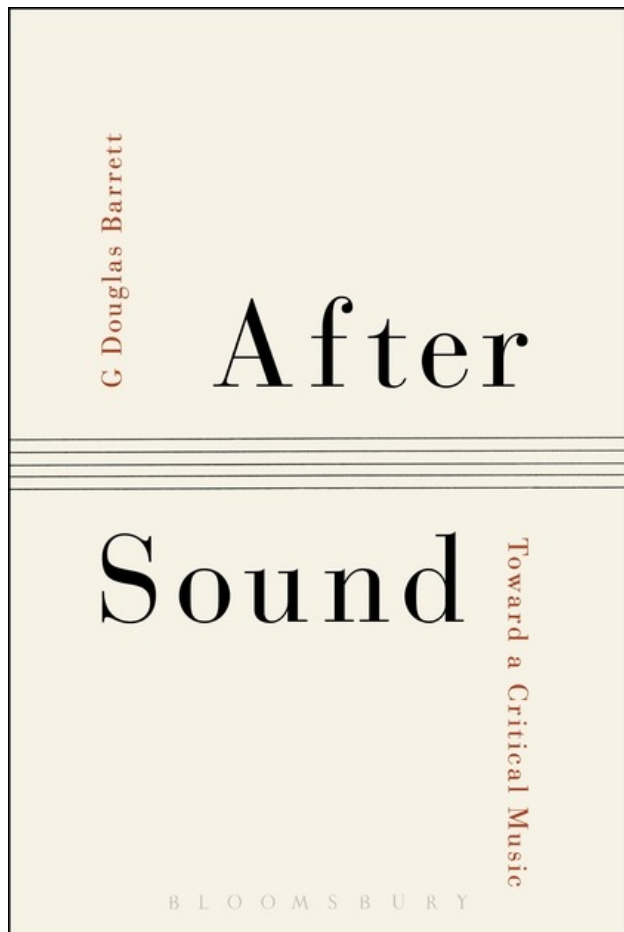


[After Sound: Toward a Critical Music - G. Douglas Barrett. London: Bloomsbury, 2016](#)



by Jonathan Impett

G. Douglas Barrett finds courageous new formulations for urgent and persistent questions concerning the relationship between sound and music, their cultural place, and how we might consider their role and future. He does so through a series of case studies, guided by constellations of references that sometimes fall into elegant patterns, sometimes not. In the process, however, he exposes fissures in our aggregate contemporary thought about sound and music that afford new ways in, new perspectives and some reflection on how we use certain ideas in common circulation. His opening gambit is a challenge: he finds parallels between the theory and listening strategies of sound art and the absolute music of Hanslick. Sound art is absolute music, he says; together they indicate a view of sound as an autonomous medium. Barrett goes on to outline a vision of music that is at once broad enough to subsume differences of label, genre, or medium and quite focused in its promoting of a new engagement. He declares his goal clearly: “to reimagine music as a critically engaged art form in dialogue with contemporary art, continental philosophy, and global politics” (p. 1). To this end he proposes a notion of “critical music.” Specific aspirations and criteria periodically surface from the exegesis and theoretical excursions in his series of case studies, such that a manifesto effectively emerges through the course of the book. If we try to distil such a manifesto, however, inconsistencies emerge that themselves point to interesting questions.

Barrett sets out the problem as he sees it: “Music has steadily devolved from its status as one of the most culturally relevant and aesthetically radical art-forms [...] to an unprecedented level of cultural conservatism, political impertinence, and artistic regress” (p. 7). And his ambitious aspiration: “*After Sound* [...] offers a way out of one of the most vexing deadlocks of contemporary cultural criticism: the choice between a sound art effectively divorced from the formal-historical coordinates of musical practice and the hermetic neo-absolute music that dominates new music circles today” (p. 8).

[Ultra-red's SILENT/LISTEN](#) invites, produces, and presents statements addressing the AIDS epidemic, combining them with versions of Cage's 4'33". Cage's piece is the first of what becomes a series of limit-cases; it fascinates Barrett as a work void of sound. For him, the appropriation of nothingness in Ultra-red's treatment provides an example of Debordian *détournement*. Unanswerable questions of *Werktreue* or authorship are perhaps less interesting than those concerning the nature of the work and of the activity of its instantiation.

Barrett refers to the “birth of the performer” in contemporary music/art practices: rather than a mandate from the composer, the score may instead provide a kind of text to be inhabited, to be activated, to be used. There is, of course, an important if commonplace truth here, but it self-invalidates in its caricature of other practices. The “text to be inhabited, to be activated, to be used” (p. 23) is probably just how any of the musicians we most admire would describe their relationship with works from the classical canon. And there's no shortage of mechanical, unengaged performances of 4'33" or concept-based works. The assumption that 4'33" is a work of indeterminacy is also problematic. Cage's score is a precise mandate to the

performer: to be quiet. “Tacet” is an instruction to act, not an invitation to behave as you like. This interpretation colors Barrett’s discussion of the notion of “authentic” performance, avoiding thornier but more germane questions of intentionality and awareness. Follow [sonicstudies](#) 38 active and passive. He sees *SILENT|LISTEN* as being “at the edge, at the limit, of an authentic realization of 4’33” (p. 55). What does the fact of 4’33” – its nature as a work, its cultural/historical role – mean to the listener/performers of \*SILENT|LISTEN\*? This does not put into doubt the power of the experience for the participants, but does rather challenge Barrett’s apparent insistence on epistemic transparency. Nevertheless, we arrive at a strong, crucial point: the collectivity of listening produces a collectivity of sound, an un-muting. 4’33” is also the reference point for Barrett’s discussion of the music of [Wandelweiser](#). The negation of individual authorship (interestingly distinct from the distribution of group creativity) and the collectivity of listening again emerge as crucial features. This suggests an interesting thought-experiment: how would the history of Western art music appear, viewed from this perspective?

[Pussy Riot’s 2012 performance at Moscow’s cathedral of Christ the Savior](#) and Zizek’s response that “IDEAS MATTER” are at the center of Barrett’s argument. Here he finds the very embodiment of the embodiment of a concept (or of the concept of a concept; conceptual art is itself a vital component of the epistemic charge of Pussy Riot’s work). His point is well made: what better example could there be of the physicality of enacting a conceptual construct, even to the cruel punishments inflicted subsequent to the event itself? Here, too, new questions arise. Pussy Riot are presented as exemplary of the inevitable move towards transmediality of conceptual art. And yet unique medium-specificity is itself a post-conceptual art construct, at least in the case of music. (The irony here is that this is one of the implicit tropes of recent musicology, which would tend precisely to avoid any inherent properties of the “text”). Did Hanslick’s absolute music not depend crucially on its highly codified cultural context? Historically, the idea that recorded sound might constitute music was not immediately obvious. Only with Schaeffer’s acousmatic listening might we posit a sonic abstraction. But this is an entirely different relationship, and not one that Schaeffer was proposing for Brahms. Do we consider painting and literature to be the same medium because they are both encountered through the eye? John Baldessari’s singing of Sol LeWitt’s “[Sentences](#)” is cited as an example of using existing musical codes in order to break them, of the subverting of assumptions, expectations or “correctness.” So much is entirely appropriate, but Barrett’s claim is over-enthusiastic and under-historicized: “[Baldessari] imparted conceptually reflexive language to music [...]. Music had, once again, incorporated (conceptual) language and was now capable of self-reflection” (p. 91).

The question of language is further developed through his discussion of Ablinger’s “[Letter from Schönberg](#).” He refers to Dahlhaus’s assertion that until the eighteenth century, the Aristotelian view of music as comprising harmony, rhythm, and language was unchallenged. While this itself may be worthy of challenge, there is no sense here that the constitution of music – and thus of the role of language within it – might evolve with circumstances, with culture and society. And yet this, surely, is Barrett’s central point: that it needs to. Here we might usefully recall Schönberg’s own 1912 essay on music and text. Both Barrett and Schönberg describe a confluence of music and words in the successful musical act. For Barrett, language carries specificity, the epistemic charge; for Schönberg, this musical catalysis seems to relieve language of what David Panagia describes as “the weight of epistemic validation” (*Ten Theses for an Aesthetics of Politics*, 2016). More problematic, Schönberg says in the same essay, is that nowadays (that is, even in Vienna a century ago) not enough people have language with which to say material things about music. This is the area in which Barrett’s book really begins to make a contribution.

[Cassie Thornton’s series \*The Sound of Debt\*](#) offers an artistic response to the monetarization of higher education – interventions in which participants use their own experience of having been drawn into long-term financial obligation. Barrett uses the idea of debt to explore the relations between the materiality of social relations, the materialist values they embody and the linguistic construct that is its point of origin. He adopts Meillassoux’s speculative materialism as a potential way of avoiding a false materialism/idealism duality, and introduces Thornton’s idea of social practice art: “the materialism of a (musical) social practice in the place of economic and philosophical speculation alike” (p. 126). *The Sound of Debt* points to another issue implicit in Barrett’s argument: the relationship between criticality and catharsis. From a Brechtian standpoint, this event might be seen as the very embodiment of the problem Brecht saw in bourgeois theatre – the emotional identification of the observer with the situation presented. When participant and observer are one, surely this identity is guaranteed. The purpose of Brecht’s estrangement effect is precisely to overcome this risk – to enable the observer to develop a critical view of a situation, the necessary basis for material action. In this light, the only way for such an event to avoid the catharsis trap is for it to be empowering, for it to lead to change brought about by the participants, and Barrett provides no evidence for this. Surely Bourriaud should reappear in his argument at this point.

Reflexivity becomes an important property in Barrett’s treatment of [Hong-Kai Wang’s \*Music While We Work\*](#) – a sound and video piece in which retired Taiwanese workers perform a series of listening and recording exercises in the factory where they once worked. Vertov provides his comparator. Here we are dealing with the composition of listening itself, as Barrett approaches the central question of criticality: the uncovering of ideologies. *Music While We Work* is an attempt to “hear things through things” (p. 157). Sense itself is metaphorical, he decides, a conclusion which might seem at odds with his insistence on the materialization of concepts. Perhaps some essence of criticality lies in this tension. For Barrett “critical music [...] recomposes music’s codes, materials and forms and listens for strategic assemblages and formations in the making. [...] The artworks in *After Sound* interrogate music’s historical modes of technological reproduction and elaborate new forms of instrumentality. They reconfigure music as a site for political agency by challenging and exfoliating its forms” (p. 8).

Are these instances to be understood as exemplars? If so, Barrett is either creating an insurmountable obstacle to the broadening of his project or reducing the whole undertaking from the formulation of a new discourse for music to a set of descriptive terms for a sub-genre. We might more usefully see them as limit-cases that probe the terrain for a new path.

He is in favor of the materialization of concepts: “ideas matter.” A major topic of the book from which Barrett derives his title – [David Joselit’s \*After Art\*](#) – is the propagation of art and the ideas it embodies, its status as an informational currency. Here, Barrett’s case studies are fascinating instances of the precise alignment of concept and materialization. As exemplars for a new criticality this makes them somewhat brittle, however. In what ways do they afford the “replication, remediation, and dissemination” that Joselit studies to understand the power of artworks? We might introduce an additional parameter: conceptual plasticity. These cases are not plastic; while Barrett makes a strong case for their strength in situ, from another perspective they could be seen as culturally inert. All art loses power out of context, just as our ability to apprehend it – to make sense of it or assess its efficacy – diminishes with informational distance. Conceptually plastic works – those that retain more of their criticality under transposition of milieu – are also subject to mis- or re-apprehension, to projection and invention, of course, but the truthful voices of *SILENT|LISTEN* or *Debt 2 Space* may be heard as profit-preserving therapy by the powers in question. The real danger is that the isolation of the critical moment works against the emergence of new, constructive cultural dynamics that might be shared more widely. The objects of critical engagement and the work of consciousness-raising operate on many levels. Does the critical charge of these examples only obtain within their immediate context? If so, how can we form a critical relationship with *them*? If the neatness of fit between an explicitly critical concept and its materialization is the currency, then we can only record that it took place and move on. Well, fine and good that it should be so, but how does this contribute to the evolution of cultural dynamics, of the role of music? Is this not a form of immanence that comes full circle to join with the transcendence of absolute music?

As always with theorists, personal taste is a major uncredited contributor. Barrett clearly sets great store by niceness of fit between concept and materialization. This takes us straight to a crucial topic of the sound-art/music debate: the relationship between materiality and temporality – the composition of temporal experience within a work, and its historical situation. His call for a critical music is timely and necessary. But is music only critical when it is explicitly, specifically so? His examples would suggest so. And in that case, how can we recognize the efficacy of that criticality except from within the particular situation? We might (mis-)appropriate terms from David Panagia: Barrett’s exemplars leap from the moment of

advenience to becoming epistemic objects. Perhaps Barrett implies his own solution in his insistence on the role of composition of putting-together. Perhaps this is where the friction, the be-holding (Panagia again) can enter. Here you must choose your metaphor. Follow sonicstudies if becoming less than an epistemic object, but rather as generating a surplus.

Barrett's calls to criticality and to the materialization of concepts are welcome and grounded in wide networks of opinion and example. His perception is acute and his reasoning coherent. But these calls are weakened by a straw man argument so fundamental that we must be grateful to Barrett for drawing our attention to its wide propagation through sound studies and philosophy of music. This is a compound, hazy-edged concept constituted of received and somewhat unreflected images of several ideas: the work-concept as a product of the long nineteenth century, absolute music as one nineteenth century aesthetic ideal, the score as an autonomous abstraction, the performer as an obedient executor of instructions, and recording as the facilitator of commodification. Together, these become a dangerous monolith that not only stalks discussion of our current situation – it denies history and feeds the culture of individualization that inhibits common purpose or progress. None of these ideas requires rebuttal; they all require serious nuancing if they are to contribute constructively to how we move forward, to the advancement of criticality.

Collectivity is a recurrent theme. In this Barrett echoes voices such as Badiou (his *Axioms for an Affirmative Art*) or Negri (*Art and Multitude*). Again, the scant regard for history is unwise. The pressure for every new act of art to trumpet its novel, unique, personal radical nature – its separation from other times, places, and imaginations – militates precisely against the broader collectivity Barrett seeks to encourage. So if there are two areas that Barrett's formulation ignores, they date from the same time and place as the notion of the critical itself: Benjamin's view of the role of history and Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. Radical change does not come about in a permanent now, a perpetual new, and the complete identification of subject with aesthetic object engenders neither personal reflection nor social dynamic. Not for nothing is there a fundamental relationship between historical awareness and radical thought in Marxism.

Barrett's book goes beyond the protesting of sound-art difference of Cox or Kim-Cohen and addresses the musicophobia of Kane. It identifies an important path and begins to move along it. Then think even harder and give us more. What do these insights – developed from what are, in effect, limit-cases – suggest for our understanding and production of music more generally? Composition – that is, music beyond the vernacular, beyond the grooves and hooks of short-term memory, and excepting certain other limit-cases of formalism – is inherently conceptual in its production and its reception, and at the same time absolutely material even when replayed in the imagination. This produces a tension, an irresolvability that we might consider the engine of musical experience. You can't legislate for criticality (that would be the black sheep of the Zhdanov family). If writing such as Barrett's constantly draws our attention back to the dynamic co-existence in music of absolute conceptuality and absolute materiality, and of the social and the individual, it's performing a vital task.

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