

Beyond Representation: Music, Language, and Mental Life

by

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Abstract

Beyond Representation: Music, Language, and Mental Life investigates how music, as a non-discursive expressive form, generates and expresses meaning. Music's use in cultural ritual is explored through social anthropologist and ethnomusicologist John Blacking's studies of the South African Venda people, as well as music theorist Teresa L. Reed's work on religious practises found within the African American Pentecostal tradition. The Project shows that music necessarily and invaluablely contributes to the efficacy of cultural rituals wherein the ritual participants express significant aspects of individual felt-experience. Additionally, these rituals strengthen cultural ties through social cohesion and solidarity. Myth and music are seen to possess similar shared expressive characteristics through poet and cultural historian Robert Bringhurst's study of Indigenous Haida myth. This comparison is further examined through anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss on how both myth and music have historically expressed non-linear felt-senses of time. Susanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* shows how discursive language is fundamentally limited in its ability to express the contradictions, nuances, and ambiguities inherent to human feeling and experience. The project extends Langer's argument that discursive language generates meaning incompatible with the rhythms and patterns of our feelings themselves, whereas music—non-discursively and non-representationally—is capable of articulating the qualities of our felt-experiences. In support of Langer, musical works by Nick Cave, Bob Dylan, John Coltrane, Stars of the Lid, William Basinski, and Leyland Kirby are discussed.

Keywords: Music; Feeling; Non-Discursive Expressive Form; Aesthetic Theory; Ritual; Myth; Non-Representative Expression; Minimalism; Ambient Music; Susanne Langer; Robert Bringhurst; John Blacking

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Introduction

Much of my adult life has been spent in close proximity to music in one form or another; my undergraduate studies were focused on jazz performance, I have been employed in record stores for over ten years, and I have performed professionally at the drum set for a little longer than that. Throughout, and to the present day, I have been preoccupied with a desire to better understand music's singular capacity for the expression of one's inner world of emotional experience. Music has long seemed to me to possess an uncanny ability to express the nuance, contradiction, and inexplicability often found in these experiences.

In this project I wish to show that music provides an expressive form which may include the ambiguous qualities of an individual's experience; qualities that other forms of expression may well leave behind. Some of these elements resist compartmentalization, frustrating our faculties of reason; for example, if an experience contains elements of both joy and sorrow, thus representing something else, something which is essentially—i.e. strictly—neither of the two, its verbal or written articulation may prove to be difficult. Here, I feel we are touching upon what Arthur Schopenhauer referred to as the *poverty of concepts*: “Concepts are [...] everywhere in art, unfruitful. The composer reveals the innermost essence of the world and pronounces the deepest wisdom in a language his reason does not understand . . . Even in giving an account of this marvelous art, concepts show their poverty and their limits” (311).

Ernst Cassirer, a German Neo-Kantian philosopher of language, symbol and culture, also spoke of the limitations of language: “[it] transforms the world of sense impression . . . into a mental world, a world of ideas and meanings.” The symbolism of language employed to articulate these sense impressions is “bound to obscure what it seeks to reveal”; inevitably, any linguistic attempt to encapsulate the “totality of actual experience must always appear a poor and

empty shell” (*Language and Myth* 28). American philosopher, writer, and educator Susanne Langer (herself largely influenced by Cassirer) similarly addressed these limits of language:

. . . Language is a very poor medium for expressing our emotional nature. It merely names certain vaguely and crudely conceived states, but fails miserably in any attempt to convey the ever-moving patterns, the ambivalences and intricacies of inner experience . . . There is, however, a kind of [expression] peculiarly adapted to the explication of ‘unspeakable’ things . . . music . . . can be ‘true’ to the life of feeling in a way that language cannot; for its significant forms have that *ambivalence* of content which words cannot have. Music is revealing, where words are obscuring, because it can have not only a content, but a transient play of contents. It can articulate feelings without being wedded to them. (*Philosophy in a New Key* 100-101, 242-243)

Cultural anthropologist E.V. Walter noted in his 1988 text *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment*—a study exploring the different ways in which people in culture experience “place”—that the original sense of the word “ambiguity” signified “something that leads in more than one direction” (72). This, importantly, suggests multiple meanings rather than a lack of a clear meaning. I will be applying the term “ambiguous” throughout this project in the same sense that Walter used it, as outlined above. Significant, emotionally heightened experiences involving—for example, either death or love—are often so filled with meaning for the individuals experiencing them, that they may lead such an individual to have a series of contradictory or “ambiguous” responses to these experiences. When the ambiguity of an experience is fully understood—that is, is fully felt—one may get closer to its real character: the totality of what is experienced in those moments. In addition to these profound and difficult to understand experiences, our memories, as well as our flights of imagination and dreams are often

coloured by ambiguity. All of these activities of the mind are attributes of what the project title refers to as our “mental lives”—a term derived from German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel’s 1903 essay, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*. In this essay, Simmel importantly suggests that life in modern Western capitalistic societies imposes “rhythms of life” onto the individual that are not in sync with the rhythms of their interior “mental lives”; that is, their inner, felt-worlds of feeling, impression and experience.

Although Cassirer extols the virtues of poetry, saying poetry allowed “the realm of pure feeling [to] find utterance” (*Language and Myth* 99), and E.V. Walter esteems poetry as the “highest form of ambiguous language” (72), I will attempt to show that music may be better suited to express ambiguity, in that it is uniquely privileged as a non-representational art form. Friedrich Nietzsche, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Arthur Schopenhauer and Susanne Langer are all figures who have influenced my exploration into music and language, and each one of them has importantly addressed music’s distinct irreducible quality. Langer, in *Philosophy in a New Key*, describes music as:

preëminently non-representative . . . it exhibits pure form not as embellishment, but as its very essence; we can take it in its flower—for instance German music from Bach to Beethoven—and have practically nothing but tonal structures before us, no scene, no object, no fact. That is a great aid to our chosen preoccupation with form. There is no obvious, literal content in our way. (209)

Without representational content “in [the] way,” music is able to articulate a sense of ambiguity that mirrors our own personal, internal world of ambiguous experience—it is free to express both this *and* that particular feeling simultaneously. This makes music invaluable to human beings, because its expressive capacity allows an individual to capture more of their

personal experience of the world, as well as better reflect their internal, emotional “lives.” What is meant by “non-representative” expression and how it may be said to benefit music as an expressive form will be explored in greater detail below.

As the barriers of language, which are so naturally inclined to categorize and separate fall away, one may feel that they are able to access a kind of feeling of universality; his or her individuality may give way to an interconnected sense of unity. Robert Crumb—American underground cartoonist and renowned collector of 78 rpm records of American blues, jazz, and country music, as well as other cultural musics from around the world—heard this when listening to the music on his 78s: “When I listen to old music it’s one of the few times I actually have kind of a love of humanity. You hear the best part of the soul of the common people you know, their way of expressing their connection to eternity or whatever you want to call it” (*Crumb*).

Nietzsche also recognized within music a distinctive power to create a feeling of unity or interconnectedness: “Music alone allows us to understand the delight felt at the annihilation of the individual . . . [It] offers us a universal mirror of the world will: every particular incident refracted in that mirror is enlarged into the image of a permanent truth” (101, 105). I believe that the sense of unity described here could be compared to what Romain Rolland referred to as the *oceanic feeling*; a term he used in a letter to Sigmund Freud, defining it as a “sensation of eternity . . . limitless, unbounded.” This, Rolland believed, was the “source of religious sentiments” (24).

For Nietzsche, this “permanent truth” includes the “primordial contradiction and pain” of human existence, and he suggests that through music, we may express this “sphere which is both earlier than appearance and beyond it” (10). Put another way, one could describe what he is

referring to as primordial suffering, i.e., the basic, fundamental suffering essential to our fates as human beings. For example, all individuals are born into lives which are continuously and unrelentingly subject to antagonistic forces beyond their control; all will experience profound loss due to the unavoidable temporality of human relationships; and finally—barring suicide—all are destined to die at a time and in a fashion completely unknown to them.

In myth, ritual, and art, people have long attempted to communicate the nature of this suffering to others, as well as come to an understanding about it themselves. Through all of these distinct cultural forms of expression, we have attempted to find a meaning or a unifying “truth” present in this suffering that may elude our rational or logical faculties. Music may also, in some cases, simply offer an expressive discharge to cope with a lack of understandable meaning; an emotional exclamation which may serve as an end unto itself.

Human beings seem to have an apparent need to "say" what cannot be said. Why else, one be inclined to ask, do cultures the world over include a musical component in many of their most important rituals, such as religious ceremonies, funeral rites, and weddings? Austrian Romantic composer Gustav Mahler indicated in a personal letter that he felt that his use of music was a necessary form of expression for him, rather than simply an option among others: “As long as I can summarize my experience in words, I would certainly not make any music about it” (171).

The “primordial suffering” I want to address in this project is exacerbated by a difficulty in expressing or communicating anything about its nature; this barrier to expression then creates yet another form of suffering. However, when our “impoverished” (i.e., completely rational, or logical) methods of communicating and processing information are confronted by their limits, music may prove to be a more effective expressive form for the articulation of this suffering.

Humanly Organized Sound

If one is to discuss “music generally” as either a distinct, singular, cultural expression, or across a set of distinct cultures, some expository remarks are necessary to clarify exactly what is meant by “music.” In the case of this particular project, outside of the occasions in which I will isolate a specific musical example, when I am speaking of “music generally,” I intend to indicate all potential music. Historically, many distinctions have been made between “art” and “folk” music, and in academic writing certain criteria is sometimes imposed upon cultural musical expression to indicate its relative complexity or perceived level of sophistication. Any such distinctions are completely unnecessary for the purposes of this project, and I intend to approach this study of music in the same fashion as did British ethnomusicologist and social anthropologist John Blacking in his 1973 text *How Musical is Man?*

Distinctions between the surface complexity of different musical styles and techniques do not tell us anything useful about the expressive purposes and power of music, or about the intellectual organization involved in its creation. Music is too deeply concerned with human feelings and experiences in society, and its patterns are too often generated by surprising outbursts of unconscious celebration, for it to be subject to arbitrary rules. (x)

This approach valuably frees up this exploration from being bound to any specific genre, distinct cultural expression, or any such bias that would favour a style of music that featured more or less “surface complexity” over another, potentially neglecting important expressive qualities in the process. The emphasis here will be on the “expressive purposes and power of music,” which I do not believe are tied whatsoever to any particular objective quality possessed by any particular form of music.

Grounding Musical Experience in the Real

A personal, subjective experience with music may be difficult for the listener to quantify or describe, and the entire effect that music may have on the life of any given listener may be impossible for them (or anyone else) to measure entirely. This aversion to measurement frequently positions the musical experience in the categorical realms of the intangible, the mysterious, or the abstract. Though some may find that after listening to a piece of music it is difficult for them to describe exactly what the music does for them, or how exactly this effect is accomplished, we must be careful not to minimize the totality of its potential and relegate it to a realm outside of ourselves and of our own humanity. Though I would never attempt to explain away every facet of the musical experience (nor would I wish to do so)—I do wish to re-position music for the purposes of this study. Instead of thinking of music as being something *over there*, i.e., something outside of ourselves we simply consume and enjoy, I intend to position it much closer to its human source—after all, it is of course, an extension of its source. This point is emphasised in John Blacking’s definition of music as being, at its core, “humanly organized sound” (*How Musical Is Man?* 10).

A detachment from humanity is exactly what sociologist Emilé Durkheim wished to avoid in his study of early religious experience. From the position of a sociologist, he felt it was his duty was “above all to explain a present reality that is near to us and thus capable of affecting our ideas and actions.” His goal of better understanding the “religious nature of man” was motivated by his desire to reveal what he saw as “a fundamental and permanent aspect of humanity” (1). Durkheim believed that because religion expressed certain fundamental human needs and wishes, its persistence as a “human institution” was explainable:

Indeed, it is a fundamental postulate of sociology that a human institution cannot rest

upon error and falsehood. If it did, it could not endure. If it had not been grounded in the nature of things, in those very things it would have met resistance that it could not have overcome. Therefore, when I approach the study of primitive religions, it is with the certainty that they are grounded in and express the real. (1)

Importantly, it must be understood that by “real,” Durkheim is not suggesting that the individual tenets of any given religion are necessarily factually (i.e., objectively) true statements. Rather, he wished to,

Reach beneath the [religious] symbol to grasp the reality it represents and which give the symbol its true meaning. The most bizarre or barbarous rites and the strangest myths translate some human need and some aspect of life, whether social or individual . . .

Fundamentally then, no religions are false . . . All fulfill given conditions of human existence, though in different ways. (1)

As with Blacking’s views of music, Durkheim similarly felt that the surface aspects of religion did not indicate its expressive quality or its capacity for meaning-making: “the greater complexity and higher ideal content, however real, are not sufficient to place the corresponding religions into separate genera. All are equally religious, just as all living beings are equally living beings.” He felt that “primitive” religions “fulfill the same needs, play the same role, and proceed from the same causes” as do other more “modern,” i.e. more “complex” expressions of religious faith (3). All examples, however simple or complex on the surface, are seen to represent “concrete reality” and “each in its own way expresses man, and thus each can help us understand better that aspect of our nature” (22).

Durkheim placed the emphasis of his study on the observable effect religion has on its participants. He focused on what can be seen and interpreted in the clear light of day: the

behaviours and social interactions of those involved. When either religious or musical experience (or any experience that combines both) is observed in this fashion, there is little doubt whether the effect it has is “real.” Regardless of how the observer feels about the specific tenets of a given religion, or what they perceive to be the inherent qualities (or limitations) of music generally, music and religion are both seen to be *doing something*; this particular fact cannot be denied.

Chapter 1: The Ritual Employment of Music to Bind People Together and to Ward off Suffering

To observe music at work in cultural ritual, one is able to see music in action. This is useful if one wishes to say something about the full breadth of its expressive capacity. Certainly, a discussion of music focused solely on it as an aesthetic experience cannot capture its total utility, or the entirety of its meaning-making potential.

As there is neither the space nor the time here for a thorough examination of music's role in cultural ritual around the world, I will isolate a few relevant examples. In certain cultural rituals found in South Africa and the United States, it can be seen that music is integral to the facilitation and promotion of social cohesion as well as the healing and personal growth of the individuals involved. In these examples, music is seen to play an active role; it is *doing something*. Establishing what music can do is useful in grounding the musical experience in the real; beyond simple aesthetic diversion or pleasure, music is seen in these examples to contribute to real meaning-making for the ritual participants and it evidently supports and strengthens the transformative potential of these rituals themselves. A cross-cultural examination of the ritualistic employment of music reveals the pervasive need individuals and groups appear to have to say and do certain things with music that they cannot say and do with language alone. The written and spoken languages of the cultures explored below have evidently required a little help in accomplishing the end-goals of some of their rituals; this help arriving in an apparently essential, extra-linguistic musical component.

1.1. Performing Selves: The Venda of South Africa

During John Blacking's study of the Venda people, undertaken through fieldwork in what was called then called the Transvaal province of South Africa (now called Limpopo) in the

apartheid years of 1956-1958, he observed that music played a significant role in their daily lives.

Blacking saw that for the Venda, music was seen as an expression of “concrete reality” —not as something mysterious, but rather something wholly connected to their personal and social experiences as a person living in Venda society. Instead of an escape from reality, music was seen to be “an adventure *into* reality, the reality of . . . ‘Vendaness’ and the very life-force to which every person, animal and plant, is subject. It is an experience of becoming, in which individual consciousness is nurtured within the collective consciousness of the community” (“The Value of Musical Experience in Venda Society” 27).

Music also offers the Venda a form of expression that allows them to avoid the same social repercussions that might follow the use of a conventional verbal exchange: “beer songs can be used to voice complaints and make requests . . . women’s pounding songs, certain children’s songs, and songs of protest” establish a “musical framework” which “ritualize[s] communication in such a way that messages may be conveyed but no counteraction is taken. You do not ‘go to prison’ if you say it in music, and something may be done about your complaint because it is a warning of growing public opinion” (*How Musical Is Man?* 50).

In citing examples drawn from Venda culture of music’s use in “warn[ing] people that girls are undergoing puberty rites” and its employment in Venda work songs to “coordinate and ease labour,” Blacking establishes a clear utilitarian function for music in Venda society (“The Value of Musical Experience in Venda Society” 27). However, Blacking also shows that music is more than a means-to-an-end for the Venda people. He found that when the Venda described performances of their national dance called *tshikona* (or “bamboo pipe dance”), it was made clear to him that music was the “decisive, affecting factor in any performance” (27). This process

of music making is valued “as much as, and sometimes more than, the finished product . . . Of all the shared experiences in Venda society, a performance of *tshikona* is said to be the most highly valued: the dance is connected with ancestor worship and state occasions, incorporates the living and the dead, and is the most universal of Venda music” (*How Musical Is Man?* 50, 51).

“*Tshikona* requires a very high level of co-operation among the large number of its participants.” It can be produced only when “twenty or more men blow differently tuned pipes with a precision that depends on holding one’s own part as well as blending with others, and at least four women play different drums in polyrhythmic harmony.” It is also required that the men “perform in unison the different steps which the dance master directs from time to time.” Its participants describe it as being able to “make sick people feel better, and old men throw away their sticks and dance,” and to bring “peace to the countryside.” The co-operation and interconnectedness experienced by the Venda during *tshikona* gave them an experience of “the best of all possible worlds” (Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* 51).

In the case of the Venda musical performance, it would seem that nothing is arbitrarily decided upon. The instruments chosen for the performance; the musical content itself; the way the music is performed—i.e., the performative aspects distinct from the musical content—and the selection of the performers are all chosen with care and deliberation, as each is understood to contribute importantly to the ritual’s efficacy. In a marked contrast to much Western music, where an error in performance is not considered particularly egregious—for example, in punk rock music, as well as in many musical forms which emphasize their improvisational aspects, including jazz—accuracy for the Venda is not only incredibly important to facilitate the realization of the end goal of the ritual, but also to achieve an emotional reaction; accuracy is necessary for the participants to properly *feel* the music. Blacking emphasised that “it is not

possible for a person to perform incorrectly but with feeling: the feeling is to be found through the music, [its] correct performance . . . Until this is done correctly it does not really become a musical experience, as it cannot be *felt* properly” (*How Musical Is Man?* 25). This facet of *tshikona* is important, as these performances of dance music are “primarily . . . geared towards emotional arousal through sound and movement” (Kruger 36).

As Blacking observed, a performance of *tshikona* served both to maintain the existent Venda political and social hierarchal structure as well as strengthen the interpersonal connection of its participants. For the Venda, the dance “make[s] them more aware of themselves and of their responsibilities toward each other. “*Muthu ndi muthu nga vhanwe*, the Venda say: ‘Man is man because of his associations with other men’” (*How Musical Is Man?* 28). In this sense, the dance is a way for the Venda to perform and understand their “Vendaness.” Their sense of self, which is largely a composite of their political and interpersonal associations, is externally represented and expressed through musical performance:

The dance-line is led by members of ruling families who are followed by members from non-ruling families. While promoting social stratification, *tshikona* also generates a spirit of community by creating a shared emotional condition. The hocket form the music takes . . . involves the periodic projection of single pipe tones by dancers into the musical cycle, thus creating an interlocking effect. The hocket structure of *tshikona* in other words promotes interdependence and social solidarity . . . (Kruger 38)

Ethnomusicologist Jaco Kruger (whom, decades later, also did field work in the Northern Transvaal) observed that young people in the community felt a sense of joy created through a performance of *tshikona* that could not be replicated through listening to the radio, as it lacked the social experience generated during the communal dance (39).

Based on a consensus opinion among the Venda, Blacking distinguished the second of the two “most powerful musical experiences in traditional Venda society” after *tshikona*, as the *ngoma dza midzimu* —or “drums of the ancestor spirits, i.e., one of the Venda dances of spirit possession” (“The Context of Venda Possession Music” 65, 67).

Ngoma helps the Venda access altered states of consciousness that facilitate healing for the community members. These “somatic states,” Blacking wishes to stress, are “not paranormal . . . although they are often suppressed or allowed to atrophy in cultures in which excessive importance is attached to verbal communication” (*The Anthropology of the Body* 10). If one wishes to validate his claim regarding the relative normalcy of trance or spirit-possession states, or other similar altered states of consciousness, one may note both their historical and continued persistence in cultures all over the world. American anthropologist Erika Bourguignon noted in her 1973 text *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness and Social Change* that in a comparative study of 488 societies located in all parts of the world, ethnographic data showed that “437, or 90% are reported to have one or more institutionalized, culturally patterned forms of altered states of consciousness” (11). These states were grouped into two categories which included, “possession by spirits (termed ‘possession trance’), and states not so interpreted (termed ‘trance’)” (12).

When discussing the Venda use of *ngoma*, Blacking distinguishes a state of mind, facilitated through musical expression, that flourishes beyond verbal communication. In this particular example, the change of consciousness (resulting in spirit-possession) is brought about for the purposes of healing an afflicted person. To understand the role of ancestor-spirits in the structure of Venda society, and therefore its role in this particular form of musical expression, some cultural context is necessary:

In traditional Venda society, each individual birth in theory marked the return of an ancestral spirit in human form, and the death of every . . . person marked the birth of a new ancestral spirit. Thus every human being began life as a reincarnation of a deceased person (who maintained his/her autonomy as an ancestral spirit), and could eventually become an autonomous ancestral spirit in his/her own right. (“The Context of Venda Possession Music” 67)

Once it was determined that an individual’s sickness was spiritual in nature, a performance of *ngoma* was called (73). As indicated by Blacking, for the ritual performance to successfully facilitate the spirit possession of its intended subject, certain musical (performative) and non-musical (social) factors were essential.

Anybody could dance *ngoma*, but only members of the cult were “taken” by the spirits of their ancestors . . . [this] depended on a proper, rhythmically steady performance of the music by drummers, rattlers, and singers, which enabled a dancer to attain a somatic state in which she/he . . . [comes] face to face with her/his other self, the real self of the ancestor spirit. (67)

Just as in the earlier example of Venda social stratification performed through the national dance of *tshikona*, it would appear the ability music possesses to establish and reinforce social structure extends into the Venda concept of the afterlife as well. Not only did music help to establish “man’s associations with with other men” (through *tshikona*), *ngoma* “provided . . . proof of the spiritual nature of the universe” for the Venda, and made clear the “role of ancestor-spirits as guardians of the earth and of the health and welfare of their descendants” (69).

In Blacking’s attempt to determine to what extent music is responsible for the effectiveness of the rituals of the Venda possession cult, he emphasised the social reality above

whatever it is the music might be doing for the Venda. In other words, he believed the interpersonal relationships of the Venda were of primary importance—the real meaning-making aspect of the *ngoma* ritual is to be found in the social, not in the musical. He believed this could be corroborated by the Venda themselves, when they described to him how the ritual worked:

None of the cult members whom I knew claimed that music was responsible for their state of possession, though some insisted that its tempo must be metronomic . . . they spoke of the ancestor spirit wanting to dance and to come to them. Thus their possession depended as much on the intention of the ancestor-spirits to come as on their own willingness to receive them. (69)

However, he did, to a certain degree, contradict this point elsewhere, when he described a particular scene wherein he himself performed the rhythmic accompaniment to *ngoma* instead of a Venda drummer:

A senior lady began dancing, and she was expected to go into a trance because the music was being played for her cult group. However, after a few minutes she stopped and insisted that another drummer should replace me! She claimed I was ruining the effect of the music by ‘hurrying’ the tempo—just enough, I suppose, to inhibit the onset of trance. (*How Musical Is Man?* 45)

Although it must be granted that an important social element may have changed with Blacking’s inclusion, thus affecting the ritual’s efficacy—the musical element of the ritual was also importantly changed as well; the music didn’t sound the same, thus it didn’t *feel* the same. The fact that not everyone in attendance at a conventional—or culturally correct—performance of *ngoma* was automatically possessed by their ancestors suggested to Blacking that there was not “any direct causal relationship between the sounds of music and human responses to them.”

Ultimately, he deduced that “no music has power in itself” (“The Context of Venda Possession Music” 65). He insisted, rather that the effectiveness of music employed in cultural ritual depended “as much on human agency and social context as on the structure of the [musical] symbols themselves . . . [it] can communicate nothing to unprepared and unreceptive minds” (64-65).

I do not wish to dispute Blacking’s assertion that music is a “social fact.” This point is certainly made clear in the case of Venda possession music, in that it is “constructed and interpreted by individuals [within] the same socio-cultural system” (66) and thus operates according to these rules and context. I also do not wish to minimize or neglect important and distinct cultural facts in pursuit of a unified and universal experience of music. However, ultimately, I do hope to show that the ability of musical expression to deeply affect those outside of the boundaries of the culture of its origin speaks, to some degree, to a kind of “power in itself” possessed by music as an expressive form. This discussion will be revisited and expanded upon in the pages that follow. Regardless of Blacking’s claims about the interdependence of music and other social facts and symbols, ultimately, “the idea of a possession cult without music was rejected [by the Venda] as inconceivable” (70).

1.2 Imagined Worlds and the Experience of Virtual Time

"When people jump through time they give themselves up to rhyme and reasons of the Heavens"
– (Cope)

The second important point on which I wish to diverge from Blacking, is his assertion that “music . . . confirms what is already present in society and culture . . . it adds nothing new except patterns of sound” (*How Musical Is Man?* 54). This statement is consistent with his

argument above regarding music's inability to communicate anything to "unreceptive minds" in that it firmly situates music's meaning-making potential within the bounds and context of culture. Although this understanding of music may be useful for Blacking in that it helps to position the musical experience in relation to other forms of Venda cultural behaviour and custom—emphasising its social function—it does create a closed socio-cultural feedback loop. Music is understood to be important, but only in the sense that reinforces and maintains what is already there in a given culture, perpetuating the loop.

In the text *The Musical Human: Rethinking John Blacking's Ethnomusicology in the Twenty-First Century*, this aspect of Blacking's theory was addressed by Deborah James, a specialist in the anthropology of South and Southern Africa and a professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She felt that it was "in the tension between the "endorsing/conforming" and the "transforming" positions that Blacking's legacy should really be sought, as both of these [musical] forces can operate simultaneously" (Ana Reily 13). Suzel Ana Reily, editor of the *The Musical Human*, elaborates:

Through her discussion of the Northern Sotho *kiba* dance style performed by migrant women on the Witwatersrand [James] shows how *kiba* draws on girls' experiences in youth and adolescence—when music served to ascribe them specific roles—and how, later in life, these same musical experiences came to be used to frame, and create, a new inclusive version of a 'home'-based identity for migrant women. (Ana Reily 13)

Ironically, elsewhere in Blacking's work, he himself illuminated what I believe to be an aspect of music whose very existence contradicts his argument above. This aspect of music opens the door for a possible discussion of music's ability to transcend culture; to express something other than what is *already there* within culture:

Every culture has its own rhythm, in the sense that conscious experience is ordered into cycles of seasonal change, physical growth, economic enterprise, genealogical depth or width, life and afterlife, political succession, or any other recurring features that are given significance. We may say that ordinary daily experience takes place in a world of actual time. The essential quality of music is its power to create another world of virtual time. (*How Musical Is Man?* 27)

What exactly is meant here by “virtual time?” Describing this phenomenon in a general sense, Belgian-born French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss believed that “listening to [music] immobilizes passing time” and that “while we are listening to it, we enter into a kind of immortality” (*The Raw and the Cooked* 16). This sense of timeless-time has the “potential to mediate . . . all dimensions of time flow, including memory . . . and expectations” (Sager 164).

In which culture, exactly, does this world of virtual time exist? Of course, one may argue, this sense of time exists in the self-same culture in which both music listener and performer are situated. However, as suggested by Blacking, culture, as we know and understand it does not, and cannot run on this time—it runs on “actual time.” After all, how is one to imagine a society operating in any form whatsoever if there was not a sense of finite time with which to pin down events and appointments? The very notion of society as we have come to understand it in the modern West crumbles instantly without it. The significant point now becomes clear: if one is to access this world of virtual time, one may (however briefly) feel that they have—experientially—transcended the bounds of their own culture.

This experience of virtual time creates a space in which the individual might imagine a “world”—i.e., a society or culture—in which they do not currently physically reside. Even if this

imagined world does not—or theoretically could not— exist in reality, the experience of it still opens up a point of departure from the culture in which one is situated. It exists in the sense that feelings “exist” through their being felt, regardless of the degree to which they correspond directly to reality—it exists as a *felt world*. “Being in a *musical space* [i.e., a “space” created through musical experience which may include this sense of timeless-time] . . . helps convince us that a world is possible beyond what we see and touch” (Sager 166).

To experience music, argued Christopher Small (educator and author of published works in the fields of musicology, sociomusicology and ethnomusicology) is to experience the activity or “doing” of music: “Music is not primarily a thing or a collection of things, but an activity in which we engage” (*Music of the Common Tongue* 50). To better express this concept he coined the verb *musicking*, which he used to refer to “not only [the] performing and composing [of music] but also listening and even dancing to music; all those involved in any way in a musical performance can be thought of as musicking” (50).

Like Blacking, Small also believes that the musical experience carries with it the potential to facilitate the imagining of a world-other-than-ones-own. This world may manifest itself—in some cases—as the expression of an ideal world:

The musicking that moves us most will be that which . . . articulates the relationships of our ideal society—which may or may not have any real, or even possible existence beyond the duration of the performance . . . musicking can exhilarate us with a vision of that ideal which is not just intimated to us but actually brought into existence for as long as the performance lasts. While it does we *can* believe in its realizability. (70-71)I believe that what Small is suggesting by an ideal being “actually” brought into existence,” is that through the musical performance the participants may *perform* their vision of an ideal society.

As Blacking stated above in the case of the Venda, through its combination of group solidarity and individual expression, *tshikona* offered them an “experience of the best of all possible worlds.” However, I do not believe that group participation is a pre-requisite for one to experience, through music, a sense of the “ideal,” and thus transcend one’s own culture. By Small’s definition, *musicking* encompasses the experience one may have through listening to music by one’s self, and I believe that as long as a human individual is engaging with the music created by even one other human individual, the listener is participating in a fundamentally social experience—though this is less apparent than in a group setting. Although the nature of this social experience is less direct in that there is no present, physical contact between persons, an individual is still sharing and/or receiving information, through music, with another person. I contend then, that any single individual listening to music created by another single individual may also be given access to this world of “virtual time” and its benefits, as would a participant in a larger shared musical experience.

Music’s ability to create a sense of “virtual time,” then, is understood as being a significant factor contributing to its distinctive transcendental potential. As the listener becomes temporarily unrooted from—and thus unbounded by—their cultural sense of “actual time,” it frees them up to experience something “new”; something which may not necessarily be reflected in their own present culture. In this way, music can facilitate an experience of something other than what is found present in one’s culture; valuably, music is not bound to simply perpetuate a socio-cultural feedback loop. At its most potent, music might actually help to create the ideal world understood by the performers and/or listeners during their musical experience; certainly, a process as transformative as world-building must begin by having those involved believing in its “realizability”—if it cannot be felt, and thus understood, how can it henceforth be built?

One such example of the transcendental power of music through its ability to create an imagined-world can be found in the historical and contemporary musical expression used within particular African American religious practise. As suggested by Christopher Small, music can be seen during the years of slavery and in churches of the present day, to describe both a “heavenly” and “possible earthly society” simultaneously (*Music of the Common Tongue* 70). Black religious music, in its ability to “galvanize a group of individuals on an emotional, non-verbal level of experience” (Sidran xiv) established it as a “potent moral weapon in the human rights struggle of the 1960s” and similarly throughout “the course of black history from the period of slavery” (Williams-Jones 375).

Pearl Williams-Jones, an American gospel singer who was also Professor of Music at the University of the District of Columbia, described black gospel music as being intrinsically future-oriented, as well as grounded in the present. Much like for the Venda, the music facilitated both a real-time performance of individual identity and an experience of an ideal-world:

Black gospel music, a synthesis of black West African and Afro-American music, dance, poetry and drama, is . . . a celebration of the Christian experience of salvation and hope. It is at the same time a declaration of black selfhood which is expressed through the very personal medium of music. (376)

1.3. Catching Fire: African American Religious Music

Teresa Reed (Dean of the School of Music at the University of Louisville) in her article “Shared Possessions: Black Pentecostals, Afro-Caribbeans, and Sacred Music,” writes of her experience attending a black Pentecostal church called the Open Door Church of God in Christ whilst growing up in Gary, Indiana in the late 1960s until the early 1980s. She describes

regularly seeing music compel members of the congregation to dance by themselves, in a state of “getting the Holy Ghost,” “doing the holy dance,” “shouting,” “being filled,” catching the Spirit,” “being purged,” or “getting a blessing” (5). After the dancer concluded their spontaneous expression, they were described as returning to “real time” (5).

Reed grants that although the term “‘spirit possession’ was nowhere in the parlance of [her] particular church, it aptly describes the divine encounters both in [her] congregation and in the religious contexts of African diaspora groups around the world” (6). She describes this process as “underscor[ing] the boundless interchange between the physical and the unseen in African consciousness” (6). This aspect of her religious upbringing was “central” to it, and “extremely rare was the church service that concluded without the rapturous dance or outburst of someone whose soul had, as it were, ‘caught afire’” (7). Aretha Franklin similarly described her father Reverend C.L. Franklin’s services held at the New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan with “church nurses [who] carried smelling salts to revive worshippers who were overcome to the point of fainting by the spirit and/or Daddy’s sermons” (23).

As was made clear by the Venda regarding their own practises, author and educator Samuel Floyd elsewhere emphasised the importance of rhythm in establishing somatic states such as spirit possession for African and African diaspora peoples: “these sacred, blissful, and altered states” are “brought on principally by drumming” (20-21). This fact was not lost on the colonial Europeans who observed the slaves’ use of music in both the Caribbean and in the United States:

Where actual drums were prohibited or unavailable in black worship settings, black American slaves used their bodies to create the rhythms necessary to incite the spirit possession and the dance (often called “the shout”) that accompanied it. Clearly,

however, hand-clapping and foot-stomping substituted for drums, which were outlawed in many places because of their communicative power. (Reed 10)

During Reed's upbringing, Afro-Caribbean sacred musical practises such as Vodou and Santeria were considered so removed from the intimate inner circle of her Pentecostal Church practise as to be considered "satanic" practises. Whilst re-evaluating them in their own proper context as an adult, she found herself simultaneously "moved beyond the boundaries of [her] own religious tradition," as well as being "reacquainted . . . with the value of that which [she] treasure[d] in [her] religious background" (24). The sacred music Reed heard spoke beyond the bounds of both their culture as well as hers. Within it Reed recognized aspects both familiar and alien to her own religious experience; the latter evidently not ultimately impeding significantly on her ability to be deeply affected.

Reed provides us an example of music's ability to "speak" across cultural boundaries—to produce significant affect even among the culturally uninitiated. I myself observed this firsthand when attending a Sunday morning worship service at the Mount Zion Baptist Church in Seattle, Washington in 2018. I joined the congregation that morning in an attempt to observe music's role in the religious proceedings; namely, to observe how the members of the church interacted with music and how it was used support the spiritual content of the sermon. Although I was culturally removed from those in attendance—both as a borderline atheist as well as a white Canadian in amongst an almost exclusively black American congregation—I was moved to tears by the power of the band and the choir. The emotional reaction I experienced was instantaneous. To suddenly be amongst strangers in an emotionally vulnerable condition, however, did not inspire a feeling of alienation or discomfort—to the contrary, I did not feel at all out of place amongst others who sang along, clapped, wept, smiled with eyes-closed, or

simply raised their hands skyward. The only other white man in attendance that morning happened to be sitting in front of me, and during an intermission remarked emphatically that he was there, “not for the religion, but for the music and the people.”

In her study, Reed highlights the parallels between her church’s use of music and that of the Afro-Caribbean religious services she observed, namely the Spiritual Baptist Tradition of Trinidad and the Heavenly Army churches of Haiti:

While both black Americans and Caribbean Pentecostals feature composed hymnody in their worship, none of these groups are slaves to those written forms. Because spirit manifestation is the goal of both types of worship endeavors, music—whatever its source—is adjusted to serve this function. (20)

In her African American Pentecostal tradition, a combination of oral and written sources was used for the creation of their sacred songs, but the source material was often manipulated to achieve greater expression: “In addition to these . . . sources one must bear in mind the black worshipper’s propensity for molding, stretching, bending, tweaking, and otherwise revising existing songs to fit various expressive needs” (Reed 16).

Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, understood the black worshipper’s need for expressive and improvisational freedom. Allen . . . included in his hymnal what has been called the “wandering refrain,” a short, rhythmic phrase that singers could affix at will to whatever hymn they chose. By the early twentieth century . . . black-American Pentecostals were using many of these same hymns both to set the general atmosphere for worship as well as to literally bring down the Spirit. (Reed 17-18)

A common theme emerges between the *ngoma* of the Venda and the spiritual music of the black Pentecostal church; the way the music is performed is a vitally important factor in

determining each ritual's ultimate efficacy. As stated by Reed, particular music facilitated spirit possession, and this music must be performed in a particular style to "bring down the spirit." Should this music be notated and then performed with the wrong *feeling*, the desired affect is not produced; the music does not "move" the listener in the desired way. One might suggest that this fact proves Blacking's argument that the music itself is seen not to possess any inherent power, but rather the performance of it does—including all manner of cues and loaded socially reinforced triggers: dress, physical setting or space, stylistic performative flourishes, and the company in which one is situated. Instead, I posit that if one considers music as did Christopher Small—to be something one *does* rather than something that *is*—the way in which these ritual participants perform music is a very part of the music itself.

In both the Heavenly Army churches of Haiti, and in Teresa Reed's own church growing up in Indiana, there are vivid examples of music being used to "become a backdrop for the minister and the altar workers to pray for those in need of healing, salvation, provision, or Holy Spirit infilling" (19). This is an example of a Haitian experience at the Heavenly Army Church: The "heating up" [i.e., the increase in energy expenditure in singing and dancing that are "part and parcel of a livelier, more up-tempo period of musical worship" (Butler 94-95)] makes for an atmosphere in which

Members achieve a level of spiritual transcendence in which they are outside of themselves . . . Once this transcendent level is reached, army members are able to work effectively in the supernatural realm and may dance continuously for extended periods of time without showing signs of fatigue." (93)

Below is an example cited by Reed, when her Pentecostal church transformed an existing hymn entitled "He Lives" for their own expressive purposes:

[The hymn] holds special significance for black Pentecostals because it celebrates, not only the Resurrection . . . but the fact that He lives inside of me—literally . . . inside my physical body. So the blacks of my childhood denomination took Ackley’s hymn and liberated it from the confines of the Easter Sunday program . . . they arranged it . . . with another section tailored specifically for hand-clapping, foot-stomping, and call-and-response, or, to put it more succinctly, for heating up. This additional section is a vamp sung by the choir/congregation, around which a leader improvises . . . as the hand-clapping and foot-stomping of the choir and congregation grow higher, louder, and faster to the repeated “I know He lives!” the atmosphere becomes charged with holy electricity. Dancing and tongue-speaking erupt throughout the congregation, and the drummer, now sweating profusely and playing with inspired intensity, carries the primary responsibility for providing musical support for the possessed dancers. (If the drummer him or herself is overtaken by the Holy Spirit, the clappers and stompers fill in any rhythmic gaps.) (20, 21)

These “somatic states” are seen to transport the members of these churches to “place[s] beyond [their] normal existence.” (Reed 24) These “places,” evidently, rely on music for their realization and maintenance.

The early black Christian churches or the pre-church “praise houses” became the social focal points of Negro life. The relative autonomy of the developing Negro Christian religious gathering made it one of the only areas in the slave’s life where he was relatively free of the white man’s domination. The “praise nights,” or “prayer meetings,” were also the only times when the Negro felt he could express himself as freely and emotionally as possible. It is here that music becomes indispensable to any

discussion of Afro-Christian religion. ‘The spirit will not descend without song.’”

(Baraka 40-41)

1.4. Real Meaning-Making through Music

During John Blacking’s fieldwork, he saw that music was woven into the very fabric of daily life for the Venda. Whether it was used to connect them to their ancestors, to mark important stages in the community members’ lives, to reinforce social stratification, or facilitate political protest, music facilitated interpersonal connection, social cohesion and was even perceived to help heal the sick. In the case of the African American and Afro-Caribbean religious practise, music provided an avenue for people to connect directly to God, to foster important relationships present in their community, as well fight racial inequality and injustice.

In both examples, music was an integral force in the performance (and therefore understanding) of self-hood. It made individuals “more aware of themselves and each other.” Through creating musical “spaces,” ritual participants were positioned to temporarily shed the “actual time” of their own cultures, which freed them up to experience, through *feeling*, the possibility of an ideal, imagined, and potential future-world. Music is evidently not bound to remain simply a tool to maintain and perpetuate culture (though it may be employed successfully to do this). It has vast transformative potential for the character of individual selves, as well as the cultures they call home.

Just as Émile Durkheim had observed with religion, music also “makes us act, and helps us live” (419).

Chapter 2: An Exploration into Some Expressive Characteristics Shared by Both Myth and Music

As a continuation of our investigation into music's use in cultural ritual to generate meaning for the participants in Chapter I—an investigation which explored how music is used to both help facilitate and valuably contribute to ritualistic ends and to see music “in action” through cultural ritual—my intention now, in the same open and exploratory spirit, is to investigate the expressive nature of myth and compare it, generally, with that of music. By doing so, I wish to further explore music's ultimate meaning-making potential; to see it “in action” in ways both similar and different to the ritualistic contexts described in the first Chapter. I hoped to show through this comparison, that music and myth—as forms of expression—have been understood and felt, historically and presently, to assist human beings “digest [. . . their] sense of the world” (Bringhurst 63). Largely owing to their significant potential for expressive freedom as non-discursive forms of expression—myth and music are both uniquely privileged in allowing human beings to wrestle with the raw materials of lived-experience and to then “say” something about them. To return to the original metaphor, myth and music may allow us to digest some of the complex and meaning-saturated elements present in our “senses of the world”; they may help us “break down” some of these dense and multi-faceted experiences that other expressive forms struggle to articulate, or express.

By “dense experiences,” I am suggesting the experiences present in one's life which are loaded with meaning. For example, our relationships with other human beings have historically represented a source of such “meaning-density.” In addition, the inexplicability and power of love, as well as the grief of loss of life through death may be seen as other particularly notable manifestations of this idea. One may also add the following to a list of what historically, for

peoples around the world, have been meaning-saturated aspects of life: one's relationship to the observable natural world and the cosmos, one's social responsibility—i.e., navigating one's role within culture, including one's own cultural taboos, and the origin and causes of phenomena unclear to the intellect (which can be named as the desire to know something about the unknowable).

The meaning-saturated experiences of life are often set-apart from one's experience of the mundane—that is, the less “dense” aspects of one's experience; those that one may move through with little to no need to “chew” on them at all (the distinction being culturally relative, of course). Claude Lévi-Strauss suggests that one way in which human beings have used myth to “digest” categories of experience, was to make these experiences more understandable; to create some assemblage of order out of an apparent lack of order (*Myth and Meaning* 13). When myths are considered in this regard, even the myths that might appear to be the most logically far-fetched to culturally-removed readers serve an understandable purpose; rather than simply being “absurd . . . fanciful creations of the mind in a kind of delirium” (21), they can be seen as useful tools, through which one might translate lived-experience. This translation allows for these lived-experiences or “sense[s] of the world” to become representable, and these representations, through their translation into myth, become performable through storytelling. This process of translation is the primary way Lévi-Strauss suggests one may arrive at a sense of meaning: “‘to mean’ means the ability of any kind of data to be translated into a different language” (12). To apply this to our example of myth—we may say the “data” involved are the raw experiences of life, and the “language” is myth.

As described in Chapter I, music may be used ritualistically to reinforce as well as transcend culture. By this I mean that through musical experience and participation, individuals

may come to a greater understanding of their own “places” within culture—potentially becoming even more rooted into place in culture through group musical participation and its resultant increased social solidarity—but also, in allowing for individualistic expression, musical experience may also contribute to a greater sense of self-awareness; that is, a sense of self which may contain elements that transcend, or exist outside, or beyond one’s cultural “place” or roles. In addition, music was seen to facilitate the creation and experience of potential and/or *felt* “worlds,” and has been used to establish a sense of “timeless-time” within linear time.

Towards some of these very same important expressive ends, myth may also be effectively employed. The observable cross-cultural use of both myth and music towards these same ends speaks to what appears to be a vital human need to translate experience into ambiguous and performable formations other than discursive language.

2.1. The Dreams We Had Before We Were Born: Myth and Time

. . . If we listen to the poem, what we hear first is not a numerical pattern. We will hear a tiny myth . . . a story that unfolds in a musical shape that mimics eternity, not the unmusical march of time. (Bringhurst 171)

Myth, similar to music, is a form of expression through which human beings have culturally transgressed the boundaries of “actual time,” or “historical time.”

Through myth-telling, human beings have been able to articulate feelings of time that may more closely resemble our inner sense of *felt-time* as it may occur in our dreams, our memories, and other lived or felt experiences. One of the ways myth may be said to do so, is through the mythic employment of archetypes; through the events, places and characters in the given myths themselves being situated in a time out-of-time. For the sake of comparison, we will refer to this unmeasurable “past” which includes these archetypes as “mythical time”—a “time”

which does not resemble most conventionally held notions of measurable duration; a key difference being one instant, or event, does not necessarily have to follow from another in a predictable, linear fashion in “myth-time.” The distinction between states of “time” will hopefully be made clearer below.

In his 1949 study *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, Romanian philosopher and historian of religion Mircea Eliade explored how myth-telling alters one’s feeling of time; he believed the repetition of myths—that is, their repeated telling—“places” the listener themselves in this “mythical time.” In observing the use of “symbol, myth and rite” in “premodern or ‘traditional’ societies” around the world, Eliade believed he could see a tendency toward “the abolition of time through the imitation of archetypes and the repetition of paradigmatic gestures” (35). Eliade elaborates below:

Through the paradox of rite, profane time and duration are suspended. And the same holds true for all repetitions, i.e., all imitations of archetypes; through such imitation, man is projected into the mythical epoch in which the archetypes were first revealed . . . There is [present in the repetition of certain paradigmatic gestures] an implicit abolition of profane time, of duration, of “history”; and he who reproduces the exemplary gesture thus finds himself transported into the mythical epoch in which its revelation first took place. (35)

The language Eliade uses in this description of myth emphasizes myth’s transportive quality—myths are seen to operate as a “doorways between realms” (Bringhurst 408) and *through* myth, the teller and listener are able to leave behind “realms” which exclusively employ linear time; “realms” where an event must follow from another irreversibly. Myths, then, establish another sense of time; time may felt differently in and through myth.

In the case of certain classical Haida myth-tellers, to mark this point of departure from linear, historical time or the movement “between realms [of time]” was a simple phrase: *wansuuga*. *Wansuuga* corresponds in English to “they say” or “it is said,” and it is commonly inserted at the beginning of the myth and is usually scattered throughout. This phrase “suggest[s] that what is said has been tested by tradition and found true, or warn[s] that it bears no guarantee because it lies outside the speaker’s own experience. It lifts a statement out of the realm of history . . . and drops it into . . . myth” (Bringhurst 115).

Robert Bringhurst, a Canadian-American poet, typographer and author has written extensively on Haida myth. His 1999 text *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and their World* combines an ardent pursuit of the preservation of important Haida cultural history, as well a desire to explore the expressive dimension of their myths, i.e., what he describes as their poetic, and even musical aspects. Regarding Haida time-perception as seen through their myth-telling, the distinction Bringhurst makes between their multiple senses of time is supported by the Haida themselves; the Haida have different words for the stories which encompass myth (*qqaygaang*) and those which describe family histories (*qqayaagaang*) (298). The multifaceted sense of time experienced by the Haida falls into some distinct categories:

Past experiential is used when speaking from personal knowledge (*I saw him, etc*) . . . *past inferential* [is] for stating knowledge gained at second hand (*My mother was born in Ttanuu, etc*). There is also a *past habitual* (*I always used to go, etc*). But the forms we meet most frequently in southern Haida mythtexts are the *putative past* and the *definitive past* . . . They are used when acts are talked, thought or asked about (*Where did he go? He went, they say, etc*). The definitive past is used where time is framed or self-enclosed. (Bringhurst 298)

Bringhurst noted that when Skaay—a notable Haida myth-teller born in 1827—told his family stories, he used past inferential verbs, but when he dictated his *Qquuna Cycle* and *Raven Travelling* myth-stories to American linguist John Swanton in 1900, he instead referred to the definitive and putative past (298). Bringhurst believed that this expressive distinction indicated that Skaay “accepted these events [of his family history] as part of historical rather than mythological time” (298). This distinction when telling stories, Bringhurst grants, is not a primary concern among “all Haida speakers” or “all Haida poets,” and does indicate, to some degree, “grammatical choices inflected by personal style,” which are not entirely “dictated . . . by language or culture” (298). In respect to this multifaceted sense of time, a parallel may be drawn between the Haida and the Siouan speaking Ho-Chunk (or Winnebago) peoples American anthropologist Paul Radin documented in his 1956 text *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. Radin noted:

Like most American Indian tribes, the Winnebago divided their prose narratives into two types: those that dealt with a past . . . which belonged to the realm of things no longer possible or attainable by man or spirits; and those which dealt with the present workaday world. The first is called *waikan*, what-is-sacred, and the second *worak*, what-is-recounted. (118)

In both cases the events that occur in myth time are set apart—the timeline in which they are placed is not understandable in the same sense that a chronology of personally experienced events is. Myths play by different rules: “the subjects, the themes, and motives of mythical thought are unmeasurable” (Cassirer, *Essay on Man* 73). Lévi-Strauss also believed that when analyzed closely, the very structure of the myths themselves reveal a disregard for linear time. Each myth, Lévi-Strauss claimed, were made up of constituent building blocks: these he

referred to as “mythemes, in response to what his colleague, the linguist Roman Jakobson, called phonemes—the atomic building-blocks of meaningful sounds that make up words” (*Myth and Meaning* ix). These blocks can then, by the myth-teller, “be arranged in any order, thereby excluding cause and effect or chronology . . .” this “allow[s] for difference as well as sameness: If a woman kills her son in one variant, the theme might be inverted so that the son kills his mother in another” (xiv).

I believe that when myth and music are similarly investigated regarding their ability to express time, that both expressive forms may be seen in certain important aspects to negotiate the contradictions found between “historical” or “linear time,” and what might be called our inner-sense of “felt time.”

2.2. Myth and Music and the Negation of Historical Time

In *The Raw and the Cooked*, Claude Lévi-Strauss drew his readers’ attention to how both myth and music, as forms of expression, require a “temporal dimension in which to unfold” (15). He saw this expressive kinship between music and myth to make them similar to articulate speech rather than painting (15). Lévi-Strauss suggested that both a piece of music and a myth “need time in order to deny it” and that these forms of expression could be called “instruments for the obliteration of time” (16) with respect to how they may affect the participant’s sense, or feeling of time.

To clarify and elaborate upon this latter point, Lévi-Strauss contrasted historical time, which he characterizes as “irreversible” (16) with a fundamentally different sense of time which may be established through a performance of myth or music—this he describes as an experience of a kind of “totality, enclosed within itself” (16). These two distinct senses of time create a

“contradiction between historical, enacted time, and a [sense of a] permanent constant” (16) which myth and music, in Lévi-Strauss’s estimation, are both equipped to reconcile by allowing the listener to experience both senses of time, and to move between them. That is, while hearing a myth, or a piece of music, one understands that either is heard during historical time and that their duration can be measured—but, somewhat paradoxically, *through* them, a listener to either myth or music may be given access to a sense or feeling of time which exists outside of it.

This sentiment regarding a reconciliation of two distinct senses of time is evidently shared among some contemporary composers and students of music, and is also corroborated by the scientific community as well. Jonathan Berger, an accomplished American composer and Professor of Music at Stanford University believes that “music hijacks our relationship with everyday time.” As a composer, Berger has made it a personal goal to “compose music that usurps the perceived flow of time and commandeers the sense of how time passes.” He elaborates upon how this may be possible:

Music creates discrete temporal units but ones that do not typically align with the discrete temporal units in which we measure time. Rather, music embodies (or, rather, *is within*) a separate, quasi-independent concept of time, able to distort or negate “clock-time.” This other time creates a parallel temporal world in which we are prone to lose ourselves, or at least to lose all semblance of objective time. (“How Music Hijacks Our Perception of Time”)

Myth is also capable of creating a “parallel temporal” world—a time-within-time but also out-of-time. If one imagines historical time to be marching onward without reprieve, linear and irreversible, a myth could be understood as “a piece of timelessness caught like an eddy in narrative time” (Bringhurst 48) along its path. It is of course not as if myth has suddenly stopped

time in its tracks, but rather, one may feel they have temporarily left history's lock-step march for a little while. One has "through the doorway of the story . . . step[ped] into other worlds beside, behind, within [their] own" (Bringhurst 409); said another way, one has stepped out of one sense of "time" into another—thus, one is able to feel time differently.

Both music and myth are both made up of an assemblage of smaller units; they are made up of various ideas, images, and sounds, and these "units" are continually assembled and re-assembled by their tellers and performers. A comparison may be drawn between the "discrete units" present within any piece of music—i.e., its constituent chords, notes, rhythms, melodies—and Lévi-Strauss's "mythemes." In both cases these "units" may be endlessly re-purposed and borrowed from one myth or song to another; they may be inverted, transformed, or re-arranged in any possible order in their new context.

In the case of myth-telling, the process each myth-teller engages with in arranging and re-arranging each myth's constituent "building-blocks," or "mythemes," naturally produces the potential for there to be an incredible amount of variety heard in each myth from teller to teller. This may be observed even within a single given community of myth-tellers, as was described by ethnographer named William Lipkind during his fieldwork in Brazil in the late 1930s:

The stories are told differently by almost every teller. The amount of variation in important details is enormous. A Carajá [a member of a tribe living along the Araguaia River, in central Brazil] who travelled with me from village to village heard all sorts of variants of this kind and accepted them all with almost equal confidence. It was not that he did not see the discrepancies. They did not matter to him. A similar laxity is found in all Carajá religious observances. The pattern of a ceremony is more or

less definite but every performance varies greatly. (251)

Lévi-Strauss suggested about myths generally that “The criterion [for their] validity is . . . not to be found among the elements of history . . .” (*The Raw and the Cooked* 13). The “elements of history” do not reveal the “reality” of the myth—this reality is revealed through its telling; through the performative and expressive elements rather than the historical. After all, if myth-tellers operate from a “conviction of the unbroken unity and continuity of life” (Cassirer, *Essay on Man* 73) it is unlikely this disposition would result in a preoccupation with specific, immovable beginning or ending points. A comparison could be drawn between the Carajá, or Haida myth-listener, unperturbed by discrepancies in detail across different performances of a myth, and a fan of Western musics, such as jazz, classical, or folk. For example, it is not uncommon for an appreciator of baroque or classical music to listen to and enjoy many different versions of the same concerto or opera; famed Austrian conductor Herbert von Karajan recorded four different versions of the entire Beethoven symphony cycle between 1951 and 1984. Nor would it be unusual for a jazz fan to hear and appreciate many different versions of canonical pieces like “Body and Soul,” or “Stella by Starlight.”

Myths and songs themselves take shape during their respective performances; their constituent pieces dance together and become visible and understandable in a tangible whole; myths and songs “live” in these moments. Once assembled during performance, however, neither a song nor a story are a “solid object or a solitary entity,” instead each involves us in a “transformative relationship.” In the case of music, “[music] is not a note or a set of notes . . .” It is made up of the “relationships between the notes—more than [it is] from the notes themselves” (Bringhurst 48). It could be argued that this is also the case with myth, in that although “a single image or even a single word can evoke it [once it is known] . . . only a linked sequence of

images, words, or gestures can tell it” (Bringhurst 48). Christopher Small similarly emphasised the importance of the *doing* of music in his text *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*: “The fundamental nature and meaning of music lie not in objects, not in musical works at all, but in action, in what people do. It is only by understanding what people do as they take part in a musical act that we can hope to understand its nature and the function it fulfills in human life” (8). In fact, he takes this point one step further: “*performance does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform*” (8).

Where, chronologically, the myth-teller or musician chooses to place each of the constituent discrete units present in the myth or song, which parts are accorded greater or lesser importance or emphasis, as well as how the words themselves in the myth are spoken, or the musical notes are played—i.e., the musical timbre or tone—all contribute to as well as ultimately constitute a myth-teller or musician’s individual voice. Not only do all of these performative elements importantly establish the ultimate character of a myth or a song, when it comes to the meaning-making potential of a given song or myth, it could be argued that these performative elements are just as consequential as the particular “contents” of a myth or a piece of music. Said another way, the *way* in which myths and music are performed may be just as important as *what* is performed in terms of how a myth or a song generates meaning for the listener. Each performer of music or myth, through the particularity of their own individual voice carves out a particular shape out of out of the raw mythical and musical materials available to them.

In the case of myth, due to the expressive form’s reliance on performance to generate meaning—there occurs a collision of myth-time and linear-time; a collision of the archetypal, universal world of the myth and the directly experienced-world, or personal history of the myth-

teller. After all, myths need to be told to be heard, and each voice is imbued with personal experience and some degree of expressive flair. Myth then provides an expressive form through which the definitive, self-enclosed myth-world collides with personal and subjective lived experience of its teller; the particular and universal overlap and together establish the character of the myth. I believe a very similar dynamic plays out in music.

Somewhat paradoxically, the “doorways” of myth and song, though presented by a particular, individual voice may establish for the listener a sense of the universal, or the general. This latter point is partly how myths and music may be said to help us “digest our sense of the world”: when the undifferentiated wholeness of the totality of our experience—i.e., our total “sense of the world”—is translated, and to some degree parsed out into mythic or song-formations, that is, when our total “sense of the word” is given shape to—we may find that how we feel—i.e., our “sense” of our own experience—has been rendered more “knowable.” Our “sense” of the totality of our experience, which includes of all of our lived experience as well as all felt manifestations of our inner world of feeling and impression—including both our memories and our dreams—requires some degree of particularisation to render it comprehensible to any degree; it needs to take a discernible shape for us to come to know anything about it.

2.3. A Sense of the Universal Made Particular in Myth and Music

Certain songs, through their lyrics—for particularly disposed and receptive listeners—have a peculiar way of simultaneously conveying distinct, particular events as well as a sense of all events of that nature, or a sense of the archetypical event. For example, when American country blues musician Mississippi John Hurt (1892-1966) is heard to sing his version of the

traditional American folk gospel song “Lonesome Valley,” there may be established for the listener an almost uncanny sense that he is singing about his personal experience, the listener’s own experience, and a fundamentally human experience that transcends cultural distinction:

You've got to walk that lonesome valley,

Well you gotta walk it for yourself,

Ain't nobody here can walk it for you,

You've gotta walk that valley for yourself

Avid folk music fans may appreciate the unique warmth and vulnerability present in Hurt’s voice as well as his melodic guitar fingerpicking—these attributes set him apart from his peers and cut him out as the singular artist he was (though he was firmly rooted in the mid-20th century “country blues” style of American folk music). The listener is receiving the lyrics as well as the melody of this song through this vehicle of Hurt’s unique voice and instrumental accompaniment, which the listener hears as distinct and singular; it is a particular human voice, and we hear it as such. However, what I consider to be the real mystery and power of the performance of this song lies in more than an appreciation of Hurt’s individual voice—i.e., his musical skill or the sensitivity by which he delivers the song (as worthy of appreciation as these aspects of the performance may be)—it lies in his ability to potentially convey—depending on the individual disposition of the listener—a sense of the universal and the subjective simultaneously.

Should listeners find themselves to be disposed to find meaning in this music of Hurt’s, incredibly, it does not matter in the slightest whether or not the listener is African American (as Hurt was), or whether or not they are well-versed in the song’s biblical subtext, or whether they are religious themselves at all, or were, like Hurt, also born in Southern United States in the late

19th century for this sense of the universal to potentially come across; for a “doorway” to open for the listener. Though, granted, a close relation on any or all of those terms may significantly affect and potentially intensify or sharpen the listener’s emotional engagement with the material on a personal level, I do not believe these relations are a prerequisite for the song to be capable of generating a lot of meaning.

The listener may feel that they completely “understand” the message contained in Hurt’s performance regardless of any cultural particularities. The message of the song is clear: as human beings we must eventually die and—unfortunately for us—we must do this alone, regardless of any assistance we might be fortunate to receive from our loved ones or any other members of our culture. The listener may be confronted with their own mortality through Hurt’s performance, and this message is delivered calmly and almost dispassionately, but with a gravity befitting the subject matter. Critically, the song retains its power by not pandering to an imaged sense of the listener’s own emotional sensibilities: the listener is not told how he or she *should* feel about the inevitability of death. In addition, Hurt wisely avoids excessively colouring the performance with his own emotion, which could reduce the song to a confessional: an outpouring of his own feelings about death. Instead, Hurt as an individual humbly recedes into his own performance, allowing the music and the message contained within the lyrics to take precedence. As a result, the song and its performance might be understood to retain their universality and ultimate potency.

In the case of this performance of Hurt’s “Lonesome Valley” (which was recorded from a television broadcast in 1965) the “doorway” of the song is presented through the particular quality of Hurt’s performance; that is, through *his* voice. In his delicate and age-weathered voice the listener hears a partial history of a man’s life lived which helps to ground the song and its

message in a relatable humanity. Through engaging with a performance such as this one, the listener may come to understand something distinct and particular about how they feel about their own deaths as well as mortality generally, because the unrepresentable has been made presentable to them by a gifted and sensitive performer. Though presented by a particular man at a particular point in historical time, the song may be felt to transcend itself. The message and the music may communicate beyond their temporality and particularity.

The particular folk song example cited above features relatively general lyrics. The sentiment is broad enough that one may imagine it to be less likely to alienate the listener than a set of lyrics speaking with a great degree of specificity to events taking place in a songwriter's personal life. However, I suggest that there is a quite a bit of play and flexibility in music's ability to express a sense of the general, through a particular voice. There is room for a lyricist to become specific, or personal, and still potentially express something to the listener that transcends their individual voice. To use Bringhurst's analogy, songs which are capable of this kind of expression may lift their lyrics "out of the realm of history" and "drop [them] into myth."

For example, when American country singer Blaze Foley sang:

I'm tired of runnin' 'round lookin'

For answers to questions that I already know

I could build me a castle of memories

Just to have somewhere to go

Count the days and the nights that it takes

To get back in the saddle again

Feed the pigeons some clay, turn the night into day

Start talkin' again, when I know what to say

On his recording of his classic melancholy American country-folk tune “Clay Pigeons,” listeners may get a sense that they are not simply just listening to one man’s lonesome tale. Instead of imagining, as the song describes, a melancholic Foley riding in the back of the Greyhound bus—listeners may feel that they are hearing a story about the very feeling of being adrift and feeling lost itself; in essence, of suffering and heartache itself. There is a quality present in the combination of the world-weary timbre of Foley’s singing voice, the sparse sound of the solo guitar accompaniment, the bare-bones production of the recording and the lonely cowboy-poetry of the lyrics that creates something greater—that is something *more*—than the sum of its parts. Owing to the total effect generated by Foley’s individual voice—this being the overall sound he generates through his combination of idiom and idiosyncrasy, which is in essence everything that contributes to his way of performing that song—the recording as a whole may communicate to listeners a sense of loneliness which transcends that particular experience described on that particular bus trip described in the lyrics. Although the lyrics are framed using the first-person point of view of the storyteller, this story of loneliness takes on the function of myth; it has no clear beginning or end, and Foley never makes reference to anything specific enough to place the story and (therefore the listeners themselves) in an exact historical or temporal chronology. These markers would tether the song to history and would weigh it down with specificity. Fortunately, for the listener, what they are given instead is another “piece of timelessness,” in this case harnessed in the shape of a song.

Robert Bringhurst saw a lot of value in recognizing the individual voice in myth-telling—in this voice he heard “all the learning and insight, perception and wisdom, that the myth has been used to convey.” When historical myth-collectors opted to translate the original indigenous languages of the myth-tellers into English and edit their myths for ease of reading and cross-

cultural comparison, leaving no record of their original versions or even the tellers themselves, Bringhurst saw the loss of the “*reality and power of the myth*” (Bringhurst 337). Anthropologist Clark Wissler, co-author of a 1909 study entitled *Mythology of the Blackfoot Indians*, was guilty of such a practise, which resulted in his collection becoming “quite polished but derivative English prose,” bearing little resemblance to the style of the original Blackfoot myth-tellers. Wissler, it would seem, recognized to some degree the error of his ways, acknowledging that: “Each [Blackfoot] narrator has his own version, in the telling of which he is usually consistent; and while the main features of the myths are the same for all, the minor differences are . . . great.” Wissler suggested that rather than this indicating a “breaking down of Blackfoot mythology,” it was just as probable that this variety was due to the fact that “Myths are told by a few individuals, who take pride in their ability and knowledge, and usually impress their own individuality upon the form of the narrative” (Bringhurst 336-337).

In Haida myth-teller Skaay’s work, Bringhurst saw that:

His poems are built of images and themes shared throughout the Northwest Coast, yet the poems are his alone. They bear the imprint of his mind, his voice, though not his face or name. The mirror is raised . . . But there are no demonstrations of authorial self-importance. Those who come to listen to Skaay’s story come to listen to the world unfolding in his voice (278).

Paul Radin described one such cross-culturally pervasive mythical character—the Trickster—as a “collective personification.” According to Radin, this is the “product of a totality of individuals and is welcomed by the individual as something known to him, which would not be the case if it were just an individual outgrowth” (201). “Collective personifications” such as the Trickster join company with musical counterparts such as the lonesome traveller in Foley’s

“Clay Pigeons,” or the individual confronting their own mortality in Hurt’s “Lonesome Valley” in that each example transcends the individual voice telling their stories. Each performance of these stories serves as an example of the individual voice translating something fundamental about our human experience into living, performable formations untethered to time.

Chapter 3: Music and Language: Expressive Form and Human Feeling

3.1. Language and Its Limits: Words as Symbols

In following our comparative exploration into some of myth and music's shared expressive qualities, I wish to now turn to Susanne Langer's work in *Philosophy in a New Key* wherein which she compares music with spoken and written discourse as expressive forms. I will begin by exploring Langer's study of discursive language in general terms, as to ground our later comparison of language with music in a clear understanding of what is meant by "language." Primarily, however, I wish to now focus our attention on how discourse and music compare as expressive forms through which one may successfully express, or articulate one's feelings, including the emotional dimension of one's experience of life. As we have done thus far, in exploring musical-meaning-making through the lenses of cultural ritual and myth generally, I hope we may continue to do so here, in broadening our discussion of musical meaning-making to include a comparison with how meaning is generated and expressed through discursive language.

There are certainly many reasons to esteem discourse as an expressive form: "Words are certainly our most important instrument of expression, our most characteristic, universal, and enviable tools in the conduct of life. Speech is the mark of humanity. It is the normal terminus of thought" (Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* 45). Discourse has proven itself to be a tremendous boon to human beings in their quests to procure goods and services, meet a potential mate, fulfil their duties at work, and to interact and build and maintain relationships with friends, family, as well as other community members in the myriad ways which culture dictates.

Of course, in order for us to use language toward significant ends such as these, there has to be a language to use—and, as Langer reminds us—the creation of any language requires a “transformation” of the initial thoughts, impressions and experiences held and felt in the mind which precede this language and inspire its construction. The process through which our initial thoughts and impressions “transform” into useful objects for speech—those objects, of course, being words—is a process Langer refers to as *symbolic transformation*: “The material furnished by the senses is . . . wrought into *symbols* which are our elementary ideas. [Symbolization] is the starting point of intellection in the human sense and is more general than thinking” (42). In this same study, Langer described the symbolic nature of language, and how, ultimately, “the development of language is the history of the gradual accumulation and elaboration of verbal symbols” (31):

Symbols are not proxy [i.e., direct substitutions] for their objects, but are *vehicles for the conception of objects* . . . In talking *about* things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves; and *it is the conceptions, not the things that symbols directly “mean.”* Behaviour toward conceptions is what words normally evoke; this is the typical process of thinking. (60-61)

When one requires a spur toward direct and specific action or an indicator of the immediate presence of a “thing or situation,” a sign may be employed, rather than a symbol—reason being, the former “*announce* their objects” whereas the latter “*lead [us] to conceive* their objects” (61). “A sign indicates the existence—past, present, or future—of a thing, event or condition. Wet streets are a sign that it has rained. A patter on the roof is a sign that it is raining . . . A shot may mean the beginning of a race” (59). Although words may be used as signs, Langer argues that the primary function of words is symbolization, and despite the capacity of words to

“serve in either capacity” there remains a “cardinal distinction” between the two functions (61). Importantly, regarding the use of symbols versus the use of signs—the former enables one to think about “objects” in their absence. This is possible because the attendant “conceptualizations” or connotations of the denoted object, event, or quality may be held in the mind in the absence of that which is being denoted. Should the verbal symbol for the concept “river” be understood by both parties, and thus carry with it the appropriate connotation—it may be used in conversation to discuss the concept “river” without the two speakers being situated physically near a river, or even without one or both individuals ever having experienced a river firsthand.

To symbolize sense impressions into speech patterns serves a tremendous utilitarian function for human beings, but the practicality of this particular process of *symbolic transformation* does not make up the entirety of its function; that is, the role that the symbolization of language plays in human life cannot be described entirely as a tool to procure the necessities. In addition to being an “instrument,” Langer also saw language as “an end”; that is, she believed that as the raw data made available through the senses is symbolically transformed in the mind into words and sentences, the symbols and accompanying conceptions are the “end[s]” or “products” of this “transformation” (51). With this idea in mind, she writes critically of those who did not recognize language’s dualistic function—i.e., those who have suggested that both language’s likely origins as well as its primary use lie strictly in its instrumental capacity and that language can only be understood in terms of its practical usefulness. Langer, however, ultimately sees the “formulation and expression of conceptions rather than the communication of natural wants” as the “essence of language” (118).

Discursive language is, however, not the only “terminus,” or “end” available to our initial impressions and experiences of the world around us. It is not the only form of expression that may be “wrought” from this process of *symbolic transformation*. As some of our initial experiences of the world are “sucked into the stream of symbols which constitutes a human mind” (42), the resulting impressions may be “transformed” into something else; they may take a “shape” other than that of language:

We are apt to be so impressed with [language’s] symbolistic mission that we regard it as the only important expressive act, and assume that all other activity must be practical in an animalian way, [i.e., strictly utilitarian] or else irrational [or strictly] playful . . . But in fact, speech is the natural outcome of only one *kind* of symbolic process. There are transformations of experience in the human mind that have quite different overt endings.” (45)

The cross-cultural historical pervasiveness of myth, ritual, and art indicate fairly clearly that discursive language evidently has not, nor cannot, meet the demands of all of humankind’s expressive needs; some of our experiences of the world must take a different shape—they must *symbolically transform* into something other than objects for discourse. Regarding the “symbolic transformation[s] of experience” that result in myth, ritual, art—Langer believed that they were “born [out] of an *elementary need*” human beings apparently possess—a “need” which has been misinterpreted as being strictly motivated by either “social purposes . . . [or as expressing] ‘mistakes’ of sense and reason that verge on complete imbecility” (45-46).

Although social solidarity may certainly be seen as one of the effects, or by-products of both myth and ritual, Langer counters that neither “myth nor ritual arose originally for this purpose.” (48) Rather, she suggests that “[their] roots lie much deeper than any conscious

purpose . . . they lie in that substratum of the mind, the realm of fundamental ideas” and myth, ritual and art were seen by Langer as being the “fruits” of the “human need for *expressing* such ideas” (49). Myth, ritual and art —like discursive language—may be used “instrumentally” toward aims such as social solidarity and communication—but they are also “ends” unto themselves; myth, ritual, and art, as expressive forms, are themselves “termini” of thought—they are themselves distinct “outcomes” of a process of *symbolic transformation* that occurs in the mind.

3.2. What is Suited for Linguistic Expression?

Discursive language and non-discursive forms of expression—including myth, ritual and art—are employed for different purposes, and express different needs; thus, their relative successes and failures as forms of expression must be understood in relation to the expressive limitations of each expressive form itself. For example, although spoken or written language may be used in a functional capacity to express aspects of human emotional experience, language itself is too rigid and rule-bound a form of expression to be able to translate and articulate much of human feeling accurately; ultimately, due to its own limits as an expressive form, it must be said that it is simply a “poor medium” for the job (100). However, it would be unfair to weigh this shortcoming against discourse too heavily in assessing its overall effectiveness as an expressive form; it does much else very well—which will be addressed below in brief. Similarly, one would not obtain a very balanced idea of how effective pictorial representations can be as expressive tools, if we held them to the same expressive standards as we do language:

Most of our interests center upon events, rather than upon things in static spatial relations. Casual connections, activities, time, and change are what we want most of all

to conceive and communicate. And to this end pictures are poorly suited. We resort, therefore, to the more powerful, supple, and adaptable symbolism of language. (73)

When judged on their own merits, however, images reveal their own expressive strengths:

Visual forms —lines, colors, proportions, etc.—are just as capable of *articulation*, i.e., of complex combination, as words. But the laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language. The most radical difference is that *visual forms are not discursive*. They do not present their constituents successively, but simultaneously, so the relations determining a visual structure are grasped in one act of vision. Their complexity, consequently, is not limited, as the complexity of discourse is limited, by what the mind can retain from the beginning of an apperceptive act to the end of it. Of course such a restriction on discourse sets bounds to the complexity of speakable ideas. An idea that contains too many minute yet closely related parts, too many relations within relations, cannot be “projected” into discursive form; it is too subtle for speech. (93)

A simple and relatable example of such a “subtle” idea which contains “many minute yet closely related parts” could be the countenance of any given person. Short of beholding the countenance with one’s own eyes, the most reliable way by which one may obtain a clear idea of what an individual’s face “looks like”—is to “grasp” this face “in one act of vision” through some kind of visual representation; a photograph, a drawing, or a video recording, for example. Should one instead be required to rely on a verbal or written description of this face, it is easy to see the immediate expressive disadvantage one would have to reckon with, should they hope to arrive at an accurate idea of the details of this particular face. To summarize briefly: some things

must be said with language, and some things cannot be said; thus necessitating a different expressive form.

In terms of what is suitable for linguistic expression—it is necessary, firstly, that the ideas, thoughts, or impressions in question must fit into symbols fit for discourse; symbols which already possess specific connotations commonly understood by other speakers of the same language. Then, these symbols—that is, these words, or groups of words—must be expressed in a “linear, discrete, successive order.” This is imperative because, ultimately, language, as an expressive form dictates that “we cannot talk in simultaneous bunches of [words]” (80). Although we may feel some our experiences of the world in “bunches”—which is to say that some of the impressions we may hold in our minds may feel as if they bleed into each other indiscriminately and overlap to the degree that is difficult to say whether or not we feel particularly one way or another at all—should we wish to express ourselves understandably in language, we must, to some degree, logically parse out these impressions.

Discourse, then, as an expressive form, necessitates a two-step “transformative” process of our initial experiences of the world around us. Firstly, the ideas, feelings, or impressions that constitute our experiences must “fit” properly into specific word formations—that is, first language dictates *what* exactly is capable of being expressed through its expressive form. Secondly, for these words to be functionally useable as language objects they must then be organized syntactically to make any sense at all—that is, secondly, language dictates *how* its objects must be used, or expressed. Regarding the first step of this process of “transformation” of our experiences into language, Suzanne Langer addressed the limitations of “speakable ideas.” She states that if an idea is too subtle and contains too many interlinked “relations,” these ideas simply cannot be “projected into language”—i.e., these ideas are unsuited for language because

they cannot be shaped into language objects at all. Concerning the second step of this process—the step which involves *how* acceptable language objects themselves may be used—Langer also addresses the limitations of language’s functionality. Even these “speakable ideas” must be “arranged” in certain ways for these “ideas” to be comprehensible, for language to be functional as an expressive form. “All language has a form which requires us to string out our ideas even though their objects rest one within the other . . . This property of verbal symbolism us known as *discursiveness*; by reason of it, only thoughts which can be arranged in this peculiar order can be spoken at all” (81).

3.3. The Wrong Expressive Form for the Job

That expressive forms do indeed have their own expressive limitations is made clear if one imagines even a few simple and common examples drawn from everyday life wherein an individual is required to use an incompatible form of expression to satisfy the ends desired. For instance, if a person were to seek directions to a specific location from a passerby, it would seem logical and obvious that, should it be determined that both individuals speak the same language, discourse would facilitate this interaction both effectively and efficiently. Once the two people are proven to be proficient enough speakers in the same language and thus share a functional conceptual understanding of the same basic discursive symbols, the nouns, verbs and adjectives employed by both speakers in this conversation will likely be sufficient to answer the question and to help the questioner reach their destination—should the individual questioned know the answer, of course.

On the other hand, if, faced with the same question, the individual is instead not permitted to speak or write, but is restricted to communicating through instrumental music, it

must be said that however deft and skillful the musician might be, this proposition would pose an essentially impossible challenge. If a fundamentally different question is posed, however, instead requiring the answering party to consult their own subjective “sense” of the world; their feelings regarding a person, place, or situation—discursive language, as an expressive form, may not prove to be as effective as it had been in the first scenario. [For the sake of clarity, I wish to briefly note here that any usage of the phrase “instrumental music” within this project is intended to theoretically include music with no vocal accompaniment, as well as vocal music without lyrics. The human voice is of course, after all, very much an “instrument.” The distinction I wish to make when the phrase “instrumental music” is used, is between music *with* lyrics and music *without* lyrics]

For the sake of this general argument, let us imagine a few such questions in which one’s feelings are of primary import, rather than one’s sense of reason—as was the case in our initial example, in that this question relied upon the addressee’s recollection of perceivable, objective fact. Firstly, let us imagine that a married man of many years is asked, “Upon seeing your wife smile, how does it make you feel?” In the second scenario, an individual who has recently returned from a visit to their hometown—a place they had not visited for many years—is asked, “What general impressions were you left with?” Additionally, let us imagine an individual is compelled to answer the following question: “How would you describe what it felt like to you, when you have felt most acutely a sense of being truly alone?” Lastly, an individual is asked, upon returning from a hiking, or camping trip, “How did it feel to be completely immersed in nature, all that mountain, forest, and ocean?”

To accurately answer questions which—depending on the individual who is asked—may involve a varying but certain degree of emotional complexity and ineffability, one might

bump against, whilst consulting one's feelings "many minute yet closely related" impressions—impressions which contain "relations within relations." In cases such as these, a non-discursive expressive form such as music might serve to better—that is more accurately—express how an individual actually feels. Susanne Langer draws attention to language that symbolically *re-*presents our feelings and ideas to ourselves and to others. In doing so, it necessarily approximates the nature of these actual feelings and ideas. This compromise, as we have said, serves language to be an effective tool for general communication. Put another way, for language to function as well as it does in expressing a baffling array of complex ideas and propositions, our denotative language must sacrifice something in terms of *what* it can express. Music, as an expressive form, is not compelled to make the same compromises. It is not required to transmit information as does language, thus it affords us the opportunity to retain in its expressions qualities of experience that were unsuited for linguistic representation; qualities that did not make it through the "transformative" process of language intact. These qualities may include, for example, some of our "minute" impressions and their "relations." Therefore, it is possible that an individual may find and listen to a piece of music which, for them, expresses and retains certain aspects of their own direct felt experiences pertaining to my hypothetical questions; their experiences potentially including a confluence of feelings of love, nostalgia, loneliness, and a "sense" of the natural world, for example.

Unfortunately, should a music listener find a piece of music that did capture their own feelings pertaining to the experiences referenced in the above hypothetical questions, this musical reference cannot, necessarily, be communicated to the one posing the question. A highly personal experience with music does serve to emphasize music's untranslatability. For example, although an individual may find a piece of music which articulates their own deeply personal

experience of loneliness profoundly and accurately, this in no way suggests that it may function similarly for anyone else. Because of the disparity in affect generated by music among listeners, should an individual be asked, “How would you describe what it felt like to you, when you have felt most acutely a sense of being alone?” the individual, unfortunately, cannot simply respond by playing that piece of music for anyone who asks the question, expecting the other will, to any degree, hear the same qualities. Though it is cross-culturally patently evident that many may hear at least similar qualities present in certain pieces of music, music cannot be used to express and communicate ideas concisely the same way that language can. This fact not only addresses the limitations of music as an expressive form, but it also differentiates music fundamentally from language—an important concept which is explored in greater detail below.

As we have noted, should an individual be required to provide a detailed impression of a person’s face or a landscape, a drawing or painting may provide welcome, and even necessary expressive possibilities that language as an expressive form may lack. Likewise, an individual may feel expressively stifled if asked to paint a chronological history of the city of Vancouver without being able to use any words or any other supportive materials in the elaboration of their chronology. The reason for this is that a painting “may suggest, but can never actually report a *history*” (73). Although “we may produce a series of pictures . . . nothing in the pictures can guarantee the conjunction of their several scenes in one serial order of events” (73). These examples hopefully indicate, in a general sense, that each expressive form has a certain capacity for expression. Presently, I will try to show with greater specificity, that when it comes to articulating feeling, for the listener as well as the individual or individuals expressing themselves through the music they are making, music may be said to be the expressive form *par excellence*.

3.4. The Universal Language?

My hope here is to engage in a discussion which may lead toward a basic understanding of why and how music may be said to be such a uniquely successful tool for articulating feeling. To simply say that it is such a tool, without including any of the how or why—that is, without any substantial theoretical or empirical support—may maintain the mystery of the art form, but it also keeps some of the important obtainable knowledge about its nature hidden from view. To reiterate what has already been said elsewhere, my intention is not to attempt to explain away the entirety of music’s expressive function, but rather to show that we must take music seriously as the potent expressive form that it is, on its own terms, if we hope to say something about how it works. To contrast the expressive nature of music with language as such, generally, serves this purpose, I believe, in that on principle it can be effective to understand something about what something is, by bringing what it is not clearly into focus adjacent to it. In the case of music versus language, *how music works* is made clearer in relation to *how it does not work*.

To start with, music is not a language—despite the oft-repeated and clichéd expression “music is the universal language.” Perhaps this expression has caught on so strongly because it conveniently serves to explain away the expressive power and global pervasiveness of music by suggesting that music’s communicative effects are linguistic in nature (language, of course, is a powerful form of expression which is globally pervasive). It is not difficult to imagine how the temptation may have arisen to fundamentally link them—to see music and language as manifestations of the same impulse and the same root: the desire and need to communicate with other human beings.

As with many clichés, there is some truth to this claim. A musician in Japan who can read conventional Western music notation may perform with a similarly skilled musician from Germany without a single rehearsal, and through this process the two are in certain respects communicating musically. This is possible even if the music performed originates from a culture shared by neither party—for example, in this case, let us suggest they are performing jazz music together. If the two performers are given a piece of sheet music for Duke Ellington’s jazz ballad “In a Sentimental Mood,” it will provide each of them with the pertinent information: the song’s key signature, the time signature (or metre) in which the song is supposed to be performed in, the accompanying chords, and of course the notes of the melody. In short, they are given the relevant symbols required to perform the piece. If each player understands the relevant symbols, they can perform even exceedingly complex materials together in a snap—much like individuals who share a language can “perform” an improvised conversation without rehearsal. In the case of conversation, the relevant symbols are words instead of the symbols of musical notation, but the process functions in fundamentally the same way.

In this respect, music can function like a language; that is, in both music and language symbols can be learned and then subsequently used to represent sounds which are then performed and can potentially be used to communicate something to the receiver, or listener. The important and ultimately critical distinction between music and verbal or written discourse, however, is found in *what* these sounds are capable of expressing. This distinction ultimately determines the fact that music is not a language most decisively above all other factors. In my estimation, this distinction answers the question “Why use music?” most convincingly, and it follows logically from there that music not only has a right to exist at all, but that it *must* exist; rather than “conveying propositions as literal symbols [like words] do” (206)—music can

express something else, something which is otherwise “unspeakable” (101)—this being the nature and quality of *feelings themselves*.

This particular kind of musical expression Langer contrasts with what she refers to as the “sound-painting” found in “program music,” that is, music “which deliberately imitates [for example] the clatter and cries of the market place, hoof-beats, clanging hammers, running brooks, nightingales and bells” (220). In these cases, musical sound is used to represent a specific phenomenon. However, when music is instead employed to convey feeling, this is another matter altogether. Instead of serving as a tool for the imitation of the environmental sounds found in life, music can be used to be an exposition of “love and longing, hope and fear” and “the essence of tragedy and comedy,” attributable to “persons on stage, or fictitious characters in a ballad” (221). Music is the exposition of *feeling itself* in these cases. Notably, this expressive feat is also possible by music which does not include a specific literal dramatic referent (such as lyrics), as in entirely instrumental and non-programmatic music. This idea will be re-visited shortly.

German composer Richard Wagner offered a similar argument, claiming that when music serves the general purpose of conveying feeling, it has the potential to not simply “express the passion, love, or longing of such-and-such an individual on such-and-such an occasion, but passion, love or longing in itself.” This, Wagner suggests, is “the exclusive and particular character of music, foreign and inexpressible to any other [form of expression]” (“Ein glücklicher Abend” 489). Wagner’s statement may be coloured by his evident passion for music—just as some of my own declarations around music’s expressive power have been so coloured. However, my desire is to bring this form of expression out into the clear light of day and not to rely on romantic appraisals without a stronger theoretical foundation. I believe this

pitfall can be avoided by looking directly at how music may be said to express the inner “life of feeling” of human beings as effectively as it does, and why language fails in this regard. With this aim in mind, we will now explore in greater detail how each form of expressions works, generally speaking.

3.5. Music as a Non-Discursive Expressive Form vs. Language as Discursive Symbolism: Framing Our Experience with Language

Susanne Langer’s explorations into the logic of language’s functionality are thorough, and while there is not the space here for a summarization of her entire theory of the nature and function of language, I do believe a closer look at a few key areas of her study is of benefit to our pursuit of a greater understanding of what fundamentally separates music and language as discrete expressive forms.

Two key aspects of language—denotation and connotation—are highlighted throughout *Philosophy in a New Key*. The former she describes as the “complex relationship which a name has to an object (or event, quality, person, etc.) which bears it . . . [It is] the *application* of a term to an object” (64-65, 133). Connotation is “the more direct relation of the name, or symbol to its associated concept . . . The connotation of a word is the conception it conveys” (64). According to Langer, should one wish to come to a general understanding of how language works, it is of primary importance that one understands how language utilizes these two functions.

Denotation, she understands as the “cardinal virtue of language” (101) and connotation—or “the formulation and expression of conceptions”—as its “essence” (118). It would seem then, that if we are to position language’s expressive nature against that of the expressive nature of music, it would be of use to first familiarize ourselves with how these two

functions of language are used, and then explore to what degree they can be said to be compatible as functions within a musical system of expression. To contextualize these two functions of language within their own native system, let us use some of Langer's examples:

A name . . . in itself is never *true* or *false*. But if it already has a connotation, then it cannot be given an arbitrary denotation, nor vice versa. I cannot use the word "kitten" *with its accepted connotation* to denote an elephant. The application of *a word with its connotation* is the equivalent of a statement: "This is a such-and-such." To call an elephant "kitten," not as a proper name but as a common noun, is a mistake, because [the speaker] does not exemplify the connoted concept. Similarly a word with a fixed denotation cannot be given an arbitrary connotation, for once the word is a name (common or proper), to give it a certain connotation is to *predicate* the connoted concept of whatever bears the name. If "Jumbo" denotes an elephant, it cannot be given the connotation "something furry," because Jumbo is presumably not furry." (77)

Both functions decisively enable human beings to navigate their world(s); they provide us with the ability to directly indicate and name specific objects, events or qualities, as well as to provide these "objects" with their own specific conceptual contexts. Through and with these conceptions, we may frame our thoughts as well as communicate these thoughts to others. In terms of discourse, Langer suggested that "the relation between denotation and connotation is . . . the most obvious seat of *truth and falsity* . . . [Their] conventional expressions are sentences asserting that something is a such-and-such, or that something has such-and-such a property" (77). On their own, words say very little. In fact, before they are combined into propositions "they assert nothing, preclude nothing . . . although they *name* things, and convey ideas of such things, they *say* nothing . . . [Words] have no value except as symbols (or signs); in themselves

they are completely trivial” (66-67, 75). Once words are entered into combinations, however, they may not only embody concepts of individual “objects” or given phenomena present in our experience, they can express things in combination—that is, they can express “situations” (76). The “tremendous readiness” of “verbal symbols . . . to enter into *combinations*,” Langer suggests, is “probably . . . their greatest virtue . . . [making] it possible for us to grasp whole groups of meanings at a time, and make a new, total, complex concept out of the separate connotations of rapidly passing words” (76).

The fact that words “give us nothing but their meaning[s]” valuably contributes to them being successful and highly functioning symbols. The “transparency” of verbal symbols allows our “conceptual activity . . . to flow *through* them . . . [thus we become] conscious only of their connotations, denotations, or other meanings . . .” Said another way, “The more barren and indifferent the symbol, the greater its semantic power” (75).

3.6. No Fixed Meaning

Music, on the other hand, functions entirely differently. Its basic building blocks—the musical sounds we may refer to as chords and musical notes—have no intrinsic meaning when listened to in isolation. A word may not “say” anything on its own, but it does carry with it a sense of meaning if one understands the language in which it is spoken; it *symbolizes something*. The word “tree” means something all on its own: although it doesn’t tell the listener anything about *a* particular tree, it does express a particular connotation. The connotation that accompanies the word “tree” should conjure up a particular mental image or impression to the listener in which its meaning is situated and grounded. This is the idea, or conceptualization of what a “tree” is, which one may then use in combination with other words and their accompanying ideas to say something about a particular tree, or “trees” as a concept altogether.

Once a musical statement of an expressive kind is assembled from its constituent parts—melody, harmony and/or rhythm—even then, this music lacks “the existence of an *assigned connotation*. It is a form that is capable of connotation, and the meanings to which it is amenable are articulations of emotive, vital, sentient experiences. But its import is never fixed” (240).

Just as the verbal symbols we identify as words benefit from a degree of “transparency” insofar as they benefit from conveying only their meaning to us, which makes them very useful in complex combinations and allows the emphasis to be placed on their connotations rather than the verbal symbols themselves—the constituent building blocks of music benefit as expressive tools by not conveying anything distinct to the listener—by being empty of meaning themselves. This makes music, as an expressive form, incredibly powerful. When the building blocks of music are put together in various combinations, the resulting configuration of musical content does not carry the burden of meaning of its constituent parts—it does not need to reconcile all of their independent meanings into a sensible and logical whole. Music expresses meaning differently than language, and because of this crucial difference at its core, rather than being a kind of language, or “the universal language,” Langer instead refers to music as “Significant Form.” She chooses this label because music is “significant” in the “peculiar sense” that one “can grasp, or feel, but not define [its meaning]; such significance is implicit, but not conventionally fixed . . . [It is] unhampered by any fixed, literal meaning, by anything it represents” (241, 256).

There has, however, been a historic temptation to grab hold of at least *some* firm emotional connotative associations present in music, to suggest that although music may not convey “literal meaning,” it is “a language of the emotions” and thus certain musics can be said to convey such-and-such an emotional response in all emotionally receptive peoples (Cooke 32).

British musician and musicologist Deryck Cooke, in his 1959 book *The Language of Music*, attempts to show that it may be possible to come to “some objective understanding of the ‘emotional content,’” of music by isolating and analyzing its constituent parts: pitch, time, volume, the uses of the major, minor, and chromatic scales, and “certain basic melodic patterns which have been used persistently throughout our musical history” (xii). As tantalizing as this prospect might be intellectually, any attempt at affixing a universal emotional connotation to a musical device—regardless of however many musical examples one may draw upon to support this claim—becomes fruitless when we look closely at what the music is doing for those not receptive to the music in the same manner.

If one were able to boil down all the potential emotional content expressed by and through music into two distinct conceptual categories—“happy” or “sad”—one would still not be able to say that certain music “means” or is able to distinctly convey either emotional state definitively; no music exists that connotes either happiness or sadness regardless of context.

Traditionally, in the West, many have come to recognize music performed in minor keys as expressing a “sad,” or melancholic connotation and those in major keys expressing a “happy,” or uplifting and joyful connotation. To attribute to music played in these keys a kind of fundamental “connotative distinction” would, however, be false; neither major or minor songs intrinsically “possess” a happy or sad connotation on their own. Their association with either emotional response is instead merely an effect of personal or cultural familiarity. Similarly, if one was to attempt to attribute such a fundamental emotional quality to certain rhythmical patterns, it would be equally ineffective. “Slower” songs, or those often identified as “ballads,” are not definitively affixed to a “sad” connotation, despite the cultural association many listeners may hold in their minds. Equally, “quicker,” or more up-tempo songs cannot be said to express

joy and excitement in every case, to every listener. British science writer Phillip Ball addressed the folly of dogmatic assertions concerning universal “musical meaning” in his 2010 book *The Music Instinct: How Music Works and Why We Can't Do Without It*:

Peter Kivy [Professor Emeritus of Musicology and Philosophy at Rutgers University] suggests that the “pulling down” of the major third to the minor creates a kind of sinking, plaintive effect . . . But there’s no reason to believe that people will inevitably experience the minor and diminished chords as sad and anguished, if they have not learnt those associations. Christian sacred music in the Middle Ages commonly used modes that now sound to us like minor keys, but it wasn’t seeking a ‘sad’ ambience [at the time] . . . Minor-key compositions with relatively upbeat connotations aren’t rare in the Western canon, [for example] Bach’s Double Concerto for Violin . . . [In addition] there are plenty of examples in popular music . . . such as Van Morrison’s Moondance.’ (274, 275)

In addition to the general emotional response roused by music being culturally relative, the same relativity apparently holds as we discuss another commonly sought-after dichotomous paradigm in music: consonance and dissonance. These terms refer to music that sounds harmonious or discordant to the human ear. Put in even simpler terms, consonant names that which sounds “pleasant” (at rest) while dissonant refers to that which sounds “unpleasant” (not at rest; tense). Ball explores the vast potential differences in human responses to music, relating to its perceived consonance or dissonance:

Until cognitive testing and ethnomusicology began to challenge the assumption in the later twentieth century, it was common for music theorists and composers in the West to claim that consonance was merely a matter of acoustic physics and physiology, and so

would be judged the same way by anyone . . . Champions of atonalism such as Schoenberg and Boulez dismissed this notion that we have an innate aversion to dissonance, claiming instead that it was culturally learnt—and could thus presumably be unlearned . . . [Even] Chopin[’s] music is *riddled* with dissonance. Or take [Indonesian] gamelan, which the uninformed listener might dismiss as a clangorous riot but which may leave Javanese people smiling joyously. Or consider the . . . most clichéd of hotel-lobby pianists, whose saccharine versions of popular songs are undoubtedly laden with intervals that music theorists would have no hesitation in pronouncing dissonant (Ball 166).

Another clear example of completely opposed impressions of dissonance occurring among different people while listening to the same music took place during a class facilitated by John Cage—the 20th century American composer, music theorist, and philosopher. Cage played to his students, during a music class he gave in “Oriental music”:

a record of a Buddhist service that began with a microtonal chant and then continued with the repetitious beat of a percussion instrument. After fifteen minutes, one woman in the class stood up, screamed, and then shouted, “Take it off. I can’t bear it any longer.” Cage took the record off. Then another class member—a man—got irate. “Why’d you take it off? He demanded. “I was just getting interested.” (Toop 42)

Despite a lack of coherence of meaning generated by music relating to both its general emotional expressivity and its basic qualities of tension and rest observed in the above examples, this does not suggest, as I have explored, that music, as an expressive form, lacks an ability to clearly express meaning. Although cultural relativity and personal taste and disposition are both evidentially critical factors in regard to how “musical meaning” is received and interpreted, this

does not diminish the claim made earlier, that music possesses a concrete and definitive “power in itself” as an expressive form. The examples make clear, rather, that the individual constituent building blocks of music do not possess a “meaning” unto themselves. They do not carry within them a “fixed” emotional or conceptual connotation. When notes, chords and rhythm are assembled into some kind of “musical form” what meaning the music “itself” *does* express may vary dramatically depending on the culture in which it is situated, as well as the individual eardrum it makes contact with. The fact that the “meaning” of music may vary dramatically from culture to culture, as well as person to person, does not suggest that as an expressive form music lacks meaning—it is, after all, the expressive form of music itself that is conveying this meaning. Music itself, then, as an expressive form, has the potential to express and to generate a substantial amount of meaning for its listeners.

3.7. What Does Music Express?

Now that we have explored some fundamental expressive differences between music and language by highlighting what it is that music is not, I believe it is pertinent to consult some examples drawn from the expressive form of music itself and to now focus our attention on what we are able to say music *is*, and how it may be said to express meaning as an expressive form. An attempt has been made to come to some understanding, in basic theoretical terms, about how discursive language can be said to be fundamentally lacking in its ability to articulate human feeling and to articulate the ambiguity present in human “mental life.” I wished to emphasize the expressive limitations of language to articulate the nature of certain feelings which may be understood and known through our feeling of these feelings themselves, but which cannot be properly conceptualized, thus rendering them incommunicable through words, phrases and

propositions. When language fails to ensnare complex combinations of sensory experience, conscious perception, and emotion—including all that may lie in our dreams and our memories—into neatly organized objects for discourse, should we wish, or in more crucial cases, should we need to express their nature at all, another expressive form is evidently necessary.

Should we wish to express, or articulate the nature of these feelings and experiences present in our “mental lives,” rather than to represent them, or symbolize them—as language does with concepts, or images may do with existent people, places or objects—the most successful option may be instead, as Susanne Langer suggested, to articulate some of the feelings and experiences themselves, to *present* them, “to *mimic* . . . the ebb and flow [of the] . . . dynamics of emotion itself” (Ball 262). Langer suggested this may be possible because there are “certain aspects of the so-called ‘inner life’—physical or mental—which have formal properties similar to those of music—patterns of motion and rest, of tension and release, of agreement and disagreement, preparation, fulfillment, excitation, sudden change” (*Philosophy in a New Key* 228). This idea was shared by Ernst Cassirer, though he believed the ability to directly reflect the nature of feeling was an attribute applicable to art on the whole: “What we feel in art is not a simple or single emotional quality. It is the dynamic process of life itself—the continuous oscillation between opposite poles, between joy and grief, hope and fear, exultation and despair” (*Essay on Man* 148-149).

As Langer reminds us, however, this privileged proximity to feeling is an expressive attribute not shared by language: “Because the forms of human feeling are much more congruent with musical forms than with the forms of language, music can reveal the nature of feelings with a detail and truth that language cannot approach.” (*Philosophy in a New Key* 235) To put this idea of Langer’s into even simpler terms: “music [can] *sound* the way moods *feel*.” (Pratt 78)

As I have tried to show, the qualities of some of our feelings and experiences of the world around us resist tidy conceptualization, and, because of this fact, should we attempt to express how some of these feelings and experiences feel to us, this cannot be done with a symbol. Said another way, *that which cannot be symbolized, cannot be represented to us accurately as a symbol*. “To articulate knowledge that cannot be rendered discursively because it concerns experiences that are not . . . amenable to . . . discursive projection,” Langer suggests in *Feeling and Form*, is the sole “office” of a “non-discursive” expressive form, such as music (241).

If a non-discursive presentation of an emotion or feeling is articulated effectively through music—that is, if it is articulated accurately—there is a recognition, or a knowing experienced by the listener; the listener may recognize that either he or she has felt this feeling before, or that they are feeling something new in that moment. In the latter case, they are feeling a novel combination of impressions hitherto unarticulated in that exact manner. This awareness, or recognition, may take place in an instant; it is a kind of “wordless knowledge” (Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* 244) in that the insight obtained from such an experience does not appear in the mind in the shape of a distinct word or image. It takes a far less distinct shape; it appears as *a feeling*.

It is also possible, that in having one’s feelings “presented” through music, a listener may recognize personal feelings that they were not yet fully cognizant of. Said another way, through music, a listener may recognize personal feelings that had not yet been entirely assimilated into their own awareness at the time of the experience which had initially brought the feelings about. It is possible, that in such cases, an individual may be partially cognizant of having such feelings, due to having held their memory in mind enough to retain at least a rough sense of them. However, in having these feelings “presented” to them, and in being given a chance to “revisit”

them, they may come to a greater understanding of the nature of these feelings. This process may then enable them to experience these feelings more fully.

To draw up a potential example of this process, one might imagine an individual who has grieved the loss of a loved one, and then—even years later—this individual listens to a piece of a music. Owing to the particular and distinct combination of the qualities present in the music itself and this individual’s disposition towards them, this music is found to be capable of reflecting a sense of their grief—a sense of grief which may include many contradictory feelings simultaneously. It may be that in the initial grieving process, for any number of reasons, certain aspects of this individual’s total sense of their loss were not emotionally accessible to them, and that, through having the nature of their own feelings “presented” to them in that moment of listening—through listening to that piece of music at that time—the listener is enabled to come to a greater understanding of his or her own feelings. In this case, the music facilitates an experience which allows them to feel these feelings more acutely than they had formerly done.

Let us now draw our attention to music itself. My intention, by citing specific examples drawn from recorded music and from the perspectives of particular composers, is to hopefully make clearer the idea described above: the idea that music can be said to present directly what we experience in our “mental lives.” Music may provide a more direct link to our inner world of feeling because its expressive form need not satisfy the same symbolic requirements of language; it does not require a distinct connotation to convey meaning—for its form to function effectively. Language, in contrast, necessitates an extra degree of abstraction between human beings and the impressions and feelings that exist in the mind. This degree being represented by the very symbols of language itself, which are used to represent, or stand in for our impressions and feelings as conceptions of them, thus making them suitable objects for experiencing the range of

discourse. In the case of music, to *present*, rather than *re-present* an experience that exists in the mind through its expressive form, is to articulate this experience (or certain qualities of it) without “symbolically transforming” the experience into a particular language object or a series of language objects. As a result, the experience may retain some of what is lost through the process of conceptualization.

3.8. Music with Words: Nick Cave & Bob Dylan

Despite its limitations, language is, of course, capable of much expressive power and utility. When music incorporates poetry and storytelling into its expressive form through the inclusion of lyrics, it adds another expressive dimension to both the music as well as the words expressed in the lyric. Similarly to how words may be used in poetry, the words that make up a song’s lyrics may express much ambiguity and are free to engage in significant “conceptual play.” In both cases, this is owing to the words being largely freed from the constraints of discursive logic. In song lyrics the traditional connotations of the words used can be re-contextualized, distorted or abandoned altogether, should the songwriter so choose.

Australian singer and songwriter Nick Cave—known most famously for fronting the adventurous rock group Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds—highlights the expressive utility of lyrics to convey ambiguity on his online platform *The Red Hand Files*, where he answers submitted written questions from his fans. One particular fan believed that Cave had succeeded in relating a sense of “common [human] suffering” through his music but was curious whether or not Cave was regretful that he had not addressed specific political issues in his songwriting as well. Cave suggested that what this particular fan may enjoy about his songs is that “they are conflicted, and often deal in uncertainties and ambiguities . . . sit[ting] in that liminal space between decided

points of view” (*The Red Hand Files*). Cave then described what he sees as being the key difference between the kind of songwriting he feels most inclined to engage with, and political songs, which he feels

inhabit a different space. They have little patience for nuance, neutrality or impartiality.

Their aim is to get the message across in as clear and persuasive a manner as possible.

There can be great value in these sorts of songs, but . . . my songs seem to be resistant to fixed, inflexible points of view. They have, as you say, a concern for common, non-hierarchical suffering . . . [My songs] are often slippery, amorphous things, with unclear trajectories—position-free attempts at understanding the mysteries of the heart. (*The Red Hand Files*)

In the mixture of poetry and storytelling present in the songwriting of Bob Dylan, one may find a confounding mixture of the personal and the general; the logical and the purely expressive. I will turn to Dylan to illustrate my points.

I believe that his decision to avoid explaining what his music “means” has been a large contributing factor as to why generations have continued to both puzzle over and admire his music to the present day. His songs have been interpreted in the light of the civil rights movement of the 1960s by both white and African American listeners; they have been used as protest ammunition against military conflicts such as the Vietnam war; they are favoured as late-night drinking companions for the lovelorn and broken hearted; and they have circulated as anthems about growing up and striking out on one’s own for generations of youth around the world. He has historically praised the music of black America as being one of his most significant influences, and his music has in-turn been re-interpreted by African American artists as notable as Jimi Hendrix, Sam Cooke, Nina Simone, and the Staples Singers. People from

emphatically different backgrounds have been able to find meaning in his songs potentially largely because his exact intended meaning has not always been apparent to each listener.

When Dylan discussed the most significant literary influences on his work during his Nobel Lecture, upon receiving the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature, the question around what is meant by his songs was answered with his characteristic avoidance of definitiveness. When addressing the specific influence classic literary themes present in texts such as Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Homer's *The Odyssey* have had on his songwriting, he remarked:

So what does it all mean? Myself and a lot of other songwriters have been influenced by these very same themes. And they can mean a lot of different things. If a song moves you, that's all that's important. I don't have to know what a song means. I've written all kinds of things into my songs. And I'm not going to worry about it—what it all means.

(Dylan)

In his 2004 memoir *Chronicles: Volume One*, Dylan intimated the close relationship his personal experience of the world has had with the songs he'd written. Rather than his songs materializing instantaneously in his mind with no experiential context—as in a moment of pure, singularly artistic inspiration—the songs he'd written were precipitated by an understanding: his understanding of an experience he'd had. He suggested that it's not as if one “see[s] songs approaching and invite[s] them in. It's not that easy.” Rather, he felt that if one wishes to “say something about strange things that have happened to [them]” or the “strange things that [they] have seen,” one must “know and understand something and then go past the vernacular” (51). Dylan's songs are vehicles by which he has been able to “convert something . . . that exists [i.e. an experience] into something that didn't yet [i.e. a song]” (51).

Regardless of the “understanding” which precipitated and inspired a specific song for

Dylan, it is certainly not necessary that a listener share it—or even be aware of it—in order find meaning in the song itself. In fact, it could be argued that the less a listener is aware of the specifics of Dylan’s state of mind when he wrote a given song, the more a listener may be able to recognize “within” Dylan’s lyrics aspects of their own experience. If a listener feels capable of inserting their own impressions and experience—including their own feelings, dreams and memories “into” a song of Dylan’s, the more personal significance or “meaning” the song’s lyrics may generate for them; the more the listener may find Dylan’s melodies and words to connect to their own experiences of the world around them. This is possible regardless of what Dylan had in mind when he wrote the particular song in question. In this way, the absence of strict connotation in the lyrics leaves open a “space for potential meaning” which a listener may “fill” according to their own disposition—should they be moved to do so.

Of course, Dylan’s lyrics may not at all compel us toward conjuring up a series of vivid impressions, nor may they necessarily stir any significant emotion within one’s heart. In addition, it is possible that a listener may not at all feel capable of recognizing within the lyrics of Dylan’s any of their own personal experience, even if they wished to do so. Beyond a general impression drawn from the most immediate and readily-available qualities perceived in Dylan’s music—that is, the total, overall impression drawn from the sound of the music and the lyric themselves—it is possible that any number of listeners may find no real discernible meaning present in Dylan’s songs at all. While a song of Dylan’s plays, any number of listeners may agree that they are certainly hearing something, as opposed to silence, but they may not recognize within this music any specific qualities which mean anything to them beyond their immediate impressions of it being, for example: “quiet,” “pleasant,” “abrasive,” “annoying,” “boring,” or “slow.” In addition, they may perceive stylistic qualities present in the music

inasmuch as it may sound “folky,” “bluesy,” or “country-sounding,” to them.

Regardless of the expressive merit or import one listener may attribute to a piece of music, there is absolutely no guarantee that anyone else on Earth will arrive at an identical conclusion. This point is, of course, evident to anyone who has had their musical recommendations rebuffed by someone who did not share their own enthusiasm. In *The Music Instinct*, Phillip Ball emphasised the lack of implicit meaning possessed by any piece of music when he cited some particular cross-cultural musical studies and their results. For example, in one such study, “students and teachers at a school in Liberia were played Western classical music in the 1930s [and they] didn’t recognize any emotion in it. Villagers were even more direct in their response: they became restless, and some simply got up and left” (277). Similar results were shown in another study, where “Europeans and South East Asians were played a selection of extracts from Western classical, Indian classical and New Age music and [were] asked to choose adjectives to describe the moods represented. Their responses suggested that cultural tradition exerted far stronger an influence than did any inherent qualities of the music” (276-277). Regarding what *is* expressed, for example, “by a theme of Mozart or a Haydn symphony,” 19th century Austrian music critic Eduard Hanslick offered: “One will say ‘Love’. He may be right. Another thinks it is ‘longing . . .’ Perhaps so. A third feels it to be ‘religious fervour.’ Who can contradict him?” (Ball 307). Ball, in agreement with Hanslick on this point, suggested that when it comes to the music of Dylan, Mozart, or Haydn, we had best remember that human beings “are not passive recipients of musical emotion,” but rather “we construct our own interpretations. All we ask is that the music provides us with the materials” (Ball 307).

Regarding the potential for musical “material” or “content” to move a listener, that is, for it to generate significant meaning, it matters not whether a listener “understands” how a songwriter

felt when a given song was written, or whether a listener is aware of what precipitating experience lead to the song's creation. Should the listener be aware of the songwriter's precipitating experience, it is also unnecessary that their own lived experience resembles the songwriter's. If these experiences do happen to cohere—that is to say, if one listens, to some degree, in sympathy with the songwriter—the listening experience as an experience of relation may carry with it its own distinct and meaningful effects. However, it is not a requirement for music as a meaning-making expressive form to be “understood” in the same way by all involved. Music's meaning-making potential does not at all hinge on a coherence of experience among composers, performers, and listeners.

Here we may briefly return to the idea that music, unlike language, does not require that the listener internalize specific connotations to be able to pull consequential meaning from its form. That I, an English monolingualist, may come to be moved intensely by, for example, a song sung in Hindi, Swahili, or Tuvan—languages from which I cannot discern a single literal meaning—demonstrates this idea well. Further to this point, it is also possible that I may feel a strong emotional response to a song in English that comes from a cultural context entirely alien to my own lived experience, or may be moved profoundly by instrumental music without any accompanying literal or programmatic material through which I may be directed conceptually toward an intended or suggested meaning.

On the other hand, should a listener be made aware of the cultural or personal context that informed the piece of music they are listening to, they may feel that it significantly benefits and influences their listening experience; they may feel this awareness has increased the music's meaning-making value for them rather than detracted from it. I do not wish to minimize this. The important fact I wish to draw attention to, is that music, as an expressive form, does not require

conceptual orientation to generate meaning.

That instrumental music may generate profound affect and may potentially stir a listener's emotions significantly is an idea somewhat distinct from our present explorations of meaning-making through music with the accompaniment of lyrics, and thus, I believe, it deserves special attention and consideration. Without words, a listener must determine what a piece of music means to them based entirely on the music itself; the sum of a piece of instrumental music's potential meaning-making value is contingent on its musical content alone. We will use examples drawn from jazz music, as well as musics often termed "ambient," "minimalist," or "electronic" to explore how instrumental music generates meaning in this way.

3.9. Music without Words I: John Coltrane

American saxophonist John Coltrane, undoubtedly one of the most celebrated and influential instrumentalists and composers in the jazz idiom, believed strongly that music, as an expressive form, could articulate profound feeling without words. Coltrane felt that he could, in a sense, express the totality of his experience as a human being through the playing of his instrument and through his composition. In a 1966 radio interview, he opened up about his creative process to Frank Kofsky, a professor in the Department of History at California State University in Sacramento. Kofsky was particularly interested in the forward thinking, conventionally liberated, modern jazz music of mid-1960s USA exemplified by African-American performers such as John Coltrane, and this new music's relationship with some of the civil rights politics of the day oriented around early black movements of justice and empowerment as espoused by individuals like Malcolm X. Kofsky questioned Coltrane as to whether or not, in fact, there was a relationship between his music and the similarly spirited

music of some of his peers, and those movements, politics, and ideas. Coltrane replied: “I think that music, being an expression of the human heart, of . . . being itself . . . *does* express just what is happening . . . I feel that it expresses the whole thing . . . The whole of the human experience at the particular time that it is being expressed” (Coltrane).

When Coltrane was asked whether he felt the phrase New Black Music was fitting for the distinctive sound currently played by jazz groups such as his, he responded: “I don’t think there’s a phrase for it . . . I think it’s up to the individual, you can call it what you may . . . when I know a man’s sound . . . to me, that’s him” (Coltrane). Similarly, when questioned about his intended meaning of the new music, he was mostly disinterested in specifics, and instead spoke of how he perceived its meaning in general, broad terms. Coltrane did acknowledge that there was a link between his politics and his music, but, as Coltrane evidently felt his music expressed the entirety of his own lived experience and being at the time of its creation, the inclusion of his personal politics was natural and inevitable. As such, he felt his music expressed his desire to see societal change: “In music, I have tried to make . . . consciously . . . an attempt . . . to change what I’ve found, in music . . . in other words, I have tried to say, ‘this I feel, could be better.’” He felt that his music could embody his own ideals, and he found jazz to be, at its best, capable of being “an expression of higher ideas [such as] brotherhood [through which it may be possible that] there would be no poverty . . . no war.” Coltrane did believe that it was possible for music to “create a change, in the thinking of the people” (Coltrane).

The potential Coltrane felt for jazz to instigate cultural change was corroborated by Kofsky himself, when he noted the effect Coltrane’s music had had on his own sense of cultural awareness: “That’s how I got interested in . . . Malcolm X and so forth—I might not have come to it, or come to it as fast, if it hadn’t been for the music. ’Cause that was my first introduction to

something beyond my own horizons and it made me think about the world I was living in" (Coltrane). When Coltrane was asked whether or not he felt he needed to "educate his audience in ways that [weren't] musical, to better contextualize and acclimatize them to this bold new music he was making, he ultimately felt that it was up to the music itself to get his feelings across:

The music is enough . . . I think the best thing I can do at this time is to try to get myself in shape, and if I can do that . . . then . . . I'll just play . . . and leave it at that!

That will do it . . . If I can really . . . be, just as I feel I should be, and [then] play it, [then] I think they'll get it. 'Cause music goes a long way, it can influence." (Coltrane)

In being able to "influence" and "create a change in the thinking of the people,"

Coltrane saw that it was possible that he could be "a force for good" through his mostly instrumental music: "I know that there are forces out here that bring suffering to others, and misery to the world . . . But I want to be the opposite force, I want to be the force which is truly for good" (Coltrane).

When John Coltrane recorded what is widely considered to be his magnum opus, 1965's *A Love Supreme*, he gave very little instruction to his bandmates, according to pianist McCoy Tyner: "I don't think we even rehearsed that music . . . he just had things sketched out that he would want, nothing in detail, just more or less a few [chord] changes" (Tyner). Tyner recalls that he and his bandmates, "didn't talk about a lot of things," and that in leading up to the recording date, he "didn't know what [they] were going to do." When looking back on the album's success, he remarked that he and the other members of the quartet "couldn't really explain why things came together so well . . . it's hard to explain things like that" (Westervelt). Tyner felt that through playing together extensively over the years leading up to the recording

date, they had honed a level of group musical communication that required very little in the way of verbal instruction:

We had reached a level where [we] could move the music around. John had a very wonderful way of being flexible with the music, flexing it, stretching it . . . He gave us the freedom to do that. We thought of something, 'Oh, then we'll play it,' you know? And he said, 'Yeah, I have a feeling'—you know? And all that freedom just came together when we did that record. (Westervelt)

The work was presented as a four-part suite. The titles of each section are:

“Acknowledgement,” “Resolution,” “Pursuance” and “Psalm.” The album’s liner notes, written by Coltrane himself, describe briefly the album’s general aim and context. The listener is first informed that in 1957 Coltrane had a “spiritual awakening,” and subsequently asked God “to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music.” He then alludes to a period following that wherein he had strayed from the “esteemed path” he was on. Finally, following this lapse, he had once again restored a personal connection to God, and in the wake of this spiritual re-alignment, wished to offer this record as his “. . . humble offering to Him. An attempt to say, "THANK YOU GOD" (*A Love Supreme*).

It was uncharacteristic for Coltrane himself to provide any kind of supplemental liner notes to his albums. That he included his own written notes to *A Love Supreme* suggests to the listener that there was a particular personal significance to this work, an importance which needed addressing in his own voice, even in abbreviated and broad terms. Nat Hentoff, a noted jazz critic, writer and editor, recalled that each time he was asked by Impulse Records to write liner notes to a new John Coltrane album, his conversations with Coltrane about them would go

the same way: “John would reply by telling me he wished I wouldn’t [write them], because if the music doesn’t speak for itself, what’s the point?” (Hentoff).

Hentoff, in his liner notes accompanying *Kulu Sé Mama*, an album of Coltrane’s recorded the same year as the release of *A Love Supreme*, remarked that he felt “listening to Coltrane work through his own challenge[s] may well stimulate self-confrontation in the rest of us. Each listener, of course, will himself be challenged in a different way” (*Kulu Sé Mama*).

Ashley Kahn, American music historian, journalist and author of *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane’s Signature Album* felt that this assessment made by Hentoff of Coltrane’s music was astute:

[Coltrane] certainly was doing it [i.e., practising self-confrontation in] his own life and I think that he was, in some sense, aware this was a challenge inherent in his music. He often spoke about how music should be a challenge, and that it shouldn’t come too easily. . . . I wanted to show how even the most verbally astute critics of the day were forced to talk about themselves, when talking about Coltrane’s music. There is no way to avoid it. If you are going to be an open and honest listener, and allow this music to enter you—which was Coltrane’s intent—you have to be willing to speak about yourself. . . . The whole idea that music could take people to this level of self-confrontation, of self-honesty, is exactly what Coltrane was about. There is no album he recorded that he was willing to be more obvious about this principle than *A Love Supreme*. (Kahn)

That these “challenges” may present themselves differently to each listener speaks to the fact that although Coltrane had a particular generative “idea” driving the music contained on *A Love Supreme*, and although he did disclose this generative “idea” to the listener through the

album's liner notes—the music's ultimate “meaning” is destined to be felt and understood differently depending on the listener's own disposition. What *A Love Supreme* does end up meaning may potentially be connected deeply to the individual's own spirituality, or their own personal relationship with God—which is to say that it is possible a listener may be stirred in ways generally similar to Coltrane's own declared religious feelings which inspired the project. However, it is also certainly possible that the album may prove to affect someone without any spiritual orientation or religious faith in an equally profound way.

Throughout his life, Coltrane would suggest that it was unimportant to try to articulate in words—either conceptually, or through technical explanation—what he felt to be his music's ultimate meaning. He felt that his music should “speak for itself” and that it was therefore unnecessary to translate his music into discursive form. In one such instance, when it came to the “concern that non jazz listeners could appreciate his music” he was quoted that “[he had] never even thought about whether or not they understood what [he was] doing”—that it simply wasn't “necessary that it be understood” (Kahn). One good example of a listener who expresses being tremendously moved without “understanding” the technical aspects of *A Love Supreme* was popular Mexican-American guitarist Carlos Santana, who described his very first experience of hearing the album being both bewildering and enlightening: “I couldn't make out the structure or the scales . . . it felt so alien to me. It was one of the first times I realized the paradox of music: it can be violent and peaceful at the same time” (177).

In *The Music Instinct*, Philip Ball similarly described personal experiences while listening to music when he felt he took away a set of opposite impressions, as well as experiences where he felt his emotional engagement lacked a distinct conveyable conceptual quality. When he listened to the music of Baroque composer and musician Johann Sebastian

Bach, he found it could make him “tearful without being either happy or sad”; when listening to American minimalist composer Steve Reich’s music, he would feel “relaxed yet alert: a clear emotional state, but not one I can articulate very coherently” (*The Music Instinct* 261-262). If I had the regrettable task of trying to describe in words what my own personal experiences of listening to *A Love Supreme* have been—that is, if I had to describe what that particular music has meant to me—it is inevitable that I would similarly resort to conceptual contradictions. I have found it to be both a work of incredible force, and a work of quiet serenity: its combination of explosive passion and restraint stir within me an unnameable mixture of emotions. I feel a kind of transcendence in the work, even though my own personal agnosticism borders on atheism. The introspection it induces, in my case, therefore, is not related to my own relationship with God, but it is undoubtedly a significant and affecting introspection, nonetheless. To echo Langer, somewhere in the “substratum of [my] mind, [in the] the realm of [my own] fundamental ideas” I feel that I am stirred while listening to *A Love Supreme*.

Ashley Kahn noted that following the release of *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane is quoted saying a goal of his was to “uplift people as much as [he could]. To inspire them to realize more and more of their capacities for living meaningful lives” (Kahn). Coltrane evidently felt he was best positioned to achieve this goal through performing, and recording music—and ultimately, he was correct in his belief that “music [was] enough.” The wealth of it he left behind after his unfortunately early death from liver cancer in 1967 at age 40 still continues to uplift, challenge and inspire people all over the world—almost entirely without words.

3.10. Music without Words II: Minimal, Electronic, and Ambient

French-born American avant-garde composer Edgard Varèse said (including a slight addition of my own) that music may express, “[both] new [and old] worlds on earth, in the sky, or in the minds of men” (Toop 83). Defending an early work of his own entitled *Amériques* against critics who charged that it was simply “a kind of barbarous programme music, a simple sound painting of urban noise pollution,” Varèse responded by saying that it was, in fact, something more; it was a “portrayal of a mood in music and not a sound picture” (Toop 83). English musician and author David Toop also saw this quality in Varèse’s music. He saw that rather than to *re-present*—through musical sound—specific observable phenomena, Varèse “sought to develop . . . the superior capacity of all kinds of music to capture . . . transient, non-articulated feelings” (84).

Minimalism is a musical movement which originally sprung up in the late 1950’s in New York and San Francisco. Minimalism continues to see its influence permeate outward into pop music, contemporary classical musics, electronic music, film soundtracks and elsewhere, proving to be a an effective creative idiom through which one might attempt to “portray a mood in music.” Minimalism, as the name suggests, characteristically includes less musical (i.e., melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic) materials in pursuit of its expressive aims than does much Western music. Minimalism often employs the repetition of short melodic and rhythmic patterns, drone (i.e., a “sustained tone, usually rather low in pitch, providing a sonorous foundation for a melody or melodies sounding at a higher pitch level” [DeVoto]), and tends to emphasize texture and tone quality above harmonic and melodic complexity. The composition as well as the dictation of these musics for performance may include informal or unconventional musical notation. In some cases, this will leave room for improvisation, though in other cases minimalism rejects improvisation to any degree, and may instead require strict adherence to the

created compositional materials.

The average Western ear, through the repeated exposure to structural elements present in traditional European classical musical forms, as well as “popular”—i.e., non-classical—musical forms, has naturally grown accustomed to a certain sense of “direction” and forward momentum in music. Specifically, some examples of these forms may include sonata form, as well as the forms commonly used in pop, folk, and jazz musics that feature verses, bridges, and choruses, as well as the 32-bar AABA form, AABB form, and the 12 bar blues. Similarly, Western filmgoers or novel-readers who have been repeatedly exposed to those popular forms’ conventional structures may expect a formulaic, clear beginning, middle, and end, as well as some degree of clichéd character development and some kind of conflict and resolution. Western music listeners who have spent much of their lives listening to conventional song-forms are inclined—despite all manner of possible variation within those structures—to expect a reliable pattern of development, repeating motifs, and a predictable resolution in the music they hear. However, minimalist music and some of its eventual offshoots, such as certain electronic and ambient musics, often do not “move” predictably from beginning to end, nor do their musical contents necessarily feature motifs that come and go reliably as per conventional, popular Western song formats. In thwarting the expectations of the average Western ear, minimalism, as well as ambient and electronic musics, may compel those predisposed to certain musical characteristics to listen differently. Once it becomes clear to a predisposed listener that the piece of music they are listening to does not “lead” to the kind of “destination” to which they are accustomed and that there is no “goal” to which they are directed—such as a chorus, or a recapitulation—the “journey” itself then becomes the inevitable focal point. The process of listening attentively itself becomes its own reward.

3.11. Stars of the Lid

Contemporary American exemplars of some of the main tenets of minimalism which I have described, Stars of the Lid, have exploited the “less is more” tendencies of the musical movement to great expressive heights. So much so, that Ivo Watts-Russell, founder of influential British independent record label 4AD Records, believes they are making “the most important music of the 21st century” (Maleney). In addition to being minimalistic, their music is also often described as being “ambient music”—a musical term defined by one of its most lauded pioneers, English musician and producer Brian Eno as:

an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint . . . suited to a wide variety of moods . . . Whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities . . . Ambient Music is intended to induce . . . a space to think. [It] must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular . . . (Eno)

For listeners who find themselves capable of connecting emotionally to the instrumental, ambiguous long-form pieces, with their use of drone and slow, swelling, elongated melodic statements, the recorded music of Stars of the Lid may serve very well as a “space to think,” or, more importantly for our purposes, a “space to feel.” Stars of the Lid do not provide their listeners with much in the way programmatic content of any kind through which they may be directed toward how they should feel while listening to the music. Thus the “space” their music provides may seem expansive and vast, open to much possibility, interpretation, and variety of affect. Much like experimental electronic trailblazer Laurie Spiegel before him, who

claimed that her music wasn't "verbal or conceptual" (*The Expanding Universe*), Adam Wiltzie—half of Stars of the Lid—similarly does not believe his work to be conceptually oriented. "I've never really been much into conceptual music," he replied when asked if the duo informs their song writing process with concepts in mind. Instead, he finds himself "sitting down at a piano or sitting down with a guitar" eventually "find[ing] a chord progression or a note. I've always had this feeling in my stomach, if I have this feeling, I always trust myself, I don't second guess myself. That's how it starts" (Wiltzie, "The Cosmic Ballet Goes On").

Echoing these feelings elsewhere, Wiltzie suggests that feelings are what drive his musical efforts: "I think about making art, creating something beautiful, but I don't think about its functionality . . . when I create something, in the context it seems to work with what I'm feeling" (Wiltzie, "The State Of Dreaming").

That Stars of the Lid's music lacks any degree of rigid conceptuality imbues their music with high degrees of ambiguity. I believe this has helped their music land fans among many disparate groups, including: "science fiction writers, yoga practitioners, as well as new parents" (McBride). Wiltzie has observed that, in the case of the latter, he "know[s] a lot of parents . . . who . . . use [his] music to calm their kids down. It works really well. It's a drug in some sense—a baby drug" ("The State Of Dreaming"). Infants are evidently not the only age-group who have benefited from using this music as a sleep aid—many adults from all over the world have testified to using it similarly. However, this is certainly not the only benefit that fans of Stars of the Lid have derived from their music. In infusing their music with deliberate periods of tension and dissonance in addition to their liberal use of consonance and musically induced feelings of "rest," their music may establish a kind of "intense [...] tranquility" for the listener (Velichko).

Though it may lull some to sleep, the music of Stars of the Lid is "suited to a wide

variety of moods,” and can “accommodate many levels of listening attention,” as Brian Eno’s definition of ambient music in its most ideal form suggests. Music journalist Nikita Velichko found that although Stars of the Lid’s music has helped her fall asleep many times, she finds it to be neither “tiresome [nor] dull” and that it expresses to her a “wide range of emotions.” She compares listening to the music of Stars of the Lid to her own experiences of dreaming, in that she feels she is uniquely positioned to “experience different feelings” in both cases. She claims that the absorption and close attention she experiences while listening to Stars of the Lid “prevent[s] [her] from being constantly wired to the amounts of multiform information” directed toward her from elsewhere in her life (Velichko). Wiltzie himself has been made aware that some fans have used their music “to have one of their babies in the hospital” or that it has “pulled them out of a depression” (“Adam Wiltzie on Ambient”).

3.12. Different Sounds for Different Experiences

Both Susanne Langer and Ernst Cassirer have suggested that music, non-discursively, is capable of reflecting and presenting the fluid and ever-changing complex of feelings, intuitions, emotions and impressions that both express and constitute our “mental lives,” and that forms of music may mimic our forms of feeling. I wish to suggest that what this sounds like—that is, what the presentation of one’s feelings in music may sound like—is naturally going to vary (potentially dramatically so) depending on the particular individual’s feelings. As individuals evidently feel similar experiences differently from one another, if music is capable of presenting or reflecting this variety of felt-experience it is necessary that music, as an expressive form, offer a sufficient and equivalent amount of expressive variety.

For example, if bereaved individuals should find themselves actively trying to “digest”

their sense of profound personal loss through listening to music, it may be that they do not find the mournful fourth movement of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 9 capable of expressing the qualities of their sense of loss—though, they may find those qualities present in Estonian composer Arvo Pärt's deeply melancholic "*Spiegel im Spiegel*" ("The Mirror in the Mirror"). Or, it may be that neither piece of music is capable of expressing their sense of grief to them. It may be that this individual has a deep personal connection to the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations," and that this piece of music succeeds in helping them "digest" their personal grief and feelings of loss where other songs fail, despite the song's widely perceived connotations of cheerfulness and buoyancy.

Regarding music with lyrics in general, there may be some musical situations where *any* lyrics may prove to be a hindrance when it comes to articulating the impressions, feelings and experiences present in our "mental lives" which are incompatible with any degree of discursive conceptualization. I do not wish to engage in a qualitative comparison between the ultimate inherent expressive value possessed by music with lyrics versus the inherent expressive value of instrumental music. Owing to the plurality of factors concerning cultural relativity as well as individual disposition, neither music with lyrics or music without lyrics can be said to intrinsically possess more or less meaning-making potential. What I wish to say—and I do believe it can be said somewhat un-controversially—is that music without words is capable of generating meaning differently than music with words.

Without words, music must express and communicate meaning all on its own. This does present an expressive advantage, in that without the inclusion of words and the specific discursive connotations words require, music is free to suggest and express multiple distinct concepts simultaneously, or to express feelings which cannot be grouped whatsoever into

particular conceptual categories that can be described discursively. It is possible that, through a non-discursive expressive form such as music, one may “bring together” and express the “intimate relations” between “emotional opposites” such as “joy and grief [and] desire and fear . . .” whereas “literal description [by its very nature] can only emphasize their separateness” (Langer, *Feeling and Form* 242). Ultimately, music can express that which exists in our “mental lives” before these impressions, feelings, and experiences are shaped into language objects; it can express our *feelings themselves*.

Certain ineffable feelings may only be understood in their original state prior to conceptualization—that is, as the feelings themselves—or through an accurate presentation of them—such as through music—which permits them to retain enough of their original character and quality as to not be fundamentally compromised. Such a presentation may be understood as being “accurate,” in that the feelings presented may still be recognized and understood as the feelings themselves. Once such a feeling has been *symbolically transformed* into a word or a phrase, the original feeling-content has become something else entirely. The symbolic representation of this feeling may include elements of its original character, but the representation unavoidably and necessarily becomes an approximation of it, a “re-presentation.” Although neither words nor music are these “feelings themselves” that inspire and give rise to their respective expressive formations—instrumental music is uniquely privileged as an expressive form to articulate the nature or quality of these “feelings themselves” very closely. Thus, it may “present” rather than “re-present” them. As a result, there are some feelings we may experience and understand that simply cannot be accurately spoken, written down, or sung in lyrics, but that may be presented, and understood—without words—through the expressive form of music.

When it comes to the feelings which cannot be represented and expressed discursively—or through any language formations whatsoever—some music listeners may find that regardless of how skillfully and subtly a lyricist wields their pen, instrumental music may reveal certain qualities of these ineffable feelings in a way that a lyricist is not capable of evoking. Such a particularly disposed listener may feel that words —*any* words—hinder the potential of a piece of music to adequately present their emotional state to them. The appearance of lyrics in these cases proves to be a hindrance upon one’s freedom to feel, rather than an expressive boon. They may find, as Brian Eno suggests, that certain instrumental musics generate for them a beneficial experiential “space to think,” or “space to feel,” and that these “spaces” are made more “open” owing to their not being cluttered with words and coloured by their attendant connotations. In this way, by being conceptually ambiguous, certain instrumental musics may benefit tremendously as expressive formations. By indicating “named” experiences, objects, and ideas through song lyrics, a piece of music necessarily directs the listener—even if by implication alone—toward conceptual ends. Words will inevitably affect how one listens to a piece of music, since words are suggestive of the discursively agreed upon connotative meanings that they carry, even if they are arranged poetically with expressive freedom.

By omitting lyrics altogether and abandoning the prescribed meanings inherent to discourse, instrumental music is uniquely capable of sounding like a feeling or a combination of feelings which the attentive and receptive listener may recognize as their own. As has been said, when it comes to some of the more emotionally “dense,” as well as conceptually ineffable feeling-experiences in the lives of individuals, this kind of conceptual ambiguity can offer—through the expressive form of music—a broader expressive scope; it can offer a way to articulate “*forms which language cannot set forth*” (Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* 233).

3.13. Memory and the Sound of Loss

Lastly, I wish to single out and explore, in brief, three instrumental music works which I believe to be particularly illustrative of the expressive form's potential to articulate human feeling; namely, the articulation of what a sense of profound loss and the memory of loss may be said to feel like. First, we will visit William Basinski's 2002/2003 work *The Disintegration Loops*, and its relation to the loss of human life as well as the public consciousness and societal norms that occurred as a result of the terrorist attacks on New York City on September 11, 2001. Secondly, we will explore Leyland Kirby's 2011 album *An Empty Bliss Beyond this World* as well as his six-part follow-up work entitled *Everywhere at The End of Time* (2016-2019). These latter two works will be discussed relating to their treatment of the loss of cognitive abilities; specifically, the loss of memory entirely. In addition, we will explore how these two albums of Kirby's treat the loss of the coherence one's memories through the distortion and alteration resulting from the neurodegenerative disease of Alzheimer's, as well as from dementia, generally. The music we will explore by both Basinski and Kirby can be thematically linked to the general idea and feeling of loss. Both artists explore loss through the literal presentation of audible degradation—in other words, both artists dynamically employ the sound of degradation itself in their music.

3.14. *The Disintegration Loops*

William Basinski, an American composer self-described as working in “experimental electronic ambient music” (“Bubbles of Eternity”) was deeply inspired by Steve Reich's minimalist works, as well as Brian Eno's pioneering 1978 *Music for Airports* album (it's liner notes are the source of Eno's definition of ambient music cited above). In the latter, Basinski

heard a “deep melancholy,” and found that it opened “big horizons . . . for [him] as far as what was allowed [in music].” Basinski’s medium for much of his musical efforts has been the manipulation of tape loops; “capturing, slicing and warping the world around [him] on reel-to-reel . . . [making] field recordings from nature and shortwave radio signals, then literally cut[ting] them up into short loops” (“Divinity From Dust”). When such a “loop” of audio tape is perfectly cut and arranged, it is possible that one may not be able to perceive that it has been cut out of something else. That is, the musical content contained on the tape “loops around” or “plays” from beginning to end seamlessly, as if the musicians were themselves playing it over and over again. Much like the musically established senses of “virtual” or “timeless” time suggested by Lévi-Strauss and John Blacking—Basinski feels that a well-constructed tape loop may create for the listener a novel and unusual “sense of time.” While listening, the listener may find it difficult to “tell the beginning [from] the end” and therefore the loop may “create a timeless . . . sort of amniotic bubble that [one] can float in” (“Bubbles of Eternity”).

In 2001, Basinski, in search of inspiration and new compositional material with which to work, salvaged some tape loop recordings he had made from an “easy-listening” or “muzak” radio station during the 1980s from a box in his apartment. He had originally selected this music for sampling, or “looping,” because he found that when he slowed down these saccharine recordings, “[it was] like looking into a microscope,” in that he found he could observe a “huge well of melancholy there” (“I wanted to be David Bowie”). He also found the loops to be evocative personally when they conjured up images of “American pastoral landscapes” before his “ears and eyes” (“on The Disintegration Loops”). In 2001, he went about archiving them digitally, so they could be stored and manipulated later, potentially as material for future musical projects.

The unexpected occurred during this transfer process from analog tape to digital.

Basinski found that,

as each of the loops played round and round on the tape deck, I soon realized the tape loops were disintegrating—the iron oxide particles were gradually turning to dust and dropping into the tape machine, leaving bare plastic spots on the tape, and silence in the corresponding sections of the new recording (“on The Disintegration Loops”).

In one such example, he describes what this process of discovery was like, as a particular loop which contained a “French horn . . . countermelody” was being digitally transferred:

I turned on the recorder, set the levels and started recording . . . I started noticing something was changing . . . I could see dust in the tape path. I thought, “what's going to happen?” [I] looked at the CD recorder to make sure it was on . . . I just sat there, listening as this gorgeous melody decayed over a period of an hour in such a beautiful way. I . . . [p]ut the next one on, same thing. That one started doing the same thing in its own time in its own way and I started to realize . . . I don't need counter melodies. This is its own thing. I need to just pay attention and make sure I'm recording and let's see what happens here. (“Divinity From Dust”)

While listening to these segments of recorded music decay and gradually fall apart, Basinski found himself taking away an impression other than a mere recognition of the loss one incurs from decay. Ultimately, he was left with an impression of redemption and “transfiguration” (“Time Becomes A Loop”).

It was very emotional for me . . . Tied up in these melodies were my youth, my paradise lost, the American pastoral landscape, all dying gently, gracefully, beautifully in their own way, in their own time. Life and death were being recorded here as a whole—death

as simply a part of life . . . a transformation. When the disintegration was complete, the body was simply a little strip of clear plastic with a few clinging chords. The music had turned to dust and was scattered along the tape path, yet the essence and memory of the life and death of each unique melody had been saved, recorded to a new medium, remembered. (“on The Disintegration Loops”)

The second significant and unforeseen turn relating to the genesis of the *Disintegration Loops* project occurred on the fateful morning of September 11th, 2001. Basinski lived a mile from the World Trade Center, and from his Brooklyn apartment he had a front row seat for the heartrending and consciousness-changing carnage of the immediate aftermath following the planes’ collision with the towers—including witnessing the towers themselves falling to the ground. Intuitively, after the towers’ collapse, Basinski then played his *Loops* loudly from his home stereo, with all the windows open, and headed to the roof with some friends to try and take in what it was they were seeing. They continued their vigil into the evening, as the fires burned long after the towers fell. The following day, Basinski watched some film a friend had shot from his roof the evening before—pairing the footage of the smoke-filled New York dusk sky with the first of his *Disintegration Loops*. These images were evidently an appropriate fit for the music in Basinski’s mind, which he now understood to be his elegy to the events of that day. He proceeded to use stills from this footage to provide the artwork for what would become the albums’ record covers, once the music was made available to the public. Initially, the music took the shape of four separate self-released CD-R albums, each titled numerically (“Time Becomes A Loop”).

Employees of Manhattan’s popular (and now shuttered) Other Music record shop recalled Basinski bringing in his CD-Rs of the *Loops*. The music proved to connect with “a broad cross

section of the staff, [and] then the customers [as well],” which led them to sell “hundreds” of copies. As a result of all the interest it generated, they felt they could “just keep selling those CD-Rs all day.” (Other Music).

Ten years on, the project’s relevance persisted, and the first of the four *Loops* was commissioned to be performed at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, within the relocated ancient Egyptian Temple of Dendur, to mark 9/11’s 10th anniversary by a group billed as the Wordless Music Orchestra. Maxim Moston, who arranged Basinski’s recordings for this live orchestral interpretation, said that his goal was to “notate as precisely as I could the dissolution of a musical idea and to harness the instincts of the musicians to collectively feel a slight hesitation as it evolves into a pause, and that into a fermata, and that into a rest” (“Wordless Music Orchestra 9/11 Memorial Concert”). In addition, the *Loops* have subsequently been re-issued individually, as well collectively in 9-LP and 5-CD box set formations by New York record label Temporary Residence Limited in 2012. Editions which have subsequently gone out-of-print fetch hundreds of dollars each in the re-seller market.

While Basinski felt that the whole world was “falling apart” around him, he felt that he was best suited, as a musician, to try, rather than to “fight all this . . . by marching in the streets” to instead “create a different resonant frequency” which might take “people out of time for a minute” (“I wanted to be David Bowie”). It turned out that Basinski’s piece did in fact succeed in taking people receptive to the music “out of time” temporarily; one of the employees working at Other Music when the *Loops* were initially brought in, wrote in his review that the work “uncannily transcend[ed] time as the loops swell[ed] and fray[ed] into seeming infinity. This is an undeniably tragic and stunning tribute, and one of the best and most prescient records I’ve heard” (Klausman). In addition to providing what has been described as “powerful allegorical

elegies for both the horror and the enduring humanity of 9/11” (“I wanted to be David Bowie”), the music has been lauded for its ability to generate meaning outside of the context of the events of 9/11. Valuably for our purposes here, as John Doran, co-editor and co-founder of British online music and pop culture magazine *The Quietus* said, one doesn’t “have to be a New Yorker to feel its emotional impact.” Ultimately, Doran believes, “this is music for anyone who has friends and family—for anyone who has history. This is music that speaks directly to what our lives mean in the early 21st Century” (“Time Becomes A Loop”). Elsewhere, it has been described, in even more direct terms, as “vital music for the human condition” (“Divinity From Dust”).

Ultimately, what is suggested in these responses, judgements and reactions, I believe, is that *The Disintegration Loops* is able to convey a sense of loss itself; and since loss is about as fundamental a human experience as one is likely to know and have, it is not entirely surprising *Loops* has affected many listeners in meaningful ways. The listener hears the tape loops degrade, in actual, or “real-time,” and this serves as an obvious allegory for loss—the loss of the composition’s original fidelity; the loss of the physical integrity of the tape itself. But the expressive capacity of this work is not limited only to its most immediate and obvious significations. The musical content on the *Loops* is ambiguous enough to suggest many aspects of our complex feelings about and within the experiences we have of loss.

Basinski heard “American pastoral landscapes” in those original orchestral loops, and thus, it can be imagined that as he heard the loops themselves falling apart, he may have sensed aspects of his own personal history falling apart, too. This is especially easy to imagine, considering he had himself documented these recordings some 20 years prior to the album’s release. It is also not hard to understand how Basinski could have forged a powerful emotional

and experiential bond to the sound of those “landscapes” falling apart while listening to them on September 11th, 2001. That day, the view from outside his apartment windows was forever changed and he and his fellow New Yorkers were left with a new landscape to behold as well as a new landscape to live in. Any listener to the *Loops* brings their own sense of loss to the work, a sense which may have an entirely different character than Basinski’s sense of loss, or the sense felt by his friends that day. Thus, the *Loops* may potentially mean something very different depending on who is listening.

For Basinski, however, the project was not all about loss: he saw, following the events of 9/11, that although people around him were falling into their “own disintegration loops of fear, terror and anxiety,” he also saw there was a “rethinking going on about what had value,” and that there “was a lot of compassion in the public . . . amongst New Yorkers” (“Time Becomes A Loop”). There was a “transfigurative” aspect to the project as well, which Basinski emphasizes in his musings about what one does with the experience of loss, and importantly what happens after loss. Following the first live performance of the *Loops* at the MET, Basinski recalled that “Several people, friends of [his], people [he] didn’t even know . . . came up to [him] . . . and . . . told [him] how profoundly moved they were and how they felt that the whole energy had changed and somehow the [pre-existing] resonance had lifted” (“Divinity From Dust”).

As Basinski had said himself, although his tape loops had frayed and decayed over time, somehow they were able to “retain the very core of what made [them] special” (*Other Music*). That is, despite the music going through a process of substantial loss, of natural degradation, something of that original music was retained in the *Disintegration Loops*. What was left behind was “transfigured” rather than destroyed. In this way, the music contained within Basinski’s finished project mimics aspects of the very essence of the experience of life itself—which is

necessarily and inevitably affected and weathered by time. Much like the *Loops*, as they spun through Basinski's recorder and fell apart, each experience present in life cannot be experienced the same way again. Each rotation of the loop is heard differently because it is affected by time on each rotation through the machine. Sometimes it is affected imperceptibly, and sometimes drastically, but it sounds differently on each turn as a result; silence is introduced where before there was sound, or a particular sound is rendered almost unrecognizable, for example. Similarly, our experiences also feel differently if we are ever to encounter them or ones like them a second time, or any number of subsequent times. The experiences of our lives, just like Basinski's tape loops, are "transfigured" by time, and thus can never be experienced the same way twice. However, it is possible that these experiences—like the *Loops* themselves—may, despite their "transfigurations," retain aspects of their original character in our memories of them.

3.15. The Caretaker: *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World*

English experimental musician Leyland Kirby has spent a lot of time exploring memory in his work; notably what happens when "memory [goes] wrong" ("The Caretaker_PRESENCES"). Kirby has adopted a number of different names for his various creative projects over the years, but the project he dubbed "The Caretaker" is the one which has gained the most critical attention, as well as the most praise. The genesis of the moniker—and in certain respects the overall spirit of the project as well—lies in one particular scene from Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film *The Shining*. In this particular scene, Jack Nicholson's character "Jack Torrance" walks into a large, beautifully antiquated ballroom at night and sits at the bar for a drink. The music coming from within the ballroom is first heard as Torrance approaches the room's entrance; it is warm and nostalgic. Rather than the music being contemporaneous with

the spirit of the film's 1970's setting, it is the music of a bygone era. The music is exemplary of the relaxed, easy-swinging American big band jazz music popular during the 1930's. The song that is heard, in fact, is a recording of Ray Noble and His Orchestra from 1934. The music is soft and situated in the background. It is quiet enough not to pull the viewer's attention away from the action in the foreground, including the conversation between Torrance and the bartender. Nonetheless, the music still powerfully underscores and helps to establish the scene's mood. The music blankets the already ambiguous and dream-like dialogue between Torrance and the bartender in a kind of uncanny other-worldliness, contributing to the mounting sense that this apparent "ballroom" may be from another time altogether.

Leyland Kirby described himself as "very interested" in stories of "mental breakdown For example *The Shining* . . . if you actually start looking at the brain . . . when things actually do go wrong it's very scary. We're only one bump on the head away from entering this dark, disorienting world." Due to the brain "misfiring" from injury or Alzheimer's, "If things start to go wrong then what you perceive as being reality actually isn't, it's something completely different" ("Madness, Memory & Mindfulness"). Kirby, in his Caretaker project, has explored states of compromised memory, as well as the brain's ability to retain music in spite of cognitive decline: "Music's probably the last thing to go for a lot of people with advanced Alzheimer's. There are a lot of people who suffer from Alzheimer's who just hum the same songs over and over again" ("Madness, Memory & Mindfulness"). While putting together his most critically lauded work, 2011's *An Empty Bliss Beyond this World*, Kirby, taking inspiration from the ballroom scene in the *Shining*, similarly utilized the warm sounds of big band jazz from the late 1920s and 1930s to explore the links between music and memory. The project was also inspired by a 2010 study (*ScienceDaily*) published by researchers at the Boston University School of

Medicine which claimed “that patients with Alzheimer's disease are better able to remember new verbal information when it is provided in the context of music” (Powell).

The musical recordings Kirby manipulates and distorts on *Bliss* were drawn from his personal collection of 78 rpm vinyl records, and although this original source material, being of a particular vintage, may conjure up its own sense of nostalgia, melancholy, or time lost—depending on the listener's disposition—it is what Kirby does with this music that defines the project. Kirby reworks and rearranges the various original recordings of big band jazz music found on these 78s into a single, new, cohesive whole—much like Basinski does with the recordings he had taped off of the radio on the *Disintegration Loops*. Although the musical recordings used by both Basinski and Kirby retain critical elements of their original character, they are fundamentally transformed through each artist's creative process.

In the case of Kirby's *Bliss*, the various recordings he samples are often conjoined by abrupt “jump cut” editing: a listener may become familiarized with a particular melody or musical idea from one of these 78s, only to find it ending suddenly without warning, replaced by a new, unfamiliar musical idea from another record with no logical segue or modulation between them. In addition, Kirby also decided “to repeat whole tracks” during *Bliss*'s running time, to establish “a feeling of déjà vu throughout the release itself” (“James Kirby (The Caretaker)”). On *Bliss*, Kirby brings certain “things . . . in and out of focus” present on the original source materials (“The Caretaker interview with James Leyland Kirby”). One such element that is given this treatment liberally is the surface noise present on the records themselves, such as the audible crackling, popping and hissing all too familiar with anyone who has played a record that has been damaged due to wear. Although this noise was present on the original recordings, by alternating between bringing this noise to the fore, followed by reducing it to non-distracting

levels, the music sounds as if it is emerging from a sea of static, only to be submerged again. This musical effect, when understood in relation to memory, may suggest to the listener the contrast between memories that are alternately clear and perceptually concise, and ones that are cloudy, distorted and indefinite.

Similarly, his use of “jump cut” editing is very effective in that it suggests to the listener the kind of memory that stops suddenly; the kind of memory which, like a snippet of film reel, plays in the mind and ends at the same point every time without any further resolution. His repetition of musical materials may suggest other functions of memory to the listener as well. Through these repetitions, listeners may be reminded of the fact that memories have the tendency to assert themselves at unpredictable or inappropriate times, leaving us to potentially wonder why they we find ourselves recalling *that* particular memory at *that* particular time. Also, listeners may find themselves experiencing a kind of “déjà vu” while hearing a piece of music they have already heard replayed to them later on, feeling unsure of whether or not they have in fact heard this already. “Have I already heard this piece of music? Or was it something very similar to it?” one may ask themselves during these segments of repetition found on *Bliss*.

In employing these various methods of editing and audio manipulation, Kirby “isn't just making nostalgic music, he's making music that mimics the fragmented and inconclusive ways our memories work” (Powell). This is precisely why, I believe, I find his music to be so powerful and affecting. Rather than approximating a sense of how our memories may feel or appear to us through a vague sense, or as a reminder of a specific memory, or group of memories—that is, rather than operating strictly in a connotative sense regarding our memories—*Bliss* invokes “the world of memory” itself. Specifically, *Bliss* invokes the loss of the integrity of our memories, memories that are at least partially corroded by some kind of degradative agent. This agent may

be time itself, in that chronological distancing from an event may naturally result in a certain “blurring of the edges” of the impressions we may hold in our minds, or the effects of a mental illness such as Alzheimer’s, or something else entirely. For some, the sense of “déjà vu” or memory confusion that *Bliss* inspires may be reminiscent of experiences they have had while recalling a particular memory. On such occasions, it might be that it was unclear to them whether this event had actually occurred at all, or whether they were recalling something erroneously as a personal lived experience. In such a case, one may wonder whether or not the “memory” they are recalling is in fact a dream they once had, or a story they were once told by someone else, for example.

It is also possible that, in some cases, we may be able to vaguely recall an event or a feeling once held clearly in our minds only enough to retain its approximate shape. In such a case, one is left with the shadow of a memory, a barely tangible and essentially vague sense of something left in place of what was originally a vivid impression of an event or a feeling. Kirby believes his work as *The Caretaker* is capable of expressing a “loss for something [one is] not sure about.” (“James Kirby (The Caretaker)”) I believe this to be true. This “loss” might be, for some listeners, the very sense described above, the awareness of a loss of a memory through encountering its “ghost,” or its shadow.” In this sense, *The Caretaker*’s music may be said to express “loss itself,” or said another way, the memory of memory.

3.16. *Everywhere at the End of Time*

Kirby would follow up *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World* with an ambitious six-album follow up entitled *Everywhere at the End of Time*, the latter being released in installments beginning in 2016, with the sixth and final installment released in 2019. This project was intended to document, through music, a progressive six-stage journey into, and through

dementia, and the toll the illness takes on our ability to store and recall memory. Kirby set about doing this by attempting “to give the music itself dementia.” This he intended to do, by “break[ing] down” the original musical materials through an application of extensive and deliberate edits and manipulation (“The Caretaker_PRESENCES”). Just as Kirby had done with *Bliss*, the source materials he uses here are again vintage jazz records from the 1920s, ‘30s and ‘40s. When compared to his work on *Bliss*, the edits here are employed in a more dramatic and extreme fashion, particularly in the later stages, intended to show the illness progressing. This Kirby does by employing a significant degree of textural experimentation; repetition, drone, and at times a liberal use of distortion, static, hiss, and various forms of “noise” are used to render the original musical materials less and less recognizable to the listener. Finally, the six-and-a-half-hour project culminates in a minute of silence.

Kirby’s six-part project inevitably calls to mind Basinski’s own *Disintegration Loops*; both works use musical artifacts to express progressive degradation by allowing the materials themselves to “degrade.” In Basinski’s case this occurs literally, as his source materials did in fact fall apart in the recording process, whereas in Kirby’s case the degradation occurs through his own post-production edits. While Kirby has acknowledged this influence, professing his “admiration” for Basinski’s work, *Everywhere* was not intended simply to be another example of music “breaking down” gradually. Rather, he wished to address “why [it’s] breaking down, and how” (“Six Albums Exploring Dementia”). Although Basinski contextually situates his chance recordings of tape loops falling apart within the events of 9/11 and their immediate aftermath, his work explores loss and degradation in a more general, open-ended way than Kirby’s *Everywhere*. Kirby’s work is more conceptually specific; the “why,” and “how” pertinent to his music’s decay is constructed to signify a relationship to Alzheimer’s, dementia, and memory

loss. However, despite *Everywhere*'s sharper conceptual focus when compared to *Loops*, the work still leaves a tremendous amount of room for interpretation and for a variety of affect and emotional response.

The ambiguous quality inherent to the Caretaker's work on both *Bliss* and *Everywhere* is highlighted by the album artwork provided by a personal friend of Kirby's, the artist Ivan Seal. The art that accompanies each release taps into the intrinsic subjectivity of the Caretaker's music: it is presented in ways meant to provoke individual interpretation. Each image is conceptually unrecognizable and undefinable. They are pictorial expressions but cannot be called direct "representations" of any concrete object, or objects that exist in the world. The images may suggest ideas and feelings to the observer, but they are substantially abstract. They are all "objects with form and shadow," but they are never quite representational—instead, they are "just alien enough to keep [one] confused." While looking at them, the observer may encounter the sense that they "trying to remember something, but it . . . isn't clear enough [for them to recall it]" ("Can You Name One Object In This Photo?").

That Kirby's music and Seal's artwork leave themselves open to interpretation, that they leave "space" for the listener to experience how memory loss may feel to them individually, I believe, goes a long way in explaining how a project as challenging and resistant to convention as Kirby's *Everywhere* has received the reception and audience that it has. Due to the project's length, content, and subject matter, *Everywhere* may appear to many as an unlikely candidate for a wide listenership. Incredibly, however, it has reached many listeners, both geographically far, and demographically wide. By December 2020, the full project, released in its entirety on YouTube by Kirby's own V/Vm Test record label, has been played over six million times, and has inspired much discussion with more than 100,000 listener-generated comments registered to

date on the platform (*Everywhere At The End Of Time - Stages 1-6 (Complete)*). Recent pieces published online by both *NPR* and the *New York Times* have explored the unexpectedly widespread relevance and impact of the project and have suggested that this may be at least partly owing to the album being embraced by younger listeners. “Hundreds” of these young listeners have been sharing their experiences listening to the album on the popular social media platform TikTok (Marcus).

Among the listeners mentioned in the *New York Times*, is a sixteen year old named Owen Amble from Spokane, Washington. “He was drawn to ‘Everywhere at the End of Time’ because his grandfather was recently diagnosed with dementia” and he had hoped to obtain a better idea of “what was going on” with his grandfather’s condition by listening to Kirby’s work. His experience with the music inspired him to post a video on TikTok, where he says that “the album had reduced him to tears.” In the caption to the video, he described the album as being “Literally the definition of pain,” and stated that he had previously “Never cried listening to something.” Amble’s video had been “viewed more than 340,000 times” as of October 23rd, 2020, when the *Times*’ article was published online. Amble described his reaction to *Everywhere* in greater detail to the *Times*:

‘It made me feel . . . so sad, but I was also . . . so happy, because it truly made me appreciate this part of my life so much more,’ he said of the album. ‘I’m still a kid . . . And I’m just making all these memories. But to think that one day, everything I’ve ever done can just disappear, because of my memory. It’s so horrifying.’ He said the album helped him understand his grandfather’s illness. (Marcus)

Brian Browne, the president of Dementia Care Education, an organization focused on training people who work with dementia patients, found that reactions such as Owen’s suggested

to him that Kirby “was onto something in terms of being able . . . —through the medium of music—[to] lead a younger generation on a journey through the sounds of what the brain is going through, through a dementing process.” He saw the engagement with youth the work had inspired to be “. . . a much welcome thing, because it produces the empathy that’s needed [to understand the illness]” (Marcus). Kirby also seemed heartened by the reaction among young people, writing that he thought “that anything that can enable awareness, open a discussion and give people some empathy with [other] people and family members suffering from Alzheimer’s and dementia especially among the young is a good thing” (Marcus). That TikTok users have been challenging each other to listen to the entire six and a half hour work in one sitting, and are then documenting their experiences to speaks to “a need for [both individual] experiences and shared experiences which goes hand in hand [with how social media is often used among the youth of today]” suggests Kirby, noting that he did not interpret these challenges to be “disrespecting the work” to any degree (Marcus).

Meaghan Garvey, in an essay published on NPR’s website about the unexpected internet presence of the Caretaker’s *Everywhere* work, posited that it may not be a coincidence that a work so singularly focused on memory and its distortion should resonate so much for so many in 2020, the year the global COVID-19 pandemic emerged. She speculated, as did Kirby, that the recent wide listenership of The Caretaker’s music might suggest a particular “need” for a “shared experience” of memory loss and that in its reception one might see a “collective grappling with ideas of broken time and lost futures, in a year that has made us question our grasp on reality at just about every turn.” She herself attests to have listened to *Empty Bliss Beyond This World* nightly in the spring of 2020, finding the experience to be both “dreamy . . . [and] unsettling” in that she felt the experience akin to being “stuck within the locked groove of

someone else's distant memories.” Amidst the “unsettle[d]” feelings generated by the music, she did find a sense of “tenderness” as well; by “surrendering . . . to someone else's mind,” she was left with a sense of “empathy” (“What Happens When TikTok Looks To The Avant-Garde For A Challenge?”).

3.17. Loss Itself

If a consensus among listeners emerges that indicates that the work of The Caretaker and William Basinski has been found to only generate any degree of significant meaning among those directly affected by either Alzheimer's, dementia, or the events of September 11th, their music would still undoubtedly still serve an important expressive purpose, albeit a more specific one. However, somewhat remarkably, this is not the case; their work has been shown to generate meaning for a multitude of different people, including those removed from those particular events or phenomena. Just as New Yorkers had approached William Basinski to tell him how his *Loops* had affected and informed their own personal experiences of the aftermath of 9/11 after listening to them, Leyland Kirby similarly had people reach out to tell him of his music's impact on their lives—including those who had “never heard anything of [his] before, but . . . [somehow came] across [*An Empty Bliss*].” One such person “[had] said it was really beautiful to him, because he'd lost his mother to Alzheimer's, and now his father's got it as well” (“Madness, Memory & Mindfulness”). Although these stories speak to the expressive power of their music, the ultimate meaning-making potential of Basinski and Kirby's work is not limited to these specific and categorical experiences of loss, or to any *one* conceptualization of loss. Rather, for many of the listeners, their music is able to express a feeling of loss itself—which is to say it is capable of expressing many potential feelings of loss simultaneously. This is why I believe their

work continues to transcend their original sources of inspiration. I believe how these works have been able to accomplish this expressive act and this quality of feeling—as other effective musical works do and have done—is by remaining free from rigid conceptuality, by not dictating their intended meaning, or meanings, but by remaining open to interpretation, by “leaving space” for the listener to dream and feel “in,” by “leaving space” to project their own respective senses of loss “into.”

3.18. Music as a Tonal Analogue of Mental Life

Richard D. James, a British musician, composer and producer most popularly known as Aphex Twin, was described by the *Guardian's* music journalist Paul Lester as “the most inventive and influential figure in contemporary electronic music.” (Lester) James has stated that he feels grateful to have access to an expressive form other than discourse through which he may express himself:

I was just thinking this morning about the reason I was still making music . . . I think it's because when you are talking to people and interacting with people you're limited by your language, by your vocabulary. You think with your language so your language dictates how you think. But when you're making music it doesn't. That's why I love making music so much. You're not limited by vocabulary and words . . . you can access whatever you want. You can't do that with language. Yeah, you could look up some more words I suppose but it's infinite with art, with music. That's the best bit about it basically. (James)

Through music-making, one may be better equipped to express the ambiguous and conceptually resistant content of one's feelings. Through music-listening, it is possible we may

recognize within the music we listen to qualities of our own ineffable feelings and experiences. In either or both instances, it is possible for music to give one “an insight into what may be truly called the ‘life of feeling’”; this it may achieve through its ability to be an accurate “presentation of . . . the emotional life of human beings” (Langer, *Feeling and Form* 126).

The tonal structures we call “music” bear a close logical similarity to the forms of human feeling—forms of growth and of attenuation, flowing and stowing, conflict and resolution, speed, arrest, terrific excitement, calm, or subtle activation and dreamy lapses—not joy and sorrow perhaps, but the poignancy of either and both—the greatness and brevity and eternal passing of everything vitally felt. Such is the pattern, or logical form, of sentience; and the pattern of music is that same form worked out in pure, measured sound and silence. Music is a tonal analogue of mental life. (27)

The desire to both better understand *and* better express, non-discursively, as well as non-representationally, this “life of feeling” which constitutes much of the activity of our “mental lives,” including our impressions and experiences of the world around us, may be a significant factor in driving what Philip Ball termed humanity’s “music instinct.” This “instinct,” Ball believes, we possess as much as a “language instinct” (Ball 5). Undoubtedly human beings appear to have an instinct toward both discourse and music, as both expressive forms meet specific and essential expressive needs that cannot otherwise be met.

I think there are similarities between what Ball refers to as our “music instinct,” and what could be called our “myth-making” instinct that merits a closer look. This I have attempted to do, preliminarily, in an open and generally investigative manner in this project. Both forms of expression, in their own respective ways, may be said to meet the same fundamental human need to both better understand and express the nature of our lived experiences themselves, including

the “vital rhythm[s]” of our inner, “subjective” sense of time, or feelings of “lived’ time” (*Feeling and Form* 129). The substantive reality of our inner world of experience and feeling is often coloured with much ambiguity, contradiction, and ineffability. Thus, by their very nature, many of the feelings and experiences felt and understood within this “world” cannot be accurately translated into language objects with fixed connotations, nor can they be ordered into logical linguistic structures. However, Suzanne Langer reminds us that although “there are things which do not fit the grammatical scheme of expression” these things are “not necessarily inconceivable.” Rather, it is the case that these aspects of our lived experience must be “conceived through . . . [a] schema other than discursive language” (*Philosophy in a New Key* 88). I believe, in a general sense, that myth and music both satisfy this requirement in that they both help human beings to “digest their [senses] of the world” through non-discursive expressive form (Bringhurst 63).

Music and myth—despite their important expressive similarities—do, of course, differ in notable ways; each offers its own distinctive expressive advantages and possesses its own expressive nature. Where instrumental music most importantly diverges from myth lies in its complete abandonment of fixed conceptuality—or fixed literal meaning—due to the exclusion of words altogether. Words and their meanings, of course, must be retained in myth to tell its stories, despite the non-discursive nature of its expressive form. Owing largely to this difference, music, which I have presented as a non-representational expressive form, is uniquely positioned to help us “know . . . [something about that] which cannot be named” and to “*reveal* the nature of [these] feelings with a detail and truth that [any] language cannot approach” (Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* 232, 235). Music brings us closer to certain ineffable aspects of our experiences and feelings by *presenting* them to us, rather than re-presenting them.

Postscript

If music can be said to reflect aspects of our innermost states of being and experience, such as the flux, movement, and character of our emotions, feelings and impressions, it can be said that music reflects important aspects of our own humanity. Therefore, it can be said to reflect, in certain aspects, the *very experience of being human*. Music is capable of opening up “spaces to think [and feel] in” wherein we may express senses of time that more closely resemble our inner experiences of felt-time—this sense of felt-time being impossible to represent with either clock or a calendar. In addition, through music, we may be given a chance to express our feelings and experiences which are filled with ambiguity, contradiction, and a lack of conceptual clarity. In these musical “spaces,” or through musical experience, human beings are afforded opportunities to not only express their own humanity, but to retain critical elements of it.

In this latter regard, in music’s ability to retain, one may see its capacity to serve a redemptive function in human life. Through music, as an expressive form, human beings are able to both preserve, and in some cases reclaim aspects of their own humanity which may be threatened or have been lost due to the contemporary cultural demands placed on human consciousness in the modern West. Many jobs that people are compelled to work in order sustain their existence do not allow for ambiguous expression and bind them rigorously to the ticking of a clock and calendrical demarcations. In addition, owing to the rampant technological progress of recent decades, the ways in which human beings use certain forms of technology to communicate with each other—despite their many advantages in assisting human beings to communicate more conveniently and expediently—similarly compel human behaviour towards unambiguous ends. Social media and the algorithms which direct its functioning thrive on personality atomization; on particularity. Human beings, through their increasing use of social

media and its integration into the fabric of their daily lives—including the influence this has on the various other forms of media and art they consume—seem to be increasingly directed toward picking an ideological side; either agreeing or disagreeing with a given opinion, feeling, or idea. To float in the middle, in between decided viewpoints or conceptualizations, seems to be becoming increasingly incompatible with much of modern Western life. In addition, as Claude Lévi-Strauss suggested in 1963 in his text *Structural Anthropology*, “in industrial civilization there is no longer any room for mythical time, except within man himself” (204).

Through the expressive form of music, we not only may be afforded a chance to express the contents of our hearts and minds that cannot be expressed any other way, we may also express that which is unsuitable or even prohibited in many areas of our modern lives. In addition, we may be given access to ways of “feeling time” that resemble what Lévi-Strauss called “mythical time,” wherein we are given a temporary reprieve from the demands of our decidedly unambiguous and fundamentally linear clocks and calendars.

It is also possible, that amidst all of the social, political, and technological influences that permeate much of our modern Western cultural experience, as well as directly impinge upon the character and freedom of our individual psyches—that music may also serve as a helpful reminder that there remain “world[s] . . . possible beyond what we [can] see and touch,” and realizing them through our felt-experiences of them may in fact prove to be the first step towards building them.

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