

Throughout his career, Peter Ablinger has focused extensively on noise in nearly every capacity, especially as it appears in his extensive *Weiss/Weisslich* (*White/Whitish*) series. This essay discusses some of these works along with a specific piece from Ablinger's *phonorealism* series, in which recorded speech is transformed directly into the music-mechanical production of tones played by a computer-controlled player piano.

Between Noise and Language: The Sound Installations and Music of Peter Ablinger

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*I am not a musician by profession and therefore, I
have no acoustical prejudices, nor works to defend. I
am a futurist painter who projects beyond himself,
into an art much-beloved and studied, his desire to
renew everything.* —Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises:*

A Futurist Manifesto

*I do not believe in the new. At best, I believe in a
renewal in the sense of a permanent process, in the
sense of an equilibrium. Renewal is needed for things
to stay the same.* —Peter Ablinger, “*Die Klänge inter-
essieren mich nicht/The Sounds Do Not Interest Me*”

Though the Berlin-based Austrian artist and composer Peter Ablinger has gained significant exposure in

European contexts ranging from music performances to gallery installations and discussions in various German publications, save for some notable exceptions (residencies at Villa Aurora and the Santa Monica Museum of Art, Los Angeles, and Bard College, New York), coverage of his work in North America, especially within a discursive context such as this journal, has been relatively limited. I will not be ambitious enough to attempt to cover the composer's entire oeuvre, which, for his nearly three

decades of consistent artistic output, could already be considered staggering. Rather, I will concentrate on a few important threads I perceive as running throughout his work and that I have continued to find stimulating and provocative. The first: *noise as totality: as phenomena, in lived duration, in action, or in concept*. Throughout his career, Ablinger has focused extensively on noise in nearly every capacity, including ways of obtaining noise, ways of recording noise, and ways of listening to noise—a kind of listening, I might add, that need not actually include sound at all. To Ablinger, listening represents “any type of perception, the ways in which we react to the world which we have to create through the same perception in the first place. Listening is thus the means of observing perception” (Ablinger, “Keine” 87). Perception, pivotal for an engagement with Ablinger’s noise work, should also prove invaluable in discussing questions regarding language and music in relation to Ablinger’s work with the materiality of sound and speech, work he has called “phonorealism.” This forms another thread of interest: *the relationship between language and music*. In discussing work from Ablinger’s phonorealism series—concentrating on one work, entitled *A Letter From Schoenberg*, a piece in which recorded speech is transduced directly into the music-mechanical production of musical tones played by a computer-controlled player piano—I will explore questions regarding music, language, and representation, drawing upon the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. This piece will also demand a short discussion of issues related to recording technology and musical automata.

To a large degree, *A Letter From Schoenberg* would have appeared to have been the centrepiece of Ablinger’s *Hören hören* (*Hearing Listening*), a gallery exhibition held in 2008 at Berlin’s *Haus am Waldsee*, a private mansion-turned art space, built in the interwar period, that has been exhibiting contemporary art since 1946. Perhaps a context such as this might initially seem somewhat obscure for Ablinger: a composer coming from a tradition of concert music presenting work in a gallery ostensibly geared toward visual art. The *Haus am Waldsee*, however, has had a long-standing tradition of hosting art events ranging from concert music to theatre and literature readings. Additionally, many of the works from *Hören hören* took form as installation pieces comprising various media (sound recordings, sculptural works, video installations, interactive performance) and would have appeared relevant to at least a few artistic disciplines (music, sound art, sculpture, performance). This multi-modal, multi-medial output would seem perhaps entirely appropriate for a composer who, although having studied with modern European composers Gösta Neuwirth and Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, explains that he has “learned a great deal more from visual art than [he] did from new classical music,” and who cites Gerhard Richter, Barnett Newman, and Antoni Tàpies as primary influences (“Klänge” 97). Regardless,

Ablinger explains that the transition from his concert music to installation-based work has had “nothing to do with transgressing [...]. As a child I painted, wrote poetry, composed. Today I do nothing different” (“Keine” 86). Only during the “realization” of a work does the medium or discipline become important: certain things can be done only in a gallery while others only in a concert hall (87). In fact, the majority of Ablinger’s work since the ’90s has consistently crisscrossed between media and engaged various disciplines. At one point, the artist offered an updated consideration of the term *opera* as a meeting grounds for “perception and action,” with the potential for encompassing “sound-installation, sound-art, concert-installation, instrumental-theater, visual-music, text-music, music actions in public space, interactive music forms, net-music ...” (“Art”). Whether it occurs conceptually, with respect to discipline, or in medium, Ablinger’s work cuts across and between.

With at least one early practitioner of noise would Peter Ablinger share a sense of interdisciplinarity. Luigi Russolo, allied with the avant-garde group of Italian futurists, initially began as a painter before his impassioned call for noise in his *Art of Noises* manifesto of 1913. In terms of the general project of the futurists, described lucidly as “the matrix of an attempt to forge a total homology between the physics of the art object, the physics of the street, and the cultural physics of the vanguard” (Mann 98), it should be easy to see why Russolo eventually chose sound, specifically noise, as his medium of choice in his effort to capture the dynamism of modern life. Russolo states in the opening section of *Art of Noises*, “Ancient life was all silence. In the 19th Century, with the invention of machines, Noise was born. Today, Noise is triumphant and reigns sovereign over the sensibility of men. Through many centuries life unfolded silently, or at least quietly. The loudest of noises that interrupted this silence was neither intense, nor prolonged, nor varied” (23). Russolo goes on to describe an evolution of music that has increased in dissonance in parallel with the onset and evolution of one of many facets of modernization: the city itself: “*This evolution of music is comparable to the multiplication of machines, which everywhere collaborate with man. Not only in the noisy atmosphere of the great cities, but even in the country, which until yesterday was normally silent. Today, the machine has created such a variety and contention of noises that pure sound in its slowness and monotony no longer provokes emotion*” (24, *emph. Russolo’s*). At this point, a certain tint of antagonism, even something of the “anti-traditionalism” or the down-with-the-past attitude, “so dear to the Italian futurists” (Poggioli 31), might already be apparent in Russolo’s manifesto. That antagonism becomes clear, however, when he proclaims that “Beethoven and Wagner have stirred our nerves and hearts for many years. Now we have had enough of them,

and we delight much more in combining in our thoughts the noises of trams, of automobile engines, of carriages and brawling crowds, than in hearing again the “Eroica” or the “Pastorale” (25, *emph.* Russolo’s). However close for Russolo the connection was between the sounds of life and noise, he did not limit noise to mere imitation: “Although the characteristic of noise is that of reminding us brutally of life, the *Art of Noises should not limit itself to an imitative reproduction*” (27–28). Noise was not simply to serve as an imitative depiction of life. Rather, noise was to be an element within a composition, to be regulated “harmonically and rhythmically” (27), to be given pitches. Russolo accomplished this via his array of “noise-instruments,” *intonarumori*, consisting of drone-machines, crash-machines, din-machines, whistle-machines, shrilling machines, and snort-machines. As far as what to do with these instruments, Russolo stated that “it is necessary that these noise timbres become abstract materials for works of art to be formed from them. As it comes to us from life, in fact, noise immediately reminds us of life itself, making us think of the things that produce the noises that we are hearing” (qtd. in Nattiez 51). Something of this impulse was also iterated in the “organized sound” of Edgard Varèse, particularly in his *Ionization*, the earliest percussion-only work from the Western art-music canon. In discussing a performance of the piece, Varèse said, “People call them instruments for making noise. I call them instruments for making sounds.” It is true that with Varèse, as with Russolo, the emphasis was on integrating noise into a composition. It was “still the composer who decided what he wishe[d] to retain in his work” (Nattiez 52).

Russolo’s conception of the use of noise was not a far cry from that of the *musique concrète* composers, for whom, beginning in the 1950s, Russolo was a precursor and a clear influence. Nearly all of the theory of early *musique concrète* comes from the writings and compositions of one of its most influential pioneers, Pierre Schaeffer. First, facilitated by the new ability to conceal sounds from their sources via the technological advancement of the tape recorder, Schaeffer contemplates a corresponding mode of listening, *écoute réduite* (reduced listening), in which a sound’s causality is removed or ignored. Causality was ignored if the recorded material went mostly unaltered; it was almost entirely a matter of listening practice. The removal of traces of causality occurred as a result of various tape-manipulation procedures, editing, etc. Schaeffer invokes the trope of Pythagoras’s curtain, according to which disciples listened to the philosopher’s lectures behind a curtain so as to not to be distracted by his appearance or gesticulations. Pointing out that *acousmatic* refers to “a noise one hears without seeing what causes it,” Schaeffer writes that it “marks the perceptive reality of sound as such, as distinguished from the modes of its production and transmission” (77). In asking the listener to ignore the references of a sound’s origin and

instead concentrate on its acoustic morphology, Schaeffer suggests an experience similar to what appears in a few of Ablinger's noise works. Although, as Schaeffer illustrates in his *Études de bruit* (*Noise Studies*), noise—encapsulated by *l'objet sonore* (the sound object), the fundamental and temporally short perceptual unit Schaeffer defines for working with recorded sound—is material for composition. Noise is not noise for its own sake; it must be placed within a structured musical context. Semiotician Jean-Jacques Nattiez concludes that, rather than investigating the work, Schaeffer concentrates solely on the material itself. “Inspired by linguistics, he distinguishes three levels in musical works, comparable to the phoneme, word (or morpheme), and sentence; these are (a) the components that go into the sound-object, (b) the sound-object as a unit, and (c) integration of the sound-object into a structure, giving it meaning” (94). Schaeffer's hesitance to move beyond *a* and *b* might be related to his “lesson” of the *sillon fermé* (skipping needle), in which a record was left to repeat endlessly in single groove while Schaeffer became fixated upon this type of particularly brief structural level of compositional material (Nattiez 94). “I arrived at an itinerary leading to sound . . . through experiencing a skipping needle (without that skipping needle, my method would doubtless never have seen the light of day)” (Schaeffer qtd. in Nattiez 94).

For Ablinger, noise exists as a different category altogether. Perhaps this might allow for the possibility of resisting the kind of integration into a composition *as material*, as was the case with the noise of the avant-garde, characteristic of Russolo, Varèse, and Schaeffer. Ablinger insists,

Noise is different [from] other sounds. To me it is almost the opposite. Noise is certainly one of the oldest sounds of which humans have become aware. A waterfall, the sea or a forest rushing can involve an experience comparable to the sight of a mountain range, the desert or the stars at night. Such experiences are as far as possible devoid of meaningful information yet they act like a mirror, they throw something back upon ourselves insofar as we read something into them, turn them into something which is anchored only in ourselves. Hence, in such situations we experience ourselves. (“Klänge” 94)

In Ablinger's noise works, especially those from his exhaustive *Weiss/Weisslich* (*White/Whitish*)¹ series, the emphasis is neither simply a gesture of anti-traditionalism (though I do not suggest here that Ablinger's work is devoid of a certain spirit of antagonism or “anti-” inherent to the avant-garde, but rather suggest that it is not caught up in the mere gesture of its repetition), nor is this work about merely placing noise within a composition. Rather, in concentrating on its materialization, or the entire lack thereof in works that exist only in concept, noise becomes the composition

in and of itself. And this occurs in a myriad of instantiations and conceptions: its physical and phenomenal presentation, its existence across media, its mere potential for existence in the form of places or situations, its existence as thought. What follows is a brief overview of some of the *Weiss/Weisslich* pieces contained in Ablinger's *Hören hören* show.

The installation of *Weiss/Weisslich 7a, Rauschempfänger/Noise Receivers* for the *Haus am Waldsee* exhibition consisted of several consumer-grade, portable world-radio receivers hung at ear level, each spaced less than a metre apart around one of the rooms. The sound emitted from these devices was just barely audible amongst the sounds of others in the room (the rustling of clothes, footsteps, softly-spoken conversations), imparting a quality of being surrounded by a very subtle yet constant hum that would drift out of perception when attention was not deliberately paid to it. In fact, with this piece as with a few others, the visual component of its presentation was even at times more conspicuous than the sound. This uncertainty as to whether or not the piece would rise to the perceptual surface was accompanied by the thought that, at any moment, something, some unknown signal or sound, could be transmitted through one of these tiny radios.

Weiss/Weisslich 18, für Robert Ranke-Graves, CD was one of the pieces set up for CD playback at a listening station. The CD contained individual tracks for twelve field recordings Ablinger created, each containing a forty-second recording of a tree from one of various locations (Lower Austria, Croatia, Germany). What was interesting about these recordings was the consistency. Each recording contained only a single, ever-so-slightly varying colour of noise that lacked outside "disturbances" or interferences. Ablinger says that nothing in these recordings was edited and that for some of the recordings he "sat for more than a week, like a hunter, in order to get an undisturbed recording of 40 seconds" ("*Weiss/Weisslich 18*"). It is worth noting within these two examples a current already apparent: a preoccupation with the *found*, whether that might come from nature, technology, or culture. For Ablinger, these findings are entirely about perception. In describing a walk through a corn field in eastern Vienna, he speaks of a "jerking open of perception" when he describes actually hearing the field itself, a *hearing* that was his first outside of an explicitly aesthetic circumstance (e.g., a concert hall). He explains that the rest of his work from that point on has had to do with that experience ("*Weiss/Weisslich 18*").

If I were to extend much further the noise history I began earlier, doubtless I would be required to include the work of John Cage. In particular, the piece *4'33"* would be said to mark a transition from the (organized) sound of noise to the indeterminate noise of silence: a realization that sound, and therefore noise, is all around

us, always.² Following 4'33," an even further distillation of listening as such. Ablinger's *Weiss/Weisslich 29 b, 24 Stühle/24 Chairs* consists of a set of twenty-four chairs arranged in rows as they would normally appear in a concert hall, only situated outside. For the *Haus am Waldsee* show, the chairs were arranged in a sectioned-off area in the courtyard in front of the house. With this piece, I found there to be a tension between considering the chairs as sculptural objects and considering them as a conceptual invitation for listening—and then, of course, experiencing their actual physical use as seats for hosting a listening body when I did sit down and listen. Here the apparatus of the concert hall itself is invoked (ostensibly minimally, yet almost absurdly) and transported in order to instantiate anywhere the kind of listening the concert hall normally suggests.

In what might be considered another listening piece, this time also containing a certain kind of conceptual purity and quasi-absurd sense of humour, a participant is offered a set of headphones with built-in microphones designed simply to amplify sounds one would not normally hear: sounds inaccessible due to proximity or amplitude. *Weiss/Weisslich 36, Kopfhörer/Headphones* ultimately acts as a kind of acoustic magnifying glass. Walking around the *Haus am Waldsee* and sitting occasionally with the oversized contraption on my head, certain sounds stood out more than usual: wind sounds, the water sounds of the lake, conversations whose participants I could not see, sounds from other pieces inside the gallery. Upon Ablinger's approval, I wore the *Kopfhörer* throughout the city of Belfast, accompanied by performance artist Francesco Gagliardi, as part of a collection of urban performance works in *Performing the City: An Urban Performance Workshop* (Barrett and Gagliardi). In the noisy urban landscape, sound sources were yet more difficult to place and the overall experience, as would be expected, was more chaotic and disorienting.

As it was installed for the *Hören hören* exhibition, *Weiss/Weisslich 15, Installation und Hinweis/Installation and Reference* took up nearly the entire second floor of the *Haus am Waldsee*. However, other than a small music stand containing a diagram and the title of the piece, there was nothing to see in any of the five gallery rooms; it would almost have seemed that there was nothing to hear either. Each of the five rooms was filled with a unique "coloured silence," filtered noise approximating the German vowels, A, O, U, E, I, played extremely quietly over hidden loudspeakers, just at the edge of perceptibility. In moving from one room to another, an almost unbearably subtle change occurs; one is not quite sure if it is a change in temperature or in the quality of sunlight entering the windows. With further examination it becomes clear: this isolated sonic component of language, an element of speech, the vowel, is phenomenalized and made explicitly temporal and spatial. Each nearly silent vowel sound covered

the space of an individual room of the gallery; the listener was able to test the threshold of audibility of each vowel, and, walking from room to room, the various possible in-betweens.

In a number of works from Peter Ablinger's *phonorealism* series, another kind of phenomenalization of language occurs in which a similar kind of perceptual boundary is approached and placed upon a delicate brink of articulation. In these works, however, it is materialized recorded speech that becomes the perceptual matter for scrutiny, placed beneath the magnifying glass of what would otherwise serve as ordinary musical tones. Aside from explaining the technical problem of how this is eventually accomplished, I should first take a slight detour, a contextualization of the relationship between the fields of music and language.

It would seem that, if anything, music has always held a complex relationship to language. Often considered apart from language, music is said to be "ineffable." It is between "*le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien*," (the I-don't-know-what and the almost-nothing), writes philosopher Vladimir Jankelevitch (qtd. in Pisaro 13). Nevertheless, language seems to enter the frame every time the question of what music means is asked. The question as to whether music refers to anything beyond itself, anything of the "extra-musical" outside world, was famously argued between theorist Eduard Hanslick and Richard Wagner, and continues to be debated by new musicologists such as Susan McClary and Lawrence Kramer. Theodor Adorno discusses signification in his essay "Music, Language, and Composition" in a manner that departs somewhat from earlier assertions that refer to music's "aconceptual and nonrepresentational aspect," or his and Hanns Eisler's description of music as the "abstract art *par excellence* [...], farthest removed from the world of practical things" (Eisler and Adorno 74). And though Adorno begins "Music, Language, and Composition" by writing that music "does not form a system of signs," he asserts that music, in some sense, must rely on signification. He posits music somewhere between "non-signification" and language: "music without any signification, the mere phenomenological coherence of the tones, would resemble an acoustical kaleidoscope. As absolute signification, on the other hand, it would cease to be music and pass, falsely, into language" (Adorno 114).

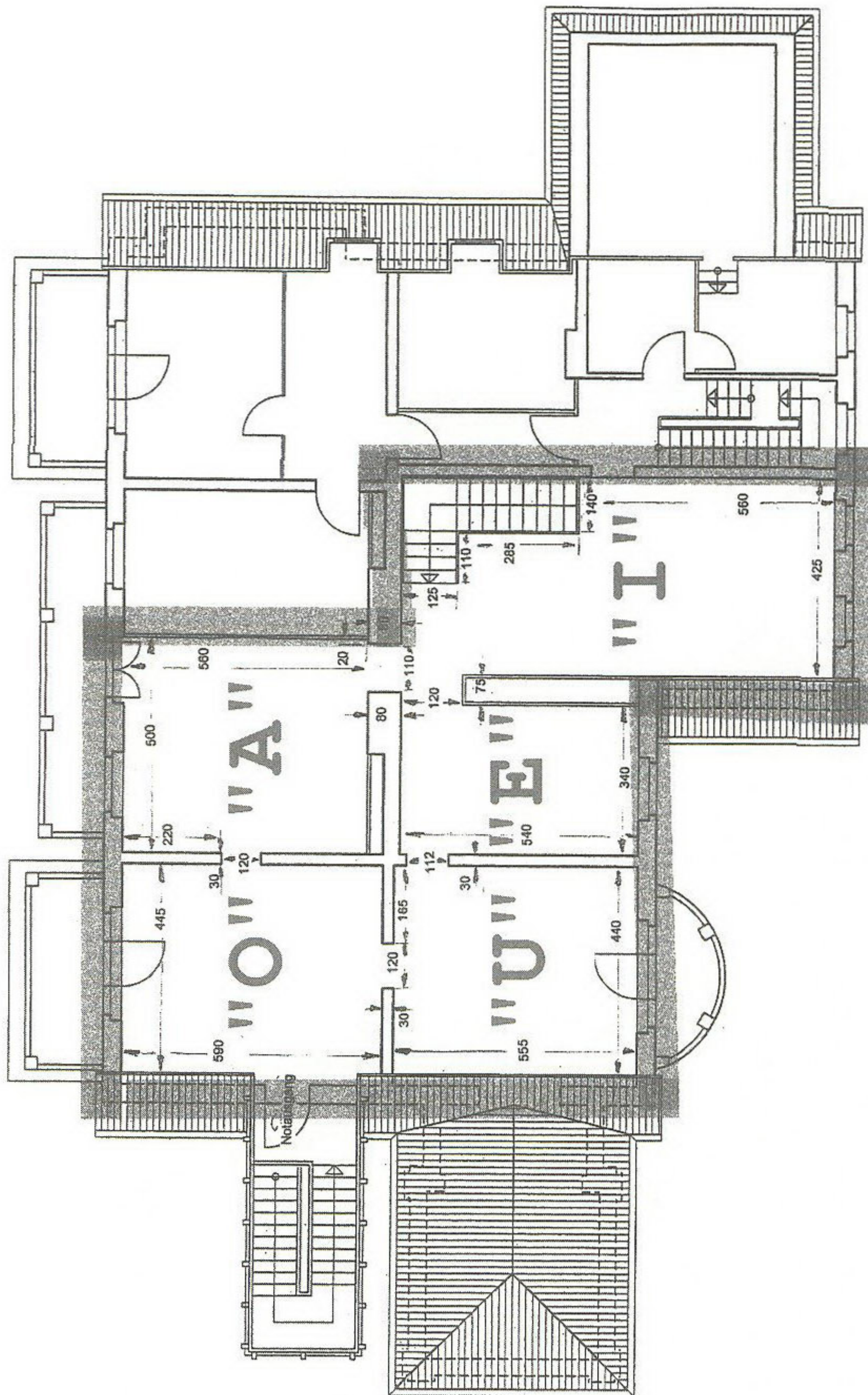
It may also be said that Deleuze and Guattari share in a conception of music as an aconceptual, nonrepresentational art form. They consistently privilege music not for any signifying or "communicational value" (348), but for its explicit temporality. "Music molecularizes sound matter and in so doing becomes capable of harnessing the nonsonorous forces such as Duration and Intensity" (343). Music, they say, is *of the refrain*. "The refrain fabricates time (*du temps*). The refrain is the 'implied sense'



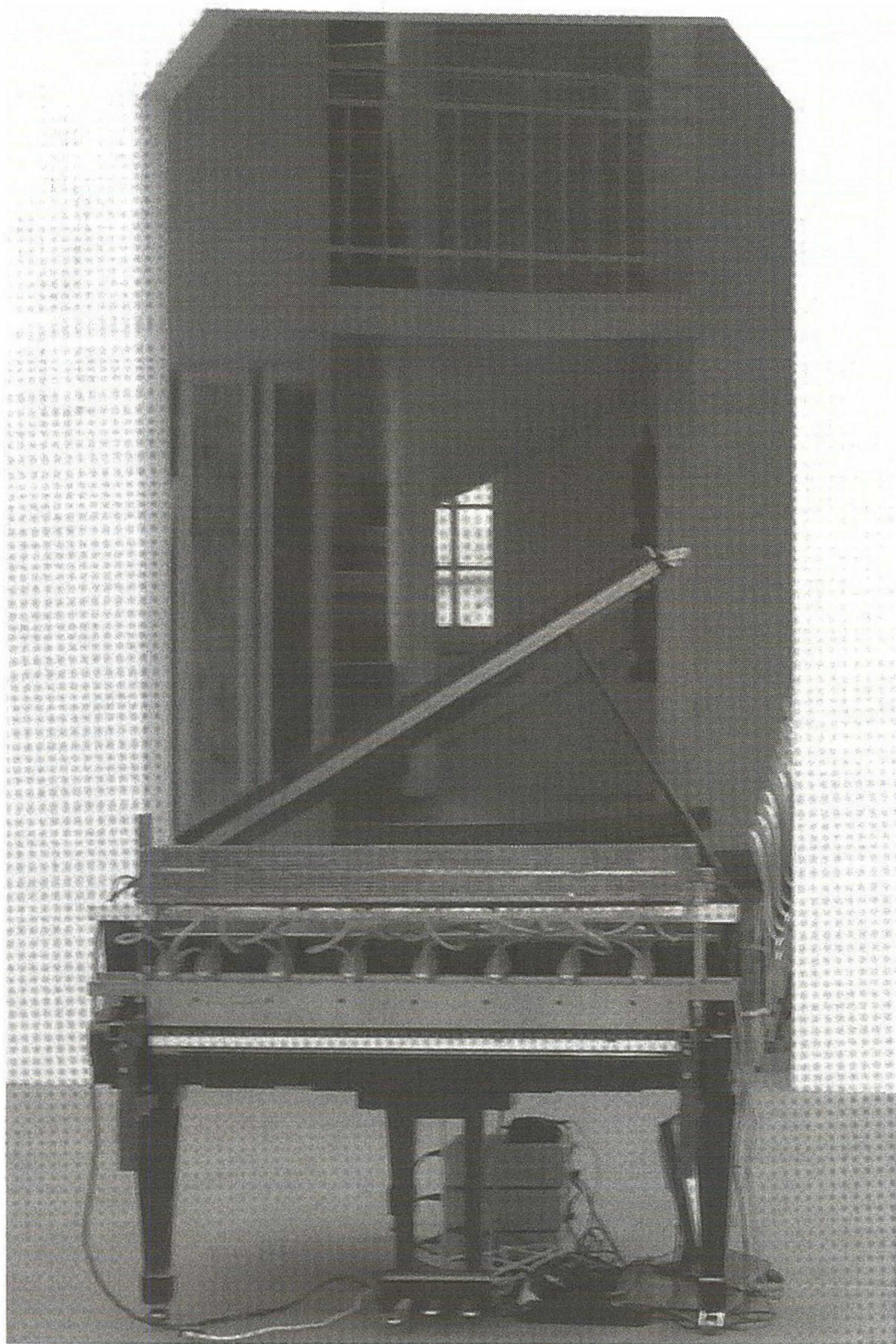
1. Weiss/Weisslich 36, *Kopfhörer/Headphones* (1999) from Peter Ablinger *Hören hören* (*Hearing Listening*), Haus am Waldsee, Berlin, 2008.

(temps) [...]. Time is not an a priori form; rather, the refrain is the a priori form of time, which in each case fabricates different times" (349). This fabrication of duration, or marking of time, has less to do with the signified, or the nonmaterial, than it does with immanent sound matter: "Certain modern musicians oppose the transcendent plan(e) of organization, which is said to have dominated Western classical music, to the immanent sound plane, which is always given along with that to which it gives rise, brings the imperceptible into perception, and carries only differential speeds and slowness in a kind of molecular lapping" (267). Writer Eric Prieto elaborates on Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on the nonrepresentational dimension of music; he goes on to note their description of music as nomadic:

For Deleuze and Guattari, music is an exemplary art, providing the clearest practical example of the kind of nomadic thought they seek to promote. A temporal art, it puts the emphasis on the Bergsonian dynamics of flux and becoming; a non-representational art, it puts our perceptual faculties in touch with our intellectual faculties in a way that does not require the mediation of concepts and representation. But above all, they argue, it is nomadic, it brings together different levels of analysis, enabling them to be contained within a single thought. By liberating us from the limitations of representational thought in the Aristotelian tradition, which requires that we work on one conceptual plane at a time, music helps us to understand how, from the interstellar to the sub-atomic level, everything is in touch with everything else. (Prieto 10)



2. Weiss/Weisslich 15, *Installation und Hinweis/Installation and Reference* (1995) from Peter Ablinger *Hören hören* (Hearing Listening), Haus am Waldsee, Berlin, 2008.



3. A Letter From Schoenberg – Reading Piece with Player Piano, view of computer-controlled player piano from Peter Ablinger Hören hören (Hearing Listening), Haus am Waldsee, Berlin, 2008.

This quotation touches upon a feature of Deleuze and Guattari's thought I find particularly provocative and makes the work of the post-structuralist duo particularly relevant to my discussion of Ablinger's phonorealism. This feature is a special category they introduce, a category that is entirely centred on the abolition of categories themselves: the rhizome. In counter-distinction to the tree (*arbor*), the rhizome is a root structure; it allows unrestricted movement between fields, categories, distinctions, media, disciplines. Although music is indeed nomadic, for Deleuze and Guattari music is the rhizomatic art form *par excellence*. They write, "Music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many 'transformational multiplicities,' even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it; that is why musical form, right down to its ruptures and proliferations, is comparable to a weed, a rhizome" (Deleuze and Guattari 11–12). Music's potential for "overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it" (11), whether these codes are its existence as non-noise or as non-language, may be realized precisely in Ablinger's work. In other words, with Ablinger, music may also be noise or language. Or, as with phonorealism, it may be said to exist somewhere in between.

If one would suspect a connection between phonorealism and the visual medium, Ablinger confirms: he says the impulse behind the concept began precisely in wondering "what the concept of photographic realism could mean for music" ("Klänge" 96). What resulted was a series of works referred to as *Quadraturen* (*Squarings*), a series nearly as extensive as his *Weiss/Weisslich* series and similarly encompassing realizations in various media (concert performances, sound installations, works for computer-controlled piano). What these works have had in common has been the way in which the musical structure, typically consisting of dense layers of musical tones, would come close to actually copying a sound recording. Ablinger compares the temporal and frequency grids with techniques used in the graphic arts in which photographs are rendered into prints ("Quadraturen"). The series of pieces similarly creates "best possible fits," so to speak, between recordings and what effectively become the sonic analogue of pixels: musical tones. Ablinger explains, however, that "a genuine *phonorealism* would only be possible if the instruments had no overtones and their playing speed could be taken beyond the limit of the continuous, namely 16 beats per second, and if series of changing parameters could be rendered at that speed. The latter condition can only be met with a computer-controlled piano; the former cannot be met by natural instruments at all" ("Klänge" 96). Ablinger states that his concern in these works lies not in "literal reproduction itself but precisely [the] border-zone between abstract musical structure and the sudden shift into recognition." However, he then describes the work as dealing with the observation of "reality" via "music" ("Quadraturen"). This

work becomes concerned with the tension between abstraction in musical terms and the potential for music to exist as recorded document. This document, however, does not operate in familiar terms, such as photography or images. It is sound, particularly recorded sound, that serves as the subject of musical observation.

Comparisons with visual art aside, the uniqueness of this procedure within its own medium should be emphasized. Deleuze and Guattari describe certain medium-specific qualities of music when they assert that “when sound deterritorializes, it becomes more and more refined; it becomes specialized and autonomous. Color clings more, not necessarily to the object, but to territoriality. When it deterritorializes, it tends to dissolve, to let itself be steered by other components” (347). They continue: “Sound owes this power not to signifying or “communicational” values [...], nor to physical properties.” It owes more to the sense that “sound invades us, impels us, drags us, transpierces us” (348). Sound is unique as a medium because it resonates and resounds within us; it does not exist solely exteriorly, as an object of signification or communication. Deleuze and Guattari also write: “The voice in music has always been a privileged axis of experimentation, playing simultaneously on language and sound. Music has linked the voice to instruments in various ways; but as long as the voice is song, its main role is to ‘hold’ sound, it functions as a constant circumscribed on a note and *accompanied* by the instrument” (96). In Peter Ablinger’s *Letter From Schoenberg*, the voice is a primary subject of experimentation. And it is precisely the structure of its relationship to a musical instrument, the player piano, that becomes crucial.

To accompany the following discussion, I reproduce here the text from *A Letter From Schoenberg – Reading Piece with Player Piano*³

Mister:
 You.... In spite of my protest,
 you have published
 Leibowitz’ performance
 of my Ode to Napoleon
 with a woman voice,
 which I find
 terrible.
 (... behind the orchestra ...)
 I can only tell you now,
 that you will
 hear from me.
 You will, I can tell you,
 you will regret this act

severely.

I will

be busy to help you

to be ruined

by this

what I will do....

(Some of the instruments ... in small....)

You are not only a bugger ...

You are not only a man who disregards an artist's wishes,

his artistic beliefs,

you are also a man

who does not care

to keep a contract.

You know that you signed a contract,

according to which

you have

to account to me regularly.

You must have sold

quite

a number of records

of my Violin Phantasy,

of the Trio,

and other things which you ...

but which you issued without my consent.

I tell you,

you will hear from me also about these things,

and I hope it will cost you very much money.

Yours ...

The installation of *A Letter From Schoenberg – Reading Piece with Player Piano* for the *Haus am Waldsee* exhibition consisted of a grand piano with an enormous apparatus placed on top of its keyboard, situated in one of the main rooms of the gallery. Every hour upon the hour a gallery visitor saw the keys of the piano's keyboard, obviously aided by the contraption sitting atop it, move in a seemingly sporadic, violently rapid manner. What a visitor heard was an enormously loud aggregate of piano sound emitted entirely by the instrument itself. Remarkably, as one eventually realizes when reading along with the text, one could actually discern Schoenberg's original speech, constituted by piano tones. What could be said of this discernibility is its potential for constant oscillation: one could hear the mass of sound as piano music (extremely loud and fragmented piano music), and then upon recognition of a word, for instance, be

immediately thwarted into intelligibility. Upon realization of this phenomenon of perceptual oscillation, and upon noticing that one can will it into being (one is not required to read along), the thought arises that perhaps the very constitution of speech, and similarly, the experience of music, are each entirely voluntary activities, lucid perceptual acts. On which “plane” am I experiencing this? Musician and writer Chico Mello makes note of a similar cognitive questioning that occurs with the piece: “In this reduplication which links two differing symbolic worlds (music and language) various cognitive perceptions are questioned. Thus the occasional intelligibility of the spoken or rather, “played” texts are perceived musically as recurring irritations or even hallucinations—the decoding of words encumbers the purely musical reception pushing it into the background” (103). The presence of speech becomes a kind of mirage, the voice of a phantom character, when listening musically; when decoding words, one is forced to ignore the purely musical. There seem to be strong resonances between this phenomenon and the *acousmètre*, sound-film theorist Michel Chion’s characterization of invisible, “off-screen” speech. This phenomenon is the filmic version of Pierre Schaeffer’s *acousmatic*; it describes “a character whose relationship to the screen involves a specific kind of ambiguity and oscillation [...]. We may define it as neither inside nor outside the image” (Chion 129). This master voice constantly shifts between appearing to be “on-screen” and off, and in film typically takes shape in the form of robots, computers, and ghosts, who are granted special powers of omniscience and omnipotence (129). Though without image per se, *A Letter From Schoenberg* contains a similar oscillating ambiguity with respect to the origin of the voice of Schoenberg. And though there is no screen, the listener is caught up in the task of trying to place the source of this ghostly apparition: if not from the piano, from just where does Schoenberg speak?

And by what mechanism are we able to hear Schoenberg’s voice? *A Letter From Schoenberg* involves the anachronistic meeting of two music technologies: musical automata and the phonograph. Typically, the latter is thought of as having replaced the former. Mello writes that the player piano used in *A Letter From Schoenberg* becomes “an oversized phonograph” for reproducing speech (103). Thomas Edison’s invention of the phonograph in 1877 was a by-product of experiments designed to reproduce the human singing voice (Abbate 202), and was a culmination of a desire to “fuse speech and writing” (Kahn 91), and to communicate with the dead (Kahn 214). “Prior to inventing the phonograph, [Edison] sought to develop a device that could take the phonautographic signatures of vocal sounds and automatically transcribe them into the appropriate letter” (91). Ablinger’s machine turns the “phonautographic signatures of vocal sounds” into piano tones. As far as musical automata go, *A Letter From*

Schoenberg uses a souped-up player piano, enhanced by the precision of the computer and the dexterity of augmented mechanical elements. Historically, the components of automata have been, first, the sounding instrument, the keys and hammers in the case of the player piano; second, that which touches the instrument, a fitted player; and third, “an inscription of the musical work, which determines rhythm and pitch as well as other nuances by the specific arrangement of pins on the cylinder, or punches in disks, or in rolls of paper or brass” (Abbate 203). This third component, in the case of *A Letter From Schoenberg*, is yet another copy, another unoriginal: the resurrected, reproduced voice of Schoenberg.

To return to a question raised earlier with respect to Deleuze and Guattari and *A Letter From Schoenberg*, namely regarding the structure of the relationship between the piano and speech, what does it mean to say that the piano “plays back” the recording of Schoenberg? Does this relationship belong to the representational, the imitative, the mimetic, or something else entirely? As part of their elaboration of the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari describe a “principle of asignifying rupture: against the oversignifying breaks separating structures or cutting across a single structure” (9). As an example of this phenomenon (and perhaps to disagree with explanations contained in many a David Attenborough film), they write, “It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing its image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, lure, etc.). [...]. At the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp” (10). Could it be said that in *A Letter From Schoenberg* a capture of code is occurring? A becoming-speech of piano, a becoming-piano of speech? Or perhaps it is the becoming-Schoenberg of piano.

For that matter, can we speak of a becoming-Schoenberg of Ablinger? One cannot help but think about what appears as a certain gesture of iconoclasm invoked in *A Letter From Schoenberg*. The same violence of supposed misinterpretation of which Schoenberg accuses Mr. Ross Russell (the addressee of the letter) seems to become redoubled with the Ablinger piece. The materiality of the accusation itself (the original recording) becomes fodder for yet another (mis)appropriation, the new grounds upon which yet another transgression is committed (the Ablinger piece). This time the difference is its deliberateness, its constitution and placement as art object, and of course the bizarre conditions of its mode of production. I mentioned earlier something of the complex relationship Ablinger’s work holds to the “anti-traditionalism,” or down-with-the-past attitude shared by the futurists and much of the avant-garde, and suggested that Ablinger’s work is not consumed with simply repeating gestures of

the “anti-”, or with the tearing down of tradition. I would like to suggest now that, more importantly, Ablinger’s work invites, with its refraction of perception, an ambivalent overturning of each moment. An overturning that simultaneously requires stasis, it emphasizes the between (noise and language, music and object, thought and experience) and privileges perception in the now over the new as such. Ablinger: “I do not believe in the new. At best, I believe in a renewal in the sense of a permanent process” (“Klänge” 94). Deleuze and Guattari assert that “all history is the history of perception, and what we make history with is the matter of a becoming, not the subject matter of a story” (347). For Ablinger, this matter of becoming, perception, is a process that continually happens in the present.

NOTES

- 1/ See <<http://ablinger.mur.at/werke.html/#a27>> for a complete list of Ablinger’s *Weiss/Weisslich* pieces.
- 2/ See “The Future of Music: Credo” in John Cage’s *Silence* (New York: Wesleyan UP, 1961). “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. [...] Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments. [...] If this word ‘music’ is sacred and reserved for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instruments, we can substitute a more meaningful term: organization of sound” (3). And to recount Cage’s often-quoted conversation with the engineer during a visit to the anechoic chamber at Harvard: “I heard two sounds, one high and one low. [...] He said, ‘Describe them.’ I did. He said, ‘The high one was your nervous system in operation. The low one was your blood in circulation’” (*A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings* [New York: Wesleyan UP, 1967], 134).
- 3/ Documentation of Ablinger’s *A Letter From Schoenberg* can be found at: <http://ablinger.mur.at/txt_qu3schoenberg.html>. For the original Schoenberg recording and transcript, see: <http://www.schoenberg.at/6_archiv/voice/voice48_e.htm>.

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