

Allen S. Weiss

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Varieties of  
Audio Mimesis:  
*Musical  
Evocations of  
Landscape*

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Errant Bodies Press

*Varieties of Audio Mimesis* is many things: an investigation of the metaphorical relationship between music and landscape, a study of the poetics of onomatopoeia, and a theory of sound in the arts.

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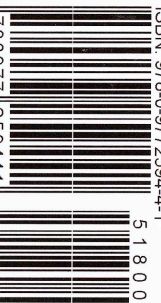
Varieties of Audio Mimesis

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The history of European musicology is perennially revised around the central ontological debate about whether music is a representational or an abstract art. This discussion may be extended to all of the sound arts. Thus the minor poetic phenomenon of onomatopoeia is emblematic of what might be seen as the ontological aporia of sound art (and by extension of all representation): mimesis is simultaneously a loss and a gain, placing representation on uneven ground where the signified loses structural integrity and existential verifiability, while the signifier gains in complexity and ambiguity. Through literary, performative, and sonic analysis, this book simultaneously serves as a tool for investigating the micro-structures of audiophonic representation; proposes a unified, though open-ended, field theory of the sound arts; offers expanded descriptive possibilities for audio productions; and revises the study of audio mimesis in relation to gardens and landscape.

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totally based on the glissando. These horrifying, ghostly plaints are produced by one musician sweeping the piano strings with both a fingernail and the flesh of the finger to produce glissandi and some pizzicati, while a second musician holds down the damper pedal throughout the performance. Cowell himself suggests the disquieting effects of this little utilized musical device, explaining that the banshee, a spirit of Gaelic folklore, is, "a woman of the Inner World ... who is charged with the duty of taking your soul into the Inner World when you die ... She has to come to the outer plane for this purpose, and she finds the outer plane very uncomfortable and unpleasant, so you will hear her wailing at the time of a death in your family."<sup>130</sup> Through their fleeing pitch and ungraspable line, these glissandi trace the path towards the unknown and unspeakable realm of the underworld. As has no doubt been the case since its origins, music is a process of both evocation and invocation, revealing the wonders of the world and summoning the terrors of the afterworld.

Compare the recent electroacoustic composition by Georgia Spiropoulos, *Klama* (2005-06), for eight part mixed chamber choir of 33 voices with 3 soloists (soprano, contralto and baritone, who at times join the other parts); prerecorded sounds (vinyl records and audio tapes, with their characteristic deterioration of the analogue storage medium and consequent noise); and real time electronics (focusing on distortion, filtering, vocal noise simulation, accentuation of breath, amplitude modulation, granular synthesis) – all combined in hi-fi and low-fi. "The vocal, the electroacoustic and the live electronics parts are interwoven and interdependent; these three levels tend to maximal fusion as if past and present formed a continuous circuit, a new acoustic reality."<sup>131</sup> The three sources of the recorded sonic material are: (a) mourning and speaking voices and ambient noises from an old audio tape recording of a ritual lament *in situ*; (b) excerpts of a Katerina Xirou lament cycle recorded at IRCAM and pressed on vinyl; (c) excerpts of a hymn of the 7th-8th century byzantine funeral mass of Ioannis of Damascus. This work is inspired by Greek *mirolóya* (laments or keening) of the Mani tradition from the south Peloponnesian peninsula. The term

*klama* refers to both weeping and ritual lamentations:

*It characterizes a "polyphony" integrating improvised monodies (mirolóya), epodes, weeping, cries and monologues, accompanied by ritual gestures. Rather than a chant, the lamentation, by its acoustic violence, may be considered as an alteration of vocality: an alteration that, due to the emotional shock, equally affects tonality, timbre and language. Practiced by women, usually in the home before the body of the defunct, this "polyphony" is a sort of accompaniment and appropriation of the dead, a reorganization of social structures. This ritual is followed by the byzantine monody of an orthodox mass celebrated at church. The two forms reunite in a simultaneously complementary and opposed manner, in a sort of chaotic acoustic dissemination and scattering.*<sup>132</sup>

This heart wrenching music – rather than reconciling us with our mortal destiny, as most of the sublime musics of the great religious traditions attempt to do – disturbs, disorients, disquiets. It is a music of anguish and trauma, of fear and trembling unto death. A curious and poignant aside in one of Walter Benjamin's analyses of language is apposite:

*It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language ... Lament, however, is the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language; it contains scarcely more than the sensuous breath; and even where there is only a rustling of plants, in it there is always a lament. Because she is mute, nature mourns.*<sup>133</sup>

Such terrible *impotence* makes of lament a form of mourning, and such *undifferentiatedness* calls for its musical elaboration. Writing of the radical "alteration of vocality" inherent in these almost unbearable Mani lamentations, Spiropoulos explains, "the voice is completely deformed, the tonality constantly deviates."<sup>134</sup> This deformation – including voiced gasps, hoarse voices, screams, sobs – is informed by the classic stylizations of ritualized lamentation, and is thus musically coherent, as the composer explains concerning the onomatopoeia in *Klama*:



*Women's screams: In Mani, when one says "scream" one often refers to an entire sentence or sometimes a single word that is screamed. As it is impossible to recreate this type of screamed sentence, I opted for fragmentation. The screams one hears in Klama are either separate words or phonemes extracted from words. Solo baritone and tenors (part B and C): The word oimoi (pronounced imi) sung by the baritone and taken up again by the tenors roughly means Alas! The two oimoi come from a short and autonomous melody (idiomelon) from the orthodox funeral mass, and it is found several times in Greek tragedy. Tenors (part C): The text is a translation of a popular Mani lamentation:*

*The earth a tree  
Man its fruit  
Charon its harvester  
Who takes its flower.<sup>135</sup>*

It is hardly surprising that the vocal passages in *Klama* are based, "on single-tone or drone phrases, sometimes including microtonal fluctuations or short glissandi, and continuous ascending glissandi as those observed at the end of phrases/verses of the laments — often, these phrases are to be sung with a continuous raising intensity until exhaled air finishes."<sup>136</sup> The voices of mourners are rent just as the ancients tore their clothes in grief. This musical shock motivates the attempt to express and bemoan death, and it is only appropriate that it would be given over to the human voice, that most complex and subtle of instruments, emanating from our own fragile and mortal viscera. It is once again Thomas Mann who speaks to these issues:

*But most shattering of all is the application of the glissando to the human voice, which after all was the first target in organizing the tonic material and ridding song of its primitive howling over several notes: the return, in short, to this primitive stage, as the chorus of the Apocalypse does it in the form of frightfully shrieking human voices at the opening of the sev-*

*enth seal, when the sun became black and the moon became as blood and the ships are overturned.<sup>137</sup>*

The effect is metaphysical, theological, aesthetic, psychological, physiological. In terms of structure, "the too simplistic organization of sounds must be placed at the border of pain: a sinusoidal sound is difficult to tolerate,"<sup>138</sup> and in terms of force, extreme sonic amplitude is painful and destructive, to the point that above a certain decibel level irreparable damage is done to the ears. When one adds hell or the apocalypse as the ultimate referent, such pain becomes absolutely unbearable, and music attains the sublime (or, as the case may be, the counter-sublime), shifting from the mourning for a single person to the breathtaking and terrifying lament for an eternally damned humanity. Such is perhaps the song of the Sirens.

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The glissando is thus a key trope of modernist music, one that reveals the transcendent, metaphysical, and indeed sublime aspects of the soundscape. However, so as not to leave the impression that the glissando is only a trope of disaster, I would like to conclude this section on a lighthearted note. First, as a comical and dystopian aside (but a historically and musically crucial one), the soundtrack to the film *Forbidden Planet* (1956) must be considered as a major precursor to all programmatic electronic music.<sup>139</sup> Composed by Louis and Bebe Barron in their New York studio, the sounds derive from what they termed "organic circuitry" that occasionally self-destructed after one use, producing aleatory and thus unexpected sounds, including many glissandi, the epitome of sci-fi film audio effects. Most of these sounds were produced by ring modulators, with added reverb, delay, reversals and speed changes, all of which were then composed into the component parts of the score. The soundtrack variously evokes the sounds of the extraterrestrial landscape, human and Krell technology, the monster from the Id, and the emotional denotations of the film. A par-