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## Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, *Musically Sublime: Indeterminacy, Infinity, Irresolvability*

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Music has always occupied a problematic position in the realm of philosophy. Paired with text or (dramatic) action, it may invite interpretation, but what is a toccata or a string quartet 'about'? Within an aesthetic framework based on representation, music is the odd one out, emerging in time rather than in space, being audible rather than visible. This gives rise to a fundamental paradox featuring any musico-intellectual discourse. Musicologists are supposed to 'explain' music just as literary scholars 'elucidate' narratives and art historians 'read' paintings. But how can musical sounds be elucidated through words if they are devoid of conceptual meaning?

Granted, all the humanities suffer from this hermeneutic dead lock, but in the study of music it can be paralyzing. Musicians traditionally regard musicologists with suspicion. They claim that only those who *do* music are entitled to *interpret* it, preferably 'in terms' of itself: offering a 'musical interpretation'.<sup>1</sup> Scholars in adjoining disciplines, by contrast, watch musicologists with weariness because musicologists seem unwilling or unable to handle the theoretical tools that are common property in history, literary theory, and cultural analysis. Musicologists often perceive the demands of musical and academic practices as an impossible *Doppelaufgabe* (Kalisch 2000: 71) because they consider these practices irreconcilable.

But how irreconcilable are these practices? Why would music be less 'interpretable' than other forms of artistic expression such as painting or literature? These questions kept nagging me while I was reading Kiene Brillenburg Wurth's remarkable book about the musically sublime. Brillenburg Wurth makes it very clear that she is not investigating how the sublime appears *in* music (which has been done many times be-

fore in the ample sources she cites), but rather in what way music *is* the sublime, *performs* the sublime. Thus, rather than focus on music as a concrete phenomenon, she focuses on music as a philosophical tool for the clarification of a concept (the sublime) (47), boldly defying all the prejudices that have determined music's status as a 'meaningless' art and the musicologist's (in)capacity to expose this. That alone already makes her study an invaluable project.

This bold reversal of things – using music to clarify a concept rather than using concepts to clarify music – is not without its pitfalls. In proper scholarly fashion, Brillenburg Wurth's clarification remains an explanation, an unfolding with words. She needs to explain music before she can use it as a hermeneutic tool, and for this explanation she needs concepts. Being a literary scholar, she displays a daunting virtuosity in handling the incredibly wide range of concepts she feels she needs. A musicologist who reads her work might feel like he or she is doddering through a dark room, stumbling over objects that are vaguely recognizable but not quite. 'Is this Derrida's *différance* I am stumbling on now? Or in fact Lyotard's *différend*? And what are they doing here?'

My metaphor of obscurity is functional in this context, for Brillenburg Wurth mentions obscurity as an important aspect of various interpretations of the sublime experience. Again, she is very explicit in her intention to provide her own philosophical interpretation of the sublime rather than present a historical overview of other interpretations. Still, I find her study as much a historiographical as a philosophical exercise. In her choice of philosophical and musical sources she focuses on a specific historical period (eighteenth to twentieth centuries) and repertoire (Western classical music). In five balanced and well-proportioned chapters, she takes interpretations of the sublime by Edmund Burke (1729-1797), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) as a starting points, while also addressing interpretations by Arthur Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

She juxtaposes these interpretations of the sublime with the idea of *Sehnsucht* among several German *Frühromantiker* such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, Ludwig Tieck and Wilhelm Wack-

1 See Laurence Dreyfus (2007) for a critical discussion of the notion of a 'musical interpretation'.

enroder, and uses the musicologist Arthur Seidl's concept of *Formwidrigkeit* as a tool for revealing that Kant's romantic and Lyotard's postmodern sublime are in fact less divergent than they would seem at first sight. It is on this insight that Brillenburg Wurth builds her own interpretation of the sublime experience: that of an aporetic and liminal sublime featured by indeterminacy, infinity, and irresolvability. In order to bolster her case she draws on Freud's account of the interaction between life (*Eros*) and death (*Thanatos*) drives, Derrida's concept of *différance*, and the Deleuzian *affect*.

For those who are not yet mindboggled, Brillenburg Wurth takes on yet another task: to 'reread this experience "musically"'. For this, she construes 'dialogues' between the earlier-mentioned philosophical stances and musical compositions from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, showing that these compositions *stage* the sublime, rather than *represent* it: 'this, here is where the sublime happens as *musically* sublime, this is how it *hears* here (or might hear) rather than how we can *think* it.' (9) At the same time, she intends to support the existing claim that the rise of instrumental music in the nineteenth century is inextricably interwoven with a fascination with the sublime (14) – a quite explicit historiographical aim. 'To reinforce the fact that this is about *listening to* sounds rather than reading notes,' Brillenburg Wurth continues, 'I have based myself on specific recordings rather than scores alone.' (9)

For a musicologist, the binary created here between listening to sounds versus reading notes is not entirely fair. Any decent analysis is based on hearing the sounds while reading the notes. However, her choice of a specific musical performance of a score (which she always substantiates) enables her to write a very direct report of her listening experience, supported by

– sometimes detailed, sometimes less detailed – analytical observations. Her observations not only concern harmonic and rhythmic progressions, instrumentation, and metrical patterns (which she obtains from the score), but also tempo, rubato, dynamics, and touch (referring to time indications in the recording). Thus, she can emphasize the dynamics that make up the process of a (sublime) experience.<sup>2</sup>

So what is a sublime experience? Brillenburg Wurth paraphrases Burke describing it as a "great and awful sensation" that momentarily halts the mind and "fills it with terror," freezing it into a debilitating stupor' (2). 'There is something that arrests the mind,' Brillenburg Wurth goes on to explain, 'but this arrest harbors its own release: the experience of fright or frustration screens a reversal in that it signals to the mind the possibility of its opposite. The pain becomes an occasion for pleasure; the latter is mediated by the former, so that this pain is never more than a go-between. It is this passage, as if it were a failsafe thoroughfare, that I question in this book, by rereading the sublime "musically"' (2).

In order to question this 'passageway' (3) of pain towards pleasure, Brillenburg Wurth focuses on Kant's analysis of the sublime in his third *Critique of Judgment*. Kant describes a similar 'passageway' when a subject encounters an object too great for comprehension or too mighty to be resisted. The subject experiences a painful difficulty in trying to measure itself up to or resist this object, but then overcomes the pain in a delightful moment of release or self-transcendence. Once the subject realizes that nature may appear awesome to the eye and the imagination but can merely simulate the unlimited extent of reason, the subject can switch from pain to pleasure (3-4). Whereas Burke's existential sublime evolves around the delight of having a physical life (being at a safe physical

2 Although Brillenburg Wurth does not mention it, this manner of analysis not only has a philosophical, but also a historiographical relevance. Increasingly, music historians and music theorists acknowledge that precisely those aspects of the performance that cannot be reproduced in a score were of the utmost importance in nineteenth-century musical practice. The demand of *Werktreue* (fidelity to the *Urtext* left to us by the composer) was imposed not by taking the written score literally, but by using it as a guiding manual for the understanding and unveiling of the composer's intentions (Dreyfus 2007, 261ff). Although Brillenburg Wurth is obviously not concerned with the composer's intentions, she seems to favour the unwritten, unobjectified aspects of a musical work over those that can be captured in a score in order to arrive at some kind of 'deeper' level or alternative method of understanding its meaning, as if (sounding) music steps in where (verbal) representation falters. Thus, she joins a number of illustrious nineteenth-century thinkers (whom I will mention later), in reinforcing a perceived tension between music and representation.

distance from the source of terror), Kant's critical sublime evolves around the delight of having a rational mind (transcending the source of terror). Brillenburg Wurth argues that the Kantian sublime experience acts out the dynamics of mythological plot structure, a narrative with a beginning (rest), a middle (crisis) and an end (climactic resolution), with a pivotal point when pain topples into pleasure (5).

Lyotard's reworking of Kant's transcendental sublime into an 'immanent' sublime (in which the sublime is *inherent* to a work of art rather than *hinted at* by a work of art) is seminal in Brillenburg Wurth's own rereading of the sublime. Lyotard associates this immanent sublime unreservedly with an aural 'network', pointing out that visual arts and literature can also 'behave aurally' (105). 'This feeling,' Brillenburg Wurth explains, 'no longer exclusively turns on a mind suspended by shock but on a mind willingly suspending its own intentions to welcome the unknown. If and when an alien, un-thought event happens is contingent, yet it is this very contingency that makes up its sublimity as an *occurrence*: something that appears all of a sudden out of nowhere.' (104)

Whereas Lyotard emphatically distances himself from Kant's transcendentalism, Brillenburg Wurth sets out to reveal that Kant's romantic and Lyotard's postmodern sublime are not that different. She observes that Lyotard's sublime of 'open immanence' as described above is subject to a narrative structure of taxation and difficulty similar to Kant's (7). Moreover, in her chapters on Burke and Kant, she has already cleverly hinted at the immanence of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sublime: the staging of disruption per se (through contingency and occurrence) rather than the representation of it. She draws on Burke's explication of the existential sublime as a double privation: first a privation of certainty (threat) and, second, a privation through the suspension of that threat. She also situates this 'sustaining of lack' in the experience of *Sehnsucht*: 'the romantic, catastrophic longing for the infinite that can repeat itself infinitely' (47).

Brillenburg Wurth finds a crucial tool to down-

play the differences between romantic and postmodern sublimity in Arthur Seidl's quaint explanation of the sublime *of* (rather than *in*) music as *Formwidrigkeit*: a staged suggestion of (formal) excess or disruption against the background of formal regularity and conventions. 'Thus conceived,' she says, expanding Seidl's concept, 'form-contrariness will be linked to the shock of the new: the surprise that in the absence of absolute foundations something new and unforeseen by artistic rules suddenly happens after all. Or the threat, conversely, that no such possibility will ever announce itself again: nothing, the neuter, remains when anything, no matter what, could be made.' (112) Whereas Lyotard reserves this sublime of immanence quite strictly for (post)modernist experiments, Brillenburg Wurth situates it in a range of romantic musical practices, taking Chopin's Prelude in A minor Op. 28/2, the 'Chorus Mysticus' from Liszt's *Faust Symphonie*, and the piano solo version of his *Totentanz* as examples of form-contrary experimentation.

For music historians, this exercise does not provide much new information. Chopin's and Liszt's fascination with formal fragmentation, harmonic excess, and sonic distortion (124) is well known and has already been solidly identified as self-aware avant-garde experimentation comparable to that of the twentieth century (Dahlhaus 1970; Samson 1992: 4; Williamson 2002: 291). More important is her mentioning of Lyotard's notion of the postmodern immanent sublime as the 'sublimity of "now" ... a moment already beginning to disappear as it is being pronounced' (124-125). As Brillenburg Wurth points out, the ever fleeting and ungraspable present has been a crucial issue in the whole of Western philosophy. She makes this issue audible by means of the musical experiments of John Cage (4'33") and Morton Feldman (*Piano and Orchestra*), representatives of the twentieth-century avant-garde. I would like to add that in the nineteenth century, the obsession with the '(im)possibility of being touched by the instantaneousness of the instant' (125) was also explained musically,<sup>3</sup> which supports Brillenburg Wurth's claim that romantic and

3 The elaborate nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse on the association of music with 'the moment that already begins to disappear as it is being pronounced' revolved around the question of whether music was – precisely for the reason of ephemerality – an impotent art or profoundly 'meaningful'. (Sponheuer 1987: 115; Titus 2005: 49ff; Vischer [1857], § 764: 64; Hanslick [1854]: 86-87).

(post)modern interpretations of the sublime are not as divergent as they might seem at first sight.

But Brillenburg Wurth's trump card to disprove the binary distinction between romantic and postmodern interpretations of the sublime is Lyotard's own analysis of the Kantian transcendental sublime. Following Lyotard, Brillenburg Wurth points to a 'fatal subtext in Kant's third *Critique* threatening to undermine the grand gesture' of self-transcendence (139). This is the impossibility to fulfil ideas on the level of sensibility (64ff). Imagination, on the level of sensibility, can *apprehend* an idea through a mathematical estimation by means of counting numbers extending into infinity. It cannot, however, *comprehend* this idea in one intuitive grasp as an absolute totality, although the voice of reason summons the imagination to do so. Due to this intrusion of reason into the domain of sensibility, an idea (as a product of reason) remains empty, incomplete and undetermined (67): it is an 'imperfect idea'. Lyotard identifies this intrusion as a *différend*: a conflict in which one party (imagination) is denied the possibility of a response due to a hegemonic force (reason). Lyotard highlights the irresolvable breach between imagination and reason, the impassible bridge between the sensible and the supersensible (134).

Brillenburg Wurth, however, further deconstructs Kant's 'fatal subtext' and convincingly relates this to the Burkean idea of the 'artificial infinite' (41) and the romantic experience of *Sehnsucht* (52 ff). Thus, she once again reveals that open immanence featured in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interpretations of the sublime as much as in twentieth-century ones. She highlights the fact that the intrusion of the mind into the realm of the sensible is not necessarily unproductive. The 'imperfect idea' opens up 'a space of unbounded imaginative activity that, however, remains inconclusive because this very same openness obstructs a *goal-directed* activity. As a faculty of image-making, the imagination fails to produce a "complete whole," a perfect picture, and is to that extent ineffective. At the same time, this ineffectiveness intimates a potentially creative excess: in the absence of a stable given, the imagination can attempt a myriad of possible forms and images, which would attest to its flexibility and inventiveness.' (41)

This notion of an 'imperfect idea' is central

to Brillenburg Wurth's attempt to reread the sublime experience musically. Musically? Or in musico-intellectual terms? And whose musico-intellectual terms? Brillenburg Wurth says she strives for philosophical rather than historiographical aims. The philosophical tools she employs, however, have a specific historical context that remains underexposed. 'As a philosophical concept that opens up a critical domain,' Brillenburg Wurth argues, "'music" affects the course of the sublime sense in a rather dramatic way: it changes the track of conversion into *suspension*. More specifically, I argue that, in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interactions with "*musicality*," as the *indefinite* (*endless and undecided*), the sublime *branches off* into a feeling that *defers resolution* as it *undermines its own progress*, or into a feeling that always *defers completion* because it *suspends consciousness* – and hence *cannot be retrieved or resolved*. That is to say, in these interactions the sublime feeling often turns out *unfinished or unaccomplished*.' (9) [Italics added – BT]

The idiom, italicized, that Brillenburg Wurth uses here to describe music (and the sublime) is entirely determined by the philosophical discourses that featured in the late eighteenth and – and this is often downplayed or ignored – the larger part of the nineteenth century: an idealist discourse that was dominated not so much by music enthusiasts such as Hoffmann, but rather by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1832) and Friedrich Theodor Vischer (1807–1887), who, like Kant, profoundly distrusted the aesthetic qualities of music (Titus 2005). I wonder whether it is possible to connect the musical with the sublime without addressing the reasons why Brillenburg Wurth's nineteenth-century colleagues (Hoffmann, Schopenhauer, Wagner, Nietzsche, Seidl) did it: namely to legitimize music as a proper fine art with sufficient interpretative, or if you wish 'spiritual' (*geistreich*), content. The prejudice of being meaningless may have haunted music since times immemorial, but the intellectual tools to disprove this prejudice were developed in a very particular historical setting. The gradual revaluation, during the nineteenth century, of features such as 'obscurity', 'emptiness', 'lack', 'indetermination', 'limitless excess', and 'disruption' – key concepts in Brillenburg Wurth's 'musical' interpretation of the sublime – clarifies why, as Brillenburg Wurth herself as-

serts, 'the rise of instrumental music cannot be disconnected from the sublime' (14). But this is a historical development, and, as far as I am concerned, it does not necessarily say anything about the philosophical tenability of the connection between the sublime and music.

Because she minimizes this historical context of her philosophical exercise, Brillenburg Wurth downplays the huge philosophical importance of her project: the use of music to clarify a concept. Rather, it now becomes part of a nineteenth-century legitimation project that she could have considered with more historical distance.<sup>4</sup> However, this does not make her musical interpretation of the sublime less compelling and exciting. She rereads the sublime as 'an affect that cannot be unequivocally or satisfactorily resolved' (150). But unlike Lyotard, she does not consider this irresolvability as an impassible abyss between two opposing principles of pleasure and pain, or reason and imagination. Rather, it is an affect caught in its own conflicting intensities 'paradoxically inscribed in each other' (161). Inspired by Jacques Derrida, Brillenburg Wurth calls this 'endless shimmering of unstable intensities' *différance* (138), meaning both difference and deferment.

Whereas this irresolvability was implicit in Kant as a 'fatal subtext' of his transcendental thinking, it became explicit in Schopenhauer's interpretation of the sublime. The Schopenhauerian sublime is a forceful, conscious break with the Will through knowing and contemplation, while the subject remains a symptom of desire, oscillating between transcendence of and submission to the Will (82-83). Nietzsche's description of the mutual dependence of Apollonian *Schein* and Dionysian *Rausch* (directly associated with music) displays a similar inconclusiveness. The Apollonian safety net prevents the spectator-listener from drowning in the Dionysian current, but it never conclusively covers or removes Dionysian power (98).

This 'being caught in conflicting intensities' is described by Brillenburg Wurth in terms of trauma, which, as she herself notes, at first seems far-fetched. Although both revolve around 'a painful helplessness, a loss of con-

trol, and a threat of annihilation,' the sublime is featured by distance (otherwise pain cannot be transformed into pleasure) whereas trauma is featured by a lack of distance (144). Brillenburg Wurth, however, points to the dissociation that is part of both the sublime and the traumatic experience: 'this is not happening to me; it may be someone else's experience.' The subject suspends itself in order to prevent the traumatic or sublime object from invading it. Traumatic encounters rehearse a presubjective state of being, an emotional identification that precedes all self-representation in order to resist active integration of traumatic object and traumatized subject (149). But because of this lack of inscription, the subject is trapped in an experience that is at the same time inaccessible (forgotten) and irremovable (unforgettable). Instead of closure and transcendence, there is a pattern of potentially endless repetition (150-151).

Brillenburg Wurth explores this state of being in the context of Freud's ideas about the interaction of life drives and death drives as two sides of the same coin. Needless to say, many of Freud's ideas were foreshadowed not only in nineteenth-century pathology, but also in the realm of aesthetics. Nineteenth-century aestheticians attributed great importance to a pre-egoic, pre-conscious or pre-linguistic realm in the human psyche, and they often pointed at music as the only form of expression that could in some way access this realm. Hearing was considered the most intimate sensibility because it registers a process rather than a (self-)representation and therefore might indeed precede (self-)representation (Helmholtz [1863], 555; Vischer [1857] § 747). Brillenburg Wurth's focus on music as an opportunity to touch on a pre-subjective state of being has, indeed, an illustrious nineteenth-century history too. It has been reiterated by the many twentieth-century thinkers she cites, but never really questioned. The question is: is Brillenburg Wurth's focus on music as an interpretative tool indispensable for her impressive intellectual *tour de force* that I have tried to summarize here? For her rethinking of the sublime in terms of trauma, the an-

4 This supports my contention (which is by no means a reproach) that Brillenburg Wurth stands closer to the nineteenth-century scholarly tradition that she studies than she would have us believe. She uses a nineteenth-century intellectual apparatus to describe music as an unconventional art and – as I noted earlier – she uses nineteenth-century analytical methods to bolster this apparatus (see footnote 2).

swer is: yes. Her analysis of the Andantino of Franz Schubert's Piano Sonata in A major D 959 is absolutely crucial in revealing the dynamics of suspension, invasion, dislocation, and compulsive repetition that she situates in the sublime as trauma, and I don't think I will ever be able to hear this piece again in any other way than in terms of trauma. Brillenburg Wurth's analysis has made me more aware of its form, or rather its *Formwidrigkeit* – its disruption of the tonal and formal conventions it thrives on – precisely because she has attributed an interpretative capacity to this *Formwidrigkeit*.

The functionality, however, of some of the other analyses is less obvious to me, not because I do not hear what Brillenburg Wurth observes in them, but rather because they make me doubt the distinctiveness of the sublime experience. When discussing the Burkean, Kantian, Schopenhauerian, Nietzschean, Lyotardian, and Brillenburg-Wurthian sublime, there are quite a number of experiential dynamics to be addressed that are contained in the interaction of pain and pleasure: tension versus relief, stasis versus mobility, regression versus anticipation, unity versus dispersal, limitedness versus limitlessness. Brillenburg Wurth addresses them in detail and the great merit of her study is that she successfully problematizes their binary opposition and shows their interwovenness. In music, Brillenburg Wurth claims, we are actually able to hear (and hence experience on a level of sensibility) this interwovenness, this oscillation, this irresolvability of all those binaries.

But does this audible oscillation suffice to identify the sublime? Is Brillenburg Wurth's account of the sublime not rather an account of experiencing per se? In other words: is not any experience an unstable, shimmering mixture of pleasure and pain in various degrees of intensity? As for the role of music in explicating this experience, I seek refuge in the writings of the formalist Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904), no matter what Seidl may have said to dismiss him (99). Hanslick famously described music as 'tönend bewegte Formen' (Hanslick [1854], 75). Music does not represent feelings, but it moves according to the dynamics of those feelings: tension and relief, stasis and mobility, etc. Thus, music is able to stage the dynamics of any experience, and becomes meaningful in its 'Nachwirkung vorher verklungener Töne' (Hanslick [1854], 79). If I were to write

an essay on the banal, I could use the *Radetzky March* by Johann Strauss Sr. as an interpretative tool for the explication of my interpretation of the banal: an adherence to convention ('*Formhaftigkeit*' rather than *Formwidrigkeit*, so to speak) that signals an experiential process of regularity, resemblance, recognizability and predictability. In that case, I would not be talking about the banal of music, because the music is not necessarily banal, it just (intentionally or unintentionally) stages the dynamics of the banal experience. Hence, I cannot agree with Brillenburg Wurth's assertion that she talks about the sublime of music rather than the sublime in music. I do not believe that there is a difference. In my opinion, she talks about the sublime as music, just as one might talk about the banal as music. Thus, music cannot be the exclusive harbour of the sublime or be singularly paired with the sublime, something that Brillenburg Wurth does not explicitly claim but nevertheless suggests.

These, however, are marginal comments on an otherwise superb attempt to draw music into the realm of mature theoretization. Brillenburg Wurth's project is urgently needed and warmly welcomed in a musicological discourse that still struggles with music's putative lack of interpretative capacities, reiterated time and again by both musicians and academics. My comments should, therefore, be read emphatically as enthusiasm for, and sincere engagement with, this manner of theorizing music, even though it might come across as tough and inaccessible for many musicologists. Like Brillenburg Wurth, I am not particularly worried by the inconclusiveness of her attempt to reread the sublime musically. In the final sentences of her book, she expresses her concern to '[bring] home the problem that the sense of the sublime is never more than the (after)effect of an untraceable interaction.' (176) That may be as much as one can say about it; all the rest is music...

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