

Possible Futures of Text Setting

by Rick Burkhardt

for Steve Takasugi

INTRODUCTION

In 1827, when Franz Schubert turned 24 poems by Willhelm Müller into the song cycle *Die Winterreise*, it was still possible to imagine a landscape such as the songs depict: a solitary wanderer, having lost all affiliation with other humans, travels through a still, silent, frozen environment, encountering no signs of other humans — an environment in which the wanderer is the only source of language. If he were not there, there would be no language in the scenes he describes, and as soon as he leaves, there will be none. *Die Winterreise* takes the idea of “text setting,” placing a text into an environment, as literally as can be imagined: the narrator of the songs *is* the language placed into the frozen landscape. That language is the main character, the subject, the “I” that wonders, reflects, and despairs at his relation to the sounds and silences, the responsiveness and the unresponsiveness, the strangeness and the ice-covered familiarity, the ultimate *wordlessness* of his environment. The gulf between language and the environment is emphasized repeatedly throughout the cycle, culminating with the narrator hurling his desperate final questions into the environment, questions the imperturbable environment, of course, does not answer.

We can no longer find such an environment. Today, spoken and written language are permanent fixtures of our daily environments, awaiting us long before we arrive. Billboards, radio and television voices, the merged worlds of information, entertainment, and advertising, do not merely “dot” the landscape; they have saturated it. They do not merely fill the environment in which we wander; they *are* that environment. What’s more, we cannot (like Schubert’s traveler) place our thoughts into the environment, for the uncanny reason that they are already there. Our thoughts, our speech, our innermost and outermost feelings, and our personalities are formed, illustrated, countered, echoed and pre-echoed in the swirling mass of language that surrounds us.

This language is not the same as the language spoken by the narrator of *Die Winterreise*. It is not attributable to any single “I” character or subject. One cannot emphasize enough the importance of this development: language has, in effect, lost its tonal center. (Too much emphasis has been placed instead on “non-linearity” and “non-narrativity” in the arts, when in fact, lines and narratives still thrive abundantly in language, in the world, and in art.) One no longer experiences an identity, a one-to-one correspondence, between “text” and “voice” — a

text may issue from more than one voice, or from partial voices, and a voice may produce more than one text, or partial texts. More often than not, texts are unattributed or unattributable, voices are unidentified or unidentifiable; voices are associated with but not identified by the texts they speak.

Without an “I” at its center, language derives its meanings and functions not from the intentions of speakers, but from its relation to the other language(s) making up the environment. Billboards exhort “Just do it!” (a respected and apparently successful ad campaign) without anyone ever imagining that they will specify an addressee, a context, or especially what “it” is. The world to which advertising refers is its own; its texts inhabit a tone unique to advertising itself, with no need to refer outside of its own context (or arguably, with a need to *not* refer outside of its own context). One could analyze at length how and why “Just Do It” works as a slogan today, and why it wouldn’t have worked a hundred years ago outside the context of ubiquitous advertising — but the most urgent aspect of “Just Do It” from the point of view of a text-setting composer is this: *it doesn’t mean “just do it,”* and what’s more, *nobody, not one single person believes* that it means “just do it.” (A person who saw the billboard “just do it” and believed the message to be “I should just do it” would be considered mentally unsound — and in the case of that slogan, potentially dangerous). We understand “Just do it” by recognizing its context, rather than its meaning: advertising language is not merely a style or a flavor which may be given to words, but is in fact a context outside of which the words of advertisements cannot be understood. Since we do understand, we can’t say that the words “just do it” are meaningless, but rather that the power of their context renders their meaning less active, subordinate to the context and the message *it* carries.

In this landscape, so unlike that of *Die Winterreise*, we encounter complete texts only rarely. We have no reason to pursue fragments of language to their origins or to their conclusions — their contexts are recognized and understood long before the arcs of their syntax approach closure. Words are not read but scanned, not heard but overheard. It is their strangeness and icy familiarity, their responsiveness and their unresponsiveness, at which we wonder, reflect and despair as best we can, using whatever fragments of language we can carve away or cling to as we are buffeted through this language-saturated environment, *Die Winterreise’s* inversion.

Here it is no longer possible for “text setting” to mean “placing a text into an environment.” Text is the environment. “Text setting” must mean placing something into the environment of text, to see what ripples can be created.

Under this new circumstance, the language we hear in a piece of text-setting will not bear a one-to-one correspondence to the voice(s) transmitting it to us. As described above, the language we hear

1. may be unattributed or unattributable
2. may be overshadowed or upstaged by the context which it always carries with it
3. may be unintelligible, misunderstood, or only understood through an indirect, mediated process, and yet still function as a medium of communication

Even more crucially, this language we hear will not bear a one-to-one relationship to meaning. It will not be *meaningless*: we will at times hear more than one meaning, even contradictory meanings; and we will at times hear fragments of language adding up to less than a meaning. We will hear sounds we recognize as language whose meanings we cannot discern at all, and sounds unrecognizable as language whose meanings are perfectly clear. Ultimately, and most importantly, we will know that the meaning of all this language we are hearing is *not* the meaning of the piece which includes it.

I. Problems with the use of text in today's new music

Most recent composers, whether they use text or avoid it, have taken meaning for granted. Too few have confronted the difficulties poets, writers, and actors confront whenever working: the difficulties of creating a dynamic (unfrozen) meaning (story, emotion, character, effect) given only the few brushstrokes allowed within their chosen form. With only a few exceptions that I know of, music composers have approached text as if its meaning were fixed, as if the composer's only job were to find a role for music in projecting that fixed meaning outward. One hears today a startling number of pieces written in new styles, with new harmonic and sonic resources, attempting to place music and text in a relation identical to that of traditional German Lieder — as if acknowledging that the meanings of language (and the sounds of music) have changed, but assuming that the channels through which language reaches listeners are the same channels that were in operation two hundred years ago. The results are most often awkward, as if meaning were a heavy piece of furniture someone were trying to carry up a narrow stairwell.

Other composers, apparently sensing but failing to analyze that awkwardness, have either avoided text altogether or followed in one of the two paths established in the 1950's by the groundbreaking serial works *Le Marteau Sans Maître* by Pierre Boulez and *Il Canto Sospeso* by Luigi Nono. Neither of these works refers to the typical channels by which language reaches listeners; in fact, they deny those channels, and in both cases, the pieces derive a certain strength of purpose from that denial.

Le Marteau Sans Maître (says Boulez) is not meant to transmit a text, the meaning of the language, to the listener. Rather, the piece uses its text as a reservoir of vocal sounds. The piece does not transmit the recognizable sound of the language to the listener either — the vocalist is heard to produce a stream of phonemes which may, by coincidence, resemble words. Any

attempt to understand the piece must acknowledge the language's irrelevance to the attempt. On the contrary: the atomization of the text becomes an affirmation of the act of serial arrangement, where structural integrity overrides time, and along with time, narrative. (See, says the piece, it can even be done to words!)

Later pieces poeticize this act of atomization (Kenneth Gaburo's *Inside*, for example, allows the atomized word a minor poetic triumph when it finally arrives, at the piece's end, virtually intact). Others, such as Georges Aperghis' *Recitations*, treat fragments of language (or language-like sound) as building blocks in quasi-musical structures, structures markedly unlike linguistic syntax; part of the allure of these pieces lies in the uncanny, doppelgänger-like similarities between the resulting virtuosic babble and "ordinary" meaningful speech. Thus meaning itself, by association, comes to seem fragile, arbitrary, tinged with irrationality or even lunacy. An easy (and frequent) copout for composers is to make "madness" the subject of such a piece — a blanket of semantic justification for the lack of conventional meaningful threads.

Il Canto Sospeso, on the other hand, travels through stages in which meaning (in this case written letters from prisoners of fascists) slowly transcends its phonemes, words, all the rules and shapes and structures of language. By the last movement, vitally important meanings (meanings which one could call essential to the work, the heart of the work, the reason for being of the work) are presented in a dense choral texture which renders them unintelligible, though (crucially) not unknowable. They transcend their original writers / speakers / singers; they become pure meanings wafting (somehow) through the medium of music. They become greater than their origin, or perhaps more accurately they themselves become originary.

Though I love *Il Canto Sospeso*, I must be cynical about this method of transmitting meaning. The truth is, we the audience know what the language means because we read it in the program or the liner notes. (And there is something disingenuous about the all-too-frequent use of the word "transcend" to describe what music does to language — I will discuss this disingenuousness further below.) We may have been given a feeling that the meaning is larger than the language because the composer has created a powerful musical experience; in the case of *Il Canto Sospeso*, that experience corresponds to a vital aspect of the piece's political content, thus adding meaning (or giving meaning back) to the language, and for that I forgive the composer and (conditionally!) allow my cynicism to evaporate.

But think of all the pieces composed nowadays in which language puts in a brief appearance, often whispered or murmured "under the breath" by the instrumentalists, or in some other way treated as if it had come from nowhere — as if it were "pure" meaning, unsullied by a language, a culture, a context, or even a speaker. Frequently the words are deliberately left in a language nobody in the audience (or the performing ensemble) can speak. Here, meaning is a

mysterious Other: it arrives, deposits its wisdom, and disappears immediately (who *was* that masked man?) often leaving no repercussions on the musical material or texture. (Dare I compare it to the way so many composers have “incorporated” folksongs, or oriental(ist) melodies, into their work? One strain of “Amazing Grace” at a lusciously “prepared” moment — then the 12 tones return, radiant in the light of a beautiful, clean and pentatonic Otherness that has just, effectively, shined their shoes.)

This should not be tolerated. Meaning (like folk music) is impure, both by virtue of its contact with the world and by virtue of its many ideological commitments. Nor can language transmit meaning as if through a clean conduit. Language, read or heard, always brings with it context — if it did not, we would not understand it or even recognize it as language. Language’s social constructedness is not simply the source of unpleasant ideological residues without which language and / or meaning would be pure; rather, language’s social constructedness is why it means anything at all to us. Those embarrassing (to some) ideological residues cannot simply be “wiped off” of language by pretending that nobody is speaking it. They are necessary for us to understand language — and they must be interrogated, using other language(s) which we understand for other equally socially constructed reasons.

Music has a special role to play in this investigation: music is not language (though it can be made to behave in ways analogous to language). Music is one of the very few things we have which is not language. This does not mean that it is ideologically free either, but its ideologies may be of a sort different from language’s, thus offering a unique vantage point from which to scrutinize language. (And vice versa?)

II. Foregrounding language’s structural functions: the mythic speaker

Relationships among parts of a piece of music give that piece of music its moments of significance. The same occurs in language, on many different scales (a television commercial derives its significances from the individual meanings of each word and each image in the commercial, but also from the succession and / or repetition of words and images in the commercial, and from the relationship the commercial has to other commercials, or to the plot of the interrupted program). What music offers language is the opportunity to deemphasize the usually foregrounded meanings of its words in order to look more closely at the structural relationships between words, phrases, ideas. Not “what do the words mean?” but “what is their function?” Not “what am I saying?” but “what happens when I say it?” This investigation inevitably takes social and political turns. It also has the happy effect of bringing music and language onto a playing field which, although never “level,” is slanted irregularly and unpredictably, rendering dynamic and multifaceted the usually hierarchical (trickle-down) meaning-relationship between music and language. Their large and small scale interactions become richer in the process.

It is necessary, therefore, to consider ways in which language can be made to foreground its structural relationships, at least temporarily, over the meanings of its words. In this light, it would be helpful to consider Claude Levi-Strauss' theories of music and myth.

The final movement of *Il Canto Sospeso* does something for which I haven't yet given it credit: it creates its odd texture from sounds which are, actually, the sounds of language. We can't hear the words, but we can hear that there are words. We have difficulty hearing the way a word's beginning links to its end, but we hear both beginnings and endings. What's more, the orchestra remains silent except for the timpani, so that the only sounds we hear are voice and drum. This presentation of language evokes a mythic context: the voice of the oracle.

According to Levi-Strauss, when combined with the drum, the voice of the individual is subsumed into that of the mythic speaker.

In order to avoid mythologizing the very idea of "myth," let me specify the precise aspect of myth which interests me: according to Levi-Strauss, elements in a myth have a structural function greater than the function of their content. A myth may, for example, begin with a murder. This murder adopts the structural function of beginning the story, motivating the chain of reprisals, escapes, and so on; it doesn't matter that different tellings of the same myth may disagree as to who initially murdered whom. Roland Barthes' accounts of modern mythologies show these functions at play in the ideologically-based narratives of contemporary society.

So, the mythic speaker delivers vital information — but the event of the information's delivery, and the nature of the information's delivery, play a role as great as or greater than the information itself (in the Oedipus myth, the final messenger brings news which everyone, including Oedipus, already knows). In *Il Canto Sospeso*, the words sung are not heard as words — we hear instead how they travel, the mode of their delivery. We hear them exceeding the moment in time in which they were spoken / written, exceeding the moment of their existence. Here is the source of strength of the myth (and I am not criticizing it for being a myth) of the dying resistance fighter.

(Thus the disingenuousness of the word "transcend" becomes clear. Yes, the music has "transcended" the language — but the experience of "transcendence" is exactly what the language is about: "I go believing in a better life for you..." The "transcending" of this semantic meaning is itself an illustration of that meaning and would be weaker if it were not.)

The mythic speaker is one whose speech fulfills a function, a function the speaker him/herself may not intend or even know. This does not require the speaker to be possessed of

(or by) supernatural powers. One finds the plays of Charles Mee populated overwhelmingly by contemporary mythic figures, such as the bureaucrat in time of war in *The Trojan Women*, *A Love Story*. Note that the bureaucrat in fact describes himself as divorced from the function of his speech:

I confess I am the sort of man
who enjoys what is familiar.
I have a sweater I like to wear
that I have had since my days at Princeton....
I have a favorite walking stick,
I love to tell the stories my father told to me.
I don't think of myself as a rude man
or harsh.
And so I would not say it is in my nature
to have to say to you
that the council of my countrymen
has reached some decisions
about how you women have been allotted
each to a man.

The bureaucrat is not necessarily accompanied by a drum (though Mee's plays, including *The Trojan Women*, make frequent use of interpolated music, popular songs wildly inappropriate to the tone or content of the dramatic action, whose effect may be similar to that of the drum); but Mee has embedded in the words themselves a rhythmically repeating sound, eerily drumlike: "I have a sweater I like to wear / that I have had since my days at Princeton.... / I have a favorite walking stick, / I love to tell the stories my father told to me." (The sound of "I have..." modulates into "I love...")

Then, notice how the bureaucrat, when switching to describing his function (which is not only his bureaucratic function but also, especially, his function in the plot, the myth), does not say "I have" (as in "I have a message for you") or even "I say," but rather, "I would not say it is in my nature / to have to say to you..."

Such deliberately clumsy phrasing has a triple function: (1) to sap the strength of the phrase "I have" (the words "I" and "have" are deliberately placed so far from each other that "have" barely modifies "I" at all); (2) to replace the comfortingly reliable, recurring rhythm of "I have..." with a chattering, nearly monosyllabic rhythm and a frighteningly sprawling sentence shape that defers its point with bureaucratic arbitrariness; and (3) to cloud "say" by combining it with "not say."

Thus the bureaucrat is a mythical figure, recognizable as such because he accompanies his words (that is, their meanings) with the drum of his speech rhythms (that is, their sound).

The sound of speech accompanying words may even demonstrate that a speaker's function in a story is at odds with what the speaker imagines his / her function to be. In *Son of an Engineer*, playwright David Greenspan's use of the sound of speech to demonstrate the disconnect between the weapons designer's intentions and his function is more brutal than Mee's; the sound does not so much accompany the words' meanings as scream at them, finally drowning them out:

The weight and measure of each section of the aircraft...you have to calculate the weight and measure of each section to insure the aircraft is aerodynamically sound. This is determining...in designing...

So for instance in a rocket—my unit will calculate how much, for instance, a fin...we work with the designers—to determine how much, for instance, a fin can weigh...or the length...the kind of metal used in construction... what kind of materials will weigh...their properties...So that in trajectory...in flight... So we determine—

Who are other contemporary mythic speakers, speakers who can be identified (that is, their function can be identified) simply by the sound of their voices?

Newscasters. Salespeople. Waiters. Motivational speakers. Simultaneous translators. Radio talk show hosts. The functions of media voices can be identified even when divided into hairsplittingly specific categories, such as: Voiceover announcers from documentaries, reading the letters of soldiers from the nineteenth century.

All of the above speakers must separate the sound of their voices from the meanings of their words for professional reasons; their professional function is to sound the same no matter what they are saying. The sounds of their voices accompany *but do not illustrate* their words. Oddly, that is also true of many speakers whose voices travel to us through mass media though they do not have a professional stake in those media — voices of those who have survived large natural disasters, for example. The closer one listens to these voices, the more one discovers within this disconnect between their meanings and their functions (where here the word “function” means “social role,” rather than the above-described function in a story or myth — though in fact the idea of a “social role” may not be so different from a function in a myth).

Suppose we focus on the acoustic behavior of newscasters. Actors often find it difficult to approximate convincingly the voices of newscasters because, despite the archetypically “logical” sound of the newscaster's voice, a newscaster's relation to his / her text is counterintuitive. The newscaster must read the text given to him / her on sight; sometimes

newscasters have time to practice a text, but more often they do not. A newscaster thus must learn to overlay the inflection patterns of typical logical sentences onto whatever words s/he happens to be saying. You may not always understand what the newscaster's sentence means, but you can always tell where in the sentence structure you are, because the newscaster's intonation functions like a map, giving each sentence a fully predictable arc. It is because of this predictability that newscasters' voices are often described as "monotonous," but in fact newscasters don't speak in monotones; rather, they speak within a narrow pitch bandwidth, with slower pitch fluctuations than are heard in most human speech. Their rate of speech is unvaried, and is unlikely to change in mid phrase. They come to full stops less frequently than one would expect in everyday speech, and the stops they do come to are more clearly defined. All these acoustic strategies (which we hear as "gestures") are presumably meant to make their speech more understandable. But alas, predictable does not mean understandable, and in an odd way, the voice of the newscaster, the archetypal courier of vital information, has become the quintessential background voice, a kind of acoustic patterned wallpaper, like a foreign language we wrongly believe we understand because we know what it sounds like.

To the newscasters too, the inflections have become habit, part of the job (alienated intonation) — so it shouldn't be surprising that the repertoire of inflections from which newscasters draw is relatively limited, and that frequently a newscaster overlays an inflection onto a sentence it really doesn't fit. This is particularly noticeable at the ends of news segments, when the newscaster must use an ending inflection (and newscasters' ending inflections tend to convey a powerfully narrative, even moralistic, tone) whether or not s/he has a convincing ending sentence, whether or not the story upon which the news segment is based has actually ended. The results are often nonsensical and sometimes hilarious.

III. The need to distort spoken language

Levi-Strauss asserts that the individual voice becomes subsumed into the mythic speaker when accompanied by a drum, flute, etc. Why, one wonders, can the voice not undergo this transformation without an accompanying sound? Perhaps because the voice by itself is still understood as a record of intentions (or, in much opera and theater, emotions). One hears speech and listens for intention, for the internal impulse that produced the speech, that internal place (internal to the character in the case of theater, or to the composer in the case of music), where we expect to find the speech's meaning. We ask: why is the speaker / creator of these words telling us this? We have been taught that "theater" is a place where characters speak because of their individual desires — an idea which has rendered theater unable to refer to most of the world, since so few of the daily or historical events of the world correspond to individual desires. Certainly the words spoken by the newscaster aren't understood to reflect the newscaster's desires.

Sound accompanying spoken language (the drum, the flute, but also the melody, the cadence, the tone of the speech) may draw attention away from the speaker's intention and toward the speech's function. In cases like the Greenspan quote above, the speaker's intention and the speech's function may be in direct contradiction with each other, and it is the sound of the speech, the rhythm, the cadence, the length of phrase, which demonstrates this contradiction.

Yet, as the example of the newscaster shows, such contradictions are daily, mundane occurrences, and as such they are likely to slip by unnoticed, regardless of their absurdity (even the above highly crafted examples from Mee's and Greenspan's work hover in the realm of plausibility), unless a composer works to draw attention to them by distorting them, exploiting their oddness.

What follows is a series of descriptions of techniques I have used in my own work when attempting to compose such distortions of spoken language.

IIIA. Contradictory phrase durations

One could imagine an engineer actually saying the Greenspan line quoted above; although the phrase durations are uncomfortably short, there is an overriding momentum which keeps the phrases moving forward, a sort of anxious determination that lends a plausible unity to the character of this stumbling speaker.

But there is no reason, in a piece of music whose texts are delivered by (mythic) voices instead of "characters," for plausibility or unity of character to determine sound parameters. Phrase durations can be composed, for example, that contradict both the content and the expected arc-length of the voice. In *Great Hymn of Thanksgiving*, a praying congregation may only speak in radically truncated phrase durations, often less than two words long, separated by long pauses (filled with other sounds or speech modes); then twelve minutes into the piece, once this constraint has been established, the congregation suddenly blurts out a 90-second-long "sentence." Such improbable phrase durations divorce the recognizable sound of the congregation from the comforting group breathing which gives congregational speaking its supposed naturalness. Similarly, staid financial reporters in *PIPELINE* find their sentences unable to end, and the clipped abbreviations of soldiers in *American Folksongs Opus 131* spiral into cyclical phrases which repeat indefinitely. In scene 21 of *Conversation Storm*, a waiter interrupts a discussion of the ethics of torture with the mundane task of delivering dinner, but the dishes, as they are served, overflow the boundaries of conversational logic and eventually even of Scene 21:

Oh, and it turns out we're out of Seared Farm Raised Ostrich Fan Filet Accompanied by Yam Flan and Merlot Cassis Sauce over Madjool Date Risotto in an Arugula and

Rosemary Pesto Garnish Served with Baby Field Greens and a Pear Cider Coulis, so I brought you some Roasted & Braised Wild Rabbit Jus a La Natural Served with Mushroom-Potato Gnocchi and Savory Medallions of Muscovy Duck Carnitas stuffed with a Compote of Braised Sweet Applewood Bacon and Toasted Hazelnut with Smoked Salmon Pinwheels in a Watercress sauce and a medley of Crushed / Scene 22 / in a Cabernet Sauvignon-sauteed Strawberry Creme Anglais Sauce with a Black Licorice Pomegranate Parfait Gelato Assortment in a Mascarpone Drizzle.

IIIB. Inconstancy of subject matter

Mythic speakers achieve some of their mythic status by maintaining a consistent one-to-one correspondence between their mode of speaking and the subject matter of their words (in this respect they resemble the “well-developed characters” lionized in American theater). A church congregation will speak liturgy; a salesman will speak of commodities and their advantages; a newscaster will speak of political events. There is no reason why a piece of music must respect this one-to-one correspondence. Once categories of speakers are established, the borders between them may be variously manipulated for compositional purposes: eroded, transgressed, periodically opened or closed, stretched, mislaid, splintered, or generally discarded.

Great Hymn of Thanksgiving, for example, utilizes five modes of speaking: congregational speaking (praying), newscasting, storytelling, dining-table chattering, and calling out in an emergency. Each of these modes of speaking, near the beginning, finds a subject matter appropriate to it: for example the congregational mode, when it first coalesces into a recognizable sound with all three performers speaking at once, speaks the words “Oh Lo” (implying “Lord”). But a few seconds later, the congregation says “Ground into a” — words which could be drawn from almost any of the other modes’ subject matter. As the first section progresses, the congregation speaks phrases such as “sow nor reap nor gather into barns” and “for thy thirsting peop” — phrases whose archaic syntax suggests a liturgical source, but whose subject matter refers also to food and drink, implying the speech mode of dining-table chattering.

In the terms of common musical practice, these convolutions of multiple speech mode subject matters within the single congregational speech mode sound could be described as preparations for a modulation: that modulation is reached when the congregation, much later in the piece, speaks the phrases “thirst for you... like a parched land.” Again it is a case of liturgical language with dinner-table subject matter, but by this point in the piece the audience has heard many descriptions of news events in Iraqi cities, culminating in the phrase, spoken in a newscaster’s voice, “Huguenin Benjamin of the International Red Cross calls what happened in Hilla.” This phrase appears directly after “thirst for you,” and anomalously the congregation joins in on the words “what happened in Hilla.” Therefore, when the phrase “like a parched

land” is heard fifteen seconds later in the congregation’s voice, it seems to refer not only to liturgical metaphor and to food and drink, but also to Iraq, the subject of the newscaster’s speech.

This type of modulation is designed not to result in a “message” — the fact that the choir is speaking the news apparently against its will could be considered indicative of a problem in society, and perhaps it is — but rather to give momentum to the force that erodes the borders between the initially distinct subject matters. That force is not simply entropic; it has a direction, it is moving the material in directions opposed to the material’s own tendencies. Such motions are the work of the piece, and perhaps they do constitute part of the piece’s message: if a piece finds the power to affect these types of texts, it need not do so with a disinterested, abstract neutrality.

Once that motion has been established it cannot be stopped. The next section in *Great Hymn of Thanksgiving* is the 90-second “sentence” mentioned above, spoken in the congregational tone, not only annihilating the congregational breath rhythm but also overflowing the borders between subject matters, creating a rush of phrases designed quasi-combinatorially to contain every possible confusion of the piece’s five subject matters (e.g. “hunched up like another napkin, thank you, full of tiny shards” or “oh Jesus who brings this all into blindingly clear perspective”), phrases which spill into each other faster than a subject matter can, of its own accord, change:

Severed eggs yes sure it’s going to crack oh Jesus we have some explosions left over on Earth as it is in we take you now in the helmet bowl we played soldiers more chopped ham oh shit no please it’s almost over Jane has the story in Mosul Thank you Dan I’m standing by the flaming automobile in Kirkuk an unknown number of crushed red peppers or one large jalapeno shredded and diced in its beak as it flew over crags and deserts the blood comes out there it’s going to crack the salt and pepper grinder crunch crunch bang it’s almost over tonight operation forgive us on Earth we’re losing transmission the boy’s hand found ten miles off in the crater by our competitor station the everlasting light drawer the stork is coming it’ll break no no ground into meat bang bang bang terrible beauty as unto them a child was born paralyzed give us this evening at ten nine eight next to the cracked bone handled knife container closet drawer now Lord now wait no this is safest to lift from the edges where the stork lost his feathers and the boy’s hand was found days later in the canyon pecked apart by crows a surprise for some commentators who had predicted clear returns within the next few weeks....

IIIC. Obstruction of the voice

All of these procedures place obstructions in the normal conduits of speech’s semantic meaning, so that speech’s sound may carry some of the significance that speech’s semantic

meaning tends to monopolize. The goal, remember, is not to level the playing field between sound and semantic meaning, but to create new dynamic slants in that field.

That being the case, why not literally place an obstruction in front of the voice? If the performer speaks while holding something over his / her mouth, the result will be that most of the sounds of speech will remain audible: tone, inflection, phrasing, etc. Just the words themselves will lose intelligibility — and the performer can learn how to adjust degrees of intelligibility. The composer can even create intelligibility envelopes: a sentence may begin intelligible and sink slowly, snap instantly, or veer suddenly into unintelligibility, pushing the sounds of the words to the foreground, or vice versa.

The more literally this is done, the better. When the audience sees a performer speaking, his / her mouth completely covered by a cowbell, the audience is absolved from worry as to whether they should be understanding the spoken words; they see that they are not supposed to understand the text, and this visual experience confirms and is confirmed by what they hear. Thus I require the performers to sometimes speak into plastic cups in *The Rattler's Narrative*, cowbells in *Great Hymn of Thanksgiving*, pipes in *PIPELINE*, plastic tubes in *A Brief Plot Summary of The Lady From Shanghai*, harmonicas in *American Folksongs opus 131*, and so on.

Each of these obstructions adds to the speaking voice a timbral and dynamic range of effects, produced by holding the cowbell / tube / etc. at different distances from the mouth. These effects are more like filters, or added layers of sound, than “extended techniques” for the voice (the performer is, after all, speaking completely normally, and the normal sound of speech can be heard, or even when not heard, *intuited*, as a continuous, independent layer within the many-layered sound-world of the piece). This is fortunate, because extended techniques for the voice have traditionally carried psychological baggage: a vocalist contorting his / her face to produce unusual vocal sounds becomes a character whose strange behavior can and must be explained via hypotheses about his / her contorted internal (mental or emotional) state. Such explanations locate all significance in the realm of meaning and none in the realm of structural function (a lunatic's behavior, by definition, has no structural function). Obstructions placed before the voice neatly avoid that issue because the performer is *not* contorting his / her voice, but rather speaking normally — the contortions in the sound of the voice are the results of external manipulations which are part of the sound environment.

These manipulations, and the timbral and dynamic effects they yield, widen the composer's options dramatically, since they add needed acoustic distinctions to the sounds of the speaking voice (the acoustic span which separates one speaking voice from another is fairly narrow unless manipulated). Using these distinctions, a composer can create contrapuntal layers between voices that would otherwise be indistinguishable from one another. Also, the composer

may use this added timbral and dynamic range to create acoustic shapes, timbral or dynamic envelopes, filter sweeps, tremolos, etc., layered on top of the natural sound of the speaking voice. Words can thus appear in bursts, bulbs, streams, trickles, gusts, and so on — and still be heard as everyday speech.

By “carving” shapes in this way from a steady stream of spoken words, the composer may create sounds that function as a sort of acoustic calligram. (“Calligram” is the name for a picture of an object made out of words, words which have in some way been contorted into the shape of the object.) In the simplest calligrams, the object the words depict is also the object the words name — the letters of the word “hat” are sculpted into the shape of a hat — but clearly, innumerable variations, convolutions, paradoxes, and full-on semiotic traumas are possible. Michel Foucault, in his essay on Rene Magritte’s painting “This is Not a Pipe,” cites several intriguing properties of the calligram:

1. “[The calligram] reduces phoneticism to a mere grey noise completing the contours of the shape....”
2. “[The calligram] renders outline as a thin skin that must be pierced in order to follow, word for word, the outpouring of its internal text.”
3. “As a sign, the letter permits us to fix words; as line, it lets us give shape to things.”

Each of these properties of visual calligrams could be rewritten to refer to acoustic calligrams:

1. “[The acoustic calligram] reduces spoken language to a mere grey noise completing the contours of the acoustic gesture....”
2. “[The acoustic calligram] renders the border of acoustic gesture as a thin skin that must be pierced in order to follow, word for word, the outpouring of its internal text.”
3. “As a sign, the word (or phoneme) permits us to fix meanings; as sound, it lets us give shape to events.”

Now imagine that Foucault is writing about acoustic calligrams: “Thus the calligram aspires playfully to efface the oldest oppositions of our alphabetical civilization: to show and to name; to shape and to say; to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to signify; to look and to read.” One could add: “to sing and to speak.”

IIID. Contradicted narrative time

Obstructions may also be conceptual constraints rather than physical ones. In the final section of *PIPELINE*, for example, three speech modes are entwined contrapuntally: folk storytelling, financial reporting, and the declamation of poetry. Their texts offer contradicting but related pictures of Cameroon: the folk tale depicts an amoral animal wilderness populated almost

entirely by trickster characters; the financial report crows over the progress of a pipeline built through Cameroon by international oil corporations; and the poetry affixes images to a dreamed-of collapse of colonialism.

Acoustic impediments composed into these texts complicate their interaction by giving each text a distinct time-related constraint. The folk tale is told through an imaginary filter which jumps ahead irregularly, sometimes several times a second, skipping crucial words and syllables of the text. One can still almost hear and understand the story, but simultaneously one hears that something is left out; that awareness interferes with narrative momentum, focusing attention instead on the immediate present. The financial report is delivered in unending sentences which double back on themselves without motivation: “IFC has funded a feasibility study and is now reviewing a potential equity data systems network of telecommunications systems for voice and data services to manage and control the pipeline and control pumps and pumps and control pumps and valves is being installed along stalled alongside the forest pines of Mararaba on the route in Cameraba...” This voice is spoken into a pipe, resulting in a sound similar to a voice on a television in an adjacent room; occasionally the performers allow the winding sentence to emerge from the pipe, tumbling over itself to become fully audible, but as the sentence emerges in these instances, several voices speak at once, overlapping each other, as if the sentence had burst from the pipe like an overgrown plant. The poetry is intoned in perfect unisons, fully intelligible; however, between the lines of poetry (each line three to seven words long) are gaps lasting up to twenty seconds, filled sometimes with other texts and sometimes with silences, gaps which strain and distort the memory of connections between the poem’s phrases.

These three distinct acoustic impediments create a complex sound world where meanings, whose edges have been made jagged, open, and incomplete, are bound to intermingle. But the impediments also separate the voices radically by pairing each voice with a relation to time which is not only distinct, but distinctly inappropriate to the voice’s content. The folk story, rather than constructing a plot, is made to focus obsessively on the immediate present — though it is told in past tense. The financial report, rather than announcing a present, is made to lurk continuously in the background, awaiting its eruption in the future — though it is spoken in present tense. And the poetry is made to call to itself across great gulfs in memory, invoking the past — though it is written in future tense. This counterpoint of straining tenses gives the different modes of speech, though sonically woven together, different temporal directions which heighten and highlight the tensions within and between them. The three voices echo separately in a silent, dynamic space “between tenses,” an animated time-frame of real and perceived silences wherein words, despite their actual temporal and acoustic and syntactic proximity to one another, cannot meet.

IIIE. Divided historical time

It is worth exploring how these strategies can operate within the context of theater. In

The Climb Up Mount Chimborazo, a play about Simon Bolivar and his tutor Simon Robinson, theatrical dialogue is stratified: while the two actors playing those two historical figures conduct a conversation in contemporary verse rhythms (with unusually long but syntactically valid sentences), words and phrases written in the 1800's by Bolivar and Robinson "poke up" through the dialogue, the syllables of these words distributed in scraps between the two actors so that the audience hears complete composite phrases which cannot be attributed to either one of the actors' voices. This strategy yields not only a two-tiered dialogue, featuring acoustically distinct texts arriving from two different centuries, but also an evocation of the difficulties of depicting history: the words written by the real Bolivar and Robinson are heard as reassembled shards, as if excavated from beneath the surface of the fully audible (and visible) scene — a scene depicting Bolivar and Robinson's interactions as historical fiction.

In this context, the distributed shards of primary source texts appear as an extreme form of interference, the sharpest on the scale of anachronisms that ripple through all levels of the dialogue with greater or lesser disruptive effects. (In the most extreme instance, the excavated text turns out not to be a brief phrase written by Bolivar or Robinson, but a lengthy passage from *Huckleberry Finn*.) However, the relationship between the interference and the interfered-with is unstable, and scenes like the one just described give way to scenes in which primary source texts break into the foreground, alternating with each other as if they were dialogue:

Bolivar: I love that man like mad
Robinson: Let us not deceive ourselves
Bolivar: A genius, a marvel of grace
Robinson: Without popular education
Bolivar: I love him to the point of distraction
Robinson: There can be no true society

In other cases, shards of primary source texts may suddenly dissolve into scattered syllables and phonemes, still recognizable as fragments of phrases but too diffuse to coalesce into a semantic whole.

Finally, distributed shards of primary source text are presented in a scene with no dialogue. They therefore become, de facto, the foreground, while retaining their background tone: interference with nothing to interfere in. Shards of a past robbed of a present become footnotes to a blank page.

IIIF. The musical / semantic axis and "semantic sounds"

Until this point, I have discussed mainly constraints placed on language. It is equally important to consider what constraints might be placed on musical and instrumental resources in

order to ensure that the shifting relationships between functions and meanings remain dynamic. A few thoughts:

“Melody” in its traditional heroic form (and all the 12-tone variants on that form) is not terribly helpful. Melody, even just the thought of melody, has a tendency to communicate sincerity of meaning, whether it is attached to words or not. Schubert’s songs demonstrate how this liability (I am sorry to have to call it that) of melody can be attenuated by creating sung melodies that approximate speech melodies. Any of the songs of *Die Winterreise* can be used to demonstrate how moving along an axis of melody, with singing-like melodies at one end and speech-like melodies at the other, can open up a text, both deepening and exposing its speaker / singer’s secrets.

Extrapolating from that observation, *Great Hymn of Thanksgiving* constructs a musical environment whose entire collection of instrumental resources falls along an axis ranging from the musical to the semantic. On one end are spoken words, nearly always cloaked by a constraint or an acoustic impediment or envelope. On the other end are musical instruments, but significantly, the axis stops short of instruments from the center of the philharmonic tradition; instead of cellos, trumpets, and so on, *Great Hymn of Thanksgiving* uses an autoharp, a toy piano, and a steel drum. None of these instruments is played in its customary way (it seems unusual to refer to “extended techniques” for instruments which hardly have a performance practice associated with them); as a result, the pitches which sometimes emerge from these instruments (and from wineglasses, mixing bowls, and bowed cymbals) seem to have emerged quasi-accidentally, as if pitch were present despite the musical resources rather than because of them.

In the middle of the axis, *Great Hymn of Thanksgiving* offers forks, butterknives (played on both their smooth and serrated edges), plates, peppermills — the tools of a fully adorned dinner table. The sounds these produce can be composed into shapes evoking musical relationships, but can also be left to evoke, acoustically as well as visually, their daily context: in other words, they can be made to produce “sound effects.”

Sound effects evoke the “real world” but also the world of radio theater, dramas enacted by invisible voices, a “reality” one could never see, touch, or quite believe, but which was always surprisingly, multidimensionally *representational*. Is a tape recording of a glass breaking more like a sound or a word? Sound effects introduce a new category into the mixture of music and text, a category I would not call concrete sounds (there is nothing remotely concrete about them) but “semantic sounds.” It is a category of mischievous hybrids. Should I listen to what the breaking glass sounds like, or what it “means?”

To a certain extent, the answer to that question will depend on the context established by

other sounds. But also, the breaking glass will influence how I hear the other sounds in its context. After hearing a glass break, I may hear a plucked violin as also being a “sound effect” — the sound of a violin treated with a particular physical energy — and not only as an abstract sound. Still, if the breaking glass produces a ringing “f” note and the violin plucks a “g” note, I may hear and remember that essentially non-semantic relationship, especially if it connects to other whole-steps elsewhere in the piece as part of a scaffolding of non-semantic relationships. Or, I might be led to hear the tension in the plucked string in relation to the broader semantic notion of “breaking” — since the glass released a physical tension by breaking, I am now attuned to the physical tension in the string and expect that tension to break. (Or maybe the string itself will break!)

Helmut Lachenmann’s opera *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelholzern* provides an example: the sound of a chorus of singers rubbing their hands together in rapid circular motions is a sort of indistinctly periodized “whoosh,” an animated version of the many “whooshes” of white noise emerging from the orchestra (air blown through trumpets, strings bowing on wood, etc.). All of these whooshes seem to be allied by their acoustic similarity. But the sound of the chorus’s hands becomes a “sound effect” when it is heard in relation to the story: the match seller is rubbing her hands together for warmth in the wintry street. In this case, the other whooshes must represent the sound of the cold wind, semantically opposed to the rubbing of hands for warmth. Indeed, the semantic idea of “warmth” forms allegiances via the related circular motion of rubbing hands: later in the opera, the growing flame of a match burned for warmth is represented by the circular rubbing of a bowl gong. The sound of the gong grows to a large chord. Then, when the match goes out, the only sound left is the sound of styrofoam packaging material rubbed together in circular motions, thereby recognizable as the last vestige of an attempt to create warmth.

Thus semantic sounds, quasi-sound-effects, operate as fulcrum points, from which sound may spill into semantic, musical, or further hybrid categories. Chains of such sounds connected by acoustic similarity become intriguingly multidimensional when almost any sound along the chain has the potential to become semantic, suddenly or gradually, via its proximity to sound effects heard as such, or to become abstract via its proximity to abstract sounds heard as such.

III G. Inversion of narrative elements — Pulling apart the elephant in the room

Interfering in a voice’s phrase lengths, obstructing the sound of the voice, and most of the other techniques described above may produce far-reaching effects, but rarely will those effects reach far enough to compete with the colossal, fundamental, elephant-in-the-room issue of what the voice is *talking about*. When the goal is to emphasize language’s structural workings as forcefully as its meanings, the largest scale must be attended to as well as the smallest.

Returning to Levi-Strauss, who asserts that events in myth have a structural function greater than their semantic meaning, we are invited to observe that a narrative element in a story gains its significance through its relationships to the other elements; in fact an entire myth can be defined by these relationships among its elements, while the individual elements themselves may display a great deal of variability. It is the relationships, Levi-Strauss seems to say, which must remain fixed.

We are not, however, composing myths. Rather, we are using this very aspect of the construction of myths to assist us in emphasizing language's structural workings as forcefully as its meanings. There is no reason we cannot subject the relationships of the narrative elements to large, unsubtle structural recombinations. And when operating on the scale of an entire story, or even a master narrative, the less subtle the recombination the better. One may, for example, recombine the narrative elements of a story by inverting them. Not only does inversion of narrative elements yield new combinations, but more importantly, the very act of inversion lends its own status as a blatantly (even archetypically) structural operation to the proceedings, enhancing the emphasis on structural resonances and dissonances between the new and the old combinations.

Again, an example occurs in Helmut Lachenmann's opera *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelholzern*, when the story of the match-seller in the snow is interrupted by the words of the imprisoned Gudrun Ensslin: while the match-seller is locked outside, imagining in glowing terms the alluring world inside, the revolutionary is locked inside, describing in excoriating terms the repelling world outside. Leonardo da Vinci's text inverts the terms of the narrative once more (and along a different axis) by positing a wanderer who stands comfortably outside a cave, both repelled and allured by the discomfiting secrets of the cave's interior. Many have called these interpolations "non-narrative," but that is a misnomer. Each story is perfectly narrative, representing a perfectly consistent narrator's perspective. That each perspective is inconsistent with the others would be irrelevant were it not for the fact that all three perspectives employ the same narrative elements (inside and outside, warmth and cold, repulsion and allure) in drastically different relationships, thus highlighting those relationships and the rules governing them — in other words, their structure. What's important is not that the story has been interrupted, but that the interruptions, by inverting the elements of the stories, have shown them to be elements of stories, elements fulfilling narrative functions; the inversions demonstrate that the functions these elements fulfill in the match-seller's story would be different in a different story.

Thus in *Simulcast* the story of a solitary salesman contemplating a presentation he will give to a crowd of executives is concatenated with the story of a crowd of interrogators contemplating the questions they will fire at a solitary prisoner. In *Great Hymn of Thanksgiving*, a newscast describing the continuous destruction of targets (children) in Iraq alternates with a fairy tale (a story for children) of a stork who flies toward a magical mountain but never reaches

it, offering along the way to carry a child to his family. Inverting the piece's many words and sounds of eating are the descriptions of bombed children, described in terms of eating: "spilling out his intestines," and "who cannot eat because his bowel is perforated," and finally "the boy's hand found days later in the canyon pecked apart by crows." In *PIPELINE*, oil companies use cutting edge pipeline technology and the latest free trade policies to empty Chad of millions of gallons of oil while a hyena crawls into a lion's anus to scrape the lion's intestines and is trapped there until death. And in *A Brief Plot Summary of The Lady From Shanghai*, the daring romantic exploits of Orson Welles et al are interwoven with the nearly silent, nonstarting romance fizzling on the couch from which the film is being viewed. Each piece tells multiple stories, stories made up of shared narrative elements pulling in opposing directions, sometimes pulling the stories apart.

CONCLUSION

To pull apart language, to separate language from one or more of its customary sounds, rhythms, voices, durations, directions, continuities, functions, and meanings; to separate voices from one or more of their customary unities, contexts, phrasings, breath patterns, functions, meanings, speakers, and texts; to separate speakers from their customary sense, characters from their customary intentions, words from their customary allegiance to their meanings and musical sounds from their customary allegiance to the abstract — to do all this is to dissolve the landscape of language and its practice of making meaning in much the same way that recent instrumental music has dissolved the world of instrumental performance practice, and with similar goals: not to erase language and meaning, but to see and hear them anew, as if for the first time.

To dissolve a piece of language is to dissolve its context, its meaning, its history, and ultimately a voice. To dissolve a voice is to dissolve its speakers and listeners. Taking apart the elements of myths takes apart myths, and the authority conferred by myth upon its elements (thus the dissolving at a certain stage can share the goals of satire, as authority is undermined by the distortion and dissolution of its context).

For several decades in the later half of the twentieth century, new music used its unique cultural position to level a tremendous intervention, a critique of Western cultural history. It would now be a betrayal of that critique to deem it sufficient, or to allow it to solidify into a new role for music: the Failures-of-History Theme Park, where musical abstraction becomes the consolation prize for failure to enter the world of meaning. The moat around music must be breached; the contemporary textual landscape must be engaged fully, head on. Only in engagement with that landscape, that lion's den of language, can language recover and be recovered. Even in this era of unfathomably debased speech, when the public sphere competes with the "blogosphere" to discover the most medieval use of modern "communication" technology, when political discourse disappears beyond the horizon of fatal embarrassment as

commercial culture elevates cliché to the status of folklore; even and especially at this time, we must not flatter ourselves by adopting the poetic stance of an inability to speak. We can speak, we do speak — we *are* and we *have been* speaking — that's the issue. And no matter how airtight the aesthetic that exalts our inability to speak in the face of historical horrors, it cannot absolve us of the need to discover what we might say, what we may already have said, and what we might in fact right now be saying. (Hence the need for music.)