'SULTRY, SMOULDERING WITH PAGAN DREAMS'

THEORISING AND PERFORMING GENDER THROUGH DEBUSSY'S FLUTE MUSIC

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF MUSIC IN PERFORMANCE

THE NEW ZEALAND SCHOOL OF MUSIC – TE KŌKĪ

2023

ABSTRACT

Amidst a sweltering orchestral haze, the flute traces the sinuous outline of an imagined curve; atop the impassioned orations of a nymph, the flute seduces and enthralls; alongside a freize-like arrangement of nude models, the flute observes, detached and aloof. Claude Debussy's flute compositions of 1894-1914 reconceived of the instrument's capabilities. But it is not only technical innovation that renders these works compelling, emotive and unsettling. These works are exceptional and unusual in that they rest clearly upon imaginations of gender, sexuality and desire. It is those imaginations which propelled radical technical change. *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, *Syrinx* and *Bilitis*: through performance, these works animate fraught conceptual battles in art and gender. When embedded in experience, these works contest a general set of interests beyond their own limits. Inhabiting the mystery of a non-linguistic artform as able to sweep performers up in great gestures of eroticism and definitional power, these works uneasily bolster the discursive frames through which art and gender are understood. Establishing a dialogue between practices of performance in artistic and lived experience, this thesis draws heavily on Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Problematizing assumptive distinctions between gender performativity and musical performance, this thesis aims to understand the possibilities of the content inhabited, projected and observed through musical experience.

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From time to time, words demand redaction. They may pose danger, compromise protocol or rupture secrecy. But language is more than practical, it is conceptual. We don't refer to things that float abstractly in a pre-linguistic plane. Rather, the normative power of words, their compulsion towards identification, delineates experience itself. I redact not because I believe myself embroiled in some geopolitical crisis. I redact because I wish to undertake an experiment. What if I were to dismantle these concepts' ability to discipline and define?

"Artworks are not being but a process of becoming."

Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 241

"*Woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end."

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 45

'Artworks,' and 'Woman': these words delimit possibilities, consolidate power and hone identity. Allowed to be definitional monoliths, they undertake their projects by casting shadows over all experience. They allow certain practices to be illuminated while others are concealed in darkness. We see only the shadows: against the wall of the cave, this play of light takes on a semblance of reality and completion. However, these terms are not objects, they are organisms. They require breath and sustenance. Their bodies are, in fact, made up of a plenitude of practices working tirelessly against the looming insecurity of the provisional. I act in the spirit of contestation. The theories interrogated here are not new. But the consonances between them are yet to be mined for their possibilities. A deconstruction will unfold in this text, a deconstruction that is as provisional as the terms it seeks to understand.

The gender and aesthetic theories of Judith Butler and Theodor Adorno serve as the starting point of this thesis. Through them, I propose a dialogue that is variably congruent and complementary. The subsequent application of this theoretical dialogue seeks to examine those meanings generated through the performance of works embedded in complex relationships to gender. Butler's approach takes seemingly fixed instantiations of gender – ranging from the subliminal to the explicit – and recasts them as incantations in an animated discourse. As a counterpoint, Adorno's theory replaces a history of art that takes its works and concepts as objects with one that breathes in sympathy with their mutable essence. Liberating the dynamism of their Hegelian legacy, Butler and Adorno pair their every elemental component with an opposite, inviting their readers to sit in the fraught space between. These openings exist not only within the approaches, but also in their relation. The applications to performance of the possibilities found within that discursive tension are the central concerns of this thesis. I argue that, on the contestable ground between these gender and aesthetic theories, there lies a constellation of musical works that can be fully understood by neither approach alone. The theoretical landscapes in which Adorno and Butler may be situated are expansive. In order to intently examine a particular discursive opening between aesthetics and gender, I have chosen in this text to not situate them more widely within their respective fields. This is not an exhaustive intellectual survey, nor an argument that relies upon an understanding of any broader disciplinary networks. I imagine a dialogue, propose an application and, finally, reflect upon an actual aesthetic experience.

This is a thesis in music, a thesis in performance. Already, this text enacts a number of tensions of its own. Where aesthetics has historically grounded itself in conceptual knowledge, musical

performance – indeed, all artistic endeavour – is experiential. A discipline struggling to unravel the enigmas of its subject matter, aesthetics took up a position that petrified the life of works, turning them from flesh to stone. In the aesthetic realm, music has been considered aspirational to the highest degree for its purported liberation from the material.[1] Adorno's approach stands against transcendental views of music that consider its most fervent detachment from the grounding forces of representation and reality to embody the [?] highest ideals of art.[2] For Adorno, the more intently one steps away, the more intensely one reacts; the more vivid the imagination one offers outside of reality, the more one sanctions its primacy.[3] If all art is defined by this relationship with the real – and the real is always in motion – then all art too must maintain an existence that is fluid. But perhaps no form can be as potent in this regard as music, rooted as it is in the flash of the ephemeral. Attempts to fix, reify and render music atemporal belie its most inherent essence: transience.[4] This thesis in performance takes musical experiences and situates them within dynamic relationships between theories of gender and aesthetics.

A sinuous scale traces an erotic curve through a sweltering orchestral haze. A nymph declares her infatuation towards a solo flute. A chamber ensemble serves as a backdrop to models posed in pseudo-classical scenes of lesbian desire. Vivid, tactile and bizarre: these scenes, drawn from Claude Debussy's flute works, are swept up in the tide of aesthetic modernism at the turn of the nineteenth century. *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, Syrinx* and *Bilitis* inhabit a radical discourse around gender and musical innovation. These pieces shall receive, contest and inform the theoretical apparatus I build through a reading of Adorno and Butler. Complex and evocative, these are the works that have yet to be explained in their fullness; their themes lie beyond the purview of the aesthetic and techniques reside outside the sphere of gender. They are radical in every sense; they demand an approach that attempts to locate their performative power.

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[1] Hilde Hein, "Why not Feminist Aesthetic Theory?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48, no. 4 (1990): 24.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 2. Originally published as *Asthetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970).

[4] Ibid, 39. Carolyn Abbate, "Music - Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 505-536.

"A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender."

Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 45

"What crackles in artworks is the sound of the friction of the antagonistic elements that the artwork seeks to unify; it is the script not least because as in linguistic signs, its processual element is enciphered in its objectivisation."

Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 243

These two theories take shape as unstable processes, as ever-provisional attempts to understand the dialectics between their constituent concepts. My approach shall throw musical experience into those taut relationships along four axes of inquiry common to the interests of Adorno and Butler. **Concepts against experience**: what forms of knowledge are sanctioned by music's disciplines, and how do they live up to the nature of the art? How can we understand that circularity of performativity that penetrates the fulfillment of gender and music? **The real and authentic juxtaposed against the illusory and artificial**: in what ways do musical projects pursue truth, and in what ways are they fictive? How might we formulate the meaning of musical experiences that demand from gendered subjects the performance of difference? **Stasis and existence pitted against process and becoming:** how are we to understand musical experiences as transient and fleeting, yet tied to atemporal reference points? How do genders and musical works consolidate coercive power through mobile actions of apparent stillness? **Tradition and emancipation**: where does music – experienced in the present – discursively situate itself in the long shadow of precedent? How can we interrogate a discursive power delineating experience without allowing gender and music to fall prey to determinism? Indeed, how can we energise those fields as sites of resistance? Musical performance shall serve as a

profitable site of application for these theorists. Dynamic, provisional, indeterminate: performance welcomes a volatile encounter with a theoretical alliance of similar mutability.

SECTION ONE

1.1 Concepts – Experience

"The definition of aesthetics as the theory of the beautiful is so unfruitful because the formal character of the concept of beauty is inadequate to the full content [inhalt] of the aesthetic. If aesthetics were nothing but a systematic catalogue of whatever is called beautiful, it would give no idea of the life that transpires in the concept of beauty"

Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 69.

"The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside this field, but only a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices… the task is to formulate within this constitution a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalise, and immobilize."

Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 203.

At the heart of aesthetic inquiry there lies a constant tension. So ephemeral is its true subject that the discipline has historically grounded itself in the interrogation of ideas: beauty, the sublime, the ugly, taste.[5] But those categories and attributes are not inhered in art's substance. They are containers instituted in art's wake that struggle to hold the gaseous remnants of an experience slipping through their cracks. Through a reach into the senses, artworks generate meaning from the relationships they establish with their audiences. Art is experience, but its critical examination has long been rooted in the requirement to fix works in space and time, to discipline them into categories and to define their orbit of influence. In the words of Adorno's translator, Robert Hullot-Kentor, aesthetics has been unable to escape a 'presupposition that intellect must renounce knowing art from within'.[6] Stepping away from the visceral, the

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[5] Hullot-Kentor, "Translator's Introduction," in Adorno *Aesthetic Theory,* ix.
[6] Ibid.

mimetic, the experiential in favour of the structural, theoretical and concrete, aesthetics petrified the artwork. A discipline that takes as its subject the live, emotive and responsive sought to remove itself as far as possible from that essence. Aesthetics took flesh and made it stone. Concepts have built an elaborate, stifling architecture through which the life of artworks is sapped. As Butler and Adorno remind us, the imperatives of deconstruction are not to throw out the terms we deploy, rather, to identify and interrogate their uses as their own sites of meaning.[7] Conceptual containers have life, a life of attempts to capture all that they seek to hold. It is that energy, that constant effort, which animates the aesthetic tension between concepts and experience.

Political thinking is mired by questions of representation, but the mechanism of that term is seldom examined. As Butler argues, appeals to representation contain normative claims that tend to be obscured by the shadow of its imperatives and outcomes.[8] For the politics of gender, this is no different. 'Representation' assumes the status of the subject to be stable. But who exactly is 'represented'? Who is excluded from those collectives? How are categorical margins policed? Before the action of 'representation' is attempted, argues Butler, language takes on a powerful defining force that delineates its intended subject. The invocation of ideas – 'woman', for example – lays discursive foundations atop which power is executed and legitimated. Even in efforts aimed at emancipation, language's construction of feminist subjects situates them within a particular system of meaning and understanding. These constitutive statements consolidate a power which goes unaccounted for, a power which we can no more escape than language itself. Through the understanding of identity as not conceptually adhered to, but experientially developed, Butler demands a critical examination of that discursive battleground.[9] The terrain of gender is not defined by any one feature. Rather, it is a rich landscape in which several topographical elements need to align so as to be culturally intelligible.[10] We might think of concepts like desire and sexuality, or of dualisms like culture and biology, body and mind, sex and gender. The discursive invocation of any identity rests upon the common recognition of specific connective paths chiselled between such ideas. But genders are more complex and varied than norms of continuity and coherence between identity and practices allow for. Interrogating the experiential affords the chance to not only examine

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[7] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), x.
[8] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), 2.
[9] Ibid, 15.
[10] Ibid, 23.

the formational imperatives of these concepts, but also to reflect upon the possibilities for recognising and energising practices that transgress normative power. This analysis will examine Adorno and Butler, first through the concept of desire and, second, through their temporal grounding.

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* seeks to reinvigorate the examination of experience and, within that, the experience of desire. Historically, we might have considered artworks to stand on their own terms, to exist as objects whose content is adhered within. The content of the artwork was not tied to the beholder; engagement and experience were unimportant. What was important was the manner in which an audience succumbed to the work and became consumed by it. However, Adorno argues that artworks are constructed through more reflexive relationships, through dynamics of definition and understanding that run in multiple directions.[11] For Adorno, it was in the hands of Immanuel Kant that aesthetics undertook a significant departure from these aspects: "he snatched art away from that avaricious philistinism that always wants to touch it and taste it… aesthetics becomes paradoxically a castrated hedonism, a desire without desire."[12] This version of aesthetics desires to understand and interrogate art, but, in its effort, belies those acts of desire contained within the works and their relations. What sparks desire in the space between artwork and audience? Stimulation of the senses is only the starting point. That sensory experience is then appreciated as differentiated from reality. Those engagements undertaken with the artwork can never be fully realised, they remain set at a distance from the empirical. While, later in this thesis, that demarcation between the worlds of truth and imagination will be examined on its own terms, for now, we will consider participation through either pole as a key site of meaning. In a sense, the pleasures and desires coalesced in artworks are false; art offers only lies. But in offering those experiences – even though they are not of the real – art asks what we do desire in the empirical world. The effects of desire within the artwork are more than replications of what we strive for in reality, they are more than immediately digestible tokens of pleasure that stand in for the vacuums of existence. For Adorno, desire endures beyond the boundaries of the work as stirrings of 'memory and longing' that remain open.[13] Art is defined by experiences that continue to resonate beyond the immediate interaction with any work.

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[11] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 16.
[12] Ibid, 14.
[13] Ibid, 18.

Butler considers the practices of heterosexual desire to generate a compulsory, normative framework that animates the concepts of feminine and masculine. While having an appearance of substance, through the acceptance of a purportedly pre-discursive body, Butler contends that material distinctions are generated through differentiating experiences of desire.[14] Before publishing their most notable theoretical work around gender, it was as a doctoral student that Butler began developing their theories of desire.[15] Taking as their focus Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Butler puts forward an understanding of the text as a seductive Bildungsroman, a narrative that demands engagement: 'we do not merely witness the journey of some other philosophical agent, but we ourselves are invited onstage to perform the crucial scene changes'.[16] It is only in participation that the reader apprehends this text. As an audience, Butler contends we are absorbed in the central character's various attempts to locate themselves, to uncover truth through an open-ended cycle of 'desire and deception'.[17] Through the *Phenomenology*, Butler identifies those reflexive mechanisms of desire that they will later deploy in order to understand the power of a heterosexual matrix to shape gender. For Butler and Hegel, desire takes place along a dialectic scale, whereby the practice is both intentional and reflexive.[18] Through encounters with an object of desire, subjects engage in a 'reflexive pursuit of self-consciousness'.[19] Desire has a differentiating and definitional power. The conditioning of a normative sexuality consolidates apparent coherence at the poles of a gender binary.

The aesthetic experience unfolds in time as a relationship between the art and the beholder. This relationship fulfills and sustains the concepts deployed to understand it. This relationship is permeated with desire but cannot endure beyond the margins of the work. What does it mean to liberate the interrogation of that which is fleeting and temporal? Desire for the beautiful and revulsion for the ugly are not automatic or unified results. They unfold dynamically. While it is undeniable that artworks derive meaning from the desire they stir through offerings of beauty, the highest orders of beauty in fact paralyse desire through their offering of a total

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[14] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 31.

[15] Judith Butler, "Desire, Rhetoric, and Recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1987)" in *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Sara Salih and Judith Butler (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

[16] Ibid, 51.

[17] Ibid, 54.

[18] Ibid, 55.

[19] Ibid, 62.

ideal.[20] The purest of cultivated forms stand still, impossible, aloof. In their offering of perfection, such works could be seen to step far away from the diversity of the living.[21] What relationship can be developed with such a work, with such an alien to human existence? It is for this reason Adorno considers beauty to have a strong affinity with death, with a 'completely pacified' subject.[22] It is the imperfect, the aching and suffering that Adorno argues enliven the relationship between artwork and audience.[23] Dissonance 'gives access to the alluringly sensuous by transfiguring it into its antithesis, pain,' remarks Adorno, constructing the mechanism of desire as far more complex than a simple offering of beauty.[24] When a work strikes us with its antagonisms and dissonances, it asserts its own autonomy. Through imperfection, an artwork enacts its own power of determination: it throbs, refusing to exist as a consumable, pocketable item. For Adorno, for whom art is ever-imbricated in a dialectic with society, this necessarily means the emboldening too of the subject. Throwing themselves upon their audience, pursuing intensified relationships that seal their authenticity with a comprehensive array of experiences – obsession, violence and suffering that no ideal can capture. As works increase in complexity, our aspiration to 'know' the art in its fullness fails time and time again. From there, the imagination grows in strength.[25] The experimental demands a honed and active imagination, an imagination prepared to adjust to varying degrees of focus and certainty.[26] Works that fail to live up to standards of aesthetic and formal perfection are, in fact, the ones that breathe the most life into their subjects. Art is alive in the moment of strained apprehension undertaken by its audience.

Emboldening aesthetic experience liberates the imagination, stripping works of stifling historicism.[27] Adorno considers the point of an artwork to be an object that has grown to consume its conditions and moment of genesis.[28] Knowledge of the circumstances of creation, for Adorno, runs counter to the essence of art as consuming its genesis and standing on its own terms. Experience of an artwork in the present trumps all knowledge of the encircling historical moment at its conception. For Adorno, aesthetics may all too readily 'substitute the knowledge

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[20] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 71.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 71.
[23] Ibid, 18.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid, 33.
[26] Ibid, 34.
[27] Ibid, 245.
[28] Ibid.

of the origin of the phenomenon for the experience of that phenomenon'.[29] And yet, Adorno does not consider the moment of genesis to be irrelevant, he does not imagine context as offering nothing meaningful at all. Rather, he considers artworks to be a form of 'comportment', to be an 'attitude' adopted towards their surrounding conditions.[30] That posture is cultivated and maintained, offered through encounters to speak mimetically to an individual experience at a particular moment.[31] For Adorno, artworks are not defined by the context in which they emerged, or even the intentions of their creator(s). They are instead engaged in constant efforts to generate meaning through the postures they adopt towards their circumstances. Adorno's vision is radically liberatory.

Butler's theory similarly works to evade determinism. Where other conceptions of gender may regard 'woman' or 'man' as scripts to be followed, as binding structures that guide behaviour, Butler opens those structures to revision. In actuality, by defining practices to be constitutive of the concepts they develop, their theory goes even a step further. Butler does not want to strike out whole categories of existence, but to examine their active construction at every performative juncture. As such, Butler views every practice, every behaviour, as a potential site of dissidence. While concepts – in this view – are in principle malleable, they become sediment through acts of repetition.[32] In this sense, we never 'are' a particular gender, but we are constantly compelled to 'do' gender. We may locate agency within the possibility of variations on those regulating processes of repetition. It is undeniable that regulatory structures of gender encircle the subject. But the subject is involved at every point of their production and may become empowered to intervene at any moment.

1.2 The Real and Authentic - The Illusory and Artificial

Artworks take up a variety of positions in relation to their conditions of conception. But in every case, they inhabit on some level the illusory, the detached. For Adorno, a central law of art's existence is its rejection of the empirical world and its imagination of an alternative that exists in dialogue with that which it has left behind.[33] But what is the function of that process

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[29] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 245.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid, 40.
[32] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 198-9.
[33] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 2.

of detachment and vision in alterity? What questions are asked and answered by the selection of elements to respond to, to carry with and to leave behind? In choosing which elements of the empirical experience to take up or reject, artworks take up a position, an attitude towards that reality. They are particular and crafted, which places them in opposition to the un-curated and arbitrary. This deliberate nature renders them, in Adorno's eyes, political, a refraction of the social and labour conditions from which they spring. [34] A great deal of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* seeks to interrogate the nature of that dialectic between artistic illusion and empirical truth. But truth is a knotty concept. To Adorno's mind, it is found not only in reality, but equally or, indeed, to a greater extent, in art. What does it mean for an artwork to pursue its own ideals of truth? For Adorno, the answer lies in form. The cogency of form in dialogue with content is what defines the power of the artwork. This aesthetic interrogation of the Real–Artificial polarity will take form and content as its two key considerations. Content – mythical subjects, fleeting sounds that evoke birds, idealised imagery – brings forth the illusory in an artwork, but form – structures, linguistic markers, mimetic forces – rules its alignment with reality.

Gender theory has grappled with questions around the extent to which its terms are true to a biological reality or learned as an artifice of culture. Butler takes Beauvoir and Irigaray as key thinkers at the juncture between approaches. While the former considers women as 'marked' by their gender, trapped in the body and denied the soul of universal personhood afforded to men, the latter contends that women are excluded altogether, rendered invisible and unrepresentable by a 'phallogocentric' discourse.[35] Feminist scholarship has been fractured by disagreements over these foundations, over the degree to which we accept the primacy of the body as an anchor to truth.[36] For Butler, a radical rewriting of the polarity between reality and artifice is required. Butler sees such divisions as a function of discourse. They are, in a word, constructed. As the real and authentic are demarcated, genders are delineated. By sanctioning particular logics and practices of gender coherence as real while framing others as inauthentic, discourse polices the boundaries of the categories it brings to life. To argue about gender as a construction does not fracture the concepts to fragments of falsity. Rather, the approach seeks to illuminate the mechanisms which render particular gender structures culturally intelligible, sanctioned and hegemonic. The first part of the gendered arm to this analysis will consider content, practices, while the second will consider form, the body. Alongside compelling

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[34] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 6.
[35] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 13.
[36] Ibid, 15-17.

parallels with the aesthetic, these concepts will emerge not as discrete, but as dynamically related through the same processes of performativity.

The content of artworks are fragments of imagination that transcend reality. And yet, as Adorno argues in his lengthy critique of psychoanalytic approaches to aesthetics, artworks are not hermetic dreamworlds.[37] They do not offer direct roads into the subconscious of their creator. Their content grapples with the antagonisms of real (social) experience and is always grounded as such. Adorno criticises models of the artwork that lean on escapism or fantasy on one hand, or determinism by way of the artistic personality on the other.[38] We might think of these critiques in a mirrored structure: just as the imagination reaches out of reality while remaining linked to the grubby realities it strives to transcend, the work emerges from the mind of an artist while also being taken out of their control.[39] For Adorno, these conflicts are polemical in all works; the essence of the artwork to undertake processes of separation and reconciliation is inherently radical, regardless of the political orientations of the artists themselves.[40] At any point in history, Adorno conceives of the truly modern work to be that which both enters into a conflict with the apparatus of production and rejects those technical approaches which are 'exhausted and obsolete'.[41] Modern works must, for Adorno, be unafraid of violence, of those violent clashes with established technique and the reality from which its imagination springs. That antagonism may take the form of dissonance, affording the experience of a higher order of aesthetic pleasure, a counterpoint to that ineffectual sensuality of artworks that offer facile enjoyment, retreated from the edge of innovation.[42] Through embracing rather than escaping reality, such content invites a more thoroughgoing quest for truth; through what is uncomfortable and, indeed, disagreeable, one sharpens a critical edge which lies closer to real, earthly experiences. Art may be sumptuous and hedonistic; it may offer a 'sublimation of sexuality' through content that embodies an impossible, artificial order of beauty.[43] But in abandoning itself to that which is ugly, forbidden and excruciating, art's dissonant avenues denounce a world that seeks to dominate it, a world that seeks to coerce its subjects into

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[37] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 11.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid, 12.
[40] Ibid, 242-243.
[41] Ibid, 46-47.
[42] Ibid, 54.
[43] Ibid, 71.

submission.[44] The truly modern, for Adorno, encapsulates a level of autonomy in art that shines light on that which society represses. It is liberatory. Artworks' most challenging content poses more questions than it answers. By inhabiting the caustically fake, such content suspends the power of empiricism and demands a return to what is basal and uninterrogated.

What content fleshes out the ideas of gender? From where does substance emerge? With their language of materiality, these questions reveal the key point of contention within the Butlerian approach to gender. Indeed, following the publication of their most famous text in 1990, *Gender Trouble*, Butler found the problem of materiality was left unresolved and demanded a subsequent interrogation in *Bodies that Matter* (1993). According to the Butlerian worldview, the content of gender is constituted through performativity, a coalescence of repeated, stylised acts that produce the effects that they discursively name. In that process of production, behaviours become normative. We might think, in everyday life, of codes of dress, practices of speech and the definitional power of images, pronouns and sexual practices. Performative invocations are not inventive; they do not create novel, unprecedented behaviours that reshape the meaning of gender. Rather, the essence of the performative is citational: it is always derived from established models that, through repetition, come to crystallise as substance.[45] In this sense, the content of gender – though coercive and hegemonic – is always on some level artificial. Is gender a free-floating set of attributes that may, in theory, be taken on by any individual?

Artworks' formal structures are moulded by the unresolved ambiguities of reality. Where psychoanalysis may take art as a raw and unmediated conduit of unconscious expression, Adorno emphasises that every element of truth filtered through the artwork is made real through the laws of form.[46] Artworks are made up of multiple elements – an array of content – bound together – through form – against the natural order of chance. They constitute bridges between empirical things and mythical ideas, fantasies, dreams. Unity is drawn up from within the work, within the systems it devises.[47] In this manner, artworks offer cogent visions that hold power over the way their audiences come to view reality. Through form, the content of

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[44] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 67.
[45] Butler, *Bodies that Matter,* xxi.
[46] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 11.
[47] Ibid, 255.

artworks is structured so as to engender mimetic responses from the bodies of its audiences.[48] Musically, this mimetic quality has gone on to be theorised more comprehensively since Adorno's time.[49] Adorno theorises this capacity of the artwork as 'intensity,' arguing that form and unity not only strengthen the totality of a vision, but disseminate power to the 'details' that constitute it.[50] Form is the key differentiator, the uniting force that takes content – which, unmediated, would be only the dissociated fragments of dreams – from the phantasmagorical to the aesthetic.[51] Generating and demarcating the realm of the artwork parallels the creation of an interior space for representation, understanding truth juxtaposed against falsehood, self against other.[52] Works are permitted, even encouraged, to bear the marks of their processes; the heaving tension between the whole and its parts constitutes an aesthetic force that renders art socially meaningful.[53] Form may both seal off artworks from the empirical world and serve to relay information to that world in new ways. While form and content have distinct definitions, ultimately, argues Adorno, they are terms of mediation rather than differentiation; through a reflexive lens, form is 'sedimented content'.[54] Sealing it off and policing its boundaries to ensure that content stays within, form defines the relationship of the artwork to reality. At the same time as these effects are disciplinary, they are polemical and liberating.

To perform any action with a gendered overtone – from getting dressed to getting married – a subject must be invested with the agency to undertake it. The agent must, in a sense, be *formed* before they can generate *content*. This takes place at the discursive invocation of sex. While gender may be acknowledged more widely as constructed, sex tends to be considered 'factic'.[55] The substance of the body is considered the foundation, atop which particular behavioural blocks are stacked. But what if there was no such facile distinction to be drawn between the form and content? What if there is no meaningful delineation to be experienced between the fantasies of behaviour and the reality of the body? Butler would argue that there is no formed subject that enters untouched into the landscape of discourse, awaiting inscription. Rather, subjects are constituted through discourse. Bodies are materially constituted along lines of

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[48] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 256.

[49] Arnie Cox, *Music and Embodied Cognition: Listening, Moving, Feeling, and Thinking* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016): 225.

[50] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 256.

[51] Ibid, 257-258.

[52] Ibid, 9-11.

[53] Ibid, 266.

[54] Ibid, 6.

[55] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 199.

intelligibility that denote what is real.[56] Discourse renders those bodies that do not adhere to its norms invisible. Butler parallels the linguistic deployment of 'sex' with 'the law'.[57] The invocation of 'the law' not only tells us what behaviours are normatively acceptable, but each utterance consolidates power around its concept. With every word, 'the law' is sedimented and develops an illusion of realism. This analogy illuminates the power of performativity to construct, of discourse that floats in the realm of the fantastical to exert a very concrete force. Gender is not just a set of behaviours. It is a coherent alliance between various identities, characteristics and practices. Alliances which do not follow those visions of coherence – including practices of gender parody – question that distinction between the real and the illusory. In recognising the phantasm of gender, all the way back to a primordial construction of 'sex' as material and pre-discursive, we find possibilities for subversion and imagination.

1.3 Stasis and Existence – Process and Becoming

"every artwork is an instant; every successful work is a cessation, a suspended moment of the process at which it reveals itself to the unwavering eye."

Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 8.

"perhaps, paradoxically, 'representation' will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of 'women' is nowhere presumed"

Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 8.

We have already seen that gender and art bear complex relationships to the real and illusory, and the experiential and conceptual. These ideas shuffle around within the practices of each domain, generating a contested field of fraught dialectic relationships that propels the dynamic constitution of form and content. Undergirding these facets of experience is a further tense dialectic: that between stasis and process. For Butler and Adorno, the objects of their domains

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[56] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 200.
[57] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, xxii.

are never complete. They are continually open to revision. Or, rather, their essence is to require constant maintenance and recitation of their content, either affirmatively or contrarily. And yet, certain practices give these dynamic elements the semblance of stasis. When an artwork becomes fixed through the means of recording and reproduction, when categories like 'woman' are invoked linguistically: these are instances in which processes are apprehended and given the appearance of stability. From a disciplinary perspective, stasis is a by-product of most writing. Ideas become fixed, interpretations become authoritative, texts become seminal. Whether in musical scores, copies of texts or images of art, aesthetics is grounded by constellations of tangible objects. That tangibility conjures up illusions of the concrete, as if the discipline were to have a library of objects lying in place, ready to be plucked off the shelf. However – restless and in a constant process of finding its feet – art derives content from its audiences' experiences. Similarly, we might be tempted to think of gender as relatively tangible, something that can be identified, constructed and replicated at will. But it remains provisional, always requiring the reinscription of those norms which constitute its subjects. For Butler and Adorno, their domains are paradoxical in that they are conceived as processes, but they are understood most easily through moments of stasis. The ongoing tension between those states occurs both at the interior of the practices – within works or constellations of behaviours – and at the exterior, in their relationships.

Both genders and artworks are defined through their differentiation from an 'other'. But that other is not static. The 'other' – whether it be reality for the artwork or an idea of the 'masculine' against the 'feminine' – is always in motion. Acquiring their meaning through separation from this 'other', both art and gender are necessarily in constant states of movement, reactive to the dynamic elements of opposition. Both domains require constant policing of those boundaries of separation, energising the magnetic poles of each dialectic.[58] For Butler, the discursive force of a normative gender binary has prompted a decontextualization from 'other axes of power'.[59] Gender, argues Butler, cannot be a singular identity that transcends the specifics of 'racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities'.[60] A universal feminism cannot achieve its aspirations for as long as it functions along static lines that fail to capture the dynamic, complex lives of its subjects. Butler calls for us to shed light on the mechanisms

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[58] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 3.
   Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6.
[59] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 6.
[60] Ibid, 4.

that construct that domineering binary and that conceal – analytically and politically – other elements of power and person. Similarly, Adorno suggests that the autonomy of the artwork is not a given, it is a quality – 'the sedimentation of a historical process' – developed through time.[61] The power to differentiate itself from reality is acquired and, for Adorno, runs parallel to the 'dialectic of enlightenment', a process by which both barbarism and enlightenment have found themselves animated by modernity.[62] It is here that Adorno draws the dynamic distinction between art and 'anti-art,' arguing that the processes of differentiation are continuously undertaken and reflective of those at the volatile heart of society. Neither gender nor art are monolithic. They are mutable and dynamic processes that may be conceived as static in order to shore up their conceptual boundaries.

Some recognition of stasis within these domains has become unavoidable. While generating content through processes, through the ephemerality of actions that fly past in the moment, gender and art both have physical reference points. Yet, again, we might consider these seemingly inalienable, fixed structures to be attributed their power through discourse. The primacy of musical scores, the importance of questions around authenticity and provenance: these are not inherent to art. These are developments that have sedimented through time in order to install stasis, to allow art to become commodified as a consumer object.[63] Similarly, the body serves as a point of contestation, a physical site of meaning often considered in terms of fixity rather than activity. Such a parallel drawn between Butler and Adorno illuminates the ongoing demarcation of the physical reference point as a significant undertaking in its own right. Freeing each domain from the primacy of its foundational reference points allows the disciplines to view themselves more completely. For Butler, pursuing gender as 'a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time' relieves pressure on its concepts and allows the lived reality of convergences and contestations to flourish.[64] We might think of the seemingly fixed, physical elements of gender and art as starting points designated as such through the same discursive processes which develop their content. The body, documents, canvasses, scores: these are tangible things, but they are only ascribed value through the language that elevates them.

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[61] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 25.
[62] Ibid, 39.
[63] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 39.
[64] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 21-22.

Just as the process of an artwork is crystallised outside its disciplinary boundaries, gender is made most conceptually suffocating through its implantation onto life more widely. This takes place in ways that deconstruct distinctions between locations, between past, present and future. As Adorno argues, artworks become concrete through their accompanying disciplines, 'interpretation, commentary, critique'.[65] In turn, we might consider those written practices to continue their own interpretive and critical lives, taking shape through their own continued circles of commentary influence. In their moment of conception, artworks develop their content by responding 'spontaneously' to their circumstances, reflecting and absorbing the dynamism of reality.[66] But as artworks endure beyond the time in which they first emerge, the meaning of that reality imagined by the artwork unfolds variably throughout its history of reception.[67] Adorno's aesthetic models enliven the processes through which content comes to generate meaning through time; they relate to their present conditions indeed more than their past. Those accompanying disciplines define the artwork through history, propelling it as a never-ending process that seems to endure trans-contextually. Similarly, gender unfolds in the present but as a part of an 'inherited discourse'.[68] Butler contends that there is no doer behind the deed, that subjects constitute themselves performatively, feeding from and into a historical shape. Discourse renders certain aspects of gender as fixed while others are allowed to shift. Phrases like 'the changing role of women' open the conceptual frame to certain allowances for change but continue to make normative claims about to whom exactly they are referring. Where art and gender may appear to be conceptual rods structuring and reinforcing consistently through time, they are in fact always shaping their own generation.

Processes of becoming take place beyond the foresight of their interlocutors. Where gender performativity takes on meaning within a wider context of cultural intelligibility, the imaginations of what transpires within artworks surpasses those of its creators.[69] While the nature of the experimental – the capacity of an artist's foresight to conceive of its outcomes – has been considered variably through history, Adorno turns to Mallarmé in order to illuminate the essential element of imagination that has survived through different historical

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[65] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 264.

[66] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 45-46.

[67] Ibid, 266.

[68] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 34.

[69] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 51.
 Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 198-199.

conceptions.[70] For Mallarmé, the artist's imagination is only a starting point: the ultimate effects of the art produced reach beyond anything possible to envision in advance.[71] When the artwork then comes into contact with its audience – the relationship through which it truly generates meaning – the provisional nature of what is imagined by the artist is then further illuminated. Where art becomes animate under the gaze of the beholder, invigorating the tensions of their internal and external dynamics through the energy directed towards them, practices of gender materialise the structures that enliven and constrain it.[72] We might think of gender and artworks as inhabiting processes of becoming through not only the experiences offered by individuals, but the ways in which those are thrust into dialogues within a wider signifying economy.

The dialogues undertaken by gender practices and artworks happen not only externally. These dynamics emerge through the relationships between the various considerations that constitute the whole art. Despite our best efforts to categorise their constituent elements, to dissect their structures, neither gender nor art can be understood as the sums of their parts. Meaning is derived from the dialectic movement between the various, disparate centres of aesthetic force undergirding the understanding of the totality.[73] Attempts to render art reducible to the elements of its constitution – as in absolute analysis – are read by Adorno as efforts to seal off art from reflection on the social, political and historical. Dynamic and engaged, processual and mutable: artworks bear a reflexive relationship to their contexts.[74] They are not factual snapshots, objects that stand as relics for a time past. Rather, artworks strive beyond their limits as gestures towards a broader historical spirit. Through mechanisms of preservation and reproduction, artworks are posited as 'a disconcerting paradox' for Adorno, who regards these practices of sedimentation as able to cover up the irreconcilable nature of art's disparate elements.[75] Whether in art or gender, the relational force that throbs between constellations of behaviours propels the formation of stable identifications. Regulated, these domains objectivate to history, removing what is immanent, fluid and relational and rendering it fixed

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[70] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 51.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, xi.
    Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 241.
[73] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 244.
[74] Ibid, 246.
[75] Ibid, 251.

and canonic.[76] The maintenance of a fixed identity requires continual management of the dynamicism of its interior elements. That maintenance – which may be undertaken by artist, critic, audience, subject in equal measure – questions the objective of the artwork. Adorno regards Anton Bruckner as a pertinent case in this regard: while his project was an art that ideologically leaned towards history and theological restoration, its technical mechanisms strived for the radically modern.[77] Identity and intent exist in a tense relationship with the realities of what they have produced.

1.4 Tradition - Emancipation

While artworks stand on their own terms as individuals, they are inevitably swept up as constituent elements of broader historical shapes. Where the agency of gender is located in the potential for deformation and decisions around the paths demarcated intelligibly through cultural discourse, the agency of an artwork is to define itself in relation to the forces external to it. Whether as art or gender, individual iterations stand in the context of universal concepts and are afforded the power of determination through the relationships they pursue. Composer and performer, poet and reader, artist and viewer: the traditions of these relationships attribute power in specific directions. Where power comes from the discursive operation that affords its application, agency affords those same subjects the opportunity to problematise the very apparatus from which they spring. Vacillating between the twin poles of tradition and emancipation, artworks and gender practices express content of individual origin while taking up a stance within a greater context of precedent.

Societal structures may generate productive relationships that posit art and gender in a variety of standings to their context and surrounding traditions. Those works that emerge as societies shore up their regulatory systems of understanding are firmly positioned as other to those systems.[78] Where societies are prescriptive and overbearing, artistic approaches leap towards freedom. Abstraction serves as a step back from a society constituted only by what Adorno deems its 'caput mortum', its worthless remains.[79] As such works unfold, intense images are

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[76] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 260.
[77] Ibid, 261-262.
[78] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 41.
[79] Ibid.

conjured up in an inverted structure to those of reality. Where the coercive power of a society becomes stronger, the impulse towards liberation expressed by the 'negative imprint' of art becomes all the more powerful.[80] In serving as a step away from reality, art may offer a kind of utopia, but it is also a critical search for the new. That idea is, however, insatiable: as soon as a version of 'the new' is achieved, it no longer fulfils its concept and the quest for innovation starts again.[81] Tradition, while invoked as something tangible before a particular work, is always in a state of emergence. Where Butler considers the performative 'doer' and 'deed' to be intertwined in their constitution, we might think of artworks in a similarly dynamic structure at the edge of innovation and tradition.[82] Just as we can't consider gender as an inherent, interior status of which individual acts are mere expressions, we cannot situate individual artworks as mere examples that typify a particular conception of tradition; rather, they constitute the living idea of those traditions at each contemporary moment. For both gender and art, modern inscriptions are perhaps defined by the friction with which selected traditional practices are embraced alongside contemporary innovations. Elements of tradition – accepted amidst a variety of available options – are thus marked as significant choices.[83] Those marks reformulate problems of agency within traditions and discourses as examinations of how those structures are made and inhabited.

Art and gender are political. They offer the chance to deconstruct, to reconstruct, to critique and illuminate in the face of coercive power. How do gender and art offer these opportunities for emancipation? Gender theory has grappled with definitional questions, with issues over the meaning of inherited traditions and the novel constructions of discourse. If such formative semblances of gender and sex truly are constructed through linguistic forces alone, is it that identities proliferate into as many as there are people? This is the approach of Monique Wittig, examined by Butler in *Gender Trouble*.[84] For Wittig, anyone who sits outside normative paths drawn between sexuality, gender identity and practice no longer has an intelligible relationship to the concept of sex.[85] Wittig's theory contains emancipatory possibilities but, as Butler critiques, overlooks those communities which appropriate sexed identity and, indeed, inhabit

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[80] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 41.
[81] Ibid, 44.
[82] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 202.
[83] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 32.
[84] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 127-150.
[85] Ibid, 155-156.

it outside the pervading heterosexual matrix.[86] A proliferation of queer identities (Butler thinks of 'queens, butches, [and] femmes') which parody the normative bounds of sex illuminates the ways in which concepts are redeployed by those at the margins of normative definitions.[87] Considering these subversive, queer practices, we may come to problematise all stable notions of identity and the performative. Individual conceptions of gender (and individual works of art) critique the power of the ideas shaping them. As Adorno argues, 'aesthetics is not obliged, as under the spell of its object to exorcise concepts. Rather its responsibility is to free concepts from their externality to the particular object and to bring them within the work'.[88] We can illuminate the semblance of the universal through the light of the particular.

Having worked to draw parallels between Adorno's aesthetics and Butler's conceptions of gender, I posit that performance can be illuminated as an interface for the meeting of these two domains. Indeed, understanding the extent of performance's reach requires such an approach. How do we make sense of the manners in which gender and art inhabit their concepts, cultivate ideas or emancipate their subjects and audiences? Performance offers a practical window into that discursive knot in which aesthetic and gendered imaginations are tied. Where Adorno and Butler offer rich theoretical approaches, seeking an application to performance takes their ideas from the abstract to the experiential. Artworks are situated within traditions, not only formal ones that guide their conception on aesthetic terms, but societal ones that establish precedents for the invocation of gender. Those invocations do not sit to the side of the empirical, making no comment on genders as inhabited in the societies encircling them. They are, even in the artistic realm, embedded in a dialogue with those performatives undertaken in reality. They may parody, feed or belie altogether those concepts. Gender in the artistic realm offers the chance to reassess what may be taken for granted under the purview of truth.

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[86] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 156.
[87] Ibid, 156.
[88] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 247.

SECTION TWO:
PERFORMANCE: AN INTERFACE OF THEORY AND EXPERIENCE

'This is not to say that any and all gendered possibilities are open, but that the boundaries of analysis suggest the limits of a discursively conditioned experience. These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender.'[89]

Butler *Gender Trouble*, 12.

The limits of what is possible to articulate in everyday discourse bind the imagination of gender. But what is the place of art – especially musical performance – in relation to such structures? Instrumental performances are often non-verbal, yet they maintain a capacity to generate imagery. This freedom from the linguistic is complicated; what of works that possess a narrative, either in the minds of composer, performer or audience? What of those that spring from collaboration with poets, that accompany dance, that respond to specific works of literature or myth? While Adorno argues that all artworks are polemical through their separation from reality, these mutable considerations of the live, non-verbal musical event make that determination difficult to readily accept.[90] Some performances may seem to feed normative discourse and traditional imaginations of gender; others may take up obviously subversive positions. The unresolved tensions around the power generated and expressed by performance shall be interrogated through those same four axes that have structured my investigation into the thinking of Butler and Adorno. However, I contend that performance is not only as an application for these theories; it has insights of its own to present. Performance offers the chance to illuminate Butlerian thinking around gender and typify Adorno's aesthetics. It enforces the primacy of experience, problematises reality, embodies process and navigates a dialogue between establishment and innovation. Performance helps us understand the world and, maybe, ourselves.

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[89] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 12.
[90] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 242-243.

2.1 Concepts, Experience: Gnostic, Drastic?

Performance throws weight behind experience in that rich dialectic drawn up against the conceptual. But the relationship is not entirely straightforward. The history of music has struggled to understand and structure the relationship of performance (experience) to the work (its concept).[91] While, today, it is likely that we might think of composition as developing a concept and performance as realising it in experience, Lydia Goehr argues that prior to the nineteenth century, such distinctions were non-existent.[92] The continuity between the roles of composer and performer in this time – marked, even in publishing, by the unity of the dates of a work's composition and premiere – illuminates a conception of music as experiential and functional.[93] Once music began to be categorised, composers' entire outputs collated and individual pieces assigned designations through opus numbers, practices of performance and composition became sharply demarcated.[94] What Carolyn Abbate discerns as the 'labor' of music became obscured through such processes of ossification.[95] Abbate acknowledges the challenge of deciphering musical meaning without responding to recordings or scores – the 'tactile monuments in music's necropolis'.[96] Live performances, within musicological discourse, have been viewed either as 'sonic inscriptions of the work's meaning over historical time,' or as more independent entities that float – somehow – on their own gravitational terms.[97] While they may challenge convention and offer up their own meanings, these independent bodies nevertheless orbit 'the work,' a sort of monumental concept that these individuated practices still strive to fulfil.[98] To be coherent, recognisable as a performance of a particular piece of music, experience is always magnetised by the conceptual ideal.

Offering up the opportunity to animate performance discourses on new terms, Abbate draws upon Vladimir Jankélévtich's distinction between drastic and gnostic forms of knowledge.[99] The 'drastic' refers most simply to information accessed through experience, but more radically

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[91] Lydia Goehr, "Musical Production Without the Work-Concept," in *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994): 176.

[92] Ibid, 189-191.

[93] Ibid, 198-199.

[94] Ibid, 202-203.

[95] Abbate, "Drastic or Gnostic?" 505-506.

[96] Ibid, 510.

[97] Ibid, 509.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid, 509-10.

to 'unintellectual and common' knowledge – found in states of shock, bewilderment, exhilaration, eroticism, sensation and emotion – that may remain unmediated by linguistic descriptions.[100] Conversely, the 'gnostic' is linked to the decryption of hidden meanings in a text by an elite audience; it is a form of hermeneutic knowledge that requires intellectual engagement of a particular academic orientation.[101] Where the gnostic mode may be undertaken through scores alone, the drastic is inhabited by experiences of performance in the moment. For Abbate, the gnostic risks wounding musical works with weaponised ideologies, sacrificing their individual character and experience on the altar of ideas.[102] Abbate and Jankélévitch seek to enliven radical approaches to musical works by considering them not as containers structuring historical data, but as living entities that elicit an engagement from their audiences that reflects their relationships with the world.[103] Reflecting on previous attempts to map those relationships through musical works, Abbate critiques those musicological discourses that use hermeneutic and formal methods to consider 'sexuality, subjectivity, the body, political faiths, cultural habits,' arguing that they conceal the approaches' 'sanitizing impulse' while failing to fundamentally address their enduring distance from the real and performed.[104] Abbate closes her essay with a rallying cry for writing about performance laid bare, without the safety of the academy or the enclosures offered by musical structures. I hope that this reading of Adorno and Butler offers one such path to that writing: what if we considered those more human aspects that Abbate argues conceal the sanitizing impulse of work-based musicology, but situated within the frame of performance?

A cluster of terms, considerations and theorists are emerging in this thesis, and it is worth acknowledging that my deployment situates them in unconventional ways. While my reading of Adorno has been centred on that late, unfinished assemblage of essays published posthumously as *Aesthetic Theory*, this represents only a snapshot of a much richer and varied output. Where I am prepared to delineate those ideas that I feel resonate between Abbate and Adorno, a much more pervasive interpretive history of opposition exists between the theorists' respective orientations.[105] As Richard Taruskin puts it – in his praise for Abbate's translation

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[100] Abbate, "Drastic or Gnostic?" 534.
[101] Ibid, 509-10.
[102] Ibid, 521.
[103] Ibid, 529-30.
[104] Ibid, 530.
[105] Karol Berger, "Musicology According to Don Giovanni, or: Should we get Drastic?" *The Journal of Musicology* 22, no. 3 (2005): 495.

of Jankélévitch's *Music and the Ineffable* – 'Imagine! A philosopher who meditates on listening to music, not its ontology… who does not expect music to prophesy the future, or tell us how to live, or solve our political problems… Welcome the anti-Adorno'.[106] Bringing together a selective reading of Adorno and a generalist's reading of Butler with the perspective of a specialist performer, anxieties about this project's intellectual footing allow it to destabilise a variety of norms and binaries.

For Butler and Adorno, desire operates as a definitional force that permeates gender and artworks, structuring relationships and determining outlooks. There exists a rich body of writing that seeks to enliven the understanding of desire within music, which I argue exists in both artistic and gendered terms through performance. One such possibility is illuminated by Philip Brett, through his analysis of performing Schubert's *Fantasy in F Minor* for piano four hands.[107] This analysis interrogates Brett's 'reactions and feelings' to the music, the performances undertaken alongside his duet partner, and the variety of relationships emerging out of those practices, rather than the 'intentions' that may have underpinned them.[108] In this manner, Brett offers a 'drastic' reading of desire that is experienced through music but informs practices and understandings of sexuality. Similarly, Elisabeth Le Guin's 'carnal' musicology develops points of contact with composers, works and historical moments through bodily performance experiences.[109] Brett and Le Guin are performers that embrace 'drastic' analyses from live musical experiences alongside more 'gnostic' modes, including score-based analysis. Their writing transgresses the boundary between the two approaches, demonstrating how drastic and gnostic thinking may exist in tandem, how even the gnostic reading of a score involves, for a performer, sympathetic drastic responses. Desire is but one functional experience that may come to constitute our conception of a musical work.

If we take as a point of departure experiences of the performed, we can consider those ways in which live music enacts the liberatory possibilities of Adorno and Butler's theories. Where

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and Sean Wood, "Drastic Criticism, Gnostic Criticism, and Brahms's Fourth Symphony," Masters thesis, (West Chester University, 2020) 81.

[106] Richard Taruskin, dust-jacket review of Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). First published as *La Musique et l'Ineffable* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1961).

[107] Philip Brett, "Piano Four-Hands: Schubert and the Performance of Gay Male Desire." *19th-Century Music* 21, no. 2 (1997): 171.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology.*

Adorno's writing seeks to consider works as possessing the potential to overwrite the particularities of their moments of conception, Butler outlines the ways in which gender is constituted through performative actions rather than determined by pre-discursive facts. Performance may be considered through both these perspectives as a network of relationships, enactments and sensations that shape the two terrains of meaning. To undertake 'drastic' thinking would be to embolden the power of musical performances to offer their own information pertaining to the music and identities questioned by audiences, performers and analysts. We might consider forms of analysis that privilege the experience of the performers and audience rather than historical or conceptual research. We might foreground those ways of approaching and becoming embedded in music that stem from a moment of immersion rather than a sustained inquiry. Rather than ask how a musical work represents or evokes gender through score-based analyses, we might ask what experiences – auditory, bodily, emotional – animate those images. While we may not come to understand exactly *how* those representations are generated, we can still sanction the primacy of performance experiences by validating images and reflections as worthy of the analytical page.

2.2 The artifice of performance, the reality of the performative?

In conceiving of a joint application of Adorno and Butler to musical works, it is critical to draw a careful distinction between 'performance' and the 'performative'. This distinction is a site of confusion and tension, but also of great potential to expose the normative imperatives of each term. While 'performance' refers to those practices undertaken with intention, direction and within the limited structuring frame of 'the stage,' whatever form that takes, the 'performative' contains that which is subliminal and unmediated by the aesthetic.[110] In her text on the performance of masculinity in opera, Kate Whittaker meditates on the polarity of the real and the artificial as parallel to the performative and performed.[111] Where performativity may be seen to inhabit the realm of reality and performance the realm of fantasy, Whittaker echoes this analysis of Butler and Adorno in indicating that there exists a more complex web of relationships between these terms.[112] Considering the ways in which we might try to distinguish the performed from the performative problematises the foundations of each term and

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[110] Kate Whittaker, "Performing Masculinity/Masculinity in Performance," in *Masculinity in Opera,* ed. Philip Purvis (New York, NY: Routledge) 22-23.
[111] Ibid, 22.
[112] Whittaker, "Performing Masculinity/Masculinity in Performance," 22.

illuminates those places where we might consider empirical truth as a collection of facts where, it actually presents constructions that are open to revision. Those acts which are 'self-consciously constructed' – for Whittaker, opera – become difficult to disentangle from those performative postures that possess congealed appearances of truth.[113] Enabled by a certain, sanctioned distance from empiricism, the performed may be more readily transgressive than the performative. As a form with a rich history of gender-bending embodiments, bodily spectacles and overwrought narratives, opera is particularly salient in this regard. Hazy distinctions between performance and performativity have the potential to rewrite the primacy of a realist semblance to gender that has long gone uncontested.

While less vivid than what is offered by texted music, instrumental performances continue to produce powerful drastic material. Fragments of musical content spark emotive, sensory and bodily responses that may invoke consideration around the performing body, but also appeal to gender more generally. The information gleaned from drastic modes of inquiry around live instrumental performances problematises distinctions between illusion and reality. The images conjured up in our minds as we perform or listen cannot be categorised in any meaningful fashion; they are responses to an event that is imbued with elements of both the performed and performative. They take place in dialogue with an aesthetic object, but that does not render them experiences of the fictive that ought to be dismissed. There is a plenitude of ways in which musical phrases and gestures – beautiful, dissonant, resolute, wavering – act upon our bodies and minds, emboldening the imagination at the service of performance or in response to it. These fragments of memory, image or thought afford us the chance to interrogate those practices in which gender is sedimented or problematised outside the everyday performative. Through such a process, we might come to illuminate those gestures and images that take on the semblance of fundamental truths while being nothing more than repeated citations of ideas. It is possible to inhabit self-consciously a performance of gender on the stage while simultaneously inscribing one's own identity with subliminal performatives.

A certain formation imbues the performer with the power to determine what images they will deploy to develop their performance ideals. This is particularly true for solo performance but may be, at a more subliminal level, also encountered amidst ensembles. Through acknowledging music as performance, we liberate the possibilities of gender that might be contained within it. Where the performative is undertaken under the coercive power of a

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[113] Whittaker, "Performing Masculinity/Masculinity in Performance," 22.

heterosexual matrix, musical performance asserts a certain freedom from such structures in its fleeting, non-linguistic form. Where the power of gender discourse is to delineate intelligible identities and normative alliances of behaviors, musical performance is liberatory for the ways in which it might spark individuated mental and emotive responses. The form of instrumental music serves, in part, to establish a privatized realm for both audiences and performers in which internal states may be explored without needing to be articulated. In this manner, the practices offer possibilities for subversion, escaping the trappings of language but also providing a certain level of secrecy. A key site of power may be located in how we feel and how we respond to artistic experience; the formal structure of musical works is to carve out privatized spaces for those subjective undertakings. While motivic elements may demonstrate the most obvious rhetorical invocations of gender – of voices constructed as variably feminine or masculine, of instruments in a power dynamic, of themes coming together – there exist a multitude of ways in which formal elements also produce gendered, drastic material. This theory is most famously expounded by Susan McClary.[114] The construction of a work and its harmonic languages holds the potential to stir, withhold or crush desire. Works can be self-conscious about their unfolding in musical time. Developing various mechanisms of aspiration, frustration and denial, works proffer experiences to audiences that may serve as models to be transplanted onto reality. As we know from Butler, desire contains a powerful definitional force that fuels normative discourses around sex and sexuality. In a sense, musical works use illusory powers to generate very real responses. Works sit in a realm that is at once responsive to reality but separated from its coercive structures. Through alterity, musical performances process and problematize the shapes of empirical life.

2.3 Music, gender: process and coherence.

Parallel linguistic tensions mark normative gender and musicological discourses, affording the semblance of stasis to phenomena always in a process of becoming. Where, in everyday conversations, I would not hesitate to speak of a 'piece of music' or a 'work', I do not hesitate to invoke categories of 'woman' or 'man'. But deploying those terms, I actively constitute their concept, unwittingly calculating those discursive formulae that chart the trajectory of ideas. My use of this language around gender and music is performative; it feeds into regulatory

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[114] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

power that delimits what is and is not contained by its terms. Over time and with repetition, these everyday incantations define experience and sediment into the semblance of a fixed conceptual landscape. But, in fact, I am participating in a never-ending process of propagation. Just as it is commonplace to speak of musical works as if they are coherent entities, we make sense of gender by fixing coalitions of attributes into identities. However, the idea of a gender or a musical work relates not to an abstract structure untouched by experience, but to a particular performance or set of performatives, even those that reside only in the imagination. Taking musical performances as the starting point of an analysis foregrounds that essential, restless quality of activity. Grounding oneself in the moment of a performance makes clear that provisional and incessantly moving nature of other types of performance. Just as musical performance accepts that departures – intentional or not – from the instructions offered in the score of a work are commonplace, integral parts of the experience of live art, we might re-examine the place of slippages from mainline conceptions of gender identity. But in our language around both gender and music, we consider those slippages as aberrations, mistakes, departures from some norm. Our default position is to consider performances as reproductive, as instances that reimagine or recast meanings that have already been devised.

Centralizing performance to the definition of music allows us to formulate the radical embedding of music in the present moment more readily. Where Adorno considers of artworks to develop their content through realisations that take place beyond the foresight of their creators, we may think of performance as generating those variable visions of the work. We can also consider how performances situate themselves within a social discourse, presenting, like performatives of gender, particular realizations of concepts that speak to broader ideas. This restlessness of performance has been theorized by Nicholas Cook, who argues that considering musical works as scripts, rather than texts, illuminates the ways in which they prompt the enaction of social behavior.[115] Considering musical works as scripts emboldens their processual quality; we might view them as works of choreography that suggest certain arrangements of the social order, played out between performers and audience. While Cook recognizes Adorno's belief in the social relevance of art, he acknowledges that Adorno himself struggled to clearly articulate a method for interrogating that content situated between political order and artistic production.[116] Similarly, despite his aspiration to capture music reverberating

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[115] Nicholas Cook, "Music as Performance," in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, eds. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, Richard Middleton (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 186.
[116] Cook, "Music as Performance," 193.

in the social community, Adorno's own analyses have been critiqued as gnostic inquiries that are deaf to real experiences of music.[117] Cook's conception of musical performance can be used to combine Butler's interrogations of gender (as fleeting discursive performances that become sediment over time) with Adorno's unresolved belief in the wider situational meaning of art. Emboldening music as processual and open to revision, performances serve as sites for the production of meaning through their unique responses to a work's social cues.

Over time, a history of performances may come to clarify the image of a musical work, but even that history remains a constellation of contestable snapshots. In the living memory of performance, transmission through recordings and pedagogy, works are realized through time and particular interpretations may become dominant.[118] As Cook notes, performance is differentiated from other experiences of everyday life; we can walk away from it holding onto 'a work' as a tangible good in our memory.[119] However pocketable that might seem, the social orders enacted with each performance need not necessarily be repeated; the script of the work is provisional. It is the quality of the live and performed to realise those prompts differently at each turn. Butlerian thinking around gender complements this processual structure. While locutions, repeated over time, come to develop the coercive power Butler locates within discourse, they emphasise that language can be co-opted subversively. Discourse demands active input for it to retain and exert its force. The meaning of a musical work is not fixed by the composer at the time of its conception, even in those works with textual backing. It is performed and inhabited by players and audiences, whose individuated affective responses generate the significance of a work as it is lived and experienced. Performances are mutable and contingent, open to signification and resignification. My own engagement with a work – in performances both mental and instrumental – can be shaped and reshaped by all manner of textual details that I invite in or cast out. Our experiences of works may be shaped by the knowledge we embrace from the conditions of its composition. However, those fragments of information, and the practices they inform, are still only parts of an ever-evolving performance history.

To engage in live musical experience is to undertake a performance even if one does not make a sound. As Cook discusses, thinking of music as script contains its own limitations. Under

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[117] Wood, "Gnostic Criticism," 4.

[118] Cook, "Music as Performance," 188.

[119] Ibid.

such a model, the significant tensions navigated by performers, and those who write about performance, may not be apparent. On some level, considering performance as realising a script ascribes that document a certain omniscience, as if a centralized domain of meaning is possible to locate. However, performances take place within a much more fraught environment. They are referential and intertextually developed. This is as true for musical performers as for the authors who engage with those experiences more peripherally. Deploying an ethnomusicological lens, Cook proposes that writing about music is as much a performance as that event which the piece describes.[120] Through a shift in ethnomusicological discourses from fieldwork as based in objective observation and description to fieldwork as participatory and experiential, the literature of the discipline has come to be 'acutely conscious of its performative nature as writing'.[121] The experiences and engagements propositioned by a piece of writing are as ephemeral as the musical events they seek to capture. An individuated literary text that localizes its focus to embrace its own performativity perhaps holds, as Cook argues, the potential to deploy 'the virtuosity with which cultural meaning is read in the multifarious dimensions of the performance event'.[122] Through writing, we transmit a particular reading of the performance, one that invokes and engages the ideas perceived by the author as pertinent to that musical moment. In turn, that transmission is co-opted by readers into their own performances of understanding and interpretation. Meaning is developed for an audience through their engagement with a variety of factors that may reside in tension with one another. That literary 'virtuosity' Cook discusses, found in reading across multiple sites of meaning, emboldens the ability to examine cultural constructions of gender as they unfold at the cusp of music's temporal horizon. Gender is realized in both performance and the performative. The tensions between those modes are critical to understanding the open-ended nature of labour towards realising both gender and music.

2.4 Traditional instructions, emancipatory actions.

Performance situates itself in that febrile state between tradition and emancipation. Taking up the musical work as a script to be realised, the performer may exercise a certain freedom in their interpretation. However, they remain always bound by a coherent relationship to the

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[120] Cook, "Music as Performance," 191.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid, 192.

'work' as an abstract ideal. The dynamic between tradition and emancipation is similarly enacted in the conditions of a performance: who plays and listens, where the performance take place, what is programmed alongside a work, to what external aims these decisions have been directed. Every one of those considerations navigates the particularities of the present without fully escaping the shadow of precedent. Gender can be seen to permeate each aspect of a musical event, the two-pronged nature of live art as performance and performative filtering every facet of the occasion.   The social content tossed around by an artwork is what Adorno theorises as holding liberatory potential, as speaking in a critical voice against the totalising structures of society. But where Adorno's approach might consider critique to be most compellingly fulfilled at the point of composition, a focus on performance nudges us to consider those acts of resistance as ongoing rather than achieved. Where Adorno conceptualises of artworks as polemical through their vision of a sphere differentiated from reality, we might consider performers as embedded in dialogues with that differentiated space, as agents undertaking the process of its construction and inhabitation. The performer and the products of their performance are intertwined. Generative, differentiated and active, musical performance develops spaces in which identity may be emancipated, dialogue enacted and tradition problematised.

While most easily thought of as a trans-historical structure, tradition requires constant maintenance through acts of performative and performance behaviour. This is as true for musical works as for gender. I contend that – in performance – distinctions between the maintenance of the two domains should rarely be undertaken. Performance – imbricated as it is in bodily, conceptual and relational demands – can be understood always through a productive gendered lens. For works with long performance histories, discourses frame what is relevant to contemporary imaginations of the work and what ought to be ignored. Performances to which the composer had a tangible link – often premieres or composer/performer collaborations – tend to be privileged above those which may emerge under more peripheral circumstances. Whether or not we, as performers, *should* choose to accept those lines of logic is not what I am seeking to interrogate. Rather, the generation and legitimation of a coercive discourse that looms over practices of gender and music-making is interesting in and of itself. Performers are agents within power structures, and we can recognise the undertaking to fix their positions in space. As Gary Tomlinson argues, we might consider

discursive processes as seeking to construct a discipline's institutional centre.[123] Through the formation of a community around a collection of works or performances, personal and individual approaches coalesce into an institution that develops and deploys power. At this point, we might enmesh the thinking of Tomlinson and Butler through the point of entry offered by their shared Foucauldian foundations. Where Tomlinson – focussing his discussion on the formation of jazz and Black literary canons – views these new canon-forming processes as harmful to their project of decentralisation, Butler makes a parallel argument directed at representational politics.[124] For both Tomlinson and Butler, these projects fail to interrogate the legitimating mechanism of their own power. Without an awareness of their own execution, conceptions of, or against, tradition may discursively regenerate the problems which they intended to resolve. Performances possess their own, new legitimating forces in the inheritance of tradition even while pursuing projects of contestation.

Just as one must be cognizant of the legitimating power executed by a performance or gender discourse, the weight of decisions pertaining to writing about music must be treated with equal awareness. Tomlinson argues that the attempts to develop places for marginalised musics within musicology have failed to 'Signify' on the existing approaches to European art music, resulting in 'wholesale restatement[s]' of the original problems presented by those traditional canons.[125] Chief among those problems – for Tomlinson – are the transcendental values placed on musical works as aesthetic objects whose meaning is located within universally decipherable auditory content.[126] To 'Signify' would be to engage on dialogical terms that question the assumptions of that position. Drawing on the Black literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Tomlinson deploys 'Signification' to ask how we locate meanings and construct spaces between understandings of ourselves and encounters with what is 'other'.[127] As we think of the musical performance developing a forum for the enaction of social relations, we might consider resonances with Butler's conception of developing one's identity through encounters with difference. These differences come in many forms and need not only refer to a self/other dichotomy. As I perform, write about and otherwise engage with music, several internal ruptures in identity emerge. A sanctioned platform for exploration of social and musical content

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[123] Gary Tomlinson, "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies," *Black Music Research Journal* 11 no. 2 (1991): 242.
[124] Ibid, 235.
[125] Ibid, 248.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid, 231.

welcomes challenges and provocations, but, following Tomlinson, our analyses of those experiences must avoid the trappings of history. Le Guin and Brett's discussions of bodily encounters with historical artworks and composers offer examples of direct and individuated encounters. Working against gnostic analyses that approach musical works and their significance as autonomous of context, Tomlinson calls for recognition of the labour – which in turn forms other cultural structures – undertaken by those who produce and experience music. One such labour is that which generates gender. Music is situated in discourses made up of multiple voices, of 'life-shapes' that animate the practices of an artform continuing to evolve whilst steeped in tradition.[128] A reflexive dialogue whereby the life carried into and realised through a musical event is critical to the meaning of that performance aspires to acknowledge the variable spaces in which identity is constructed. In this manner, we not only examine the power of musical performance, but the contingency of performative behaviour elsewhere.

PART THREE
DEBUSSY: PERFORMANCE, EXPERIENCE, UNDERSTANDING

"Someone tells me: this kind of love is not viable. But how can you *evaluate* viability? Why is the viable a Good thing? Why is it better to *last* than to *burn*?"

Roland Barthes

A Lovers Discourse

In December 2021, Gabriela Glapska (piano) and I performed a recital at St Andrew's on The Terrace, Wellington. It is this performance that serves as the other component of my thesis portfolio. The programme was as follows: Debussy, *Syrinx* and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*; Gillian Whitehead, *Taurangi*; Lowell Liebermann, Sonata Op. 23 for Flute and Piano; Debussy, *Bilitis*; and André Jolivet, *Chant de Linos*. On a technical level, this programme is dense and challenging. On an aesthetic level, it was devised with a number of factors in mind. A constellation of provocative works from the 20th century: at face value, this is just music I love and that I can command effectively on the instrument. As a temporally unified programme, it also offered the audience a tidy package of works tied together with an attractive thread. But

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[128] Tomlinson, "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz," 247.

the selection of this programme also promised an aesthetic experience that I was prepared and excited to engage with at a time of great personal uncertainty and ambiguity. Performances are meetings of multiple considerations and interests. Not all performances are deeply personal; however, extra-musical considerations may occasionally have profound impacts on the aesthetic experience of performance. But how exactly does one locate that personal element within a piece of music or its performance? As Arnie Cox examines the location of agency within musical performance, he considers the composer, performer, personas portrayed, personas implied and the mimetically engaged listener to all have variable levels of contribution to the imagination of a musical agent. Valuable as these are, he also considers personal associations as a vital part of what we consider to be 'the music'. Music acts as backdrops to particular relationships – I always associate Nina Simone's 1965 album *I Put A Spell On You* with my parents and long drives in their plum 1990s Subaru. In contrast to a backdrop, to be embedded in relationships that undertake their own performances presents an entirely different order of experience. It is an elision of any distinction between the domains of art and life that has come to inform the aesthetic reading undertaken in this thesis.

A full examination of aesthetic experience, I think, demands a certain candour. Writers fade into the background of aesthetic analyses; they are more likely to offer observations that make sense to a broad audience than direct personal responses. But if I aspire to ground this text in experience, to write about the December performance as if it existed a vacuum would be a failure to realise the aesthetic and gender theories I have described. In the first section of this thesis, I argued that academic engagements all too often cast out the life of real musical experiences. In writing and fixing their nature, discourses have shut out critical elements of what makes performance compelling. Even if they remain largely unapparent to the audience, the relationships between the performer and their performances, or particular works, are critical to the aesthetic meaning of that moment. Gender and music are shaped by experience, processes, precedents and the demarcation of illusion from reality. These categories are not contained within the artwork; through engagement, they mark also the personal. The relationship is reflexive. Deborah Wong examines the performativity of the writer who relays musical experiences, describing a process whereby the pleasure and provocation of her written text is a necessary extension of the musical event.[129] In that vein, I shall offer a candid reflection

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[129] Deborah Wong, *Louder and Faster: Pain, Joy, and the Body Politic in Asian American Taiko* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019): 126-127.

on a performance that emerged from a specific time and place. As Cox and Wong describe, aesthetic content derives from an interface between performance and the associations of one's own life. This is not a confessional essay. Nor is it a diatribe. This is an attempt to honour and understand the fullness of a particular aesthetic experience.

One can devise internal barriers between the personal and the educational or professional, but the desire to be (fully, properly, actually) understood by someone means that, with the right meeting of minds, those personal structures might vanish. Several months before my recital, I experienced this exhilarating visibility, but there were no safeguards. In this relationship, between peers, everything – intellectual, emotional, personal, musical – was on the table. Everything, except one critical oversight. The architecture of the relationship was secreted, tangled and fraught. As tangible as it felt, perhaps it was never more than an illusion. After a while, the structure that had supported the exchanges sublimated from solid to gas. I blinked, and the table was no longer there. Where I had been taking such joy from arranging objects on this known surface, I was unwittingly tossing them into empty space. These precious things – loves, fears, desires, ideas, practices, histories – formed dazzling trajectories, but, inevitably, succumbed to gravity. In the period before my recital, I sat, dazed and empty, among the fragments of a life now shattered upon impact with a hardwood floor. It didn't happen in one devastating instant. The moment of destruction was played out as if in slow motion, silently protracted over a matter of months. Nothing that had been shared – including both musical performance and the processes of writing – was left untouched. These fragments assembled into a network of sharp, broken ceramic edges that pricked and gouged me anytime I brushed past.

As I developed my recital programme, surrounded by these jagged remnants of experience, certain considerations emerged. Bach's e minor Sonata – intimate, introspective and compromised through a history of shared performance – had formed a particularly sharp edge and was scrapped. Its replacement was the violent and visceral *Chant de Linos*. The technical challenges of this Jolivet work were absorbing and easy to practice; its haunting melodies, shrieking outbursts and atavistic rhythms were worthy outlets for pent-up feeling. The recital programme was one of few things that allowed me to situate myself in variable positions with respect to an emotional life that had seeped into almost all aspects of existence. Having thought about and discussed them throughout the preceding months, I found the Debussy works vulnerable and exposing. However, learnt later, the Whitehead and Liebermann were

uncompromised on an emotional level; as I practiced and performed them, I could sit confidently atop the sense that they were externally located, untouched by the complications of experience. The Jolivet was a satisfying end to the programme. A piece that requires thrashing contrasts and dramatic expulsions rather than inner composure, the heat of its virtuosity casts out challenges rather than invites in reflection. As I practiced this recital programme, I perhaps also practiced that method of positioning myself. It became apparent that it was a choice to understand things I'd always loved as if they were tied to one person that I had shared them with. With time, I could untether and rearrange them as my own. Aesthetic practices had a very real interface with the experience of reassembling the fragments of a world touched by the fracturing power of desire.

By way of a less personal introduction, I present the audience notes written for the three Debussy flute works contained within the thesis recital programme. While there are aspects of the notes I would revise from this vantage point, I offer them here unaltered. Like my occasionally wayward pitches and capricious musical decisions, these are part of the performance event.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY
(1862-1918)

BILITIS
(ARR. LENSKI FOR FLUTE AND PIANO)
I. POUR INVOQUER PAN, DIEU DU VENT D'ÉTÉ
II. POUR UN TOMBEAU SANS NOM
III. POUR QUE LA NUIT SOIT PROPICE
IV. POUR LA DANSEUSE AUX CROTALES
V. POUR L'EGYPTIENNE
VI. POUR REMERCIER LA PLUIE AU MATIN

The six movements collected here emerged in various forms from 1898 to 1914. The starting point was Pierre Louÿs' *Chansons de Bilitis*, an 1894 collection of pseudo-classical erotic poetry from which Debussy set three songs. Following this, Louÿs asked Debussy to set a further twelve poems for instrumental accompaniment to a mimed recitation. Models performed, nude and frieze-like, across the stage to the sounds of two flutes, harp and celeste. Finally, in 1914, Debussy rearranged six of the collection for piano duet. It is from this version that Karl Lenski drew together the duo of *Bilitis* for flute and piano in 1984. These spacious movements evoke myth, nature and a heady dose of exoticism.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY
(1862-1918)

SYRINX

Though having a long collaborative friendship, *Syrinx,* or *La Flûte de Pan* as it was first known, was the first piece of music Debussy managed to complete for one of Gabriel Mourey's plays. The first written piece for solo flute in over 150 years, *Syrinx* was a remarkable departure from the instrument's usual use and idiom. No longer a bird–like ornament in the orchestra, Debussy recast the flute as voluptuous and capricious. *Syrinx* is often thought of as the last breath the mythological figure Pan expelled across his flute: a painful lamentation, a swan song. However, its place within Mourey's *Psyché* reveals it to be altogether far more alive. *Syrinx* was first performed underneath the voice of a declamatory, lustful naiad who spoke over the flute's sound. *Syrinx* does not present Pan's succumbing to death; rather, a nymph's embracing of desire.

Si tu savais quel étrange délire
M'enlace, me pénètre toute!
Si tu savais... je ne puis pas te dire
Ce que j'éprouve. La douceur
Voluptueuse éparse en cette nuit m'affole...
Danser, oui je voudrais, comme tes soeurs,
Danser...frapper de mes pieds nus le sol
En cadence et, comme elles, sans effort,
Avec d'harmonieuses poses,
Eperdûment livrer mon corps
A la force ondoyante et rythmique des choses!
Celle-ci qui, dans sa grâce légère,
Elève vers le ciel là-bas
Ses beaux bras,
Ressemble, au bords des calmes eaux
Où elle se reflète, un grand oiseau
Impatient de la lumière...
Et celle-là que des feuilles couronnent
Et qui, si complaisamment, donne
Aux lèvres de la lune à baiser ses seins blancs Et l'urne close de ses flancs...
Et cette autre tout près qui, lascive, sans feinte, Se roule sur ce lit de rouges hyacinthes...
Et cette autre dont on ne voit plus que les yeux
Enticeler, telles deux taches
De soleil, dans la frondaison de ses cheveux Qui l'enveloppent et la cachent...
Par la chair d'elles toutes coule un feu divin
Et de l'amour de Pan toutes sont embrasées
Et moi, la même ardeur s'insinue en mes veines; O,
Pan, les sons de ta syrinx, ainsi qu'un vin Trop odorant et trop doux, m'ont grisée'
O Pan, je n'ai plus peur de toi, je t'appartiens!

If you but knew what strange rapture
Entwines me, penetrates me totally!
If you but knew ...I cannot tell you
What I feel. The voluptuous sweetness that pervades this night bewitches me... Dance, yes, I wish, like your sisters,
To dance...with my bare feet to beat the ground
Rhythmically and like them, without effort,
In harmonious poses,
Madly abandon my body
To the undulating and rhythmic power of things! This one who, with nimble grace,
Lifts toward the sky
Her beautiful arms,
Resembles, along the bank of calm waters,
In which it is reflected , a large bird
Impatient for the light...
And that one there that leaves crown
Who, so complaisantly, gives
A kiss to the lip of the moon by her white breasts
And closes the urn of her womb... And this one nearby, who lasciviously, openly,
Rolls upon this bed of red hyacinths
And this other one which no longer sees with eyes
Sparkling, like two spots
Of the sun, in the fronds of her hair
Which envelopes and hides her ...
From the flesh of all of them a divine fire flows
And all are inflamed with love for Pan
And me the same ardor spreads through my veins;
O Pan the sounds of thy syrinx, like a wine
Too fragrant and too sweet, have intoxicated me.
O Pan, I no longer fear you, I am yours.

EXTRACT FROM ACT III, SCENE I FROM GABRIEL MOUREY'S PSYCHÉ. TRANSLATION BY LAUREL EWELL.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY
(1862-1918)

PRÉLUDE À L'APRÈS-MIDI D'UN FAUNE
(ARR. BEYNON FOR FLUTE AND PIANO)

Pierre Boulez considered Debussy's orchestral tone-poem *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894) as the birth of modern music. But Debussy's radical composition did not emerge in a vacuum, or indeed from simply forging a new path through the tatters of the post-Wagnerian harmonic wasteland he inhabited at the end of the 19th century. It came from engagement with other arts facing a similar crisis of decadence. Stéphane Mallarmé's poetry, including his 1876 *L'aprés-midi d'un faune* from which Debussy's work takes its name, foregrounds sound and semblance over meaning and narrative. From this, both that poetry and Debussy's music come to inhabit hazy, internal, indeterminate spaces of dreams and desires rather than actions and events. Debussy's composition captures the sensory through the deployment of timbre and the recognition of the flute as an intensely flexible, malleable sound worth placing at the centre of his orchestra. In turn, Debussy's sweltering music was used in a daringly modern ballet in 1912 by Vaslav Nijinsky and the Ballets Russes, just a year before their most famous production, *The Rite of Spring*. Dancers performed barefoot, processing across the stage as if on the surface of a vase. Whether in music, dance or poetry, these artistic experiments remain tactile and beguiling.

Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer.
Si clair,
Leur incarnat léger, qu'il voltige dans l'air
Assoupi de sommeils touffus.
Aimai-je un rêve?
Mon doute, amas de nuit ancienne, s'achève
En maint rameau subtil, qui, demeuré les vrais
Bois même, prouve, hélas! que bien seul je m'offrais
Pour triomphe la faute idéale de roses.
Réfléchissons...
ou si les femmes dont tu gloses
Figurent un souhait de tes sens fabuleux!
Faune, l'illusion s'échappe des yeux bleus
Et froids, comme une source en pleurs, de la plus chaste:
Mais, l'autre tout soupirs, dis-tu qu'elle contraste
Comme brise du jour chaude dans ta toison?

These nymphs I would make last.
So rare
Their rose lightness arches in the air,
Torpid with tufted sleep.
I loved: a dream?
My doubt, thick with ancient night, it seems
Drawn up in subtle branches, ah, that leave The
true trees, proof that I alone have heaved For
triumph in the roses' ideal folds.
Look, perhaps...
are the women which you told
Ones your mythic wishing-sense has schemed?
Faun, the illusion, when the fountains teemed,
Fled her cold, blue eyes - she untouched.
But the second, full of sighs, say you how much
Like a hot day's breath she thrilled your fleece?

OPENING OF MALLARMÉ'S L'APRÈS-MIDI D'UN FAUNE, TRANSLATED BY HOPE H. GLIDDEN & ELISABETH YOUNG-BRUEHL

As is obvious from these pieces of writing, I find Debussy's flute music sultry and voluptuous. Whether listening or playing, I do experience these three works as intensely sensual, as manifestations of personalities and desires, as prompts to emotion and sensation. They are laden with vivid content that sweeps across that stage – discussed variably by Adorno, Cook and Tomlinson – constructed by artworks for the experimental enaction of social phenomena. In this, final, section of my thesis, I shall undertake a reading of these works that assumes musical performances to hold the capacity to develop gender practices, ideals and identities. There are many profitable ways to examine music; the individual aesthetic response to these works is as valid a starting point as any. With the theoretical underpinning of Butler and Adorno, this section seeks to colour an interface between experience and ideas. It seeks to account for the pleasure and pain located in the experience of their performance. These works have resonance beyond the page; they typify music that cannot be understood fully in gnostic terms. It is in the experience of performance that their images and projections come to life.

3.1 *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*

As I described in my programme notes, it was Pierre Boulez who hailed the *Prélude a l'après-midi d'un faune* as the birth of modern music.[130] This assertion always seems important. It feels important that those opening notes of the *Prélude* are considered to have recharted the trajectory of not just flute writing, but the harmonic and instrumental languages of the orchestral tradition. It feels even more important that those innovations are situated in a work propelled by desire and eroticism. It feels important to interrogate the force of an enveloping sexual imagination, situated at the crest of the nineteenth century before it crashed down into those alienating movements – serialism, neoclassicism, futurism – of the twentieth. The *Prélude* is viscerally imbued with desire, generates a dreamworld through the manipulation of musical time, and, in its radical imagination, teeters towards the edge of impossibility.

The flute emerges out of darkness at the beginning of the *Prélude*. Still and open (quite literally, in the sense of the player having no keys depressed), the quality of the first note is ethereal and situates the modern instrument as close as possible to that pure sound of its pre-mechanical antecedents. Humankind has been building and playing flutes for thousands of years; the

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[130] Pierre Boulez, *Notes of an Apprenticeship*, trans. Herbert Weinstock (New York, NY: Knopf, 1968), 344-345.

instrument hums as an aloof handmaiden to history. But the metallic glint of the modern soon disturbs that image. A sinuous scale collapses down to outline a dissonant tritone: anxiety swirls in the comparative darkness of the pitch. We fall for a moment into the mystery of a shadow. With more trepidation, the flute staggers back up to where it began, only to repeat the whole gesture again. This is a kind of tense *chiaroscuro*, the carving out of an image in light and shade. But what exactly are we illuminating? Positioning the instrument in total isolation but surrounded by the rest of the orchestra – and the audience – this opening seems to traverse some divide between private and public worlds. It is bare. These opening bars – sinuous but undeniably hesitant – seem to resemble the gaze. The flute's eye drifts across the curve of a hip; it becomes tentatively lost in shadow; it lingers on a delicate twist of the spine. In the opening, this takes place in near darkness; only later in the *Prélude* will we sense those images as not only illuminated, but made tactile. The spectacle of performance can often leave one feeling vulnerable, observed, naked. But here the power seems to lie with the performer to direct a listener's ear, to manipulate that gaze. There exists a certain idealisation in this phrase, performance traditions often encouraging it to be performed in a single breath. What are we to make of this? I can't help but think of those hopelessly idealised bodies all too smoothly emerging from the brushes of the French orientalists: Ingres, Gêrome, Chassérieau. Those marmoreal forms and this phrase exist on the precipice of impossibility. They sidestep reality and move into the realm of illusion and fantasy.

While situated in this space of dreams and desires, we can think of the work as generating its own coherent world. It is differentiated from reality, but, within that demarcated realm, experiences still unfold in time. Those experiences – in constructing this mirrored offering – contain the chance to explore the social reality. Through its thematic content, the *Prélude* develops a kind of discursive power. I find that the relationships developed through late deformations to the material introduced in the first section of the work epitomise this potential. As a starting point, look to bars 26-29 (Fig. 1): a further, sedate statement of the opening theme morphs into rapid flurries of notes sliding throughout an outline of the tritone, then into declamatory triplet semiquavers that come to an unsettled rest. Then, look to bars 94-99 (Fig. 2): the relationship between the speed of the rapid flurries and triplets is altered. The triplets are now half as fast; they unfold as if a languid memory of a real experience long passed. In the way form and content are interrelated, performance invites the experience of lasting reflection on fleeting but tangible substance. We are mutable, moving containers of the impressions left on us by others. However, impressions melt over time to be altogether different

to the shapes that pressed them; this is as clear in the evolving experience of this phrase as in any experience of identity or desire. As detached and carefully structured counterpoints to human experience, musical performances facilitate various kinds of reflection. Their surface may be beguiling, but their form can allow a certain clarity to emerge; an encounter with this work makes obvious that difference between desire and those bewildering fragments of it that exist in the corners of memory. Performance has an important function. Its social imaginations conjugate experiences into meaningful models which we may more easily understand than reality itself.

Fig. 1: Flute Part to *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune,* bars 26-29.

(Reduction for Flute and Piano)
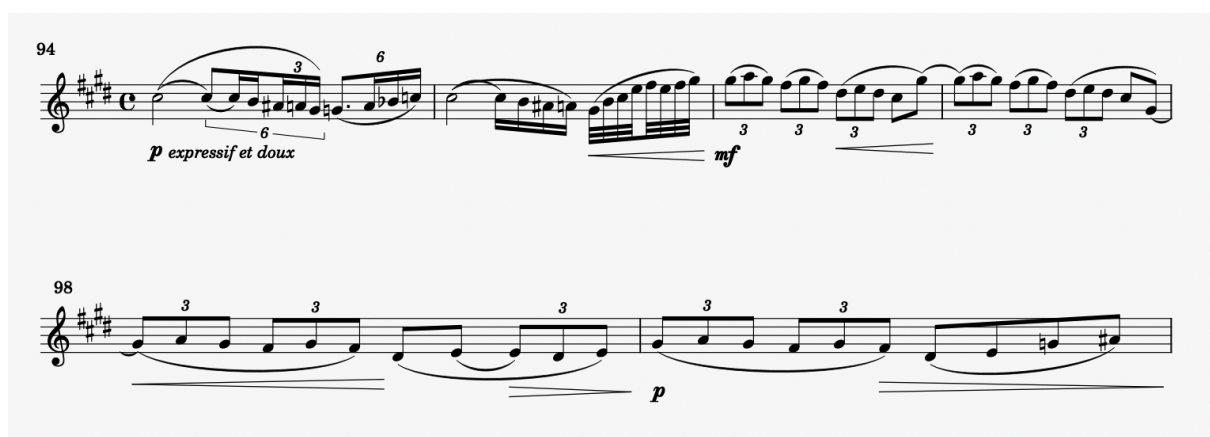
Fig. 1: Flute Part to *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune,* bars 94-99.

(Reduction for Flute and Piano)

The sensory experience of the *Prélude* inhabits that dreamworld somewhere between wakefulness and sleep – an unguarded comportment in which desire may be felt more freely. Examining this piece through the lens of musical eroticism is not a new approach.[131] In her introduction to *Feminine Endings,* Susan McClary alludes to the work as a 'reasonably clear' representation of sexuality, a work that unfolds as if it has 'managed to bypass cultural mediation to resonate directly with one's own most private experiences' while actually being a 'construction'.[132] McClary argues that this direct resonance implicates the work in listeners' constructions of sexuality; the artwork is seen to have a very real definitional power beyond its own boundaries.[133] Musical performances – crafted and constructed – feed into discourses around the representation of desire and the manifestation of sexuality. But perhaps they hold an even greater potential: rather than thinking of these performances only as reflections of a social order, or indeed as experiences that fuel that structure, we might think of them as illuminating the performative more widely. Through experiencing a highly 'constructed' thing – a musical work with rules governing its execution and sanctioned artificiality – we might take note of other, equally artificial constructions that have taken on the semblance of an untouchable truth. The musical performances springing out of Debussy's *Prélude* discursively generate experiences of desire – and therefore of gender – but they also ask us to consider where else we might be participating in such processes. Gender, sex, sexuality, desire, music, work, performance: these terms are centres that exert a very real force upon the bodies caught up in their orbit. Our uncritical consideration of them as static and comprehensible betrays their aspiration to remain untouched. In this sense, I am looping back to the opening of this thesis, to my conviction that performance and performative undertakings shape experience in ways that are mutually influential.

That the *Prélude* is posited as a dream – and essentially a sex dream – complicates any distinction between the public and the private. The performance is, necessarily, public. But the meaning of its content is quietly privatised. The flute seems centrally positioned not necessarily as the faun, the narrator, but perhaps as a conduit to sensation. Through that role, the flute undertakes a project in vulnerability. This is apparent not only in the musical nudity of the

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[131] Julie McQuinn, "Exploring the erotic in Debussy's Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 131.
McClary, *Feminine Endings,* 8, 146.
[132] McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 8.
[133] Ibid, 9.

opening, but throughout the entire work. As the flute winds in and out of the texture, it melds into the contours of other instruments. It's not the phrases of certainty and continuity that are particularly affective in this music; rather, it's the moments of transition, of contact. As is established in the opening, the theme is cyclical: the final B sharp of the bar can lead sinuously always back to that first C sharp. This unit is repeated and deformed over and over again. Gestures continue to reach towards and pass over barlines, just as in the opening. They are moments of hesitant, tentative contact met and accepted by another. Cox interrogates the meaning of the affective states found in musical encounters: chills, tears, anxiety, sadness, fear.[134] Examining the concept of vulnerability, Cox argues that music offers aestheticised experiences of various personal and emotional settings.[135] Where the theorists discussed earlier illuminate conceptions of musical works as social scripts, Cox most vividly examines the real experience of those actions. It isn't just about saying one's own words at the correct time; it's about a posture of vulnerability that opens each actor up to receiving each other's behaviour. These moments of contact in the *Prélude* were difficult to execute, particularly in the flute and piano reduction. To demarcate a transition between tonal colours as different voices is already a challenge, but to link them in such a way that the gestures melt into each other is an added complication. The ensuing demand is to adopt and generate an aestheticised vulnerability without compromising one's own performance by becoming too individually involved. The chills and tension of the public content must be prompted by the performer, but not experienced. Where I can be freely moved – occasionally to tears – by recordings of the *Prélude* and their sublime moments of contact, there is no space for such indulgences in performance. In places during the recital, I did feel technically compromised by my inability to fully disengage my own responses. At my level of playing, where technical processes are not automatic and must be actively manipulated in order to pull off difficult moments, aestheticised vulnerability does risk flaws in execution. In these blemishes, we observe cracks in the edifice that conceals a private state under a public performance.

3.2 *Syrinx*

Having first performed *Syrinx* at age twelve or thirteen, my relationship with the piece is a long one. Like many students, I was told a story that established a narrative backdrop. There are so

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[134] Cox, *Music and Embodied Cognition*, 193-194.
[135] Ibid.

many versions that circulate, shaped perhaps by what a teacher wants to encourage in a student's playing at the time, by their age, by their imaginations. This was the story I heard alongside my first encounters with this music:

> *Pan, the lusty half-man, half-goat of Greek myth, is in pursuit of a youthful nymph, Syrinx, with whom he has fallen in love. He chases after her, calling her name. She is not interested in his advances and continues to run away. In desperation, Syrinx decides to hide, transforming herself into a reed and concealing herself amongst plants along the edges of a marsh. Pan realises she has escaped and collapses at the water's edge, resting upon a rock. He is overcome with emotion and cuts from the marsh a cluster of reeds, shaping them into a flute. Then, he performs this lament for a lost love, realising as he plays that he has killed Syrinx in harvesting the plant to make his flute. Pan dies of a broken heart, his lips still on the instrument as his last breath sounds across the tube.*

This story is certainly evocative. Its accessible violence, desperation and sense of movement inspired in me an early appreciation of music and its power to evoke emotion. But, as I offered in my programme notes, there exists also the narrative setting for which the piece was originally conceived. Situated as incidental music to Gabriel Mourey's *Psyche, Syrinx* is positioned underneath a female voice who, sometimes existing in dialogue with the flute, sometimes sitting atop it, declaims the passion she feels towards the flute player. As Mourey's text makes clear, it is a process of arousal and submission to desire that underpins this original version; Syrinx as the declamatory, inflamed female voice seduced by the sonorities of Pan's performance. Reading this text, it is clear that the sexually charged language – typified by the extracts below – is necessarily restructured through the pedagogical narratives given to younger students.

> *'Si tu savais quel étrange délire*
> *M'enlace, me pénètre toute!*
>
> *(If you but knew what strange rapture / Entwines me, penetrates me totally!)'*

'En cadence et, comme elles, sans effort,

Avec d'harmonieuses poses,

Eperdûment livrer mon corps

A la force ondoyante et rythmique des choses!

(Rhythmically and like them, without effort / In harmonious poses / Madly abandon

my body / To the undulating and rhythmic power of things!)'

'Et moi, la même ardeur s'insinue en mes veines;

O, Pan, les sons de ta syrinx, ainsi qu'un vin

Trop odorant et trop doux, m'ont grisée

O Pan, je n'ai plus peur de toi, je t'appartiens!

(And me, the same ardor spreads through my veins; / O Pan the sounds of thy syrinx,

like a wine / Too fragrant and too sweet, have intoxicated me / O Pan, I no longer

fear you, I am yours.)'[136]

Pan and Syrinx have been positioned and repositioned throughout the performance and pedagogical history of this music. And yet, twisting through both narratives that I have outlined are threads that intertwine fear and desire. Put another way, these narratives seek to understand this music by speaking to the aspirations of desire alongside its inevitable cohabitants: failure and rejection. Performing this work animates that conception of music as script, put forward by Cook. These performance experiences are tangible examples of taking not only the score of a work, but the narratives within which it is enmeshed, and rendering them in new lights. Where Adorno contends that artworks generate meaning through the complementary disciplines that encircle them, it is clear that – within their own disciplinary bounds – they are malleable and responsive to the considerations of a particular context. Through examining these narrative forces and their variable developments, we can observe that the original document itself carries little coercive weight. Rather, the discourses that shape how we understand and privilege that document are of greater significance; they empower and ascribe authority. In this case, it's

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[136] Extracts from Act III, Scene I from Gabriel Mourey's *Psyché*. Translation by Laurel Ewell, as taken from Laurel Ewell, "A symbolist melodrama: The confluence of poem and music in Debussy's 'La Flute de Pan'," Doctoral Thesis (West Virginia University, 2004).

clear that my experience is filtered and decentred. Through both opportunities to examine the narrative, I have been ascribed a level of agency by the texts' presentation. In performing *Syrinx,* both as a child and a university student, I was invited to take up the image of a character and run away with my imagination. However, my ability to accept that invitation has varied throughout my relationship with this piece. In the recital performance, this was a more aloof *Syrinx* than I would usually offer. At the time of the recital, many things swiftly transported me back to enclosures of palpable loss. Not enough time had passed for those shapes to have decomposed into a productive fuel. Whatever narrative one ascribes to, *Syrinx* is a highly individuated and emotive work; it's a visceral conduit to experience as primal as the voice. What would have happened had I truly given my all to the performance? Would I have broken down? Would I have conquered that ubiquitous fear of failed emotional control onstage and offered a performance more compelling to the audience? It was too raw a moment, too personal a music for me to dwell on such questions. I had to get through it. If that meant being slightly dispassionate, so be it.

The tight relationship between the linguistic and flautistic elements of *Syrinx* renders it as an elision between performance and the performative. Wherever the performer positions themselves in terms of the narrative – whether they envisage themselves as taking on the persona of a grief-stricken Pan or a lascivious Syrinx – there is no easy demarcation to be undertaken that will separate the performative from the performed. My recital was situated along a number of tensions between those terms. While I understood the possible narrative options that might shape my performance, on this occasion I didn't feel I had a great deal of control. At the time, it was hard to imagine myself further away from the brazen passions of Syrinx. Undeniably, I was more of a Pan, a lone flute player undertaking a performance that reflected, conjugated and processed an inner world I had been struggling to understand. The piece's oratorical charms were apparent through its tender uncertainties, its repetitively swirling, improvisatory components that ruminated like thoughts or questions in one's mind, its inflamed, vocal outbursts. It is only possible to read in these terms by setting oneself at a distance from the material. Performance – situated as it is in a differentiated realm – has that capacity. Through it, we can take the intensity of experience and productively position it as an exterior object. A performer steps into a persona, but in doing so, also works to understand themselves. To carry elements of emotional truth into a performance is to utilise performative citations in order to come to terms with our own realities. At the same time, a freedom from the coercive power of the performative offers the chance to reimagine experience. Through

performance, we can subvert the limitations imposed on our actual lives by those discursive invocations that bind their meaning. We can seek to understand experiences that we have yet to put to words.

A further offering of liberation comes to us through *Syrinx*'s subversion of traditional process and technique. It is a solo piece; the performer has total control. The score is filled with pauses and breaths; the performer has a grip on silence as much as on sound. The tessitura is of the lower part of the instrument; the performer is ascribed the agency to shape sound as they see fit in that most flexible register. The harmonic language was unlike anything previously written for the flute; jaunty intervallic angles are juxtaposed against smooth chromatic and pentatonic elisions. Dynamically, the flute is asked to slither with great volatility between different levels; performance may be capricious and dramatic. Just as there is a violence immanent to the narratives of *Syrinx,* so too is there that requisite violence undertaken against the establishment which Adorno regards as the seal of the modern.[137] Whether we take the narrative of Mourey or any number of parallel versions that have sprung up through decades of pedagogy and performance, at their core is an inescapable brutality. Through the exploration of ambiguity and dissonance, performances of *Syrinx* lean into discomfort and disquiet; they resonate in the threats of violence (or violation) localised within their narratives and exuded by their musical content. Whether we look to the nymph overcoming fear to untether her passions or Pan chasing after a sensation that will be always a step ahead, there remains an antagonism immanent to these beings. These performances cannot offer definitive visions and they unfurl non-teleologically. While the piece exhibits a unified tightness, the quality it projects through that shape is demonstratively uncertain. This unusual alliance generates a certain freedom: where the implications of the work are open to the enaction of the script, what is clear is their potency. In the pursuit of innovation, the violence inflicted upon traditional musical ideas is likewise directed at any normative discourse for understanding desire. This is not the sedate contemplation of a love-object. This is not the sweltering dreamworld of flesh and water presented in the *Prélude.* A barren, failed quest for control: the greatest accomplishment of *Syrinx* is to set us free.

Aside from the normative heterosexual matrix within which they are arguably situated, the discursive frames of *Syrinx* are open. While the relations they depict may be textually tied to a

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[137] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 42, 71, 67.

gender binary, within the piece itself there seem to me to be far more liberatory conceptualisations of desire. The piece is a sequence of ideas punctuated by silence. Those ideas may be developed, in terms of colour, tempo and emphasis, however the performer chooses. In a sense, the possibility of arranging and rearranging the various fragments of this piece presents a microcosm of the broader aesthetic spirit I described: the use of a musical performance to profitably externalise personal experience. Cox describes such an approach as the generation of experiential maps to the past and present.[138] Rather than just considering relationships with whole performances and the position of the performer around the constituent works as units, through *Syrinx,* we can interrogate the agency of a performer to exert a structuring force on the phrase level. Where the position of the *Prélude* might be one resembling inner sentiment or sensation, *Syrinx* articulates a more relational structure of desire. Where the *Prélude* is a private dream, *Syrinx* is a public declaration. In this manner, we might consider *Syrinx* to more directly feed a Butlerian conception of gender and desire; its performances present quasi-oratorical features that operate discursively. The explicit demands of positionality and posture made in *Syrinx* embolden the agency of a performer to situate themselves and their discursive products productively. In the Butlerian sense, what they articulate becomes true. Where the *Prélude* perhaps reflects an aesthetic conception that generates a platform for personal sensation and contact, *Syrinx* structures a stage for social experience and its verbal articulations. Where the *Prélude* is an idealised evocation of eroticism, *Syrinx* is grounded in the ambiguities of a deprivatised reality that is always marked by responses from others. Rather than dwelling in the untouched, interior visions of private desire, *Syrinx* is situated in the fraught public realm of speech. It demands not only a cogent approach to structuring and understanding desire, but to articulating it. The unresolved tensions and immanent failures of *Syrinx* reflect a world in which communication is as flawed as it is powerful.

3.3 *Bilitis*

Nowhere is the energy bound up in that fraught dialectic between the real and artificial pursued more fervently than in *Bilitis.* The arrangement that I performed of this work was generated by Karl Lenski from various Debussy compositions dated between 1897 and 1914. These compositions – reworkings of material for a variety of ensembles and contexts – all spring from

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[138] Cox, *Music and Embodied Cognition,* 222.

relationships with Pierre Loüys' collection of pseudo-classical erotic poetry, published as *Chansons de Bilitis* in 1894. The complex enactment of the dialectic relationship between truth and falsehood is obvious in the poetry's unusual presentation. Loüys published the poetry as if an archaeological discovery, indicating that they were inscriptions uncovered on the tomb of Bilitis, a figure of Greek antiquity. Presented as truth in order to situate their lesbian content acceptably in a mythic past, these poems are entirely fictional. However, their imagination is not unshaped by the context encircling their development. Their exoticism, homoeroticism and brazen literary imagination that pushed the boundaries of acceptability are developments of very real encounters beyond the clandestine Parisian world. As Julie McQuinn describes, beginning in 1893, Loüys pursued libertine relationships with two women in Algeria.[139] First encountering Meryen ben Ali in 1893 and, later, Zohra ben Brahim in 1897, Loüys wrote extensively to Debussy of his sexual exploits during this time.[140] When Loüys returned to Paris with Zohra ben Brahim, McQuinn writes of how overcome his circle of artistic friends – including Debussy – were by her presence, novelty and apparent willingness to transgress the moral and sexual codes of behaviour looming over their society. The poetry, sociability, photography and music that stemmed from the circle during this period are drenched in fascination with an exotic figure who offered a new vision of femininity. Exploring sexuality to its fullest was, for Loüys, necessary for both intellectual and creative development; he wished through the *Chansons de Bilitis* to reinstate what he envisaged as a classical relationship between the desires of flesh and mind.[141] In the lives and arts of this circle, atemporal projects around gender, race and maturity were undertaken, swept up in questions around the nature of identity on this cusp of modernity.

It is not a coincidence that I have written a significant section on the poetic backdrop to Debussy's *Bilitis*, without interrogating to the same extent that context for the other two works. This reflects my own performance encounters with this music. Where *Syrinx* and the *Prélude* are pieces I first developed relationships with in a purely musical sense – not knowing anything of the conditions surrounding their composition – I encountered *Bilitis* as an example of poet-composer collaboration. The literary imagination of *Syrinx* is malleable, shaped by a long history of performance. Similarly, that of the *Prélude* is tenuous and fluid; guided by Symbolist roots, it feels more like surface than substance. But perhaps because of its division into six

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[139] McQuinn, "Exploring the Erotic in Debussy's Music," 126-128.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid, 127.

discrete movements – each accompanied by its own epigraph – *Bilitis* feels generative and instructive. Where the other two pieces present great sweeps of gesture and eroticism, *Bilitis* offers a series of frieze-like images. Static and contained, these six scenes perhaps position the performer as a voyeur. The performer is not embedded in the action like they are in *Syrinx* or the *Prélude*. They are playing, as the epigraphs indicate, "for" or "*pour*" a figure or image. The state of embodiment is altogether different. To my mind, the performance of *Bilitis* was some of the strongest in my recital. Assuredly, the piece presents fewer technical challenges than the *Prélude* and is not as nerve-wracking as *Syrinx*. But there was, I believe, another consideration: *Bilitis* is a more objective act of representation. Its bounds are set, its spirit contained. Where the passions of *Syrinx* and the tension of the *Prélude* are prone to a certain emotional overflow that complicates technical execution, *Bilitis* situates the music as external to its scenes. The performer is a cool, dispassionate observer.

It is clear to me that *Bilitis* presents a different model of aesthetic experience to the *Prélude* and *Syrinx*. This understanding might be further illuminated through Suzanne Cusick's conception of the erotics of performance. Writing about an imagined encounter with a performance by Jessye Norman, Cusick posits a vision of a performer and an audience member 'disappearing' into the music.[142] Cusick argues that this process of sublimation into the performance serves as a reflection of a sexual union, writing that 'if, somehow, both Norman and I disappear, I will remember the performance we share as… an ecstasy'.[143] Where the sensory and desiring natures of the *Prélude* and *Syrinx* seem to hold the potential for such encounters, *Bilitis'* distancing from the tactility of its material subjects reduces the intensity of the meetings between performer, audience and sound. They are observational rather than enveloping. The performer and audience member cannot 'disappear' as Cusick describes, for they were never posited as a presence to begin with. They are structurally evoked as voyeurs whose agency is undeformed by the experience of actual contact with those that they see. *Bilitis* presents a relief from the demands of intimacy.

More obviously than most, this work is trapped in its own process of becoming. The themes of *Bilitis* swirl out of a number of Debussy's compositions, scored variously for soprano and piano (the *Trois Chansons de Bilitis* of 1897), two flutes, two harps and celeste (*Les Chansons de*

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[142] Suzanne Cusick, "Gender and the Cultural Work of a Classical Music Performance," *Repercussions* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 84.
[143] Cusick, 84.

Bilitis, 1900), and piano four hands (the *Six Epigraphes Antiques* of 1914).[144] The settings in which these works have been constituted and reconstituted throughout their performance histories defines a piece conceived in practical and functional terms. Each moment of that narrative adheres something to the work; such fragments of context stick to surface of the piece. The image of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* as first performed alongside an assemblage of models in 'various stages of undress' proves to be of enduring significance; such a performance could be seen to illuminate further this work's light performative burden.[145] This is music of the background. The stage is set, the figures pose, the images are presented: the onus is not on the musical performer or the audience to conjure up an imagination of flesh and desire. Music here serves to ringfence the spectacle, working together with the veil of the literary to dress up a display of un-dress as art. And it must be said the art that emerges is beautiful, haunting and evocative. If *Syrinx* is about the power of desire to tear apart the psyche and the *Prélude* a surfactant dispersing through fluid spaces of supple limbs and reclining dreams, then *Bilitis* is a distancing backdrop. This spirit of the staged and artificial, generated through the first performance of the work, has continued to orbit the piece. If all performances create some realm for the enaction of sociability, *Bilitis* demonstrates the variable proximity at which that arena can be built.

This strange and indeterminate music positions the performer as viewing, rather than developing, constructions of gender. The performative burden is lighter, but the participation in a generative discourse continues; *Bilitis* most cogently embodies the power localised through acts of performance to demarcate an ulterior domain. But this aloof design of a private antechamber of pleasure rests upon imaginations and tangible links to exoticism. Temporally and fictively, *Bilitis* bears an ambivalent relationship to reality. But these are only two parts of the picture that gender comes to inhabit: it is geographically and culturally that *Bilitis* most problematically extends its sexual imagination. As we perform movements like the fifth of Lenski's edition, *Pour L'Egyptienne,* we are forced to work around scale systems that feel foreign and challenging under the fingers. With unexpected chromatic elisions and unpredictable leaps that posit the sinuous against the angular, this movement leans into exotic tropes. It situates itself within a discourse of orientalism, within those traditions that refashioned an imagined exotic other in the pursuit first of freedom, then of identity and

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[144] Karl Lenski, preface to Claude Debussy, *Bilitis : Edition for Flute and Piano* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1983).
[145] McQuinn, "Exploring the Erotic in Debussy's Music," 128.

dominance. This music has endured long beyond that original context; in performance, the spirit and content of the work continues to be enacted, the discursive power it deploys continues to be generated. Dealing with a gendered and racialised imagination, performances of this music reposition that particular historical spirit with variable angles of the present condition. Through performance, we can productively recognise the ways in which power has been and is consolidated through the discursive structures of art and politics.

To sit in a realm of interpretation and experience allows us to illuminate the nature of performance, without necessarily aspiring to make extra-aesthetic judgements. As I devised this programme and wrote this thesis, discussions about it often became tangled: there was a tendency to think I was seeking to undertake an assessment of whether or not 'we' should 'cancel' this music because of its gendered content. These same discussions could equally revolve around the exoticism of *Bilitis*. I found these conversations difficult and never handled them with any great skill. I struggled to convey that the project wasn't interested in making ethical claims or moral judgements; it was interested in performance as a discursive platform through which the power to define art and gender is executed and legitimated. To that end, the odd person would shoot back with a "Well what's the point, then?" The reality, I think, is that the project does little more than attempt to pay homage to the breadth and depth of aesthetic experience. The world is full of deftly constructed opinion pieces and bold arguments about what we all 'should' be doing, and we are all the richer for it. But comparatively little writing seeks to prolong the time spent with something that someone finds beautiful. Where Cox described a musically aestheticised vulnerability, this type of writing might be considered an aestheticised empathy, a chance to experience something through the words of another. Through this text, I have insisted upon a musical interface between life and art. The fruits of that interface are things I have consumed most often and comparably through fiction: the perfectly flawed characters and perceptions that populate novels, poetry and short stories. Though more difficult to articulate and more personal to expound, when this interface is articulated with music, it lacks the dissociation from reality offered by the fictive. Whatever the music that prompts it, the personal dimensions of its aesthetic experiences will be gratingly true.

CONCLUSION

I began with a focus on Theodor Adorno and Judith Butler, offering a dialogue between parallel concepts in their writing as a theoretical foundation. Through that section of the thesis, I deployed mirrored structures to highlight how artworks and gender are embedded in parallel discursive power structures. Our encounters with gender and with art are, I argue, delineated through these same axes of understanding that run through Butler and Adorno. Gender and artworks inhabit a number of tense dialectic relationships, four of which I outlined and interrogated. Where gender and art are understood through concepts, these theorists ground their meaning in experiences. Where gender might be clearly thought of as real and art as fictive, these theorists situated each idea in an active ambivalence to both poles: gender and art mutually fulfil both truth and illusion. Where gender and art possess the semblance of stasis, these theorists show them to be embedded in ingoing processes. Where the categories of gender and art are generated through coercive matrices of discourse, these theorists illuminated their potential for liberation and subversion. The opening of the thesis aimed to demonstrate that the discursive mechanisms systemising our approaches to art could be examined in a reflexive parallel with those of gender. The problems of aesthetics correspond fruitfully to the problems of gender.

Where writing about aesthetics and gender was abstract, performance offered a site of application that tethered the ideas to a common point of reference. This application took place first in general terms, by taking each of the axes I had drawn between Adorno and Butler, and locating it with respect to an element of performance discourse. Writing about experience alongside Goehr and Abbate sanctioned the primacy of meanings found in fleeting musical events. Examining the dual informing of both reality and illusion through Whittaker's elision of performance and the performative shed light on the nature of semblance where we might have previously read substance. Cook's suggestion to read music as script enlivened the dialectic between stasis and process, positioning performance as navigating an indeterminacy between those terms. Along with Cook, Tomlinson's meditations on musicological writing proved useful angles through which to consider performance's relationships to tradition and emancipation. Their vision of the writer's own performance (and performative) positions offered the chance to execute readings freely and generously, if mindfully. Performance clarified and problematised Butler and Adorno's theories in resounding ways.

The *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, *Syrinx* and *Bilitis*: these landmark pieces have already been written about extensively. They have been analysed, critiqued, historically situated and described by innumerable scholars with far defter language and rigorous intellectual approaches than I could offer. But what I could do was embody the understanding of performance I had worked to build using Adorno, Butler and those key theorists of musicology. There is an intimacy in the writing that emerges. It's an intimacy with the act of performance as localised to individual voices, with all that they bring. The application to these individual works does not reference constantly the trajectory of the theory I charted. Rather, it takes that arc as implicit. In elevating experience, the theory validated writing about eroticism and desire. It sought to more generously inhabit that world William Austin described, that flute that was 'sultry, smouldering with pagan dreams'.[146] In the dialectic between reality and artificiality, the theory demanded honesty about those very effectual – but often sequestered – links between the act of performance and the person living behind it. In animating the relationship between process and stasis, the theory demanded writing about the temporal experience of musical events and their contribution to the sedimentation of musical objects through time. The theory's questions around tradition and emancipation demanded performance writing that foregrounded received structure as well as the capricious possibility for deviation. Performances are moving. They imagine gendered shapes, stir desires and lay bare those emotional figurations we prefer to keep in under wraps. Musical performances execute technical and artistic brilliance. But let's not forget music's most focal point of meaning. Music may be aesthetic, political and social. But, at heart, it's simply personal.

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[146] William Austin, *Prelude to 'The Afternoon of a faun': an Authoritative Score, Mallarmé's Poem, Background and Sources, Criticism and Analysis* (New York, NY: Norton, 1970), 90.

Afterword

What began as a simple project in – broadly speaking – feminist musicology has taken on a rather different shape. My idea was always to take Judith Butler and situate them in a dialogue with musical performance. I started the thesis with passing knowledge of a theorist and with three musical works I found interesting; I thought this would be easy enough. As it happens, I had vastly underestimated the intellectual legwork I would need to do in order to walk that seemingly facile bridge from the performative to performance. Where I thought I'd be able to look at historical documents as windows into performative constructions of gender, as embedded in musical performances of the early 20th century, I found I was making leaps that persisted in falling short of my objectives. Outside of the musical application, I was fighting a losing battle in my reading of Butler. The density and difficulty of their texts were one problem, the referentiality of them quite another. I started my thesis in March 2021, and by May I was up to my neck in Sartre, de Beauvoir and Hegel. A happy undergraduate habit of reading whole shelves of the library for research essays proved to translate into great misery when applied to dense works of theory. Not only was Butler's output vast, but their work seemed to radiate from a locus of reference to which I could not feel more distal. A thesis in performance rapidly spiralled out of control. The central problem emerged as one of agency and the different realisations of it between the performance and performative modes. The whole premise of the project imploded. That bridge I thought I would be able to wander over was rife with structural issues. I felt intellectually ill-equipped to make the necessary repairs.

Over the coming months, I toyed with different models for understanding the relationships between performance and the performative, the musical work and the world around it. The agency problem required an adjustment in focus away from historical events and towards either transcendence or immediacy; I aspired to ground the thesis in the present or the abstract. I read and read, doing my best to stagger along with the thesis amidst performance commitments, lockdown, end-of-university existential angst, a certain level of emotional ruin and the writing of a rather all-consuming Proust essay. Almost all the material was peripheral and discarded – September's lengthy notes on Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* one such flash in the pan. After taking some time away from the thesis while I pursued auditions for graduate schools in the US, the nature of my woes became much clearer. I was – without meaning to – attempting to pull together an entirely watertight theory of music and gender. I was trying to plug all the gaps, without accepting that theoretical models are really just suggestions, potential ways of

looking at a problem rather than definitive answers. I became comfortable with the idea of layering up a lens for refracting one way of seeing that I found interesting, without expecting it to generate an image of indisputable truth. I was quite comfortable with my performances on the flute being imperfect; it just took a lot longer to accept that my performances as a writer would be similarly flawed. I must thank my supervisor for allowing me the time to stew over the project, and for their support in seeking the extension that was ultimately necessary. Their endless patience and kindness, even as I dropped off the radar for weeks at a time, afforded me the valuable opportunity to struggle, to flounder, to stumble and, eventually, to find my own feet. I learnt a great deal, both academically and personally. Thank you to my performance supervisors for their ongoing support and enthusiasm. And, finally, thank you to those friends and family who have gently nudged me along. I promise, I will have other things to talk about now.

il vient dans la vie une heure…, où les oreilles ne peuvent plus écouter de musique que celle que joue le clair de lune sur la flûte du silence

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