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# The Composer, the Musicologist, His Wife, and Her Lover: on Lacan's Relevance to Music

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# The Composer, the Musicologist, His Wife, and Her Lover: on Lacan's Relevance to Music

## **Abstract**

This paper asks what it is to write about music. When we ask students or colleagues to write about music are we asking them to describe music structurally, or to cope with music's ever-shifting signifieds? The paper attempts to answer this question by clarifying the relationship between composition, musicology, and music "itself" by way of a Lacanian reading of Peter Greenaway's film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. Lacan's existential concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real are first introduced in relation to music with reference to music by Hans Werner Henze, Lady Gaga, and György Ligeti. The paper then provocatively frames the discipline of musicology as the "thief" of Greenaway's film by considering the discipline's proliferation of master signifiers and resulting problematic relationship to music. The paper urges a practice of music writing that acknowledges music's structural and signifying aspects and the ultimately futile prospect of capturing the Real of music's "lover."

## **The Composer, the Musicologist, His Wife, and Her Lover: on Lacan's Relevance to Music**

**Dr. Thomas Reiner**

### **INTRODUCTION: ENTER THE MAIN CHARACTERS**

The title of this article refers to Peter Greenaway's well-known filmic allegory of England under Margaret Thatcher: *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989). Once projected into the musical domain, the cook corresponds to the composer stirring up new dishes (or maybe just recycling old recipes), the thief (somewhat provocatively) mutates into the musicologist, while his wife represents music herself. And that leaves us with music's lover, who, I will argue, can be revealed through the writings of French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan. In the process of relating some of Lacan's concepts to music, I also hope to shed some light on often avoided and frequently misunderstood matters that are relevant to our intimate relationship with music and our attempts to write about it.

Let me start by mentioning that Lacan's writings are notoriously difficult; some might say unnecessarily so. Difficult or not, Lacan continues to be widely cited throughout the literature and the fact that the metaphor-rich writing of French intellectuals does not translate easily into our often more clinical, utilitarian and positivist English is well established. As prominent Lacanian translator Bruce Fink has noted, imprecise translations 'have contributed to Lacan's reputation as an extremely abstruse writer whose murky formulations are impenetrable to even highly motivated readers' and that 'his early translators may well have been more obscure and impenetrable than the man himself' (Fink, 2014, p. viii). In any case, I am not trying to provide yet another interpretation of Lacan's writing, but rather to borrow some of his key concepts and relate them to music. I am not the first author to do this: Slavoj Žižek draws on Lacan in his work on Wagner (Žižek, 2005, pp. 283-303), Kenneth M. Smith in his work on Charles Ives (Smith, 2011, pp. 353-398), and Michael Klein in his work on Chopin (Klein, 2012).

How could an author who is so hard to understand possibly help with our ability to write about music? Writing about music is challenging enough as it is. The short answer is that reading broadly and outside the field of music adds to the number of concepts and theories available to talk about music. Lacan is particularly interesting in this regard as he draws on a wide range of texts, both fiction and non-fiction. Given that psychoanalysis is the proverbial talking cure, it is not surprising that Lacan also incorporates concepts from linguistics and semiotics into his writings. One of the core concepts that Lacan has adapted into

his theories is the well-known signifier-signified pair introduced by one of the originators of semiotics, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. The signifier is the actual sound of a spoken word and the signified is the concept or idea referred to by the signifier. In music we can speak of a signifying sound object, let's say a Leitmotif, and a signified concept or idea, such as the particular opera character associated with the given Leitmotif. We can even speculate about merging the signifier with the signified, especially in cases where distinctive sound objects, such as a beautifully voiced harmony or an unusual sound colour, largely signify themselves. This gives rise to the issue of intrinsic and extrinsic referencing in music, as Jean-Jacques Nattiez has described it, when he explores divisions in musical aesthetics on questions of the extent to which music can 'refer to nothing but itself' or 'inspire external associations' and ultimately recognises both possibilities, while noting that commentators typically emphasise one or the other (Nattiez, 1990, pp. 102-129). We will see below how Lacan integrates the signifier-signified pair in his own writing, but first we need introduce one of Lacan's core ideas: his existential triad.

### **THE IMAGINARY, THE SYMBOLIC, AND THE REAL**

Lacan posits three existential concepts (or 'registers') that inform his psychoanalytical theory: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real (Lacan, 1953, p. 413). Lacan emphasises that these three concepts do not exist without each other; they are intertwined like three interlocking rings (Borromean rings), where the structure of all three together within the human psyche relies on their interconnectedness, neither functioning entirely independently of the other two (Lacan, 1974-75). The Imaginary can be understood, at least in part, as all the things that we make up in our mind, and thus coincides to some extent with the established meaning of the word 'imaginary'. However, Lacan attributes special meaning to this concept by associating it with another one of his key ideas: the mirror stage. Lacan's mirror stage is not just about the infant's joy in recognising herself in the mirror, but about all the misrecognitions, delusions, ideals, desires and hopes associated with who we think we are. This means that all the projections and distortions about identity, which contribute to our construct of identity, are part of the Imaginary. Lacan goes further when he suggests that many of our sensory perceptions, including the experience of our own body, can lead to misconceptions that are also part of the Imaginary, through what he describes as 'fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an "orthopaedic" form of its totality' (Lacan, 1949/2006, p. 78). It has been suggested that Lacan's Imaginary is closely linked to art forms such as film and

painting, which are often concerned with imagination, fantasy, and the creation of images.<sup>1</sup>

Many works of art aim at immersing viewers and listeners in sensuous worlds of colour, shape, and sound. This, too, is the domain of the Imaginary, and a musical composition that can easily be placed in its vicinity is Hans Werner Henze's cantata *Being Beateous* from 1963. Most listeners would not find it difficult to associate Henze's setting of a poem by Arthur Rimbaud with a certain other-worldliness and mystery:

Against the snow a high-statured Being of Beauty. Whistlings of death and circles of faint music cause this adored body to rise, expand, and quiver like a ghost. The colours proper to life deepen, dance, and detach themselves round the vision in the making.<sup>2</sup>

Henze's cantata creates a strong sensuous presence by merging a rich palette of sound colours and diverse textures with an intensely engaging vocal part, delivering Rimbaud's evocative imagery. In this way, its focus is largely on its own sound world, rather than on something beyond it, and it is with this that it seeks to engage the listener. In this sense it is immediately engaging, and intrinsically rather than extrinsically, referential. We can therefore say that it leans towards the signified of the signifier-signified pair. In fact, Lacan associates the Imaginary with the signified precisely because signifieds tend to be the ideas themselves, as distinct from the words we use as signifiers (Lacan, 1955/1993, pp. 53-54, 63).

Lacan's Symbolic can be conceived quite literally as all things that involve symbols and symbolic behaviour: as the signifier in the semiotic relationship of signified-signifier (Lacan, 1955/1993, p. 53). As such, it can include all spoken and written languages, sign language, dress codes, computer codes, prestige cars and prestige homes, money in its various manifestations, money markets and their electronic embodiments, traffic signs, and of course the internet and social media. Also associated with the Symbolic, and notwithstanding their association with the Imaginary, are the visual arts, musical works, performances of any sort, as well as movies and television. All of them signify, refer, represent, connote and evoke and, as such, contain elements of both signified and signifier, serving to demonstrate, as works of art commonly do, that Lacan's registers cannot be neatly separated into distinct categories.

Lacan's Symbolic emphasises the part of the sign that refers to a particular meaning, rather than the meaning itself. Lacan's Symbolic concerns the

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the place of the Imaginary in Lacanian film theory see McGowan (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt of the poem translated by Oliver Bernard, from the CD Henze, *Versuch über Schweine*, etc., Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, *et al.* DG 449 869-2 (1996).

permanence, persistence and endurance of the signifier, while the often unstable and context-dependent meaning of signs belongs more properly to the Imaginary. Hence Lacan talks about the slippage of the signified under a fixed and prevailing signifier.<sup>3</sup> People who hold the naive view of natural language purely as means of giving names to objects in the real world may well experience Lacan's Symbolic, at least initially, as rather counter-intuitive or even unsettling. Yet we all know that the meaning of words can change over time in much the same way as the value of a particular currency is constantly in flux. Lacan goes even further by suggesting that there is always a gap between our natural language and reality: '... signification ... turns out to never come down to a pure indication of reality' (Lacan, 1955/2006, p. 345).

So if the Symbolic mostly signifies the Imaginary, rather than reality, where does that leave the real world? This is where Lacan's Real enters, which is arguably the most difficult of the three concepts to grasp. The Real is constituted by everything that cannot be fully captured through the Symbolic. Slavoj Žižek (2005, 206) has expressed Lacan's Real in rather memorable terms as 'that rock which resists symbolization'. Importantly, Lacan's Real is not to be confused with reality. Instead, all three Lacanian registers form part of our existence and our mental processes. In a sense, Lacan's writings contribute more to the questioning and subversion of our everyday notions of reality, than to the consolidation and strengthening of our often so poorly grounded ideas about the world. In Lacan's own words (translated by Lionel Bailly):

The Real expects nothing, especially not of the Subject, as it expects nothing of speech. But it is there, identical to its own existence, a noise in which one can hear everything, ready to submerge with its splinters what the reality principle has built under the name of external world. (Bailly, 2009, p. 97)

Take, for example, the excerpt between 3:45 and 4:18 of Lady Gaga's music video *Judas*:<sup>4</sup> one can hear the sort of sounds that might strike the listener as real in a number of ways. We hear different types of noise, including the sound of water, which does not seem to represent anything other than itself—it simply is the sound of water. We also hear the sounds of a large crowd of people, and while the listener might speculate about the nature of that crowd (whether it is a political demonstration, a football crowd, or fans at a rock concert), the sound remains quite literally and unambiguously that of a large crowd of people. A third sound, which appears for the first time at the very beginning of this excerpt, is a low

<sup>3</sup> The concept of slippage, the signified sliding under the signifier, is discussed at length in Lacan (1955/1993).

<sup>4</sup> Lady Gaga, *Judas*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wagn8Wrmzuc> (accessed 14 May 2014)

flutter or hiss that could be wind blowing into a microphone. One could contemplate the presence of a microphone, removing us from the immediacy of this soundscape by reminding us of our observer status. Alternatively, a listener might simply remain uncertain about the origin of this sound. Composers of electro-acoustic music have long recognised the tension and interplay between the directness and near-tactility of every-day sounds and other sounds that are less easily recognised and afforded with an unsettling sense of ambiguity about their source. What makes this and similar passages of music and sound art so robust, visceral and at the same time intriguing is therefore not their symbolic import or saturation, but precisely the absence of the Symbolic, the lack of culturally specific signifiers that open a gap for the Real to emerge. However, the images and sounds of Lady Gaga's *Judas*, once this music video is considered as a whole, appear to be caught up in all three interlocking rings of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary.



Screen shot of Lady Gaga's *Judas*<sup>5</sup>

Another connection between Lacan's Real and music is the fact that most musicians have a sense of music's ineffable. People who exist, as it were, through music would probably feel very comfortable with the observation that the various embodiments of music (live performance, recordings, music scores, music online, etc.) embrace and incorporate elements that cannot be fully captured through written or spoken language, nor accurately represented in any other way or form.

<sup>5</sup> [http://img2.wikia.nocookie.net/\\_\\_cb20110505221652/ladygaga/images/a/ac/Lady\\_Gaga\\_-\\_Judas\\_340.jpg](http://img2.wikia.nocookie.net/__cb20110505221652/ladygaga/images/a/ac/Lady_Gaga_-_Judas_340.jpg) (accessed 29 June 2014)

In his Foreword to Robert S. Hatten's *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, David Lidov points out that 'what we acquire in the end is not a translation from music to language,' and he explains that 'language serves rather to disclose aspects of the anatomy and physiology of content relations established by music alone and unavailable to any other medium' (Lidov, 2004, p. ix). The otherwise unavailable and untranslatable part of music is precisely what I would associate with Lacan's Real, and this is why I have suggested that, allegorically speaking, the Real is music's Lover.

### **LACAN'S SYMBOLIC AND MUSIC AS SIGNIFIER**

Lacan's emphasis on the signifier when talking about the Symbolic sits well with music in the sense that music's embodiments, including the music score and music in its sonic form, are more easily identified as signifying texts than their associated meaning. Although musicological hermeneutics—and more specifically music semiotics—have come a long way in establishing some of music's diverse and often very specific types of meaning, most of these meanings are also very unstable in their cultural, social, aesthetic, ethnic and historic dependencies. This instability is an example of the shifting nature of Lacan's signified, the slippage of the signified under the signifier, noted above.

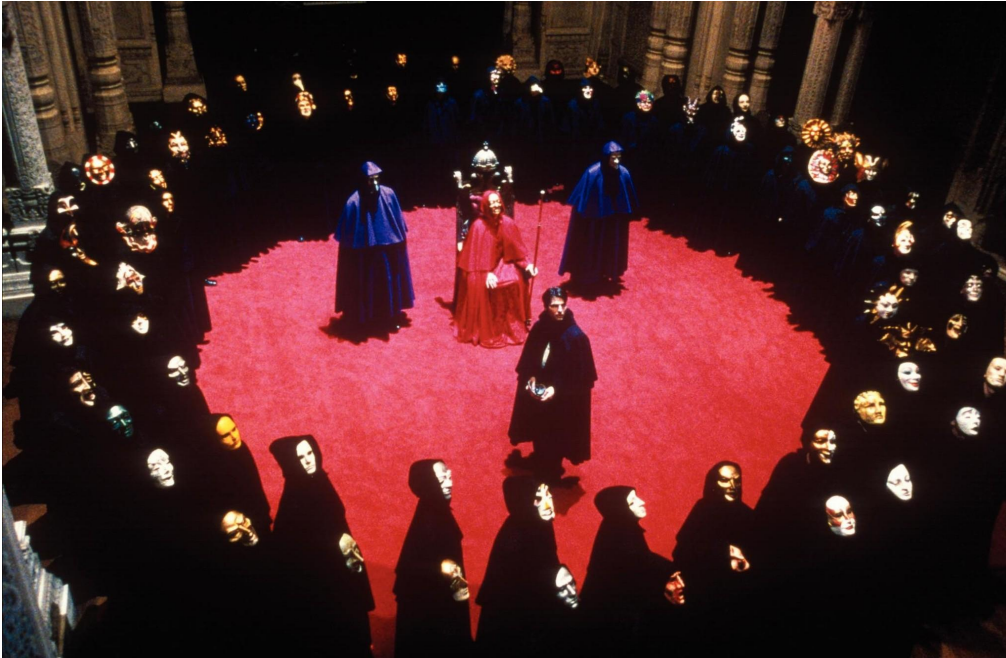
What I would like to argue is that some types of music are more closely associated with Lacan's Symbolic than others. March music performed by military bands at the arrival of high-ranking foreign politicians or royalty might not carry much semantic, emotional or aesthetic meaning; in fact, they are often quite vacuous in terms of musical content. Yet, these marches are clearly representational in their official, ceremonial and celebratory function. This is not to say that military marches lack meaning; their signifieds include a sense of occasion and quite possibly a feeling of pomp and circumstance, but these types of signifieds are rather broad and general and the emphasis is clearly on the signifying gesture rather than the semantic or aesthetic content. Another even more obvious example is the playing of national anthems prior to major sports events, where the music is all about representing the country and not so much about the dubious musical pleasure of hearing athletes sing out of tune. Another, this time subtler example, is concerts presented by high school orchestras, which may well have substantial musical content in their program, and yet one of the signifying functions of such performances is the branding of the particular school, where the quality of the performance is meant to mirror the quality of education offered by that school. The representational function of music is of course well documented, from the size of an orchestra as a measure of an Emperor's power, to



the disproportionate funding of large conservative performance bodies as a signifier of high culture.

Music that leans towards the signifier and the act of signification rather than the signified does not have to be trivial or interchangeable. György Ligeti's *Mesto, Rigido e Cerimonale* (the second piece of *Musica Ricercata* composed between 1951 and 1953) is a case in point. Although entirely built on the three pitch classes E#, F#, and G, it is mesmerising in its dark, pagan sense of ritual. Ligeti's expression markings confirm the overall character and mood: sad, rigid, and ceremonial. The melodic material is limited to two pitches a semitone apart, easily associated with a plaintive, seemingly pre-historical chant. The theoretical key to this may well be the Phrygian or Locrian semitone between scale degrees one and two. The third pitch class, G, is left to enter dramatically, first as individually articulated statements, and then unmeasured but carefully out-composed tremolos. The dissonance and tension caused by this G can be explained through the diminished tenth formed with the E-sharp as well as the minor ninth in relation to the F-sharp. Ligeti's E-sharp could be enharmonically re-spelled as F, but then we would still have a vertical dissonance notated as a major ninth. The tension associated with the exaggerated emphasis on the dissonant G seems irreconcilable with the melodic half step and suggests transgression and intrusion. Expressed differently, pitch class G is foreign to both the Phrygian and the Locrian modes in E# because the third scale degree in both modes is G#.

Stanley Kubrick recognized the highly symbolic nature of this piece when he placed it in an equally symbol-driven scene in his feature *Eyes Wide Shut*, inspired by Arthur Schnitzler's 1926 novella *Traumnovelle*. In a tense and threatening situation, Dr. Bill Harford (played by Tom Cruise) has to reveal his identity to a clandestine group of Venetian-masked individuals gathered for a pagan orgy. Harford is exposed as intruder just like the dissonant G intrudes upon the underlying modal character of the music.



Tom Cruise as Dr. Bill Harford in *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999)<sup>6</sup>

## MUSICOLOGY AND ITS MASTER SIGNIFIERS

The concept of the master signifier, discussed at length in Lacan's seminar XVII (Lacan, 1969-70/1991, pp. 88-94, 188-193), can be captured by reference to the tragically vacuous name-dropping that masks the lack of any real substance in authority-driven individuals. In politics, master signifiers would simply be called spin (Bailly, 2009, p. 62), and the business world's brand names are good examples of master signifiers in as far as they add symbolic value to a product without adding anything substantial (Žižek, 2011, p. 210). In proper Lacanian terms, master signifiers help a person avoid the pain that might be associated with facing the Real. The well-attuned ear of the Lacanian psychoanalyst will quickly pick up the master signifiers in a patient's recurrent and often un-contextualized or nonsensical expressions and turns of phrase, like that of the utterance "I'm so lucky" by the person who is actually not so lucky at all, and sadly tries to avoid contact with her misfortunes by repeatedly stating the opposite (Bailly, 2009, p. 62-4). Master signifiers are closely tied to the Symbolic in that the signifier by far outweighs the signified. In debates surrounding current social or political issues, some speakers might tend towards the Symbolic by resorting to master signifiers

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<sup>6</sup> <http://filmtrope.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/still-of-tom-cruise-in-eyes-wide-shut.jpg>  
(accessed 28 June 2014)

in the shape of big words and expressions, names, titles, deities, and institutions, for example ‘the church’, ‘the community’, ‘the whole world’, and ‘my whole life’. These master signifiers characterize the utterances of Archbishop of Abuja, Nigeria, John Onaiyekan, as he defends the Catholic Church in a much-publicized debate in 2009, also involving British Conservative MP Ann Widdecombe, the late journalist and commentator, Christopher Hitchens, and actor, broadcaster and author Stephen Fry.<sup>7</sup>

The Archbishop inadvertently demonstrates the master signifier’s lack of a well-defined signified when he enunciates that the Catholic Church “means many things to many people”. Like many signifiers, master signifiers are characterized by semantic slippage, but they are also special because of their convenient association with authority and positions that demand respect. Hence the Archbishop’s immediate follow-up assertion: “as an Archbishop I should be in a position to say what it [the Catholic Church] does mean”. By a less kind observer this would probably be considered little more than pompous waffle, while Christopher Hitchens’ stinging response focuses on the horrific transgressions committed by the Catholic Church throughout its existence, which still haunt this institution today.

So within this debate we can get a good idea how the use of language by one speaker can favor the Symbolic, while that of another speaker might tend towards the Real. Stephen Fry’s response addresses even more directly his own emotional hurt in the context of the Catholic Church’s hostility towards homosexuals. His remark ‘this is not nice’ simply states his own feelings in a touching conjunction between the signifier and the signified: no euphemisms and no big words. Fry’s mention of being accused of unruliness is a typical example of the sort of reprimand one can expect when the Symbolic is threatened, along with similar master signifiers of authority such as ‘disrespectful’, ‘rude’, ‘subversive’, ‘disruptive’, ‘unacceptable’, ‘inappropriate’ and ‘unsettling’.

How can we apply the mechanism of the master signifier to musicology as a discipline? The apparent survival of positivist ideology in some corners of musicological thought<sup>8</sup> creates an oblique relationship between positivist master signifiers such as ‘evidence’, ‘fact’, ‘objectivity’, ‘structure’, ‘material’, ‘data’, ‘repeatability’, and ‘measurability’, on the one hand, and music’s own ontological anchorage in such things as ephemerality, ambiguity, ineffability, experiential knowledge and phenomena, society and inter-subjectivity, on the other. I am not advocating inaccuracy, but the pseudo-scientific master signifiers of certainty and objectivity are neither the only nor the most adequate tools to create new knowledge about music.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfQDdfo-elU> (accessed 25 June 2014)

<sup>8</sup> For a time-honoured discussion of this issue see Joseph Kerman (1985).

Some of music's inherent challenges may motivate the importation and adaptation of other knowledge areas within musicology—hence the allegorical Thief. This allegory, which by the way is not meant to be disrespectful, might resonate more strongly if we consider that there are such people as art historians, art critics, and of course plenty of artists, but there are no 'artiologists'. Music is just another text and as such it is subject to hermeneutic inquiry and more specifically semiotics, where modern hermeneutics finds its strongest focus. Other players in the assembly of musicology are acoustics as a branch of physics, psychology and medicine as corner stones of music therapy, and increasingly prominent contributions from neuroscientists such as those of Oliver Sacks and Daniel Levine. There is also Allen Forte's set theory taken directly from modern mathematics. And this is only the beginning; historiography and cultural studies have a major stake in the study of music, and one of the most cited books on music's political economy was written, as one would expect, by an economist. Terminological purgatories should not be forgotten either, Schenker's original conception of music analysis was deeply rooted in the darker sides of blood-and-earth nationalism, only to be cleansed and disinfected by a brand-new set of master signifiers including 'structure', 'foreground', 'background', and 'prolongation'. In fact, the whole movement of structuralism, including much of traditional music theory, might have seduced musicologists to treat music as material and form rather than as text. There is also critical theory and philosophy: Adorno's endlessly debated *Philosophy of Modern Music* or Henri Bergson's experience of melody as "the very fluidity of our inner life" (Bergson, 1965, p. 44). Feminist theory, too, has made its contributions. Take Catherine Clément's *Opera and the Undoing of Women*, which makes an intriguing case for the relationship between harmonic structure and the almost guaranteed demise of the heroine in the libretto. And even literature, if we want to include Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* as creative-theoretical discourse about modern music. Anthropology is another vital informant when looking at world musics and related human expressions. Last but not least, the recent arrival of practice-led music research, which allows for a largely phenomenological reflection on artists' performance practices and creative processes. So in the end, musicology's make-up is extremely diverse and this can either be viewed as an asset or as an indication that musicology approaches sublation. Here is what Raymond Monelle has suggested as a way forward:

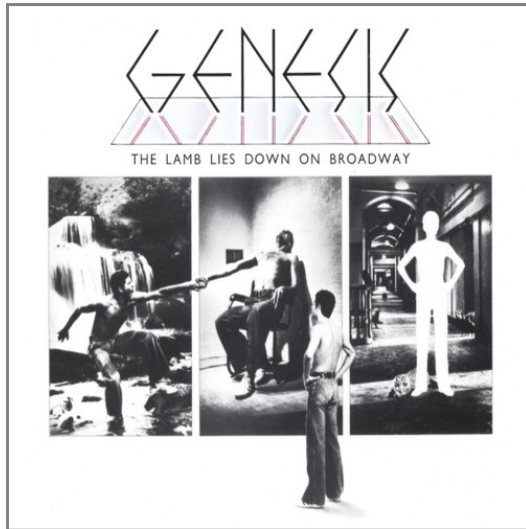
Without a view of musical semiosis, a view of the sense of music, it is hard to see how any real theory of music could be written. Cultural topics, temporality, subjectivity, textuality are all features that demand semiotic analysis, yet they have been systematically shunned by music theory since the middle of the nineteenth century. Part of the hostility to these studies has been caused by their tendency to throw up political and social

criticism; and, indeed, our own analysis let it be ever so neutral, leads us to a moral and social critique of the modern musical world. Real theory—not mere morphology, nor idealist rupture—is dynamite. (Monelle, 2000, pp. 231-2).

#### ASKING OTHERS TO WRITE ABOUT MUSIC

So, what has been achieved with this paper? When we expect our students and colleagues to write about music, we should be aware of what it is we are really asking them to do. Are we asking them to try to describe music's signifiers in purely structural terms? Or cope with the slippage of music's signifieds? Or both, only to emerge with a sense of having failed to capture music's lover: the ineffable Lacanian Real. And yet, given that music is also deeply engaged with the Imaginary and the Symbolic, and more importantly constituted by all three Lacanian registers combined, we still have much to explore and write about. If I can return one last time to the Cook, Thief, Wife and Lover allegory, the Cook continues to prepare a wide variety of musical dishes enjoyed by all four characters, the Thief's marriage to his musical Wife will never be entirely happy, but it might improve with a clearer focus on both meaning and emotion, and while the Lover remains mostly hidden, his existence will always pose a challenge to order and complacency.

I conclude with reference to a 1974 album cover for the double LP *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* by the English progressive rock band Genesis. The actual person on this cover is probably no other than Peter Gabriel, who in his role of lead singer, represents the main character of the concept album: a rough street kid from New York named, wait for it, Rael. On the left of the triptych (and that may well also be the political Left) we see the Imaginary, always trying to pull us into a better world of youthful joie de vivre, feisty energy, hope, freedom, and natural beauty. On the right we see the Symbolic, marked by the silhouette of the Lacanian Subject in the gloomy halls of power—halls that are scattered with monsters that are vaguely scary and mostly pathetic. Our subject has stepped out of the Symbolic and courageously faces a bleak, unbearable and unspeakable Real.



Album cover *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* (Charisma Records, 1974)

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