

The Aesthetics of Absence  
in Music of the  
Twenty-First Century



25-26 May 2023  
Dept. of Musicology, UiO



UNIVERSITETET  
I OSLO

International conference at the Department of Musicology,  
University of Oslo, in collaboration with the Department of  
Musicology, Uppsala University

Book of abstracts and presenters

## ***The formulations of absence in Philip Venables' Answer Machine Tape, 1987 (2022)***

Monika Żyła

In his recent composition for piano solo and multimedia, *Answer Machine Tape, 1987 (2022)*, Philip Venables through musical and narrative means explores the notion of absence caused by the AIDS pandemic. Philip Venables constructs his piece by using unique archival material, namely the voices of people who called and left messages on artist David Wojnarowicz's phone in his New York apartment around the time when his close friend Peter Hujar, American photographer and collaborator, was diagnosed and died from an AIDS-related disease in 1987. The voices of the monologuing friends, lovers, art dealers, and other artists recorded and preserved on Wojnarowicz's phone, through their textures, timbres, tempi, used words, sudden interruptions, and silences, create a powerful account of the notion of absence in its multilayered, performative aspects. The absences depicted by Venables are complex and multiple. The absence of Wojnarowicz near the phone to answer his friends' phone calls, the absence of Peter Hujar, passing away prematurely, and the absence of grand narratives in the recorded messages that instead give way to the mundane, personal, and everyday. Even the absence of grand piano on stage as the instrument's primary function is erased and now its primary function becomes that of a typewriter. What is audible and the musical seem even secondary in the piece, only as a derivative of the piano's new function as a typewriter. In my paper, I aim to complicate and nuance the notion of absence as formulated by Venables in his composition, to understand the piece, and the construction of its meaning as well as its subversive and critical potential through its multilayered and overlapping absences.

**Monika Żyła** is a musicologist, cultural theorist, author, artistic director, and pianist. She is working on her Ph.D. dissertation "Contemporary Music and Its Others: Female Composers, Gender Politics and Constructions of National Identity at the Warsaw Autumn Festival" in the Department of Musicology and Dance Studies at the University of Salzburg. She gives lectures on gender, diversity and inclusion in contemporary music and sound art both in the academic and festival context. She is currently affiliated with the University of Salzburg, the University of Vienna and Berlin University of the Arts. She has published research and critical articles in *Glissando*, *Ruch Muzyczny*, *Dwutygodnik*, *Odra*, *Krytyka Polityczna*, *Circuit-Musiques Contemporaines*, and *Contemporary Music Review*. Her peer-reviewed article "[The Need for Otherness: Hispanic Music at 'Warsaw Autumn'](#)" was published *Contemporary Music Review*, Volume 38 Issue 1-2. Earlier, her peer-reviewed article "[Cornelius Cardew behind the Iron Curtain](#)" appeared in the Canadian musicological journal *Circuit — Musiques Contemporaines* (Volume 28, Issue 3) published by the University of Montreal. She is an author and producer of the series of podcasts about contemporary music called "Radio w Kuchni". In 2018/2019 she directed and produced a series of 24-hour participatory staged performances *VEXATIONS: REVISITED* based on Eric Sate's *Vexations* from 1893. Her recent audio paper *Hysterical Racism: Gorée in À l'île de Gorée* on reimagining listening to Xenakis composition *À l'île de Gorée* from 1986 on the Senegalese Gorée Island, commissioned by MINU Festival for Expanded Music in Copenhagen has been published by *Seismograf Magazine*. She works as a researcher for Sounds Now network where she focuses on curatorial practices within contemporary music and sound art as ways of making them more accessible, inclusive and diverse.

***Sounding out absent bodies: ghost harmonies, resonances and remembering in Marisol Jiménez's XLIII Memoriam Vivere***

Luis Velasco-Puffleau

This paper explores how the performance of absence in twenty-first century music can both contribute to contemporary struggles for social justice and tackle human rights violations, such as enforced disappearances. It examines the orchestral work *XLIII Memoriam Vivere* (2015) by Marisol Jiménez (b. 1978), which refers to the story of the forty-three students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' college in Mexico, who were forcibly abducted and then disappeared in September 2014. Since then, both the right to have a full investigation and to know what happened to the bodies of the students have been central demands of the families of the victims and Mexican society – so far, only a few burned bone fragments have been matched to three students but most of the bodies have never been found. In my presentation, I examine three compositional strategies with which Marisol Jiménez performs the absence of the students' bodies and engages the audience with the global problem of enforced disappearances: 1) using the number 43 as a key structural element of the work; 2) asking the wind musicians to use their instruments as resonant bodies to amplify the word *Vivos!* (Alive!); and 3) employing 'ghost harmonies', which consist in putting out certain sounds from complex harmonic textures in order to trigger auditors' aural agency to internally reconstruct the sonic assemblage. This presentation shows how, performing absence and fostering collective remembering, musical and aural performances are acts of resistance to grave violations of human rights.

**Luis Velasco-Puffleau** is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellow at the University of Bern and McGill University, as well as an affiliate professor at the Université de Montréal. As a musicologist and musician, his research focuses on the relationship between music, ethics, and politics in the music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He is also interested in exploring the political dimension of aural memories and wartime sonic environments. He is the editor of the open access research blog *Music, Sound and Conflict*, an editorial board member of the journal *Transposition*, and a member of the Swiss Young Academy.

## ***The music of trauma: tracing the Real in Wang Xilin's Piano Concerto Op. 56***

Arturo Irisarri Izquierdo

Jacques Lacan famously defined the Real as “that which resists symbolisation absolutely,” an irreducible negativity always-already haunting our (symbolic) reality—its inherent, constitutive lack. Stemming from this notion, psychoanalysis portrays trauma as an “encounter with the Real,” a radical confrontation with lack that shatters our reality by violently exposing its ontological incompleteness, the utter impossibility of totalising experience. Torn asunder by the traumatic Real, the broken subject nevertheless gradually reconstitutes its reality, repressing the unassimilable Real to restore a semblance of completeness that allows the continuation of life. However, the unsublatable Real inevitably returns, disruptive, in the symptom.

In the music of Wang Xilin (Kaifeng, 1936), the impact of trauma is paramount. Imprisoned and tortured during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Wang often describes his compositions as attempts to musically depict and respond to trauma. In this paper, I develop a dual study on Wang's *Piano Concerto* (2010), in an attempt to elucidate how trauma can shape and condition a musical work. First, I identify and trace in the score of the *Concerto* the symptoms of Wang's personal trauma, exposing the points where the void/excess of the Real stages a musical return. In a further, speculative move, I then advance a (psycho)analysis of the *Concerto* from a purely formal, immanent perspective, a gesture that allows me to demonstrate the negative presence of the Real as an inherent aspect of music that has remained largely ignored in musicological discourse.

**Arturo Irisarri Izquierdo** is a PhD candidate at the Hong Kong Baptist University (Hong Kong). His dissertation research focuses on the development of a national style of piano concerti in the People's Republic of China (from 1949 until the present), exploring issues of ideology, nationalism, and identity politics in connection to music from a theoretical perspective oriented around the ideas of psychoanalysis and the philosophical systems of German idealism.

***Voidgaze and phantom genres:  
functions and dysfunctions of music genres on streaming platforms***

Mattia Merlini

Voidgaze is a “phantom genre” in the sense that people often listen to this kind of music without even knowing what it is. If you google it, you will find more pages asking for a definition than providing it. Being located at the crossroads between blackgaze, post-black metal, atmospheric black metal, doom metal and neofolk, this genre seems to lack an actual community and is most likely the product of genre classification operated by streaming services to guide the algorithm’s recommendation work. In this paper I investigate the origins and family tree of this genre by crossing the results of research done using several online tools for the analysis of Spotify playlists metadata – Organize Your Music, All Noise at Once and SpotiGeM (the latter being recently developed by a research group I participate in). Thus, I use voidgaze as a case study to describe new ways in which genres are born in the age of streaming, highlighting analogies and differences with the “old style” genres and their respective functions. The real absence described in this paper, then, is not that implied in the name of voidgaze as much as it is the hypothetical loss of centrality of the concept of “genre” on streaming platforms. But are genres really bound to become just tags in an all-fluid listening experience, or should we broaden the old definition of “music genre” to accommodate new “phantom” forms of classification?

**Mattia Merlini** is a PhD Fellow at the University of Milan, holding an M.A. in Musicology (2019, Milan) and a second M.A. in Philosophy (2022, Pisa). He is also teaching assistant at the University of Milan (since 2021) and at the IULM University (since 2022). He teaches philosophy, human sciences, history, and music disciplines in secondary schools and since 2017 has been promoting outreach activities, especially in the fields of art and philosophy, in the areas of Milan and of Bolzano, his homeland – where he is also active as a composer for local independent film productions.

## ***Vaporwave and the paradox of intentionality***

Alec Wood

Vaporwave art and music emerged in the mid-2010s and is characterized by distorted, fragmented cultural audiovisual memorabilia from the 80s and 90s. It is usually thought to convey a self-conscious and ironic indulgence in the culture and commodities of this period, of which the abandoned mall is emblematic. Listeners frequently report that vaporwave makes them feel nostalgic for something that never happened or that happened to someone else. This paper interprets this reaction in dialogue with philosophies of hypnosis that emerged in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century France (e.g. Borch-Jacobsen 1982, Chertok & Stengers 1989, Roustang 1990).

In particular, this paper contends hypnosis discloses a paradox of intentionality. This paradox asserts the more we focus on, or intend to, something, the less we are able to intend to anything altogether. In short, intentionality dismantles itself. Vaporwave, through its audiovisually hypnotic fixation on 80s and 90s cultural objects exploits this paradox to unexpectedly force these objects to withdraw, leaving listeners to revel in the networks of shared attention assembled around them. Vaporwave prioritizes the intersubjective *mimesis* of a pre-representative, involuntary feeling of nostalgia rather than the subjectified *diegesis* of the objects depicted and enacts the collapse of the latter into the former. These dynamics will be explored in listenings of Vektroid's *Floral Shoppe* (2011), the locus classicus of the genre, and compilations uploaded by the YouTube channel "Retro Player One." Vaporwave helps us both address unresolved questions in the philosophy of hypnosis and presents a critique of recent object-oriented approaches to musical meaning.

**Alec Wood** is a PhD candidate in musicology at Yale University. His research, in dialogue mainly with continental philosophy, deals with issues of music, subjectivity, and signification. His dissertation explores the mutually determined problems of hypnosis and musical meaning through 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century musical examples and philosophical and psychoanalytic texts. He has presented papers internationally on Scriabin and Hildegard, including at national meetings of the American Musicological Society, the International Russian Music Society, and Scriabin@150 conference.

## ***Presentifying absence: memorial practices in 21<sup>st</sup>-century popular music***

Lorenzo Montefinese

Considering the aesthetic of absence from the perspective of popular music, one facet seems rather pervasive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: that of absence-as-memory. Favored by the advent of the digital, which has allowed an unprecedented and ubiquitous access to the past, our current condition is marked by the making-present of the past; that is, the materialization of absence(s). Building upon 20<sup>th</sup> century theoretical interest with memory, as well as on the critical fortune of the concept of 'hauntology' – repurposed to tie together a range of aesthetics and practices in post-2000 popular music – I focus on the way music allows the presentification of absence. This may take on different forms, procedures and techniques, such as the use of sampling, found sound, field recordings, looping, effects like reverb and delay, and what I call figures of alteration such as vinyl pops and crackles, tape hiss, static and signal noise. I will first outline the nexus between music and absence, memory, loss and mediatization through the work of Leyland Kirby aka The Caretaker, perhaps the major musician to fall under the 'hauntology' spectrum. Then, I will examine how a particular memory – that of Rave in the U.K. – is evoked in the music of Burial and other British artists making or referencing electronic dance music heritage. Producing effects of absence and distance in both time and space via sonic procedures and references, all these musicians constitute relevant examples of memorial practices in contemporary popular music.

**Lorenzo Montefinese** is a PhD student in Visual and Media Studies at IULM University in Milan. His PhD project explores technoaesthetic imaginaries and practices in popular electronic music and their relationships with visual arts. He earned a BA in visual arts at IUAV University of Venice, and an MA in semiotics at University of Bologna. His past research has dealt with the aesthetics of repetition in art and music, memorial practices in popular music, afrofuturism, and black minimalism. In addition to academic research, he is also active as a music journalist and a DJ.

## ***Absence, non-absence, words, and music in György Kurtág's Fin de partie***

Mark Berry

'They come/different and the same/with each it is different and the same/with each the absence of love is different/with each the absence of love is the same.' In this poem, Samuel Beckett pointed to the importance of absence in so much of his work, also banishing (making absent) much of what poetry was held to be. The poem encapsulates a tendency, simplification and mystification two sides of the coin, toward what Beckett identified in Gertrude Stein as the 'very desirable literature of the nonword'. Beyond lies what some have described as 'anti-literature,' though Beckett insisted the artist should not banish form but rather—Romantically—create 'new form' that admits reality to be 'chaos' or 'the mess', without transformation of that mess or making it part of that form. Indeed, clear structure and stylisation of *Fin de partie/Endgame* betoken both literature and form.

How does György Kurtág respond to such absence and non-absence in his 'dramatic version' of *Endgame*? Music in general and Kurtág's in particular offer an obvious opportunity for drama 'of the nonword', pushing Beckett's words to the limits, the endgame, of language, to the beginning of music. Every note in this most Webern-like of operas bears the weight of tragic and tragicomic existence, yet its music is no representative mirror. Musical autonomy persists, in Beckettian hopeless hope. Until, that is, the close, when a musical synthesis emerges to sing of something that might refashion redemptive ideas through the shattered, fragmentary challenges of modernity. Absence is never merely absence.

**Mark Berry** is Professor of Music and Intellectual History at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author of *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire: Politics and Religion in Wagner's 'Ring'* (2006), *After Wagner: Histories of Modernist Music Drama from 'Parsifal' to Nono* (2014), and *Arnold Schoenberg* (2019); and co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner's 'Der Ring des Nibelungen'* (2020). He has written widely on musical and intellectual history from the later seventeenth century onwards, and regularly reviews concert and opera performances for his blog Boulezian. His next major project is a synoptic history of Mozart's operas in eighteenth-century context.



## ***The unspeakable: music in the age of uncertainty***

Christine Dysers

What are the boundaries between truth and lie, fact and fiction, honesty and deceit? From social media conspiracies to fake news and deepfakes, the Western hemisphere has been faced with an increasing ambiguity of meaning since the early 2000s. In today's hyper-globalized and internet-fueled age, where access to a never-ending stream of information is available at the mere click of a button, it has become difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is not, let alone to pinpoint what is true, or whose truth it is.

With that, inevitably, comes a loss: an absence of stable meaning, certainty and trust. According to Rosi Braidotti, we are living in 'a sort of afterlife'; a post-everything era which is defined by fear and apathy. Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman argues that today's society is 'liquid', in that it is fast, fragmented, and continuously decentered. In other words, the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be described as a time in which uncertainty and ambivalence prevail.

This paper examines two musical works and reads them against this societal background of uncertainty. In both Steven K. Takasugi's *Strange Autumn* (2003–04) and Chris Mann's *Speaking is Difficult* (2017), the slipperiness of language plays a prominent role. *Strange Autumn* confronts the audience with a moment of crisis, in which a complete absence of language, sound, or motion is the only way forward. *Speaking is Difficult*, on the other hand, presents the listener with an excess of information. How might music aid in understanding and navigating life in a radically uncertain world?

**Christine Dysers** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Uppsala University department of musicology. Her research is broadly concerned with music after 1989, with a particular focus on the aesthetics of repetition, music and the political, musical borrowing, and the notion of the uncanny. Christine holds a PhD in music from City, University of London and is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA). In 2021, she was appointed as a Fulbright Visiting Scholar in the department of music at Columbia University. She is the author of *Critical Guides to Contemporary Composers: Bernhard Lang* (Intellect, 2023).

## ***Octoechos: contemporary music and spirituality***

Kristina Socanski Celik

Over the past decades, scholars have shown increasing interest in the complex interrelationship between contemporary music and spirituality. This paper explores a compositional approach often associated with the notion of spirituality, in which musical elements originating from medieval Byzantine chant are synthesized with modern compositional tools. In doing so, it will explore the limitations of some current conceptions of spirituality and engage with music's ability to express that which is absent in conceptual understanding.

I will examine the compositional approaches of Ljubica Marić and Arvo Pärt and explore how spirituality understood through music can open up closed conceptions of spirituality, in turn exposing the shortcomings and ellipses in conceptual thinking when it comes to both analyzing the music and interpreting spirituality. Through an exploration of how the Octoechos—the ancient eight-mode system originating from Byzantine music—is transformed in twentieth and twenty-first century compositions and can be seen as an open concept transcending the fixed idea of modality, this paper suggests a new approach to studying classical music which intersects with spirituality, modernism and tradition.

**Kristina Socanski** has a background in piano performance and holds degrees from the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo (B.A. 2014) and the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen (M.M. 2016, Soloist Diploma 2019). In 2018, she was a visiting scholar at Aaron Copland School of Music, Queens College, New York, where she engaged in artistic research with the subject "American Sound", a project which sparked great interest in further development in musicology and research. The results of her artistic research were presented in a recording with music by Philip Glass, Edward Smaldone, George Crumb and Missy Mazzoli (Sheva, 2019). In 2021, she was appointed a doctoral research fellowship at the University of Oslo, where she is currently working on a project exploring contemporary music and spirituality.

***Women sing freedom:  
the absence of women's singing in post-revolutionary Iran***

Payam Pilvar

By entering the modern era and the increase in the speed of information exchange, many laws and traditions in the Islamic countries have been challenged by the new ideas that were emerged in the other parts of the world; ideas such as feminism and women rights. Many scholars tried to theorize Islamic feminism concerning the role of women in Islam (Özkazanç-Pan 2015; Weird 2013; Mojab 2001).

In the post-revolutionary Iran, the newly-established Islamic Republic government tried to correlate every sphere of the Iranians' social life with the Islamic jurisprudence. Consequently, many cultural activities have been suppressed, censored, or vanished from the public spaces. In this regards, women's solo singing in public has been completely banned by the state (Siamdoust 2017; Yousefzadeh 2015; DeBano 2005) resulting a destructive impact on the women's practice of music. Although the state was very decisive in enforcing its cultural policies at first, development of new communication technologies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century coincided with the election of the more tolerant government hence restricting women's voice was not only lowered, but also it wasn't possible anymore.

By reviewing the existing literature about women's singing in Iran and using the theories of Islamic feminism, this research tries to identify the creative ways which Iranian female singers used to bend the rules and to bring back their absent voice to the public spaces. Also, the importance of this day-to-day fight for women's rights inside the larger conflict between modernization and traditional beliefs will be discussed.

**Payam Pilvar** is a music producer, sound designer, and researcher interested in anthropology, sociology, politics, and acoustics. He also composes and performs electronic music in a variety of genres, including IDM, post-rock and modern jazz. He often uses interdisciplinary approach in both his artistic and scholarly works. He holds an MA in Ethnomusicology from Tehran University of Art and is a PhD candidate in Interdisciplinary Research in Music at the University of Ottawa.

***What's not there?***  
***Heiner Goebbels' Aesthetics of Absence and division between visual and acoustic stage in recent opera and musical theatre***

Jelena Novak

Writing about the concept of and 'theatre of absence' Heiner Goebbels notes that some of its characteristics are anchored in the gap between what we hear and what we see at the same time. Goebbels understands absence as "a separation of the actors' voices from their bodies and of the musicians' sounds from their instruments" and as "a de-synchronization of listening and seeing, a separation or division between visual and acoustic stage". That desynchronization is, according to Goebbels, typical for non-narrative theatre, theatre where "the spectator is involved in a drama of experience rather than looking at drama in which psychologically motivated relationships are represented by figures on stage". (Heiner Goebbels, "Aesthetics of Absence", in Pierre Audi (ed.) "Lectures (How) Opera Works", Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2018.)

"In traditional theatre, which is based on literature, and in narrative opera, subjects in the audience recognize themselves in the actor or singer or dancer on stage; they identify themselves with the performers and mirror themselves in them", writes Goebbels. When linear narration is absent a 'drama of experience' takes place. In this paper I will discuss how 'absence' and 'drama of experience' happen through desynchronization between what we see and what we hear in several cases of recent opera and musical theatre: a VR installation "Eight" (2018-19), film opera "Upload" (2019-20) and chamber music theatre "The Book of Water" (2021-22) all by Dutch composer and director Michel van der Aa.

**Jelena Novak** works as a researcher at CESEM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa. Her fields of interests are modern and contemporary music, recent opera, singing and new media, capitalist realism, voice studies and feminine identities in music. Exploring those fields she works as researcher, lecturer, writer, dramaturge, music critic, editor and curator focused on bringing together critical theory and contemporary art. Her most recent books are *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (2015), *Operofilia* (2018) and *Einstein on the Beach: Opera beyond Drama* (co-edited with John Richardson, 2019). Currently she works on a book *Opera in the Expanded Field* and researches about what it means and what it takes to sing beyond human.

## ***Olga Neuwirth's coronAtion cycle: into the void and beyond***

Martina Bratić

Olga Neuwirth's work is on many levels a commentary on the times in which she works; always sharp, critical, but also self-reflexive and relational. The latter may now have prevailed in her series *coronAtion I-VI*, a six-part cycle, that was composed against the backdrop of 249 days of the ban on concerts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Isolated, dislocated from her usual life and professional flows, Neuwirth composed the cycle far from the city, spending creative time in her native Styria.

Five pieces of music and a room installation, an entire cycle that was performed in November 2022 at once, in a total of 619 minutes, is, as the author discloses, a protocol and a reflection on her own composition, but also, it seems, a clear commentary and cogitation on the state of absence and general stagnation – of both authors and their productions, as well as *the marketing and consumption* chain of artistic content. In addition, the idea of absence can be translated to the level of formal-aesthetic design of the cycle, likewise; the destabilized regulation of musical conventions, then the absence of teleological sound organization (both on the micro and macro level), as well as the complete annulment of the principle of conceptual homogeneity.

This paper has in its focus the idea of void, absence and induced vacuum as a social and artistic landscape in the framework of which the author's intention, the reception factor, but also the aesthetic-formal level intertwine and activate each other.

**Martina Bratić** received her PhD in Musicology in 2022 from the University of Graz, where she currently works as a university assistant. She holds a Master's Degree in musicology and history of art (Zagreb-Budapest). She worked as an associate musicologist at the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb, and from 2012 to 2015, she was a chief curator at Inkubator Gallery in Zagreb. She has finished a one-year training program in Women's Studies. Her area of interest is related to topics of feminist musicology and music and subjectivity; to the field of contemporary art and theory, feminist art, and gender- and cultural studies.

## ***Small-screen silents: contemporary television and the neo-silent aesthetic***

Peter Adams

My current research project explores the concept of the “neo-silent” aesthetic in contemporary media, i.e. the self-conscious adoption (and reinterpretation) of silent cinema’s formal and aesthetic characteristics, including the restriction of diegetic sound and the foregrounding of non-diegetic music. In this paper, I will focus on a sub-section of my research, specifically considering the phenomenon of neo-silent content on the small screen.

As television has matured, the traditional boundaries between the “televisual” and the “cinematic” have become increasingly blurred, resulting in more pronounced departures from established formats and conventions. One-off musical episodes are perhaps the most common example of a sonically-focused aesthetic departure, but alongside these, we can also identify the emergence of the “silent” or “mute” episode. These have featured in a spate of recent TV shows, including *Inside No. 9*, *Mr. Robot*, *Only Murders in the Building*, *Evil*, *Twin Peaks: The Return*, and *The X-Files* reboot, among others.

One of the most prominent early examples of a (semi-)silent TV episode is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s ‘Hush’ (1999), which this paper will analyse in detail, before bringing it into dialogue with a more recent example, *BoJack Horseman*’s ‘Fish Out of Water’ (2016). Both episodes use diegetic silence to literalise notions of miscommunication and isolation, and in a wider sense, they highlight the continued relevance of absence as an impactful creative impulse.

Overall, the interdisciplinary themes raised in the paper relate closely to this conference’s aims, drawing attention to an often-overlooked area of contemporary aesthetics, and emphasising the role of silence as a powerful aspect of our lived experience.

**Peter Adams** is a PhD student at Cambridge University, jointly supervised in the Music Faculty and the Centre for Film and Screen. His research examines the relationship between music, sound, and media, and is situated at the intersection of musicology, sound studies, and film studies. His thesis focuses on the selective omission of diegetic sound in contemporary cinema, television, and video games, and the development of an audiovisual aesthetic known as “neo-silence”. The project includes detailed case studies of paradigmatic neo-silent content, and also considers the wider historical, theoretical, and practical foundations of on-screen silence. Alongside his PhD studies, Peter supervises undergraduate students for several colleges across the university, particularly focusing on visual culture, popular music, and ethnomusicology. Before studying at Cambridge, Peter completed a Masters in Musicology at Oxford University, where his research also centred on music and the moving image.

## ***Transitions into absence. on the musical aesthetics of disappearance***

Jakob Maria Schermann

Disappearance can be considered “as a vital dimension of existence” (Baudrillard 2009: 31) and plays a fundamental role in the artistic production of absence. As a transitional phenomenon between presence and absence, disappearance revokes any stable fixation and implies a specific temporality that shapes musical processes as well as the listeners’ aesthetic experience of these processes. Drawing upon an interdisciplinary scope of recent research from fields such as art history, literature studies, philosophy, as well as musicological approaches, I aim to outline an aesthetic concept of disappearance in music by relating it to notions of presence, absence and appearance. I follow the claim by art historian Ulrike Lehmann (2006) that every ‘art of disappearance’ depends on the presence of an artistic expression. To develop my aesthetical framework, I particularly draw on the work of Christian Grüny (2014), whose ‘philosophical constellations’ on music center around terms such as resonance, difference and gesture. Finally, I elaborate on the aesthetics of disappearance in 21<sup>st</sup> century music using the example of composer Naomi Pinnock, whose recent work is not only characterized by miniaturization and a radical reduction of compositional means but also appears as a rich source for processes and gestures of disappearance.

**Jakob Maria Schermann** is a university assistant at the Department of Musicology and Performance Studies of the University for Music and Performing Arts Vienna where he works on a PhD thesis on the musical aesthetics of disappearance. He holds a master’s degree in musicology from the University of Vienna and is the co-editor of *Analyzing Black Metal* (Bielefeld 2017) and an anthology on Theodor W. Adorno’s theory of musical reproduction, *Dialektik der Schrift* (Paderborn 2022). In his research, he is particularly interested in contemporary new music, popular music, philosophy and aesthetics of music.

## Affective ephemera: sounding absence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Judith Lochhead

The birds are singing a Spring song outside my window right now. It is mid-February in New York and the temperature is a balmy 60F(16C). The uncanny presence of bird song at this time of year conjures up its absence in previous years, along with a sonic memory of the silence of gently falling snow. I remember back to April 2020, recalling the eerie silence of quarantine life. The uncanny absence of urban sounds during those pandemic times conjured up a past of sound-full experience, along with a longing for a future sonic fullness. Hearing one conjure the other, absence and presence cohabit our sensuous engagements with a sounding world. My paper considers the reflexivity of sonic absence and presence during musical encounters, focusing on the affective ephemera of absence. I approach the question of musical absence by considering four recent pieces that were created during the pandemic years (2020-2022). These are: Sylvie Courvoisier and Mary Halvorson, "Gates and Passes" from *Searching For The Disappeared Hour*, 2021; Nick Dunston, Kalia Vandever, DoYeon Kim, "Inhale-Exhale" from *Spider Season*, 2022; Ken Ueno, *Like Starlings in Winter*, 2022; and Jlin, "Rabbit Hole" from *Embryo*, 2021. Creating during times and experiences of absence, these musicians crafted music that produces the affective ephemera of absence in sonically distinct ways. My paper explores how these four works may be understood as sonic witness to absence and how our habits—our regimens—of listening in the 21st century may have been transformed by the affective ephemera of sonic absence.

**Judith Lochhead** is Professor of Music History & Theory, Stony Brook University. She is a music theorist and musicologist whose work focuses on recent musical practices of primarily North America and Europe. Lochhead has articles appearing in such English-language journals as *Music Theory Spectrum*, the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, *Music Theory Online*, *Theory and Practice*, *In Theory Only*, *Perspectives of New Music*, *Intégral*, *Indiana Theory Review*, and others. Lochhead also has articles in several edited collections, including in *The Oxford Handbook on Spectral Music* and *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Imagination*. Book-length publications include: *Reconceiving Structure: New Tools in Music Theory and Analysis* (Routledge, 2015); *Music's Immanent Future: Beyond Past and Present*, co-edited with Sally Macarthur and Jennifer Shaw (Ashgate 2016); *Sound and Affect: Sound, Music, World*, edited by Judith Lochhead, Eduardo Mendieta, and Stephen Decatur Smith (University of Chicago Press 2021); and *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, co-edited by Judith Lochhead and Joseph Auner (Routledge 2001).

Lochhead's current projects include: "Émilie du Châtelet, Kaija Saariaho and Heroes of the 21st Century," *The Heroic in Music from Medieval*; *Festschrift for Leo Treitler*, special volume of *Musical Quarterly*, co-edited by Judith Lochhead and Vera Micznik; "The Performer's Listener: An Aesthetic of Possibility," *Thinking Music: Praxis and Aesthetics*, Special Issue of *Continental Thought and Theory: A Journal of Intellectual Freedom*; "Timbre's Realities: A Phenomenological Study of Liza Lim's Extinction Events and Dawn Chorus," forthcoming in the *Oxford Handbook of the Phenomenology of Music*, eds, Steege, Wiskus, De Souza. (under contract with Oxford); "Situational Multiplicities: A Queering analysis of Chaya Czernowin's *Anea Crystal*" to appear in *Queering Music Theory*, ed. Gavin Lee (under contract with Oxford).



## ***Two studies in losing. Richard Ayres' "No. 51" and "No. 52"***

Dominika Micał

The music of Richard Ayres (born in 1965) is often considered as the example of the eclectic, maximalist aesthetics, and the composer himself – as the continuator of Gustav Mahler, Dmitri Shostakovich, and Alfred Schnittke. Lewis Coenen-Rowe, for example, analysed his *No. 37b* using the notion of “the deliberate exaggeration” (*Tempo*, no. 74, 2020). Ayres is famous for mixing “the high” with “the low”, the audible with the visual, the traditional with the new.

Is that abundance of sounds, styles, and associations, in both Ayres' music and its paratexts (e.g. characteristic titles), the purely positive richness or is it the example of *horror vacui*, artistic document of the unhealthy excess, of which contemporary world suffers (as diagnosed by, among others, Byung-Chul Han in his *The Burnout Society*, 2010)?

The aim of my paper is to show how that maximalist aesthetics can be associated with the notion of emptiness, especially the prospect of loss. The subject of the analysis will be two of the newer Ayres' pieces, dealing with that subject directly (also in the biographic perspective): *No. 51 (resting songs)* from 2017, and *No. 52 (Three pieces about Ludwig van Beethoven, dreaming, hearing loss, and saying goodbye)* from 2019.

**Dominika Micał** is a music theorist and research assistant at The Krzysztof Penderecki Academy of Music in Kraków. She studied comparative literature (Jagiellonian University), as well. Her doctoral dissertation, defended in 2021, was devoted to the contemporary works inspired by the Renaissance madrigal. Her research interests include British and Polish contemporary music, intertextuality in music, and connections between music and literature. She has published in *New Sound* and *Res Facta Nova*, among others. She is also an active music critic.

## ***Listening within the absence: Peter Ablinger's composition and the musical potential of noise***

Marina Sudo

Peter Ablinger (b. 1959), one of the leading Austrian composers, has made a unique contribution to the aesthetics and practice of new music through his innovative use of noise. According to Ablinger, noise (*Rauschen*, i.e. static noise) is a totality of sound and an excess of information, therefore absent of meaning and analogous to nothing. Noise provides no meaningful information or structure but a blank “screen” onto which listeners can project their imaginations. Deriving inspiration from this ambiguity, Ablinger has explored creative potentials of noise in various genres of music. In his work electronically processed static noise is often combined with instrumental/vocal sounds. By carefully creating and organising electronic noise within the sound texture, the composer takes full control of the acoustic result of a piece. Whilst controlling almost everything we may perceive, the composer leaves us to decide what we actually take out of it, leaving room for individual self-projection, interpretation and acoustic illusion.

Based on analysis of his *Instrumente und Rauschen* series (1995–) and *4 Weiss* (2018/19), in this paper I will demonstrate the process by which absence/abstraction of meaning and structure lead to an increase in listeners' attention and awareness of contemporaneity. In these pieces auditory information needs to be distinguished, not in order to evaluate its semantic/syntactic value but to observe the physical phenomena and the manner in which we are projected upon it. Perceptive uncertainty in Ablinger's work is deliberately created to provoke listeners' spontaneous and creative investigations.

**Marina Sudo** completed her PhD in musicology at the University of Leuven in 2021. Her research interests include a wide range of twentieth- and twenty-first century music, serial and post-serial techniques, sketch studies and analysis of the compositional processes, electroacoustic music and musical listening as an analytical approach. She is currently working as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Leuven. In her current research project she examines the possibility of a new form of music analysis in which score-based analysis and sound-based aural analysis are combined.

## ***The texture of memory: quotation as absent presence in Caroline Shaw's Gustave Le Gray***

Mark Hutchinson

The chamber works of the American composer Caroline Shaw (b. 1982) display a recurrent fascination with memory, nostalgia and absence. In her own words, her music often focusses on the 'tiny oblique revelations that time's filter can open up in a musical memory', with all the sensory and affective intensity this implies. She has often used the metaphor of the photograph to highlight the way quotation can function as mingled presence and absence, generating nostalgic longing for a familiar experience by lingering on aspects of its sensory particulars, whilst leaving others tantalisingly ambiguous or unrealised. Shaw makes a connection here with Roland Barthes's concept of the 'punctum', an unexpected feature in a photograph that creates a sudden realisation of the subject's absence or death.

The solo piano work *Gustave Le Gray* (2012) exemplifies these interests: conceived as a 'multi-layered portrait' of Chopin's Mazurka op. 17, no. 4 (in homage to the photographic pioneer of the title), it is built as a frame around a complete performance of the earlier work, which itself hinges around a sepia-toned moment of tonal and rhythmic clarity in its central trio. This paper will explore the way in which Shaw amplifies and develops Chopin's exploration of nostalgia by interweaving fragments of his language with her own unabashedly triadic, post-minimalist palette, and the way in which musical processes combine with the score's various paratexts to create multimodal evocations of remembrance and loss.

**Mark Hutchinson** is a Lecturer in Music at the University of York, where he is a member of the Contemporary Music Research Centre. His research focusses upon creative approaches towards the analysis of recent contemporary music. His book *Coherence in New Music: Experience, Aesthetics, Analysis* (Ashgate, 2016) uses ideas from a variety of different disciplines to argue for a novel concept of coherence within recent classical music. He has published articles examining overlaps between music, literature and philosophy in works by Henri Dutilleux, Tōru Takemitsu and Georg Friedrich Haas. He is also active as a piano accompanist and oboist.

## ***Lacuna and parergon in late vocal works by Hans Joachim Hespos***

Clare Lesser

“He used to draw with an eraser, now here he is deleting.” This enigmatic statement occurs in Jacques Derrida’s (1930-2004) *The Truth in Painting* (1987), an extended reflection on the visual arts, acts of inscription and erasure, and the illusive concepts of the frame and framing. Although Derrida is ostensibly concerned with the visual arts, he frequently travels into the domain of music, albeit in a typically oblique and obscure way, for music is a powerful vehicle for Derrida’s conceptions of presence, absence, the ghostly, and the unstable places in-between, in other words, parergon and lacuna.

Using two of Hans Joachim Hespos’ (1938-2022) works for soprano and piano—*Weißschatten* (2018) and *Shut Ups!* (2019)—as starting points, I will outline some of the ways in which Hespos exploits these Derridean concepts, through the silencing of his performers and their instruments; by obscuring composer meaning and intention in the score; and by what is deliberately ‘left out’—in text and performance—and thus, potentially, waits to be ‘filled in.’ Hespos’ scores allow his interpreters considerable agency in their realisation, both drawing with the eraser and deleting with it, all the while intersecting with notions of the frame, but how do performers and audiences respond to these lacunary spaces in music that deliberately obscures the borderline between sound and silence, and between notation and improvisation? Derrida might have considered them places that wait for events, pregnant with expectation, effacing themselves “at the moment [they] deploy [their] greatest energy.”

**Clare Lesser** is a performer and musicologist who works at the intersection of contemporary music and philosophy. Her research focuses on performance, deconstruction, indeterminate and improvised music, graphic notation and sound art. Current projects include a volume exploring radio as an agent of radical decentering in 20<sup>th</sup> Century music and two new albums for *Métier* featuring chamber works by Michael Finnissy and Hans Joachim Hespos. She has given over ninety world premieres, is the founder of ElectroFest and is a senior lecturer and program head of music at New York University Abu Dhabi.

## ***Thinking absence in George Crumb's Black Angels***

Tobias Plebuch

Early last year, one of the most famous contemporary composers died: George Crumb. Various kinds of absences appear frequently in his music. Yet, if absence is thinkable only as an imagined something that is not, or not anymore, how can absence then “appear” in a composition? It emerges mostly from paradoxical listening experiences, such as truncated musical quotations, muted accompaniments, voices singing from off stage, tones that “should sound incredibly remote” (*Otherworldly Resonances*) etc.

This paper discusses Crumb's aesthetics of absence focusing on the section “Absence” at the center of his string quartet *Black Angels* which inspired the foundation of the Kronos quartet and ranks among the top 40 concert pieces today. Conceived as a “parable on our troubled contemporary world,” *Black Angels* refers to the Vietnam war which implies not only death but also the lived experience of the absence of drafted men among contemporary listeners.

The quartet's symbols of absence are musical in a traditional sense as well as numerical, verbal, and gestural. I will thus take a dialectical approach including frequent references to death, the curtailed quote of Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* quartet, fading out *al niente*, the symbolic lack of melodic motion already in Schubert's song and quartet, the omission of numerals in counting aloud, tonal chords lacking the third (i.e. modal definition), fragmentary self-quotations, performance on one string only, whispering voices etc. *Black Angels*, I propose, presents absence by insinuating its inherent sensual, epistemological and ontological paradoxes.

**Tobias Plebuch** is presently lecturer at Uppsala University. Previously he held research and teaching positions at the universities of Freiburg, Stanford, and Berlin. He received his Ph.D. with a thesis on C.P.E. Bach and his habilitation with a thesis on J.S. Bach's music in films and was awarded several research grants from the *Siemens-Stiftung*, the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* and other foundations. He co-edited the *Collected Writings of Carl Dahlhaus* (2000-08), a critical edition of C. P. E. Bach's *Essay on the True Art Of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (2011), organized several conferences and published numerous essays on 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century music, especially film music.

## ***Music of the future and sense-making: performing György Kurtág's Fin de partie***

Peter Edwards

Samuel Beckett's play *Fin de partie* gives expression to the challenges of communicating meaning through language. It is not so much about what is said but about the *process* of sense-making; the ultimate question being how to find meaning in the face of despair and nothingness. It is this process of sense-making that György Kurtág mirrors in the music for his opera based on the play. The music continues on from where words fail, capturing the musicality of Beckett and situating meaning beyond the realm of the utterable.

This paper will explore how Kurtág's music concurs with or enhances Beckett's sense-making and how the affective qualities in the music and its performance help us perceive the nonsensical and paradoxical. On a broader level, this paper will give indication of the value of music-making as a means to understand meaning-making. At a time when conceptual thinking on truth is proving detrimental to democratic world-building, the ability to engage in contextual reasoning, sense-making and critical thinking is essential.

**Peter Edwards** is Associate Professor at the Department of Musicology, University of Oslo. He has published in *Music Analysis*, *Music & Letters*, and in edited collections on the music of Ligeti and topics that intersect aesthetics, music analysis, cultural studies, music history, and critical musicology. His monograph, *György Ligeti's Le Grand Macabre: Postmodernism, Musico-Dramatic Form and the Grotesque*, is published by Routledge. Peter is also a composer and guitarist.