

Danika Paskvan  
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Final Essay: Sound, Affect, Signification Seminar

### Sounding Body

A story about my encounters with some sounds and affects, and ways they might signify.

#### Introduction

The following are some of my encounters with feeling music: feeling about music, feeling with music, feeling for music. After a challenging quarter of questioning the validity and tenability of my mode of intellectual and emotional engagement with my musical life, I write this essay as a first attempt at finding how music affects me. The completion of this project is not possible. I do not expect to ever find a satisfying synthesis between the music I encounter and my daily musical life, much less to be able to express such a synthesis: there is no such thing for me and if there is I cannot name it. However, in the course of my long deep soul-search for that synthesis, I found moments of exhilaratingly close contact between music and feeling—of cooccurrence between myself as a player of certain types of music and myself as an experiencer and observer of my feelings—and it is in those moments that I hope to draw concrete and functional parallels between the systems of knowledge. In the attempt that follows, I will bring along my intimate knowledge of my body's particular experience as a lifelong violinist and musician, as well as my current capacity to understand and possibly express my affectual encounters with some music and the circumstances of its performance.

I chose a few personally relevant pieces to shape this exciting upcoming shared event of ours: two viola solos that I have played—Georg Friedrich Haas’ ‘...aus freier Lust... verbunden...’ and Salvatore Sciarrino’s ‘Tre Notturmi Brillianti’—and two that I have not—Andrew Greenwald’s violin and cello duet ‘jeku(ii)’ (played by Austin Wulliman and Chris Wild) and Katie Young and Austin Wulliman’s cycle *Diligence is to Magic as Progress is to Flight*. Of course, I wish I could devote space to the things that fascinate me about each of these pieces and their performance uniquely, and I also wish I could write another paper about a different set of pieces, more famous ones perhaps, more Important ones. However, in addition to being uniquely close to my own life experience, these pieces together can access central aspects of my emergent thesis: the vital manifestation of a new physical materiality of the performing body in late 20th/21st century European+ avant-garde music aesthetics and the physical functioning of the resultant avant-garde affects, because of and through and in answer to *how* that music makes me feel.

I would like to address the challenges of formatting the following essay. It proved too difficult to cite this piece of writing, since many of the thoughts that follow have the illusion of being my own, though I believe they are (of course) the direct product of my recent readings—both in class and for the project—and my understandings of the above pieces. An attempt at a comprehensive works-cited list is included at the end. Also, I have attached several relevant visuals, including fragments of the scores of the pieces mentioned above.

## 1. Feeling Sounds

Five cheap instruments wait before the premiere of *Diligence is to Magic as Progress is to Flight*, spatialized around the installation at the Defibrillator Gallery, a now-defunct Logan Square performance art venue. They have been drastically prepared, a lower string detuned to the point of minimal tension to snap against the fingerboard at the pull of the bow, binder clips and buzz-makers attached to the strings around the neck and at the bridge, contact mics placed to amplify and make significant every *gritty little thing*, every *unrefined little sound*. The preparations stand out to me, wires and attachments coming off violins, replacing the illusion of immediacy of the solo-show performance with hard preconcert evidence of heavily prepared instruments, concurrently waiting remnants of pre-thought to be sonically enlivened one by one in the interval-time of performance.

The tactile empathy rises in me in the course of *Diligence*: Austin's bow skids and snaps the low-tension detuned G string. His improvisations on a slow-grinding video clip (a white screen begins to show vibration, vertical linear oscillation, and finally comes into clarity as a field of waving grasses before de-articulating back to white) intensify the string crossings and pitch activity as the video clarity intensifies, then open back into silence and quiet buzzes as the video opens back into whiteness. His flying bow arm parallels the activity on the screen, his clicks pops left-hand pizzicati scratch-tones bridge noise a familiar technical language recombined for this moment. Viola between his knees, he flies at the instrument with both hands, nightmarishly aggressive in a

pizzicato-percussive caprice. Here is new music performance that I *necessarily feel*: his physical mode of engagement—with my home instrument no less—is foregrounded by preparation, performance, and composition, the *newness* emanating from unbound nonstandard points of contact with the instruments themselves. Solo scordatura violin, violin with electronics, pizzicato viola, improvised violin with tape, violin with small ensemble: common and even some ancient forms rendered fresh by the new tactility of this particular physical playing-act. As I feel through Austin's performance the flexibility of the drastic scordatura against a bowstroke, the quick fly of an eight-finger two-hand pizzicato tremolo, the push-back of the bridge and the push-back of the strings under the bow, my violinist's body with its trained reverence for expensive instruments and polished, easy virtuosity feels—viscerally—the innovation of this performance. This is not a Hauschka gimmick that prepares the instrument mid-performance or a Steen-Andersen performance *of* preparation. This is also not a Biber prepared violin sonata or the Cage Sonatas and Interludes, where the new-touch in performance is only in the contact between string and foreign body rather than between player and instrument. *Diligence's* newness, the boundary it pushes in performance, juts up against my tactile-aesthetic and arises from the physical feel of playing *like that* on an instrument *like that*.

## 2. Making Sounds

Gerhardt Richter layers on paint in his studio, developing on five or more canvases simultaneously his now-characteristic strata of brilliant pure color, swaths of blended primary hues, and finally a dark overlay that all but obscures the chromatic vibrancy below the surface. Presently, he takes a long scraping blade and draws it slowly, vertically, across a canvas. In the wake of the scraper's stroke, the colors reveal their interactions with the other strata: the pressure does not reveal the layers, but alters them as they emerge in an interactive processual revelation that presents color, texture, infinite tiny variation across a broad field. Process is content is form is material. He says: "I realized, above all, that all those "slashes" and "blots" were not a formalistic gag but grim truth and liberation, that this was an expression of a totally different and new content."

I play the viola solo "...aus freier Lust... verbunden..." (tr. '... our free will... bound') having already played its ten-piece small ensemble counterpart "... Einklang freier Wesen..." (tr. 'a unison of free beings'), to perform with CME during the ensemble recherche residency here in the fall of 2013. It was the hardest ensemble part I had ever seen, actually intended as a collection of ten high-complexity solo pieces interacting and—impossibly—cohering. I spent untold hours with the massive pages, both alone and in smaller groups for extra rehearsal time. In performance, with a conductor baffled by the metric modulation and prone to massive performance anxiety-induced errors, I lodged my part in aural cues from the other players. Despite the viola part being the

predominant sonic presence for many structural pillars of the piece, my understanding of it was almost entirely relational. Playing it now, as a solo, is a scraping away of the strata of that first performed encounter. With the ensemble in my ear, I integrate and appropriate tones previously untenable on my instrument, continue phrases unsupported by my solo line alone, respond to motion and directions unavailable in my own part. The sounds in my ear, in my memory, are diverted from their lines, processed, reduced to a zero degree of signification, and reconstituted within my instrumental and physical capacity. The piece does not so much resolve the well-known contradictions of European+ avant-garde instrumental composition as it performs and suspends them: parametric reduction opening into unbound timbral exploration, a fractured disjunct sonic space from which gestural relationships are always emanating, an inevitable always-forward progression between blocks of unrelated content that somehow culminates in a returning melodic fragment. As solos and chamber works 'become' within and because of the performance of the ensemble piece, all the instrumental combinations are recalled in performance concurrently while simultaneously each 'free being' is being suppressed by each other solo line playing itself, the piece is the rhetorical performance of the coexisting prehension and negative prehension.

## Interlude I.

I am huddled alone on the ground in the dark at midnight, on the top floor of a five-story converted train station in Darmstadt. It's an all night music event on two concurrent stages; I've seen so many staggeringly brilliant performances and met so many wild-eyed performers and composers tonight at this culminating concert that I have long since retreated into myself. Morton Feldman's *Piano and String Quartet* is being performed on the stage by people I do not know or remember. All lights are off in the room except their tiny stand lights, very far away. There are no chairs: people all around me are lying on the floor in the dark, with pillows and sometimes blankets, in couples and threes and fours. Some are holding each other, and some are barely touching hands as they sprawl, starfish with softly bent limbs. I am the only one alone. The piece sits in the air, happening. I was looking for a respite from the intensity of the evening, some austere music to dial down my overtaxed consciousness, but my musical hyper-vigilance is affectually overtaken by powerful dark cold aloneness. The chords keep inevitably coming from the empty spaces, too-alive, not-stillness, and in the ineluctable punctuating flow I realize a sort of sophomoric vibrating horror that this "I" will never be uninfluenced—there is no place where I can be free from signs in space, from the cycles of hunger and breath and pacing feet, from the flow of words indicating consciousness, from the mechanisms of parsing these inevitably happening pitches, from the bodily quickening of coffee and slowing of wine, from the constant flow of stimuli and me, this horrible conglomerate monster made of all these states of influence, now alone in the becoming world with only my ability to receipt, absorb, respond, reply, move on.

### 3. Hearing Sounds

I first saw Andrew Greenwald's "jeku(ii)" (2011) at cellist Chris Wild's album release show in the middle of the biggest snowstorm of last year. It made no sense to me: at first listen I described it in some frustration as yet another young composer's timbral etude preoccupied with string "extended techniques" and no feel for form, but in the weeks that followed the piece kept coming back to play in my head. Greenwald accesses a fantastic clicking sound from the violin (and sometimes cello), a highly restricted overpressure bow at the frog which he describes as an "accented stroke, press into string with slightly increased pressure creating staccato/muted click". It grabbed at me. I went home and made twenty or thirty clicks on the violin myself before bed. The intense contact with the fundamental tension of a string and nothing more, the hyperawareness of friction and new physiological control in getting "click" and not "scratch" with overpressure, the calibrated teeter-totter of the weight of my arm over lateral and horizontal restriction, all to produce such a tiny focused noise still sends funny shivers into all my muscles. I was still less than thrilled to see it a second time, again on a program with Austin Wulliman and Chris Wild, but again the piece yielded a fascinating new entry point. I sat on the right side of the stage at Constellation, this time fully able to see the score in the course of performance. Andrew Greenwald's scores are simply, objectively beautiful. Illegible to a passing reader, his pages are an incredible synthesis between extremely complex notation and expressive spatialization and formatting. Suddenly, following a score I couldn't read, the piece cohered: the physical gestures I had dismissed as a mere exploitation of the timbral gutsiness of these two incredible new-music performers became a virtuosic display

of control over sound and contact with their instruments. Both bows race to the frog and stop—fully, disjointedly, consciously—overpressure and cranking produced by the torque of the entire bow arm. They assumed a notable and attention-grabbing dispreference for performing with the pseudo-natural metaphor of “fluidity” or easy circularity that has been prioritized in string pedagogy for a well-documented 350 years. With some degree of immediacy, Greenwald’s piece de-specifies the sonic requirements of the players from the standard pedagogy of string technique, even beyond the boundaries of contemporary “extended” techniques as described in Irvine Arditti’s *Techniques of Violin Playing*, Garth Knox’s *Viola Spaces*, and the like, to form a new materiality of the physical act of playing from the accessible capabilities of his performers. His ‘Instrumental Key’ for the performers (and readers) outlines the physical scope of its parametric interactions as the prioritized point of entry into the work: “a hierarchy of; 1. fingering shape, 2. ornamented fingerings layered over the held double stops, and 3. alternating bow techniques (both traditional horizontal motions, vertical “cranking” or circular motion and muting vertical pulsations of the bow)” are combined as parametric weights”. He describes his notational units in terms of their physical execution: a “tension screw tremolo (very fast percussive vacillations between two strings using tension screw as point of contact” recalls Lachenmann’s “Toccatina”; “pizz. with nail of 1st finger” and “using flesh of first finger, rub bridge horizontally in direction denoted by arrow. No string pizz. should be present. No nail.” incontrovertibly relate the notated sound with body parts traditionally unclaimed by the composer (“nail”, “first finger”, “flesh”). The key is matter-of-fact, deceptively practical, in presenting what is essentially a semantic alignment or coding of thoroughly nonstandard musical notation with the player’s newly-prioritized physical actions and interactions.

Jeku(ii).

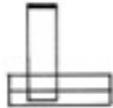
Instrumental Key.

-Violin.

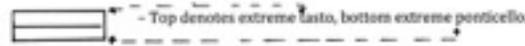
General Remarks - Top staff denotes the actions of the bow, bottom staff denotes actions of the left hand on the fingerboard. Throughout sections of the work, the violinist is asked to balance three interrelated techniques which, (when combined), focuses on the production of an internal dialogue upon the activated strings (2 during a given iteration), creating a polyphonic dialogue between a "speak" emerging from both the bow and nut sides of the string. To fully articulate the aforementioned process, a hierarchy of: 1.fingering shape (held double stops on the left hand staff), 2.ornamented fingerings layered over the held double stops (utilizing the 2 free fingers on the left hand creating "speak" on both the bow side and nut side of the string), and 3.alternating bow techniques (both traditional horizontal motions, vertical "cranking" or circular motion and musing vertical pulsations of the bow) are combined as parametric weights. What result is skewed chatter of melodic content, with ornamentation of an "other speak."

-Bow Techniques

- The bow should stay in contact with the string during all sections utilizing the aforementioned, three layered places.



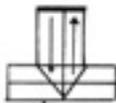
- Indicates continuous bow articulations.



- Top denotes extreme lasto, bottom extreme ponticello.



- The bow is turned like a crank while in contact with denoted strings. Arrows state change from clockwise to counter-clockwise cranking motion. The bow should not leave contact with string.



- Bow moves in given direction between lasto and ponticello without horizontal bow motion.



- accented stroke, press into string with slightly increased pressure creating staccato/muted click.



- as fast as possible.



- Bounce speed according to relative amount of flags in grouping.



- Reverse jete, beginning stroke at tip, ending at frog of the bow with last note accented.



- Tension screw tremolo (very fast percussive oscillations between two strings using tension screw as point of contact).



- Pizz. with nail of 1<sup>st</sup> finger.



- Using flesh of first finger, rub bridge horizontally in direction denoted by arrow. No string pizz. should be present. No nail.

-Bow pressure

- light pressure, almost flautando.
- slightly more pressure than normale.
- scratchy, just before complete distortion.

-Bow angle

- norm.
- halfies
- all wood.

-Bow territory

- 1 - tip.....9 - frog.

Instrumental Key from the score of Greenwald's "jeku(ii)".

## Interlude II.

I hear the circulating discourse that “this is the era of all composers speaking their own individual language”, articulated in the hopeful language of unleashed sonic individuality and unbound creative impulse. Part of that: the composer has the potential to make music through the creation of a new performing body, a new freedom of interaction with the materiality of the body without the fetters of the conventional relationship between finger and string and breath and... The obsession with parametric concepts, with sonic content derived from the interplay of parametric interactions whether audible or not, is an interest in deterritorializing and then reterritorializing a performing body, delineating a new hierarchy of interaction based on uniquely prioritized body activity within the performance of the work. The parametric conception represents a reconstruction of the performer’s role in the embodied completion of the work through performance; when formal structural material is derived from the interaction of physical processes, the role of audition is situated in a unique functionality. The immediate product of Andrew Greenwald’s notation is first and foremost a pair of bodies moving in space, segmented into functional moving parts that combine with their instrumental tools to result (finally) in sound production. By breaking open the “correct” performing body, and reforming its physical pedagogy for explicit musical purposes, the sounds are expressly the sounds of that physical scope, not through some fluid New-Age maximization of “individual expression” but as a hyper-concrete reclaiming of the body’s material capacities to then form new phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, in structured and recursive combination... Below the level of signification, below the level of sound production, the late 20th/21st century European+ avant-garde materially unshapes and reshapes its performers’ bodies.

#### 4. Doing Sounds

My eye follows the eye of the documentarian as she follows the eye of Gerhard Richter working in his studio. Riveted, in silence, I trace the point of contact between paint-laden brush and canvas. His stroke is soft and linear, a long lateral motion across a massive canvas. The documentarian maintains the framing in the shot as Richter slowly walks along the canvas to continue the line: the back of Richter's head to the left, his hand to the right, the rich streak of color becoming-line in the center. For a moment or two, Richter's hand slips out of frame; I, tracking the movement of his hand, have the startling realization that the documentarian prioritized showing the back of Richter's head over showing the brush on the canvas. The vector of his gaze, even unseen, is more interesting to her. The brush returns to the frame and I am once again transfixed by this image of fluid friction, this visceral reciprocal awareness of soft mediated contact between hair and canvas, color and emerging texture. Process is content is form is material.

Sciarrino shapes my hands. His three brilliant nocturnes for solo viola, composed almost entirely in natural harmonics, first presume the player's foundation of a refined, controlled left- and right-hand technique and then render that technique an utterly unfamiliar and repurposed virtuosity. I studied them with Barbara Lüneberg, violinist and violist with ensemble recherche, who told me that to learn the full range of the natural harmonics on the violin or viola is the first step in getting to know the instrument on "in its own

language”, on its own terms. As I come back to these nocturne-caprices, revisiting them sometimes months apart, I am immediately made aware of the state of my instrumental knowledge. There is no intonation, no room for inaccuracies in the finger or bow pressure: natural harmonics either sound or don’t, depending on subtle changes in the balance of the fingers or the speed of the bow at the moment it contacts the string. *Di volo* does indeed fly, super-light fingers sliding across gigantic double-stopped glissandi, harmonic trills necessitating an entirely new lightness—un-planted-ness—in rapid trill technique, bow briefly flickering between tremolo and arpeggiation and four-string jété or ricochet. Quick adjustments in bow placement—to the bridge and back again—proscribe for the aural result a processual gradation between speaking and unspeaking harmonics, smooth transitions between audible and inaudible, noise and clarity in the sound. These three miniatures reclaim my technical and virtuosic capacities on my instrument for a new physical language of controlled lightness, balance, and intensely accurate spatial awareness of the finger and bow on the instrument. The complex metallic brilliance that is characteristic of Sciarrino’s string sound is an innovative and lasting conception of naturalism on the stringed instrument, effected by a new sense of touch. On a vibrating string, harmonics must speak themselves, as the player is merely a facilitator activating the resonating partials with the slightest pressure at a node. The sonic language of Sciarrino’s ‘tre nocturne brillianti’, and the technical and physical reshaping of my playing, is the reterritorialization of my capacity to enliven an instrument in the process of becoming a new relationship between my feeling body and sound for the piece.



Postlude.

My body moves ecstatically through Jesús Rafael Soto's 'Pénétrable de Chicago' at the Art Institute. A rectangular world of thousands of suspended clear plastic filaments, this 'pénétrable' installation makes my every motion fluidly visible, renders my present and past as a tactile flow of a responsive and flexible space, Giacomo Balla's 'Dynamism' of my own body. I walk in the un-filamented wake of someone I love, create my path of slippery tangles that knot and unknot themselves behind me, smile back through the shimmering verticality at the giddy baby on her father's shoulders who raises her hands to come towards me and makes filament-waves of her own. The strings a foot away from the wall around all the baseboards of the Art Institute galleries tell me not to touch the art; these strings touch me. I raise my hands, a Pentecostal moved by the Spirit, the tactile vacuum of the art gallery refilled in a rush of strands on my palms, and I feel.

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