

quality constantly, particularly in the orchestration of instrumental music, vocal music, and spoken word. Patches of silence and relative quiet in one mode overlap with or correspond to similar attributes in another mode. The audience sometimes experiences the multiple "voices" of all of the sounds playing together, and at other points is aware only of the concentrated and deliberate sound of Beckley's speech. We are aware, too, of her words, and of the significance language has in our understanding of the sounds and sights of the performance.

In some respects, *The Aquarium* calls to mind other performances merging music and visual forms in performance, notably the large-scale works of Laurie Anderson and Meredith Monk. But while Anderson's stagings of music, sound, and visual mediums dramatically emphasize the power and the poetry of her words, and Monk's spectacles of dance, music, and film generally eschew words altogether, seemingly transcending language, Beckley's piece draws our attention to the interaction of ways of creating meaning. Literal and figurative elements of language play off each other, their meanings touched by abstract sounds and reframed by actions and tableaux.

Near the end of the performance, a brightly lit T-shape serves as a double phone stand ("no booths/just two phones on a pole") that is the central image in a song called "No Messages." The loneliness and isolation that permeate *The Aquarium* come together in this story of messages lost, misdirected, and abandoned. Acknowledging the "undelivered letter from the Friar to Romeo," the narrator finds a lesson. "I know the end to that story," she says, "It's a compelling argument for intervention." But the strongest movement toward communication comes in the piece's final song, a sensual love song to the possibilities of light. Evoking at once the romantic glide of a ballroom dance under a starry sky and the fantastic quality of a world brilliantly lit by endless high-tech innovations—the lights of the bus stop, the streets, and the halogen torch—"Edison Night" illuminates the intimacy the narrator shares with her imagined characters and with her audience. "Now, come lie beside me, Thomas Edison," she and her alter-voices croon, "I'll tell you about my shadows, / and you can tell me all about the light."



### *Listening Subjects: Music, Psycho-analysis, and Culture*

By David Schwarz. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

—Review by Thomas Lavazzi

A hot—though not humid—early June afternoon in Central Park. In the open field, backed by bleachers, chairs packed close, Buckwheat Zydeco has just come on the elevated stage. In his black-vested suit, gold and diamond pinky ring (the finger that trills the keys), full head of glossy styled hair above deep blue shades, he's doing well. "We're gonna take you back to the swamps..." he tells us in heteroglossic creole French. Rippling, bop-fast rhythms of the accordion. Dancing in a field in Baton Rouge: no sophisticated wireless electronics; a few beat-up but very powerful amplifiers: Baudin, Andouille, crayfish, and beer. Brackish bayou sweat glistening at the temples, eye sockets. Listening is moving, unselfconsciously. Memory of a feeling... tears—the usually clear eye watering, washing away emotional pollution...

Here in New York, Buckwheat is accompanied by what sounds like a pickup band of studio musicians—the trumpet too slick, a celluloid squealing, too bright—Las, Los (Vegas, Angeles) stage show jazz, sax not raspy enough (not from Louisiana, or even Louisiana, L.A. But—the eye clearing—any moment is always what it is.

And yet there are moments when the studio-trained accompaniment stops, when the accordion and "washboard" player sound apart, the latter raking what from my distant below-stage seating I can still imagine to be metal spoons across the ribbed metal breastplate—just the sound of that unsynthesized percussion scraping under the rapid accordion notes. As the two walk forward from the mics (though the umbilical of the accordion still runs back to an amplifier on the present stage, not that original moment of hearing...) as they come forward, toward my listening position—as recorded music closeups come to the front of the listening plane of a speaker—and the rest of the band drops away, and the beat quickens, and I forget, or, "remember to forget" that there is a



distance between the immediate representation (or re-representation) and the previous ("ordinary") sound event, and between the sound of my "listening"—an always complex, imaginatively and analytically rich experience, a "fantasy space" in which I'm always talking to myself—and the "fantasy thing," an environment of apparently pure unmediated sound; for a moment, when they move gradually forward on the rhythms they produce, I remember to forget and fall easily and naively back into the music, in a silence of the (thinking) mind. We drop back—we all drop back, borne through blurred vision as on the rhythms of a chant, of making love, of the wash and withdrawal of surf...

This is the dialogue—between "oceanic experience"/"sonorous envelope" (always, for Schwarz, sounding back to primal union with the mother) and analytical awareness; between music produced by a listener as a "fantasy thing" attributed unmediated power, and music as a "fantasy space" comprehended as a cultural construct—that generates the rhythms of *Listening Subjects*. According to the author, the book began as a physiological response to music, and developed into an incisive text of cultural criticism. It all started, for Schwarz, with "goose bumps" (like my "tears" in the acoustic memory I've sketched out above), and the urge to explore why, when listening to music, he sometimes gets them. Is the experience universal or dependent on cultural context? Is there something in the mother-child/infant relationship that partially accounts for the phenomenon? And "why are goose bumps so powerfully at the *skin*—the boundary separating our bodies from the rest of the world?"

As this last question suggests, *Listening Subjects* is not a New Age synthesis of pop-psychological theories of subjectivity (despite the homespun raised flesh), but an intense psycho-cultural analysis of the relationships among composer/musician, listener/critic, and their collective psychological underpinnings. Schwarz merges a reflective (if somewhat reductive) reading of the Lacanian psychoanalytic triad Imaginary/Symbolic/Real with a Kristeva-Barthesian semiotic analysis and a Fiskeian socio-cultural-historical astuteness. The book consists primarily of close readings of musical texts ("texts" meaning not just lyrics and

scores, but cultural contexts as well), exploring a variety of styles from Schubert's classical song cycles (*Der Winterreise*) to Diamanda Galás's multitrack sound performances to neo-fascist underground rock (German *Oi Musik*). The book alternates passages of cultural and psychoanalytic theory with in-depth semio-socio-economic-historical readings of particular compositions, grounded in detailed technical analysis of specific musical examples. In terms of scholarship, *Listening Subjects* bridges territories of "new" musicology, psychoanalysis, music theory, and history. In addition to Lacan, Schwarz acknowledges the presence of Julia Kristeva, Kaja Silverman, and Slavoj Žižek, among others, in the vocal texture of his analyses. He is concerned primarily with the way the multivoiced subjectivity (of composer and listener) is structured and played with/against/through the music, and with "unpacking" the listening experience in its "musical-theoretical, musical-historical, cultural, psychoanalytic, and personal dimensions."

Two key concepts form nodes of his analysis throughout the book: the production of music as a "fantasy thing" and a "fantasy space." As my own Zydeco listening experience illustrates above, a "fantasy thing" denotes the reification of musical structure, independent of cultural/ideological context; a "fantasy thing" becomes a "fantasy space" when a threshold is crossed between "pitch structure, form, and musical language, on the one hand, and a historical context that makes pitch structure, form, and musical language possible, on the other" (4). From a listener's point of view, when we are unselfconsciously absorbed in a piece of music, when it becomes a "sonorous envelope," transporting us imaginatively back to a prenatal "oceanic" oneness with the mother's voice, or when it simply rouses our passions and/or fears, or enforces a sense of belonging, of group identity, we are indulging in music as a fantasy thing. When we become aware of our separation or difference from the fantasy thing, when we begin to question our relationship to the music and its relationship to its extra-musical contexts, we are creating a "fantasy [analytical] space." From Schwarz's perspective, each phase is part of the larger musical experience, which composer and listener collaboratively produce.



Listening, for Schwarz, is the complex interaction of these two phases, an oscillation between fantasized moments of "self-conscious immersion and equally mystified moments of "spell-breaking" theoretical analysis. The strength of the book lies in its acknowledgement that the listening process is culturally constructed from end to end; its weakness is its own dependency on the mystique of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Schwarz unpacks musical experience only to repackage it in psychoanalytic theory via Lacan and Silverman, but avoids reference to Deleuze, who could crack the mirrors.

In chapter one, for example ("Music as Sonorous Envelope and Acoustic Mirror"), Schwarz demonstrates how certain musical moments, such as the nonreferential sound field opening John Adams' opera *Nixon in China* (1987), represent the "acoustic fantasy" of an ordinary oneness with the voice and tactile presence of the mother. Moreover, he argues, this "fantasy thing" articulates into a "fantasy space" once we recognize our current socio-cultural position *vis à vis* this sonorous illusion. Schwarz theorizes that "the sonorous envelope represents our sense of having been at one with the touch, smell, and voice of the mother in the womb and shortly after birth" (8); in the "acoustic-mirror" and "visual mirror" stages, the child attempts to hear its voice and see its face in the mother's voice and image. But is the mother's voice, the tactile sense of the mother, all that the child hears/sees in the pre-mirror stages, and attempts to imitate in the mirror stages? The mother is speaking, the father is speaking, both perhaps intoning others' words from a book; the television is playing, the parents act out a day at work, the siblings are playing with friends, or perhaps an electronic other (the synthesized, digitalized audio-visual mania of a computer game)—this is more accurately the postmodern sound environment of the infant, both pre- and post-natal. And when the child looks in a "mirror," what's in the background? When he/she imitates a gesture, is it the mother searching for a misplaced object or the cat chasing its tail? It is this early spreading—splitting—of the child's attention over the "entire social field," as Deleuze phrases it, that is most pertinent to theories of subjectivity. From the perspective of *Anti-Oedipus*, the "sonorous envelope" may be a much more multi-voiced, contested, heteroglossic space than Schwarz, via Lacan, is

willing to hear. In which case the "fantasy thing" signifies desire not for an inaccessible oneness with the mother, but for inaccessibility itself—something more akin to the Lacanian Real, a desire for death in the guise of a womb (a displacement that allows us to play safely with the urge for self-annihilation). Celebration of self-extinction: perhaps this is not what Schwarz desired or intended.

In another instance, again tuning his analysis perhaps too closely to the timbre of Lacan, Schwarz elides interpretive resonances. While perceptively concluding in chapter two that white noise at the end of the Beatles' song "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" (*Abbey Road*, 1969) "suggests a nightmarish nothingness within male desire," he fails to pursue the potentially disruptive impact of this nothingness on psychological constructions of desire. For example, the scat portions of the song, according to Schwarz, reenact a child's attempts to mirror its voice in the sounds of the mother (reminding me of the way white musicians covered songs by black musicians in 50's and 60's rock), highlighting the difference (split) between the singer's voice and the "pure" sound of the instrument it mimics. But couldn't Lennon's scatting, occurring well before the wall of noise prefigured by the dissonant "yeah!", represent the more sonically rich human voice of the singer cracking open the relatively purer voice of the instrument, rather than attempting to reduce down to it? The child-singer can be viewed as tutoring the mother-guitar, or as tilting the mother-instrument's voice toward a more resonant, not completely decipherable Real. Or, let's say, scatting suggests an interworking or collaging of voices—human and nonhuman (mechanical) other—initializing, through mutual deconstruction, a Deleuzian "machinic assemblage." Then again, (natal) mother's and child's voices are both human voices, complex interactions of textures and frequencies characterized, to use an analogy from quantum physics, more by wave pattern interference than matching sine wave to sine wave. A mother is not a tuning fork.<sup>1</sup> And we could go on, the point being that such counter-interpretive measures rattle the Schwarzian-Lacanian frame of *Listening Subjects*, vectoring toward quantum undecidability and shifting positionality, rather than theoretical resolution. The wall of white noise feeds back darkly over the entire song, sending its residual tremor through



the rhythms, and also shaking up the musicologist's analysis—"I want you... Yeah!"

Chapter seven, "Lamentation, Abjection, and the Music of Diamanda Galás," examines two music/performance pieces by Galás—*Vena Cava* (1993) and *Plague Mass* (1990). As we have seen, *Listening Subjects* is occasionally reductive in its references back through its construction of Lacan to the Wall of the Mother (the transcendent signifier for this book), but it opens up in the closing discussion of *Plague Mass*. In this chapter, Schwarz presents Galás's vocal style through an interpretive bricolage condensing Lacan's *objet a*, the Kantian sublime, and the abject (via Žižek and Kristeva). In his discussion of *Plague Mass*, a "lament" Galás composed in response to her brother's death from AIDS, Schwarz is primarily concerned with representations of Kristevian abjection. Semiotically, the abject is what eludes/disrupts the process of signification, though it is, paradoxically, also produced by it. The abject is sensed, for example, in the sound residues of words echoing over/reverberating through sense; psychologically, the abject is the residue of repressed fears and desires (just as the lament can voice a return of the repressed). In both *Vena Cava* and *Plague Mass*, Galás sustains certain notes as if searching them for hidden voices that she will play through the notes on successive tracks. In *Vena Cava*, a female chorus is heard inside a G flat<sup>2</sup>, and continues after the song has ended. In a fascinatingly detailed, multi-leveled voice graph of a twenty-two second section of *Plague Mass*, Schwarz demonstrates how vocal features such as pitch variation, timbre, voice bending, vibrato, pitch-crushing noise and pitch smearing destabilize the verbal text and conventional notation, phonically interrogating particular notes as "fantasy spaces," though ultimately contained by them. This dichotomous rhythm escape/entrapment, erasure/drawing of boundaries can also be heard in the alternation of sung and spoken 'no's in the text of this section.

Schwarz closes the chapter by redrawing Lacan's circular structure of desire. In Schwarz's graph, the *objet petit a* blocks completion of the circuit. What Schwarz's graph doesn't make clear is that the flow of desire is sustained through an ongoing metonymic displacement along a potentially endless chain of *petite a*'s. Lacan's graph in *Écrits* remains more elucidating. However,

what Schwarz does add to the circular graph, via Žižek and Kant, is a slippage at the point of (re)representational blockage that allows us to glimpse, or, more accurately, listen to, as through one of Galás's bent or crushed pitches, *Grande A* in the place of the Real. Since the Kantian sublime is a "representation of limitlessness" evoked by an object (*The Critique of Judgement*), then, Žižek theorizes, both the abject and the sublime "veer away from *objet a*" as representations of the failure of representation to close on its object. This is the situation Schwarz graphically represents, drawing two squiggly arrows out at diagonals—one up toward the "sublime," the other down toward the "abject"—from the specular circle of desire circling obsessively around the black letter of the "a." Schwarz draws a third, dual-barbed arrow between the sublime and the abject, since both point toward the *limitlessness* of the Real, and, in any event, once having left behind the realm of the sign, such distinctions collapse. The completed drawing at once echoes and comments on Lacan's Symbolic/Imaginary/Real triangle, since the *objet a* must both break and (re)constitute itself upon the (anti)body of the abject/sublime, just as the Imaginary enacts an embryonic rising to significance from, and slipping back into, the Real. This is the *jouissance of fort-da*, a state to which we desire and attempt—impossibly, once located in the Symbolic Order—to return, through the system of signs. This moment also occurs in Galás's music when, Schwarz concludes, in the struggle of the voice with(in) a note "the abject and the sublime are both *simultaneously* produced at the impossible impasse of the *objet a*," making her voice "both abject and sublime at the threshold of the Real." We can hear it, if we listen.

In addition to his Lacanian fixation and dualistic conception of the subject, Schwarz is rhetorically dependent on binary transitions: music is "on the one hand" selfconscious immersion in a "fantasy thing" with immanent energy and power, and "on the other hand" (Schwarz's transition package of choice) a deliberate cultural-historical-social-economic-psycho-physiological construct spread over a syn- and diachronic field. This binaristic argument structure may be his bid for the superego—an attempt to gain a measure of control, a refusal to let the mind slip on the details of its analysis. Despite these preoccupations, *Listening Subjects* charts an expanded reconfiguration of psycho-social-



historical-musical identity that positions musicology in the vanguard of cultural criticism.

## Notes

1. Stepping outside "I Want You" for a moment, the better analogy, for me, would be the instrumental jazz technique of lying just behind the beat, giving the impression of a rhythmic relay, or one instrument following (talking to?) another. But this is musical dialogue, rather than imitation. Objectivist poet Lois Zukofsky defined "objectivism" as the "mind thinking with things"; jazz defined "goose bumps" me when I'm imaginatively engaged with the music, thinking along with (through) its moves—on its terms—pleasurably immersed in the rhythmic conversation—acoustic *experience* more than "acoustic envelope."

## Echosystème

Collaborations by Kathy Kennedy, Montréal, Canada, 1991–1997.

### —Artist's Statement by Kathy Kennedy

"Ecosystem: the complex of a community and its environment functioning as a unit in nature."

—New Webster's Dictionary

Picture a small crowd of women sauntering along a downtown street into City Hall at midday. Clustered in seemingly random formations, they enter the building singing a musical arrangement of lyrical tones with wordless melodies. A subtle accompaniment plays throughout their navigation from the foyer up to the mezzanine. The scene is somewhat like that of an opera, in which the crowd appears to move haphazardly across the stage, but we know that to a certain degree everything revolves around the musical structure. Casually strolling through a sterile, hollow structure, the women exude an air of tranquility, a harmony of tones that fills the empty space with women's voices.

This was the scene for Montréal's notorious women's choir, *Chœur Maha*, when we visited City Hall unexpectedly on International Women's Day, 1993. With radios softly playing a musical accompaniment of flutes and strings, we serenaded the employees with what we considered a sensual and organic presence within a rigid, patriarchal structure. Our audience's reactions ranged from amused to bewildered to enraged. When the guards finally noticed our radio transmitter, the suspect piece of technology was ample enough reason for them to escort us off the premises in a confused frenzy.

This is one of many music works for public spaces that I've composed with *Chœur Maha* and other groups using radio as a primary compositional device. To create these compositions, I use a small, portable radio transmitter of one watt, which fits into a VHS cassette case. It transmits to a radius of approximately one mile, depending on the antenna and other variables, and any channel can be selected by simply adjusting the main transmitter on the device itself.

This inexpensive and low-tech form of sonic spatialization is what I have since 1991 been referring to as "sonic choreography." I send out a pre-recorded soundtrack to anywhere from eight to 100 choral performers, each of whom holds a portable radio/blaster set to the same channel. They perform live a combination of songs, text and improvisations over a prerecorded radio soundtrack. Instead of staying near microphones and behind a P.A. system, they are free to move throughout a space with their trusty boomboxes, and are able to control what is essentially their own personal monitor. This allows for many levels of audience interaction and theatricality. A great deal is left to the individual performer, who may choose to perform completely seriously, talk in between musical phrases, or make up new parts. While casually strolling through the crowd, radio in hand or shoulder-held, the performers can create an intimate atmosphere, or a confrontational one. They can even entice people to sing along. Ideally, when there are greater numbers of performers, a listener can be enveloped in a massive swirl of sound coming from several directions, like a sonic tidal wave.

This is the antecedent of my present series of works, which fall under the surname of *Echosystème*. More than a specific piece, the