporaneous book *Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour*, which was previously only available in German. Here he writes as follows:

It is foolish to pretend, or even to suppose, that each of these aesthetics, that of the beautiful and that of the sublime, rules a distinct *period* in the history of the arts or could be recognisable by a *manner* or an appropriate school. Take for example the avant-gardes. The art historian and the art critic distinguish there two major movements, one towards abstraction, the other towards the minimal.

One could believe (this happened to me) that in *both* cases it is a question of attempting to forestall the trap of figuration and of bearing witness to that which escapes all presentation. An attempt at “negative presentation,” as it were, that is obedient to an aesthetics of “too little to see,” that would turn its back on the free profusion, on the “rich matter” of forms. One would thus recognise the sublime in certain *manners*. [...]

That is a hasty application of the results of critical analysis to the description of works. Minimalism and abstraction are names which designate, more or less, manners indeed observable in the history of art. But the critical issues that interest us do not coincide at all with these manners. [...] Above all, the sublime does not become attached to manner, it is without manner, as Longinus already suggested. [...] There is no sublime technique because technique deals with the shaping of matter in presentation and the sublime is only the feeling that the absolute makes a sign in the work, whatever its form. This “presence” signs itself as much [...] in a rondo of Mozart and in a quartet for strings by Beethoven or Scelsi.⁴⁵

The upshot of this is that the late Lyotard in a certain sense retracts his claim that over the last two hundred years, and with the twentieth-century avant-gardes in particular, art must be understood in relation to the aesthetic of the sublime, understandable as a movement away from form and towards matter, recognizable in stylistic movements such as minimalism and abstraction.

A corollary displacement occurs with Lyotard's treatment of music in his last essay dedicated to it, "Music, Mute," published in 1993. Here, we see that while he continues to focus on matter as indeterminacy, opposed to form, timbre has now passed over to the side of form, of the presentation, of the audible. Recall here my introductory comments on Lyotard's methodological "doubt." He writes:

There is a sonorous matter that is not what the musician calls the material. The latter is understood as the timbre of the sound. Matter is not heard [...] sonorous matter [...] clandestinely inhabits the audible material, the timbre.⁴⁶

The above points complicate our attempt to understand Lyotard's ideas about postmodern music in important ways because he now suggests that the aesthetic feelings of the beautiful and the sublime cannot be distinguished in relation to the characteristics of the work — there is no sublime style, and timbre is placed on the side of form, not matter. In this period of Lyotard's aesthetics — the 1990s — he insists that *there is no history of art* properly speaking, only a history of the cultural reception of artworks, understood and classified according to their *forms*.⁴⁷ There is no history of what gives a cultural product an artistic value, which for him is its capacity to affect us: there is no history of the beautiful or the sublime, such that we would be able to say that for example a work by Matisse is more beautiful than one by Rembrandt because beauty has progressed.⁴⁸

7

Having completed this brief survey of some pertinent aspects of Lyotard's philosophy of music, we may return to the question of whether there is an event analogous to the postmodern in the history of western music. As previously noted, Lyotard says this is a naïve question, and we may now readily see why: insofar as he wants to insist in his late aesthetics that there is no history of art, there is no history of the artistic effect in music. The stylistic changes which determine periods of music — baroque, classical, romantic, modern, to name just the broadest and best-known — take place on the level of *culture* and of the *presentation* of the work. What would be called “the postmodern” or “postmodernity” in music as in other fields must break with such a cultural history.

However, there are some ways in which there *is* a plausible analogy between the postmodern event and music history. We can see this elaborated in Lyotard's essay “Obedience,” which appears in *The Inhuman*. The liberation of sound as material — something masterable which is used to produce specific aesthetic effects — might be thought to have revealed that sound is more (or perhaps less) than material; it is *matter*. Matter in this sense is what Lyotard called “immaterial” at the exhibition of that name (*Les Immatériaux*), for which he was principal director at the Pompidou Centre in 1985. Here he presented the hypothesis of a kind of negative dialectic with respect to modernity, understood as the attempt to liberate humanity through the technological control of materials. The very technoscientific researches which attempted to increase this mastery, he contended, have undermined it as it has broken down the distinction between subject and object which supported this project and the concept of the material, revealing an indeterminacy he names “immaterial matter.”⁴⁹ Lyotard draws an explicit link between the themes of this exhibition and his reflections on music when he calls Varèse's *poème électronique* — played at the Philips pavilion, designed by Le Corbusier, in Brussels in 1958 — the first exhibition of immaterials.⁵⁰ What he calls *sonorous matter* is *immaterial matter* insofar as it involves this indeterminacy. The “liberation of sound” has not revealed something masterable, a key to calculating determinable musical effects, but a vast heterogeneous continuum of indeterminate, possible effects. The liberation of sound has revealed something indeterminate and

unmasterable just as the modern attempt to liberate “Man” has revealed that there is no such coherent subject of history.

Despite Lyotard’s later qualifications, postmodern music would still be bound up with an aesthetic of the sublime. In his later works, there are important aspects of the aesthetic of the sublime which he wants to generalize to *all* aesthetics. This generalization is the explicit task of the 1993 essay “Anima Minima,” where he writes:

The present description extends the import of the specific analysis of the sublime sentiment to all aesthetic sentiments. Being artists, writers, sometimes philosophers, contemporaries apply themselves to detecting within sensation the “presence” of what escapes sensation: something neutral, something gray, something blank “inhabits” the nuances of a sound, a chromaticism, or a voice.⁵¹

What Lyotard ultimately wants with the aesthetic of the sublime then seems to be what I have called the “post-phenomenological” aspect of his aesthetic — the “unpresentable presence,” not only irreducible to conceptual determination but also to formed perception. He continues to identify this unpresentable presence with an immaterial matter even as the capacity to identify it in works which highlight timbre or color is now denied. The problem with Lyotard’s emphasis on timbre in music in the ‘80s is simply that it identifies “presence” too strongly with the presentation and restricts it too much to a particular style or period. His later aesthetics further open the question of where “the inaudible” might be indicated through sound.

It thus remains the case that Lyotard wants to elaborate and defend the sublime as an aesthetic which best describes the stakes of the arts he is interested in — that is, experimental arts. Such arts might be called “avant-garde,” not because they belong to a particular period or style but because they push the boundaries of the received rules of presentation through whatever manner or style in their search for the unpresentable. Lyotard’s later considerations are not retractions of the sublime as an aesthetic of experimentation in the arts but rather of a too-easy historical periodization of such experimentation, which would recognize the sublime only in a particular manner or style. “Musical postmodernity” then would not be a period but a state, mood, approach, realization, perspective, or aesthetic whereby one would not give credence to the notion that the cultural unfolding of periods or styles progressively liberates sound but would search

for the inaudible through any and all styles and parameters of experimentation. There is in avant-garde music a vast multiplicity of experimental techniques pursued to approach the inaudible. Lyotard gives just two examples to illustrate the range of these heterogeneous possibilities of experimentation; two composers, who seem to him to approach the inaudible from opposite directions: Cage through “letting sound be” and Boulez through an “over-articulation” of sound.⁵² If there is a recognition of the legitimacy of multiple, heterogeneous, and perhaps incommensurable regions of sound able to testify to the inaudible, we have entered — in music — something like the political postmodernity which Lyotard conceives as the multiplication of little narratives once the grand narratives of the emancipation of humanity, which claimed to subsume them, have broken down.⁵³

While he argues for multiplicity and heterogeneity in music, however, this does not mean that Lyotard should be thought to have subscribed to the kind of postmodernism which denies any legitimate distinction between high art and populism such that for example Boulez’s music would appear to have equal artistic value to Taylor Swift’s. Lyotard does deny that the “liberation of sound” takes place along the path of a single approach such as the atonalism of Schönberg and his followers. However, he must be thought in a specific sense to continue to privilege the avant-garde as an “elite.” Indeed, in an interview arranged as an exchange with Boulez, he asserts that “[e]litism, for my part, was never anything of which to be afraid.”⁵⁴ In Lyotard’s specific sense, such an elitism is simply a lack of concern with popular accessibility. But neither does Lyotard draw such a distinction along *cultural* lines, and he is happy to include Frank Zappa, Jimi Hendrix, Ravi Shankar, free jazz, and other musics and musicians who have found a popular cultural reception among those he would include in such an elite.⁵⁵ Rather, the line of distinction would be the capacity to testify to or gesture towards the inaudible, something which can ultimately only be a matter of aesthetic judgment but which remains at least associated with the creation of new forms or experimentation with new materials — that is, the appearance of something new on the side of presentation. Indeed, it is precisely the aesthetic of the sublime — understood as the search for “the inaudible” — which gives a specific character to Lyotard’s understanding of postmodern music and saves it from the generalized eclecticism without criteria that is often thought to follow from the breakdown of metanarratives.

In the final section of the essay “The Inaudible: Music and Postmodernity,” Lyotard repeats the appeal to heterogeneity and warning against the danger of cultural monism which closes his essay “Answering the Question: What is the Postmodern?” Here, he uses the image of Babel, suggesting that the postmodern scene in music means the multiplicity of stylistic experimentations, which would accord with the multiplication of idioms after the tower’s destruction by God.⁵⁶ He suggests that some want to metaphorically rebuild the tower by basing musics around recognizable and agreed-upon features such as harmony and rhythm. Such rules, he suggests, are a kind of equal measure which are the sonic equivalent to money insofar as they equalize differences and impose a monolithic value under capitalism. Yet the Lord, he insists, was wise to destroy the tower of Babel, and Lyotard asserts the value of multiple experimentations in music which push the limits of the audible so that it approaches the inaudible. His argument then is analogous to the one he makes against so-called trans-avant-gardism — the return to painting in the early ‘80s — that he makes in “Answering the Question.” It is a plea for continued efforts in experimentation and musical invention, resisting desires to return to the recognizable and comfortable.

We can now summarize the specific and nuanced sense in which we can understand postmodern music according to Lyotard. Postmodernity in music must be understood as an approach which rejects the linear historical development which characterized modernism (and which applies only on the cultural level) and embraces a plurality of experimental approaches and procedures. Postmodern music would be a search for the inaudible, for what Lyotard would consider the *art* in music, rather than an attempt to make cultural forms progress. Insofar as it can be periodized, a musical postmodernity would refer only to a condition in which such an approach predominates. Moreover, as we have seen, for Lyotard postmodern music is characterized by a sublime aesthetic. Such an aesthetic must be understood not in terms of recognizable stylistic features but as indicating that aspect which Lyotard isolates and generalizes to all aesthetics: the unrepresentable in presentation, the matter in form, the inaudible in the audible. 

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Notes

- 1 "The Inaudible: Music and Postmodernity," in *Miscellaneous Texts I: Aesthetics and Theory of Art. Jean-François Lyotard: Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists*, vol. 4.1, ed. Herman Parret (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 211.
- 2 For surveys of various meanings the term "postmodern music" has been given, see Derek Scott, "Postmodernism and Music," in *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*, ed. Stuart Sim (Cambridge: Icon, 1998); Jonathan Kramer, "The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism," *Current Musicology* 66 (Spring 1999): 7–20; Babette Babbich, "Postmodern Musicology," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, ed. Victor E. Taylor and Charles Winqvist (London: Routledge, 2001); and Jann Pasler, "Postmodernism," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., vol. 20, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrell (New York: Macmillan, 2001).
- 3 For example, Pasler suggests that a certain type of postmodern music "often addresses the 'master narratives' of tonality, narrative structure, Western hegemony and male dominance" (*op. cit.*, 214).
- 4 These essays are "A Few Words to Sing," in *Toward the Postmodern*, ed. Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993); "Several Silences," in *Driftworks*, ed. Roger McKeon (New York: Semiotext(e), 1984 [1972]); "Obedience," in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991 [1986]); "God and the Puppet," in *The Inhuman* [1987]; "The Inaudible: Music and Postmodernity" [1991]; and "Music, Mute," in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 [1993]).
- 5 See Don Ihde, *Postphenomenology: Essays in the Postmodern Context* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1995).
- 6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993).
- 7 See "God and the Puppet," 160.
- 8 Lyotard, "Music, Mute," 220.
- 9 The notion of "Lyotard's Doubt" has previously been used by Gaëlle Bernard: "Art et époque: Le doute de Lyotard," in *Lyotard et les arts*, eds. François Coblence and Michel Enaudeau (Paris: Klincksieck, 2014). Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993). Jean-François Lyotard, "Freud According to Cézanne," trans. Ashley Woodward and Jon Roffe, *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy* 23 (2015): 26–42.
- 10 Lyotard writes: "Cézanne's pictorial journey moves in the originary element of an uncertainty, of a suspicion in relation to what is presented as "natural law" in the schools of painting ... this suspicion, this deficiency, is given first and everywhere underlies this work of displacement, whether theoretical or plastic, that it undertakes. This means that it is vain to search in the failure of the composition, plastic for Cézanne, for the (dialectical) reason for the subsequent invention. Every composition is a failure and a success; they only *succeed* each other in a surface history, and are *contemporaries* in the substratum where Cézanne's desire, immobile, generates disconnected figures, divided spaces, contrary points of view" ("Freud According to Cézanne," 32).

- 11 For an example of the first, see “On a Figure of Discourse,” in *Toward the Postmodern*, ed. Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993). For an example of the second, see the chapter “Presence,” in *What to Paint? Jean-François Lyotard. Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists*, vol. 5, ed. Herman Parret (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013).
- 12 Lyotard, “The Inaudible,” 203.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 205. Emphasis mine.
- 14 Quoted in Lyotard, “Obedience,” 165.
- 15 Lyotard, “The Inaudible,” 205.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 205; 219.
- 17 Scott, “Postmodernism and Music,” 136–137.
- 18 “Obedience” and “God and the Puppet.”
- 19 The relevant essays (with original publication date) here are “Answering the Question: What is the Postmodern?” (1982), in *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982–1985*, trans. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (Sydney: Power Publications, 1992); “Presentation, Representation, Unpresentable” (1982), “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” (1983), and “After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics” (1987), all in *The Inhuman*.
- 20 Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” 97.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*, 96.
- 23 Lyotard, “Presentation, Representation, Unpresentable,” 126.
- 24 Lyotard, “After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics,” 139.
- 25 Lyotard’s major work in this regard is *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lyton (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
- 26 See Lyotard, “Newman: The Instant,” in *The Inhuman*.
- 27 See Lyotard, “Answering the Question, What is the Postmodern?”
- 28 Heinrich von Kleist is referenced in “God and the Puppet,” Pascal Quignard in “Music, Mute,” and Emanuel Swedenborg in “Obedience.”
- 29 Lyotard, “The Inaudible,” 209; 213.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 213.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 215.
- 32 Lyotard, “God and the Puppet,” 156.
- 33 This Kantian approach is explored particularly in the essay “God and the Puppet.”
- 34 Lyotard writes: “For music, the great question becomes: how to divide up what is called sonorous space? Which is, in reality, an immense reflection on time. I am struck by seeing that each time some philosophers have undertaken to work on time, they have taken their examples from music.” “La réflexion créatrice,” in *Éclats/Boulez*, ed. C. Samuel (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1986), 16. [My translation.]
- 35 Lyotard, “God and the Puppet,” 160.
- 36 See Geoffrey Bennington’s *Lyotard: Writing the Event*, the study which established “the event” as a term central to all Lyotard’s work.

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- 37 Murray Campbell and Clive Greated, "Loudness," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., vol. 15, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrell (New York: Macmillan, 2001), 215.
- 38 "Sound" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 23, 770.
- 39 Isabella Van Elferen, "The Lure of Timbre: Paradoxical Realism between the Sublime and the Grain," *Contemporary Music Review*, forthcoming.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Lyotard, "After the Sublime," 141.
- 42 Lyotard, "Music, Mutive," 218.
- 43 Lyotard, "Rewriting Modernity," in *The Inhuman*, 30.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Lyotard, *Karel Appel, A Gesture of Colour, Jean-François Lyotard: Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists*, vol. 1, trans. Vlad Ionescu and Peter W. Milne, ed. Herman Parret (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), 87–89.
- 46 "Music, Mutive," 230.
- 47 He writes: "The transcendence — whether beautiful or sublime it matters little, the difference not being discernible in relation to the work — of the work of art is found right there in the evocation of this precariousness forever enveloped in sensation" ("Music, Mutive," 233).
- 48 See the chapter "Long Indictment of the History of Art" in *Karel Appel* and with specific relation to music the opening passages of "Music, Mutive."
- 49 See Lyotard, "Les Immatériaux," *Art & Text* 17 (1985): 47–57; and Lyotard, "After 6 Months of Work..." *30 Years After Les Immatériaux*, eds. Yuk Hui and Andres Broeckmann (Meson Press, 2015).
- 50 "Obedience," 173.
- 51 "Anima Minima," in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 244.
- 52 "The Inaudible," "Obedience," and "Music, Mutive."
- 53 See *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); and for a less well known but more philosophically rigorous analysis, *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
- 54 Lyotard, "La réflexion créatrice," 16. [My translation.]
- 55 See for example the essays "Several Silences" and "After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics."
- 56 Lyotard, "The Inaudible," 221–23.

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