ABSOLUTE MUSIC AND CONTINGENT MUSIC: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Absolute Music and Contingent Music: A Theoretical Framework

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ABSTRACT

Although music is often talked about as having one political agenda or another, in Western art music these features are generally thought to be distinct from the “music itself.” As straightforward a proposition as this might seem to a reader fully acculturated to the contemporary music ideology, it is not the only possible way of conceiving of music as a social force. There exists music whose aesthetic merits are completely indistinguishable from its social function. More accurately, there exists an attitude about music in which it is not thought of as occupying a separate sphere with autonomous aesthetic principles. This paper creates a theoretical framework with these two attitudes at its extremes: absolute music and what I shall call “contingent” music. This theoretical framework has interesting historical antecedents, and is a useful way of thinking about some of modern music’s ideological conflicts. It is also an important part of my own work as a composer, and this paper concludes by describing the way in which the absolute-contingent opposition informs three of my own compositions.
Absolute music as an ideology casts aesthetic merits as universal and timeless, and thereby seeks to dissolve itself from history: “To write a history of absolute music is to write against it” (Chua 1999, 7). Yet the idea does have a history, albeit a convoluted one. As Chua points out, absolute music is a discourse rather than a genre, and as such the term is necessarily multifaceted and “subject to the mutations of those who speak about it” (Chua 1999, 6). This is not a neutral declaration, and its consequences are central to contemporary theories of improvisation, indeterminacy, and the sociology of music. For Chua, the idea of absolute music is existentially dependent upon the discursive arena in which it is posited. In the same way, music itself depends upon things external to it, features of musical practice traditionally termed “extra-musical” – a phrase whose artificiality Chua is quick to point out. Music and ideas about music, traditionally thought of as reliably distinct, emerge in Chua’s conception as equal players in the same theoretical sphere. This sphere is a place where music is contingent upon its social context, just as music theory – which is not in substance different from music itself – is dependent upon the contours of its discursive space.

In approaching the concept of absolute music in this way, Chua establishes obliquely a conceptual framework that this paper will develop. His title, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*, can be read two ways: first, as a reference to absolute music as a construction, i.e. that it is not the natural, objective description that it claims to be. Yet his book is more than just the unveiling of this stubborn fiction, and the title can be read a second way: as the description of a polarized musical world with absolute
music at one extreme and meaning as constructed on the other. It is this latter reading – the opposition of the ideas of absolute music and what I will call “contingent” music – that the reader should bear in mind when thinking about the ways in which the absolute music attitude persists in the 21st century, and what that persistence means for theories of improvisation and indeterminacy. The political squabbles surrounding the confrontation of these techniques in the 1960s can be cast as a symptom of these vestigial absolutist attitudes, and the same aesthetic divide is crucial to my own work as a composer.

The basic question is whether music is autonomously, absolutely meaningful or whether its meaning is contingent upon a constructed discursive space. Close scrutiny of the two poles reveals more in common than might be apparent at first, and the music philosophical questions attendant to that fact become quite thorny. Here, though, we need neither write a complete history of the idea nor explore all the philosophical issues it may provoke; instead, I offer a close reading of a single slice of the discourse surrounding the idea. In order to illuminate the absolute-contingent divide, I focus on the persistence of the absolute myth in the indeterminate music of the 20th century. Through this close reading, I attempt to establish a broad dichotomy that has been decisive in shaping my personal musical orientation as well as the contemporary music world more broadly. The ideas discussed in this paper, as much as they are intended to elucidate the persistence of 19th-century musical metaphysics, are also all geared toward developing a musical framework described by the two poles “absolute” and “contingent.”

What is contingent music? It depends. If we accept Chua’s leveling, in which music and theories of music are complementary actors in the same conceptual field, then in a way it makes no sense to attempt to answer that question except about a given work–
which, in looking at the world of African drumming as well as some of my own music, this essay will do to a certain degree. It may be a more efficient means of elucidating this opposition, however, to focus first on the absolute side of the spectrum; the totality to which this ideology aspires makes it, in a way, easier to get a purchase on— and in any case it is in the nature of contingency that the one idea can serve to bring the other into focus.

This essay begins by extrapolating from the work of George Lewis onto the discourse surrounding absolute music. This extrapolation happens first chronologically backward into the 19th century – when, with the birth of a secular bourgeois class of music consumers, absolute music was “christened” in the famous Wagner/Nietzsche debates – then back again into the 20th century, where we can see some of its modern instantiations (complete with their religions undertones) in perhaps unexpected places. The absolute-contingent opposition is used in turn as a way of thinking about two specific musical artifacts: first, some of the socially motivated features of African drumming (as theorized by John Miller Chernoff) and three of my own compositions. The first is useful as a paradigmatic example of a radically contingent musical world; for my own compositions I attempt to locate them along the absolute-contingent axis, and to describe their relationships to the dichotomy that formed such an important part of their conception.

Absolute music may emerge looking a little like a silent agent secretly shaping the Western musical world without its knowledge or permission, which in some ways is a good description. Its origins in Christian dogma, moreover, may come off as pernicious or at least incongruent with contemporary aesthetics, which are generally thought to be of
a liberal, pluralist bent. But contemporary aesthetics and Christian dogma are probably not as incongruent as they seem, nor should their congruence necessarily be alarming. The pseudo-religious rapture and fixation on purity characteristic of absolute modes of listening can be aesthetically paralyzing or socially awkward, but these features can also be a source of power and meaning. Even if we decide that music is necessarily contingent in some way (upon a performer, an audience, a received tradition of musical grammar, etc) then it is no contradiction in terms to say that music may be contingent upon its not being contingent; i.e. that absolute music is a story we need to tell ourselves before we can fully grasp music’s affective power, or that “the absolute” is merely one of many possible contingencies that form the sounding board against which music may reverberate. To what degree music can actually occupy a “separate sphere” complete with its own autonomous principles is a profound question that this essay by no means attempts to resolve; this is an explication of a crucial opposition rather than a valuation of either pole.

Afrological and Eurological Sociologies of Music

In his article, “Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” George Lewis responds to the “ongoing narrative of dismissal” that has characterized the confrontation of Afro-American improvisation with the dominant Euro-American culture of contemporary music. Lewis documents and analyzes the marginalization of Bebop in music literature, and the way in which the influence of black music – in particular its influence on the “experimental” music of Cage and his circle – has been willfully ignored. In spite of his respect for the contributions of John Cage, the
article is clearly also written as a counterbalance to the overemphasis on Cage’s work in contemporary music scholarship—Lewis refers elsewhere to the “avalanche of hagiographic encomia” that is Cage studies (Lewis 2004, 64). The political riposte in this piece is so deft that its other features—features that deal more directly with aesthetics—are easy to miss. Yet its insight is as much aesthetic as political (indeed one of the contentions implicit in his work is that the two are inseparable) and a close reading of its aesthetic dimension yields ideas that are applicable beyond the question of the political struggles that may have framed its original conception.

To begin to extrapolate from Lewis’s work, we can look first at the way in which the Eurological and Afrological traditions theorize their respective notions of social challenge. Both worlds—Lewis uses Bebop and the “New York School” as exemplars of his two “connotative adjectives”—were aware of an element of subversion implicit in their music, and it is possible to parse these “extra-musical” implications in ways that illuminate an important underlying aesthetic distinction.

The commentary posed by Bebop—besides the fact that (quoting Amiri Baraka) “merely by being a Negro in America, one was a nonconformist”—addresses both socio-economic and aesthetic issues. Bebop was characterized by a self-referential sense of abstraction, complexity and sophistication; it offered new paradigms for creativity that were hugely influential; it was also, Lewis tells us, an explicit instrument of social change: “Sonic symbolism is often constructed with a view toward social instrumentality as well as form” (Lewis 2002, 134). In addition to offering a trenchant challenge to traditional European ideas about musical production, Bebop offered a chance for black musicians in America to transcend the role of mere entertainer and to make more money.
It is an essential feature of the Bebop aesthetic that its musical innovations went hand in hand with a concrete, active confrontation with Euro-American cultural and economic hegemony\(^1\).

As Lewis has noted elsewhere, it is impossible to divorce any musical gesture from its immediate political context (Parker 2005, 84). Particularly in Bebop, where the musicians so deliberately wore their status as “high” artists on their sleeves, the line between a social act and a musical one is itself often hard to pinpoint. This is true of the Eurological approach of the Cage coterie as well, but in a different way. Bebop, as theorized by Lewis, is perfectly comfortable seeing itself as active participant in a particular historical moment. It is, in other words, unapologetically contingent upon its social context. Cage, as we shall see below, is not interested in his position in history, actively seeks to transcend his own personal taste, and seems distinctly uninterested in any practical application of his music’s political implications. Following Chua, we can regard such political/ideological features as not qualitatively different from the “musical” ones (they are not “extra-musical”); the distinctions made being made here can therefore help to illuminate a bifurcation in contemporary music aesthetics whose genealogy we can trace to the 19th century, and which, like the particular political argument advanced in Lewis’s article, is still basically relevant.

Even if it is of a mild flavor, there is an undeniable element of ideological provocation in Cage’s work. Beneath the familiar veneer of the serene Buddhist, Cage

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\(^1\) For a more nuanced sense of what social activism meant for Bebop musicians, see Eric Porter, “Dizzy Atmosphere”: The Challenge of Bebop,” *American Music*, vol. 17, No. 4 (1999), 422-446. Bebop musicians were not, of course, all of them unreservedly political all of the time, but the basic distinction being made in this paper with Eurological attitudes is, I think, sound.
seems to relish his own incendiary reputation—indeed, some of his music seems to depend upon it. Like Parker, he was aware of the novelty of his ideas and of their implicit challenges. These challenges were, in the case of Cage, primarily challenges to the traditional definition of a musical work, but they were also socially inflammatory. As Benjamin Piekut notes, the idea that Cage offers a liberatory social politics has become a truism (Piekut 23). It is easy to point to the reasons for this reputation. In Cage’s indeterminate work, there are many liberations. The performer is liberated from the traditional hierarchies of the European model of music creation, as in Music of Changes, or the Variations. The composer is liberated from the directives of habit, training and taste. Noise itself is emancipated in a manner specifically analogous to dissonance half a century earlier. Audiences are liberated from the burden of sorting the beautiful from the ugly. Performance practice is altered in a way that challenges the hierarchies of the modern concert hall. Some of these ideas require more conceptual work to transfer to the political world than others, but in any case it is difficult not to arrive the familiar picture of Cage as a utopian anarchist.

The political ideas advanced by this music evolve with its composer, but they are clearly part of his thinking starting with his first interest in the avant-garde. Nor are the ideas always left for the audience to infer; Branden W. Joseph, in his detailed account of the social and political element in Cage’s work, gives us a John Cage who is often explicit about the social ills he aims to address in his music. For Cage, Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique had offered an egalitarianism that “one could relate over into one’s life and accept.” Cage read Hindemith’s Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra as a specific allegorical statement of non-conformity and pacifism. His critiques of Antheil
were shot through with a stringent anti-consumerism, and – probably via his interest in the avant-garde literary journal *transition* – he even adopted a pseudo-Marxist vocabulary to critique the modern Capitalist state (Joseph 158). Cage’s political orientation fluctuated, but he did consistently value some kind of liberation in one guise or another, and explicitly recognized the “extra-musical” import of his work: as Joseph writes, “The social and political aspects of his thinking would nonetheless remain essential, as the holistic or organicist foundations of his earlier compositional thought were overturned and a pathway opened toward a more explicitly anarchist outlook that he began to espouse openly in 1960” (Joseph 167).

In spite of his keen interest in the political import of his musical ideas, though, Cage’s sensibility leaves little space for concrete political engagement. The political ideas offered by his music changed significantly over the course of his career, and he explicitly “denies the utility of social protest” (Lewis 2002, 138). If indeterminacy had practical conclusions, Cage never bothered to arrive at them, in spite of the “anarchy” that Joseph tells us he “openly espoused.”

Why would it be that Bebop and the New York School relate so differently to the notion of social action? Part of the answer is, of course, that Bebop was largely the creation of disenfranchised black musicians working from outside the seats of economic and cultural power. Indeterminacy may have implied a radical overthrow of the *status quo* in America, but Cage, situated as he was in a position of comfort, can be forgiven for ignoring that fact. Lewis is aware of this, and he points out that the only real political action taken by Cage was to re-articulate some of the standard tropes of Cold War era race relations in America: black music is dismissed as derivative and not “serious,” and
the forces in power engage in an “exnomination” whereby blackness is posited as “epistemological other” while whiteness is cast as the objectively natural backdrop against which cultural aberrations like “hot jazz” (using Cage’s strange preferred term) can be compartmentalized and examined (Lewis 2002, 138). The desire to be seen as self-evident and “natural,” unsullied by the messy world of human taste and political action, is a defining characteristic of Eurological attitudes described by Lewis; these same tropes are among the most familiar hallmarks of the absolute music idea.²

Cage’s critiques of jazz improvisation center on the notion that it is “generally playing what you know.”³ In contrast, Cage, whose goal is to achieve the truly unforeseen⁴, uses indeterminacy to imagine a kind of total immediacy. This radical sense of what real-time music can be has disturbing political implications. As Lewis writes, “from an exslave’s point of view an insistence on being free from memory might be regarded with some suspicion.” The erasures from music of memory, personal narrative,

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² Exnomination is the obvious rhetorical posture for such an attitude, something to which my own music attempts to respond directly, as we will see later on.
³ This is the so-called “motif” theory of jazz improvisation which, though it has been convincingly debunked, still carries remarkable currency. Lewis relies on Johnson-Laird, Philip N. “Jazz Improvisation–A Theory at the Computational Level.” In Representing Musical Structure, ed. Peter Howell, Robert West and Ian Cross, 291-325. London: Academic Press, 1991
⁴ There is no consensus, though, that Cage's indeterminacy did actually lead to unforeseen results or that Cage would “identify with no matter what eventuality,” as he maintained. Cage’s work is always performed by sympathetic performers who share and reinforce his sound palette, a palette that may have been more taste-based and limited in scope than most people realize. David Tudor’s “meta-scores” for The Music of Changes may present a real challenge to the notion that Cage valued the unforeseen, as they contained marked traces of the pianist's compositional training, i.e. his taste– the very constraint indeterminacy was designed to eradicate. See Benjamin Pickut, Experimentalism Otherwise (University of California Press 2011), in which Tudor's realizations are compared with a rare example of a hostile performance of an indeterminate work by the New York Philharmonic, an “eventuality” with which Cage found himself unable to identify.
and history are, as Lewis has shown, responses from within the Eurological world to the challenge posed by Bebop ten years before “indeterminacy.” Bebop renewed an interest in real-time music making, for Eurological and Afrological musicians alike; without any traceable improvisative antecedents for 200 years, the white dominant culture’s only means of appropriating this renewed interest was to rename it (thus “indeterminacy”), to un-name itself (to ex-nominate) and to evolve an aesthetics wherein memory, personality and social engagement are seen as the hallmarks of un-ambitious music sullied by its terrestrial shackles (Lewis 2002, 109).

**Absolution in the 19th Century**

The differences discussed above between Cage and Parker are symptoms of an aesthetic bifurcation that predates and outlives the political circumstances of their confrontation. If Cage sees jazz as hampered by its worldly baggage, what are the preconditions in the Eurological framework that enable him to imagine a purer, less finite alternative? Cage’s distaste for concrete political action, memory, history and personality are a part of his musical orientation as well as an expression of the dominant culture’s anxiety over a transgressive aesthetic threat. It is important not to forget that Cage does express this particular American, 20th-century anxiety, but his thinking also has clear antecedents that we can trace back to age-old debates reaching a head in the 19th century. Cage’s aesthetic is a demonstration that the idea of absolute music continues to exercise a high degree of rhetorical force, even as it has been largely abandoned as a serious critical idea.
It may seem odd to cast Cage as an articulation of the absolute music aesthetic. Indeed, when we look at the most emphatic declarations of contemporary musical autonomy, “determinacy” appears as an important factor distinguishing “serious” music – which is usually the autonomous stuff whose value is thought to exist independent of its reception, performance or social context – from “vernacular” music, and thus Cage, whose signal contribution was “indeterminacy,” would seem to be the etymological antithesis of absolute music.⁵ And indeed Cage does have very little in common musically with the paragons of notated complexity who sat at the summit of the musical establishment in American universities of the 60s and 70s. If we look carefully at the debates around the idea of absolute music, though, Cage begins to look less like the revolutionary from the fringe than the latest expression of a very old, European and perhaps Christian attitude about music.

Looking at the history of the term *absolute music*, we can see that the debate surrounding it is really a debate about musical attitudes rather than about music itself – like Daniel Chua, Carl Dahlhaus saw this, and his book on the subject is appropriately titled *The Idea of Absolute Music*. The idea has been applied in many different ways, and even the person who coined the phrase, Richard Wagner, vacillates in his application of it. Dahlhaus is remarkably precise in unpacking Wagner’s evolving sense of what absolute music meant, and his arguments are worth revisiting, even if what they serve best to illuminate is the mutability of the concept in question.

One of Wagner’s fundamental contentions is that instrumental music must exist in the service of the music drama. Wagner saw music history teleologically: music is born

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⁵ For a good example of “determinacy” used this way, see Milton Babbit, “The Composer as Specialist,” *High Fidelity Magazine*, vol. 8, no. 2 (February 1958)
with distinct, causal connections to language and dance. Then its techniques are perfected as it is increasingly abstracted from these first causes; this is the first step in its “absolution,” and for Wagner this second stage is inherently Christian. Music of the Christian era meets the need of expressing the totalizing sublimity of monotheism, and here the term absolute music is applied to an unlikely pastiche of Christian music: “within that concept, to Wagner as to E.T.A. Hoffman, Palestrina’s vocal polyphony and modern instrumental music overlap strangely in a historical-philosophical sense, however awkwardly they might relate to one another in musical reality” (Dahlhaus 1989, 24). Although this Christian stage constitutes an intermediate step, Wagner celebrates it enthusiastically, echoing some of the same language as the absolutists whom he would ostensibly refute– although the tools perfected in Christian harmony are eventually to be “redeemed” in service of the music drama, still Wagner sounds more than a little like E.T.A. Hoffman when he revels in their affective power. Wagner is comfortable using loose metaphors of the ocean, and like Hoffman regards music as possessing something ineffable. He is thus somewhat divided on the purpose, definition, and merits of absolute music. As Dahlhaus puts it, in Wagner “the dichotomy between a philosophy of history that sees absolute music as antithesis and intermediate stage…and an ontology in which…absolute music touches the essence of things, remains unmitigated” (Dahlhaus 1989, 25). The affective power that Wagner concedes to “absolute harmony”– supposedly a midpoint, a Christian step in a teleological dialectic culminating in music drama– complicates the subjection of music to words, however strenuously Wagner goes on to assert it.
And assert it he does, albeit less emphatically later on, after having digested the ideas of Schopenhauer. For Nietzsche, however, in his frenzied polemics against the theater, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is fodder for the opposite claim, which he makes with a fervor to match Wagner’s. Nietzsche wields the composer’s own work against him, seeing in it definitive proof of Schopenhauer’s Romantic metaphysics of music. Capable of divorcing the music of *Tristan* from its diegetic/theatrical side, Nietzsche hears in it the familiar romantic intimations of the absolute, “the innermost nature of the world” (Dahlhaus 1989, 33). For Nietzsche, Dahlhaus tells us, “Wagner’s *Tristan* is absolute music” (Dahlhaus 1989, 34). Thus Nietzsche and Wagner disagree not only on the hierarchy of word and tone, but on the very definition of “absolute.” For Wagner, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was a demonstration of the limits of absolute music; for Nietzsche, it was proof that “there are no boundaries to absolute music” (Dahlhaus 1989, 34).

The disagreement on the meaning and rhetorical charge of this term make for an extremely convoluted historiography. Delving into these convolutions is worthwhile for two reasons. First, zooming out from the vicissitudes of the term’s history, we demonstrate yet again an important epistemological postulate: as noted above, absolute music is an idea about music rather than a description of music. For us as for Wagner, “Absolute music is thus less a firmly outlined genre than a dialectical force” (Dahlhaus 1989, 23). The idea has practical consequences and concrete political causes, but on its own is meaningless as a musical descriptor. Second, Wagner’s selection of Christianity as the site of the perfection of absolute music techniques will be interesting as we
continue to follow the history of the idea and explore some its contemporary ramifications.

**Absolute Music and Art-Religion Today**

For Wagner, as discussed above, Christianity was a means for instrumental music to unmoor itself from its origins in dance and song and thereby to attain the affective power of “absolute Christian harmony,” a musical technology that could then be brought to bear on the music drama, a process he termed “redemption” (Dahlhaus 1989, 24). Others writing about absolute music, however, have seen more “absolution” in music’s steady distancing from Christianity and removal into the secular spheres of bourgeois consumption. There is a now-familiar narrative of 19th century music in which music, having become a commodity to be bought and sold by an emergent bourgeois, evolves a culture of pseudo-religious rites by which the consumers assure themselves of the (absolute) value of their musical commodities. As Susan McClary puts it, “the cult of Absolute Music took on the trappings of religious spirituality … the early Romantics sought in symphonies and quartets the subjective, transcendent experience of mystical union that formerly had been available principally through pietistic devotion” (McClary 2007, 66). Adding to the confusion already surrounding the evolution of the idea, the consequences of Christianity for it are unpredictable; the development of the absolute attitude is dependent on its presence in music (for Wagner) or on its disappearance from
music (for McClary and others\textsuperscript{6}). Christianity creates music as absolute either by being with it or by being apart from it; yet there is a third reading, explained later on, in which religion, by being with music again, creates it as socially contingent.

Whether the absolute music idea, and its resultant art-religion, owes more to the secularization of music or to the power of divine inspiration, there seems to be a certain amount of consensus that its legacy is still very much alive: “The equivalence of art and religion is a fact,” said Jacques Barzun in 1974 (Barzun 1974, 44). Critical challenges to the idea have not come with concrete changes in our performance practice and attitudes; as Arved Ashby writes, “Like any number of other concepts – ‘the nuclear family’ or ‘the sanctity of marriage,’ for instance – absolute music has gained rhetorical force by virtue of its empirical absence.” And with a persistent acceptance of the tenets of absolute music comes a performance practice in which the audience enjoys a distinctly religious rapture: “The absolute music tradition emphasizes interiority and length of utterance” (Ashby 2010, 5-6). This habit of absolutist thinking can, for Ashby, be traced to the Judeo-Christian tradition: “The Western mindset would be very different – and more music scholars would probably recognize performance as an intellectual discipline – if the Hebrew Old Testament and the Christian scriptures had come down to us in oral traditions rather than in a set of canonized writings” (Ashby 2010, 35). Ashby’s point that music scholarship fails to recognize performance as an “intellectual” discipline elucidates more than a mere scholarly lacuna. As Susan McClary points out, the persistence of the absolute music myth has tended to censure all but the safest, least

\textsuperscript{6} McClary offers a useful list of authors that chronicle the idea of art, especially music, as a “separate sphere.” See especially Jacques Barzun, \textit{The Use and Abuse of Art} (Princeton 1974)
ambitious, most purely formal analysis. By remaining strictly within the confines of the antiseptic (and for her, chauvinist) world of formal, "pseudo-mathematical" relationships, composers and scholars inure themselves against the charge of naivety while preserving the sanctity of their art-religion (McClary 2007). Thus performance, which is always flawed and never timeless, is largely ignored and the true aesthetic object is thought to reside in some cleaner, more reliable musical hereafter. It is an ideology that permits of the notion that there exists a music that is "better than it can be performed," a phrase of Artur Schnabel’s that Ashby quotes frequently. To dismiss Schnabel’s turn of phrase as hyperbolic misses the point. Underlying it, and unrelated to how “good” music can be, is the assumption that music can “be” at all without performance. It is an assumption that still goes largely unchallenged, even though it is an interesting issue to which contingent and absolute attitudes respond very differently. The major development in 20th century attitudes toward absolute music was merely that the audio recording has supplanted the Urtext as the source of definitive textual authority (thus the “definitive recording”); the basic tenets of the absolute attitude have not changed much. The very impulse to seek authority and to imbue a single text (whether it be a written one or an audio recording) with autonomous, a priori value; the need to see this value as universal and independent of history; the tendency to relate to this text alone in silent rapture—all these are vestiges of the absolute music attitude. These ideas permeate contemporary music culture and define its performance practice to such a degree that they are often difficult to see clearly.

If, in an absolute music framework, performance is altogether too concrete for the celestial realm in which music rightfully resides, it should come as no surprise that real political engagement is similarly precluded. We have seen that this formed part of the
distinction between Lewis’s Afrological and Eurological perspectives; Cornelius Cardew makes similar complaints in his polemic on Cage, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*. As a work of explicitly Marxist activism that is even more baldly political than Lewis’s, it can illuminate the absolutist attitudes latent in Cage’s work from a different angle.

Lewis points out that Cage’s work is basically disconnected from the social struggle that is the logical conclusion of his musical ideas; Cardew is much more vituperative, bemoaning the decadence and hypocrisy of a music which is both aesthetically vapid and socially toxic. Cardew’s writing is as intelligent as it is blunt and wide-ranging, and here we will restrict our focus to just two germane features of his argument: 1) his discussion of liberalism in Cage and 2) what this liberalism means politically and aesthetically.

It is fascinating that liberalism, as Cardew sees it in Cage and the avant-garde, brings us back yet again to Christianity: “Liberalism is just as oppressive as the religious dogma of the 19th century that it replaces. Liberalism is a tactic whereby the sting is taken out of the huge contradictions that run right through our cultural environment, so that we are tempted to pass them over and ignore them.” This charge recalls some of Cage’s various mantras against fanning the fires by direct political confrontation; undesirable social facts are best left, for Cage, to die a natural death. Thus Cardew probably has something of Cage’s sensibility in mind when he declares that modern music is “footling, unwholesome, sensational, frustrating, offensive and depressing” because “the bourgeois/capitalist society that brought music out of church into the realm of bourgeois art…is now in the last stages of decay” (Cardew 1974, 58). Adding to the familiar narrative of the transformation of music into an art-religion (ironically
coinciding with its secularization), Cardew sees modern music as the expression of a
decadent capitalism that seeks to remove “the criteria by which it would expose itself as
nonsense.” Thus we have the infinite stylistic permissiveness that is required for
indeterminacy to be accepted; for Cardew, Cage does not offer liberation – although this
is a notion that still goes largely unchallenged in Cage studies – but liberalism, i.e. a
picture of the “surface dynamism of modern society” that ignores its “underlying
tensions and contradictions” (Cardew 1974, 35). Liberalism is the aesthetic of a
bourgeois that is confident of its ability to develop a taste for virtually anything; it is
disengagement and abstraction from reality conveniently elevated to an aesthetic credo.
Cardew sees this in the unambiguous terms of the global class struggle; whether we
accept this position, or Lewis’s (or others\(^7\)), what is important for our purposes is to note
the absolutist instincts Cardew draws out; instincts for abstraction, disengagement from
history, and the desire to see music operate autonomously and for no social purpose.
These features of the avant-garde are basically nothing more than novel articulations of
the 19\(^{th}\) century romantic metaphysics of music.

Cardew is equally frank about what this liberalism means for music education
today. The pedagogical correlate to liberalism is what he refers to as “the line of ‘no
criticism.’” With the paralyzing nihilism of the fashionable avant-garde came a style of
music education in which “no criteria were applied.” This is worth noting primarily
because one of its particular consequences still characterizes some “contemporary music”
education: without recourse to (or interest in) actual aesthetic gestures as the objects of

\(^{7}\) For another insightful discussion of Liberalism in Cage, see Benjamin Piekut,
*Experimentalism Otherwise* (University of California Press 2011), in which Cage
emerges as the unexceptional expression of Cold War-era American democracy and
masculinity.
interrogation, teachers are left to focus on the purely formal aspects of their students’
work: “the handwriting, or the neatness of the layout of the score seemed to be a matter
of more importance.” We tend, in other words, to locate our aesthetic artifacts in the
places most remote from performance and reception; to use Lewis’s word, the
contemporary music world – at least the part of it which Cardew was attacking – wants to
remain as much as possible “unsullied” by its real-world contingencies. Scores, taken as
ends in themselves, are safe from performers. As for politics, music, when assumed to be
a totally non-referential, autonomous medium, need not, should not, and cannot achieve
anything political. Looked at this way, Cage’s indeterminate music becomes an emphatic
statement of the absolute music aesthetic. It is divorced from the personality of its
composer, does not depend on its performers (or its performance), and admits of no
criteria by which it can be “revealed as nonsense” (Cardew 1974, 58). It is even
abstracted from its sounds (its “overtone structure,” as Cage puts it in a subtly derogative
rhetorical turn); Cage’s music does not exist socially, historically or sonically. Prayer-
like and pristine, it hovers ethereally somewhere above our minds and bodies,
unconnected to the political issues that we care about and which may even have
motivated Cage in composing.

The romantic metaphysics of absolute music is closely connected to two other
familiar features of 19th-century thinking, both of which can also be observed in Cage:
the “cult of genius,” and the pre-eminence attached to originality. If the idea of absolute
music establishes music as a pseudo-religion complete with a laity and priesthood,
composers are its prophets, world-historical men whose utterances are expected never to
be less than divinely inspired. Carl Dahlhaus, in Between Romanticism and Modernism,
shows that the fetishization of originality caused thematic materials to shrink, a feature that in turn came into conflict with the epoch’s preference for monumental forms; this discrepancy is useful in illuminating the “latent unity” of an era stylistically diverse enough to embrace both Brahms and Wagner (Dahlhaus 1980, 48).

This idea can be mapped onto Cage and indeterminacy in several ways. Dahlhaus’s history of thematic materials, in which the insistence on originality makes them ever smaller – the reason why Nietzsche was able to call Wagner “our greatest musical miniaturist” – can be seen to reach a terminal point in the indeterminate music of Cage, where there are virtually no thematic materials at all.\(^8\) Indeterminacy is a way of combining the Romantic mandate of total originality with its tendency for small themes, and performing a *reductio ad absurdum* on both of them. Although Cage is stylistically much farther removed from Brahms and Wagner than either is from the other, the three occupy similar offices as high priests of music – Cardew makes much of the cult of genius surrounding Cage – and the demands on them to produce work that is wholly autonomous and original situate them as, in a way, part of the same tradition of absolute music.

Another one of the consequences of Dahlhaus’s “latent unity” useful for this discussion is the concept of “individualized harmony.” In the 19\(^{th}\) century, Dahlhaus tells us, harmony is liberated from the structural functions it served in traditional sonata-allegro form and as such comes to occupy, on its own, more aesthetic weight: “Relieved

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\(^8\) It is interesting to think of what this trajectory might mean for a theory of Spectral music; shrinking themes and “individualized harmony” may reach a different logical conclusion in Spectralism, where the generative material is pure sound and the goal has been seen by some (e.g. Joshua Fineberg) as a kind of a “time dilation,” both of which recall the absolutist attitudes that this paper traces in Cage.
of the responsibility for the large scale formal structures, the harmony serves instead to establish the unique identity of one instant in the music” (Dahlhaus 1980, 74). This is an important moment in an evolving sense of musical form. Harmonic techniques traditionally reserved for development migrated into expositions, and harmony eventually came to be seen as potentially significant in its own right: “What to Beethoven was a part, a component, was understood later in the nineteenth century to be an independent, self-sufficient musical idea, because the composers of the day looked for and found in Beethoven what they themselves practiced.” Periodic phrase structure and recognizable formal tropes make way for “modulating sequence” and the “Tristan chord.” What had given composers of the previous generation license to write in “platitudes” were the formal exigencies of recognized precedent; creativity and complexity took place in the elegant lattice of interdependent components whose individual novelty mattered little. In the 19th century, these platitudes were “condemned” as a “blasphemy against the cult of genius.” Form becomes, for Dahlhaus, a “one-sided dependence on the musical idea” in which commonplaces and legible formulae “lost the aesthetic right to exist” (Dahlhaus 1980, 42-44).

Indeterminacy is, in some fairly obvious ways, aligned with the formal developments Dahlhaus is tracing. Its distaste for predictability is as vociferous as the charge of “blasphemy” that Dahlhaus points out, and the musical trends he isolates – the “individualization of harmony” and the shrinking of thematic materials – can be seen as a process analogous to the reduction of “real-time” music to an “infinitely small now” that Lewis describes as part of the Eurological framework (Lewis 2002, 148). Although Cage broadly dismissed improvisation as predictable and habit-driven, he did, at times, accept
it as aesthetically viable if defined in its strictly etymological sense; as meaning “unforeseen.” In this way, unpredictability and originality are absolutely basic for Cage, as it was for the Romantics⁹. Cage is not looking for chords that are meaningful in and of themselves, but the Romantic fixation on novel harmony presupposes an aesthetic autonomy that has much in common with the Cage posture. The only way to be completely sure – and Cage dealt in rigorous, empirical certainties, in spite of the superficial leniencies of chance operations – of avoiding a trite utterance is to make no utterance at all; or at least none that exposes itself to the charge of specificity or historical particularity. “I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it,” he wrote in the famous “Lecture on Nothing.” Like other examples of Cage’s avowed respect for the subjectivity of personal taste, the “as I need it” here is a polite truism and can be ignored. Contained in the rest of this line of verse is a radical articulation of the absolute aesthetic we have been tracing. Autonomous music must be wholly original, which in turn limits the scope of musical materials. The reduction of thematic materials to “nothing” and the elevation of this stylistic nihilism to the status of “poetry” is merely the logical extension of the ideas set in motion by Wagner. Seen this way, Cage is the product of Romanticism run rampant and exploded in scale; and the absolutism that his music demands, so far from being vestigial, is grander in proportion to the enormity of that explosion.

⁹ For Cage’s fixation on the unforeseen, see Sabina Feist, “John Cage and Improvisation: An Unresolved Relationship.” In Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society, edited by Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl, 38–49. Urbana: University of Illinois Press – a piece that, though it is designed to reconcile Cage and improvisation, actually reinforces the differences between the two traditions.
There are also some less obvious features of Dahlhaus’s work on this subject that illuminate the contingent/absolute opposition. There is a way in which these romantic notions – the cult of genius, the rise of absolute music, the reduction of thematic material alongside the growth of monumental forms – make it impossible for a musical gesture to derive its meaning from its context. Just as the art form itself is thought of as autonomous and non-referential, so its component parts, seen more than ever to be miniature themes and interesting chords, no longer form part of a structural lattice as they did in Beethoven and Mozart. It is not a matter of metaphorical extension that Cage’s indeterminate work is as disinclined to a sense of functionality. For Cage as much as for Eduard Hanslick, music cannot be useful; certainly not to anything outside itself, but also not within itself. That is to say, it can have no concrete political consequences and its components cannot derive their meaning from the support they offer to other components. This recalls a romantic notion of beauty that sits at the crux of the 19th-century debates surrounding absolute music; when music became instrumental rather than vocal (the original sense of the term “absolute”), it lost the right to be “instrumental” for any real purpose external to itself. For some, this brought us immortal beauty on a celestial scale, for others, it was death: as Daniel Chua puts it, “music dies beautifully...it dies to the world to become immutable, pure and totally useless” (Chua 1999, 229). Cage’s tendency to treat music as the celebration of uselessness is one more way in which he is aligned with the persistent idea of absolute music.

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10 It is one of the ironies of the absolute music debates that Western music is at its most functional in church; when its only job is to usher in the Holy Ghost, music is regarded as thoroughly contingent, functional, and therefore secular – strangely, Christianity returns again as the arena in which the battles over absolute music are waged.
Contingent Music: Adorno and African Drumming

There are, however, alternative ideas of music within the European tradition that predate Lewis’s article discussed above. Perhaps the best example is Theodor Adorno, who sees music as always necessarily social and political (Adorno 1976, 62):

If so many dismiss that specifically social element as a mere additive of sociological interpretation, if they see the thing itself in the actual notes alone, this is not due to the music but to a neutralized consciousness. The musical experience has been insulated from the experience of the reality in which it finds itself—however polemically—and to which it responds. While compositorial analysis was learning to trace the most delicate ramifications of the facture, and while musicology was accounting at length for the biographical circumstances of composer and work, the method of deciphering the specific social characteristics of music has lagged pitifully and must be largely content with improvisations.

The social is not a “mere additive;” it is the very stuff of music. Adorno, like Susan McClary, criticizes the sort of analysis that is comfortable to remain within the bounds of the purely (absolutely) musical: such scholars are “childishly noncommittal” (Adorno 1976, 62). Adorno is a long way from concluding his work with an analysis of Earth, Wind and Fire (which is what McClary does) but he is the clear ideological antecedent to this kind of socially integrated criticism.

If we look closely at Adorno’s picture of the “constellation of music and classes,” we get a sense not only of music as necessarily political, but also of a particular flavor of social contingency, one which is instantly familiar to practitioners of music that never bore the art-religious weight of 19th-century metaphysics in the first place. For Adorno, music at its best represents society’s antinomies while offering a place where they can be non-ideologically mediated (Adorno 1976, 69):
It is by the anti-ideological resolution of conflicts, by a cognitive behavior without an inkling of the objects of its cognition, that great music takes a stand in social struggles: by enlightenment, not by aligning itself, as one likes to call that, with an ideology. The very content of its manifest ideological positions is historically vulnerable; Beethoven’s pathos of humanity, meant critically on the spot, can be debased into a ritual celebration of the status quo. This change of functions gave Beethoven his position as a classic, from which he ought to be rescued.

In spite of his constant dismissals of jazz, Adorno’s posture here aligns him oddly with it; Adorno’s solution to music as a “false consciousness” models very closely the sociability of the Afro-American forms that he so stridently rejected all his life. The idea of beauty as the successful mediation of conflicting elements – of “antinomies,” as he has it – is very much what happens in, to take one example from jazz history, Bebop. Yet even in this very essay, we can sense Adorno’s disdain for jazz, as well as for the critics who theorize it as a healthy and unpretentious music of the proletariat; the commonly held notion that music of the “lower stratum” is “unintellectual” and “materialistic” and therefore “compatible with Marxism” is a “demagogic swindle.” Adorno probably intends to rebut the common, facile praise for jazz as “earthy” or “soulful” when he writes that “the sensual element cannot be literally savored like a leg of veal. It is precisely where the way of serving it is culinary that its preparation has been ideological from the start” (Adorno 1976, 61). For Adorno, the sensuality of jazz is superficial and meaningless, and it would therefore be a mistake to suppose that it has escaped the clutches of ideology. Yet Adorno is missing something crucial about the music whose sensuality is so often mindlessly extolled: it is as much a “matter of the mind” as Beethoven and today it does a better job fulfilling its proper social function as a “kind of analogue…to social theory” (Adorno 1976, 70). Adorno, then, although clearly
addressing himself to an unambiguously Eurological world, offers as a remedy for
music’s autonomous “isolation” a theory to which African music and jazz both hew
closely, and which is a powerful answer to the idea of absolute music that so permeates
the music culture that Adorno was writing about. The political dimension of jazz is
discussed above; here, I will turn to African music – and its common ground with
Adorno’s rigorous social grounding – as an example of music that is paradigmatically
contingent.

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It is probably as much a matter of stylistic attraction as scholarly orientation that
John Miller Chernoff, in writing about African music, is unafraid of writing plainly about
the social element of music. Through this stylistic attraction, Chernoff arrives at a
method of inquiry suited to the music about which he is writing, and in turn practices the
kind of ambitious, socially grounded scholarship whose disappearance into antiseptic
absolutist practices we have seen lamented in Adorno and McClary. *African Rhythm and
African Sensibility* is a personal, heartfelt piece of scholarship—features that are relevant
because, as much as the book is a survey of a particular style, it also stands as a
performance of the Afrological ethos of personality and particularity (as Lewis reminds
us, “if you live it, it will come out of your horn”), in conversation with the absolutist
attitudes latent in Western music and scholarship.

One of the main obstacles for the study of African music is, for Chernoff, “the
lack of a theoretical perspective for integrating musical analysis with social analysis”
In African drumming, there is often no difference between aesthetic function and social function. Music always functions socially, “to make the occasion sweet,” and there is simply no conception of art for art’s sake alone. When Chernoff points out that Western students lack a theoretical framework to account for music that is at once social and musical, we can hear echoes of the 19th-century, even if Chernoff himself never points them out. For Chernoff, what a Western considers “wonderful” about art is its “enduring ability to affect us…and to transcend the limitations of its particular historical and cultural location.” Our performance practice is designed to “enable us to focus exclusively on the greatness that is in the music itself, greatness that a virtuoso can elicit.” Chernoff recognizes a characteristic attitude in which the music, whose quality is immortal and ingeniously inspired, resides ethereally in some realm beyond its actual performance, and in which the performer ("the virtuoso") acts more as medium than active participant. Chernoff also sees the familiar focus on the individual as another key difference between the two worlds: “The effectiveness of music, for Westerners, is its power to express or communicate directly to individuals, and we would defend our right to a personal aesthetic judgment independent of the tastes of everyone else” (Chernoff 1979, 32). Without intending to write about absolute music at all, Chernoff ends up doing exactly that when a confrontation with African musical attitudes exposes the latent absolutist assumptions of his Western background. African music, for Chernoff, is really a multidisciplinary sort of a critical practice that demands a scholarly methodology more personal and contextual than standard Western models—music in Africa is, in other words, exactly what Adorno thinks music should be (“a kind of social theory”), and Chernoff is exactly the sort of critic Adorno would approve of.
Although Chernoff never uses the term “absolute music,” he does refer to “the Absolute,” as an umbrella term for the religious element that almost always forms part of the socio-musical rituals of African drumming (Chernoff 1979, 157):

While various rhythms may be more important, no single rhythm can provide a complete focus, and in this sense there is no central point of unity, except God. Yet where Absolute reality stands removed, people must acknowledge the complexity of a plural world. Equanimity with multiple rhythms and the silent beat can and does serve to inform social relations with a cosmopolitan attitude of toleration, rationality, and pragmatism. And every time people in Africa relate to music, among other aspects of their social world, they get practice in standing back from a complicated scene in order to play a part with style and confidence.

We are back to religion as a useful lens into the absolute-contingent axis. If we think back to Wagner, for whom Christianity was the means to “absolute harmony,” and to Barzun, for whom the secularization of music meant the evolution of art-religion, here we have religion playing a third role. In Africa, where, as we have seen, music is so neatly woven into a social fabric, where it is not regarded as separate from its social function, it is also necessarily religious; in other words, where music has a job to do – to “make the occasion sweet,” (a phrase which Chernoff quotes often as an example of the African conception of music’s main purpose) to socialize the young, to serve the dancers – it is contingent upon that job and does not partake of the art-religious gravity that we have seen maligned in Barzun and others, even if that job is an explicitly religious one. In African music it is the religious ritual that is always present in music which ironically makes space for the music itself to remain secular.

This secularism, so often wanting in contemporary music that imbibes the absolute music aesthetic, goes hand in hand with the other features of Afrological music:
history, social grounding, improvisation and personal communication\textsuperscript{11}. The idea that
music can have a concrete referent as specific as a “cosmopolitan attitude of toleration” is
anathema to indeterminacy and absolute music, even though Cage was given to
declarations of tolerance and the popular conception of his work is that it offers a
“liberatory politics.” Though Chernoff’s analysis of African music aligns him with
Adorno (via the rigor of its social grounding and its non-ideological mediation of
antinomies) and with jazz (via the way it nurtures friendship through improvisation),
even jazz music, shot through as it is with the absolute attitudes implicit in the 20\textsuperscript{th}
century recording industry, carries too much of the absolute attitude to be readily
intelligible in an African context (Chernoff 1979, 23):

> An understanding of African music may lead to an understanding of the amorphous background of
cultural forms, but it should also tell you something about how to find a friend or what to do at a
dance or how to behave on a street. If you play a recording of American jazz for an African
friend, even though all the formal characteristics of African music are there, he may say, as he sits
fidgeting in his char, “What are we supposed to do with this?” He is expressing perhaps the most
fundamental aesthetic in Africa: without participation, there is no meaning. When you ask an
African friend whether or not he “understands” a certain type of music, he will say yes if he knows
the dance that goes with it.

Recorded music strikes the African listener in the above passage as strange and
meaningless; just as the master drummer from whom Chernoff studied was completely

\textsuperscript{11} The element of linguistic communication in African music is one of the most
interesting ways in which its social element is manifest. Music is, of course, not
language, but the musical-linguistic mapping in some forms of West African
drumming is surprisingly specific, and in that specificity we see some of the most
beautiful features of this music: its impetus for communication, its social
integration, its functionality, its informality, among others. See Kofi Agawu, “The
(Summer 1987), pp. 400-418
unable to play his part alone, so music has no real meaning when abstracted from a tangible social occasion. In this instance, Chernoff’s analysis of African music recalls the idea prevalent in the New York School that an improvisation heard a second time is no longer an improvisation; the reduction of improvisation to an “infinitely small now.” Yet where non-replicability in indeterminacy is connected to abstraction from history and the aesthetic autonomy of pure sound, the importance of human participation in African music is connected to the opposite. Chernoff’s insistence on the word “friend,” then, is not an informal stylistic trait so much as a way of demonstrating the specificity of the social content conveyed in an African musical event; he wants to show us that, absurd as it may sound to our absolutist ears, African music really is about making friends and instilling positive values. This scholarly approach liberates Chernoff from the strictures of academic remove and lends his writing a personal touch, but it also performs one of the central tenets of the idea of contingent music; as we saw in Chua, music, sociability, and music theory can all be actors in the same conceptual sphere: “In this context,” Chernoff tells us, referring to his particular mode of musical-anthropological field research, “scholarship becomes a celebration of the uniqueness and variety of humankind” (Chernoff 1979, 23). The social qualities of African music make universality and timelessness impossible (and undesirable), while making room for actual communication and specificity of reference. Chernoff’s claim that music “can and does” equip its practitioners with a value system for navigating the non-musical world will sound hopelessly naïve to someone accustomed to hearing intimations of the infinite in a sequestered concert hall; by the same token, the concert hall feels abstract, remote and meaningless to someone accustomed to regarding music as only possible in service of a
participatory social occasion. Chernoff’s work is as much a valuable survey of African music as a contra-example to the absolutist assumptions implicit in our own performance practice.

**Control Flow, Contrasti and Work, work**

So far I have been analyzing specific pieces of discourse and generalizing from them to the broad dichotomy that is this paper’s central tenet. I will conclude by doing the reverse: using the absolute-contingent opposition as a lens through which to view my own compositions. The main purpose of this paper is to create a theoretical construct to account for some of the most important aesthetic rifts in contemporary music culture; this construct inevitably also accounts for much of my own activity as a composer, and the rest of the paper shall be devoted to explaining how. If the absolute-contingent divide describes attitudes rather than music, still the composer himself can assume a particular attitude at the time of composition, and it is not entirely meaningless to say that the three pieces discussed below are ranked roughly in ascending order of contingency. First, I will discuss *Control Flow*, written for the La Jolla Symphony as part of the jazz Composers’ Orchestra Institute 2013 Orchestral Readings program. After that, I explain *Contrasti*, a pseudo-programmatic work that responds to the *Commedia dell’arte* tradition of improvised comedic theater. I conclude with a piece for two pianists (not for “two pianos” – the difference shall become clear) called *Work, work.*
Nowhere are the hierarchical features of Western music more plainly visible than in the symphony orchestra. The power dynamics of this institution can be seen as vestigial reflections of the attitudes of the aristocratic class which, traditionally, it was designed to entertain. As a consequence of these aristocratic inheritances, the orchestra also inevitably partakes to a certain degree of the absolute music aesthetic. It is the fullest expression of the cult of genius and the 19th century’s obsession for monumental forms. Because of its inherent hierarchies, writing for the orchestra, more than any other configuration, forces the contemporary composer to consider his or her relationship to control; and in considering that relationship he or she almost certainly must also think about the idea of absolute music. *Control Flow* is meditation on both these ideas. As a composer with roots in improvised music, it was my inclination when I was offered the chance to write for the orchestra to confront its hierarchical, absolutist structures. There are precedents for non-hierarchical, socially contingent orchestral writing: the work of Earl Brown, Butch Morris and Cornelius Cardew offer improvisative approaches to the symphony orchestra— a process George Lewis has described as “recuperating the symphony orchestra.” Yet, as alluring as it is to challenge the traditional orchestral model, and to put it to work as a “site for new aesthetic models,” it is not exactly the approach I take in *Control Flow*. It may be that the traditional symphony orchestra – and in this respect there is a huge difference between the ensembles Cardew and Morris were writing for and my opportunity with the La Jolla symphony – is not the best tool for the aesthetic ambitions articulated by Lewis (Lewis 2006, 432). Although we may not be able to say for sure what it means to “learn to improvise” (there is no consensus on that
score), my acquaintance with the aesthetic leanings of this particular orchestra as well as my sense of the context in which my piece would be rehearsed and performed, told me that all parties concerned would be best served if I did not ask them to do that on this occasion. In the end I decided that the principles of musical friendship and cooperation outweighed the appeal of polemically a potentially obsolete performance practice— and we have seen in the famous confrontation of *Atlas Enclipticalis* with the NY Philharmonic how disastrous the results can be when a composer sees himself as crusading visionary while an entire orchestra perceives a piece of music as openly hostile.

Bearing in mind the obsolescence of the orchestral model on the one hand and Leonard Bernstein’s failed experiments with indeterminacy on the other, I decided to strike somewhere in the middle. Though its notation and orchestrational strategies will feel familiar to the orchestra, *Control Flow* is closely linked to less stratified ways of making music. It aims to encourage non-hierarchical ways of hearing and to develop non-motivic strategies for coherence. It does not always offer the listener a single, unambiguous focal point. It features nonlinear relationships wherein events can have consequences out of proportion to their original scope. Above all, it aims to employ principles of formal organization that do not derive from familiar metaphors of Aristotelian narrative arc. It is not an attempt to break the orchestral model altogether, but rather to encourage speculation on the hierarchical assumptions implicit in it.

In that its basic approach was informed by considering the performance opportunity granted me by the La Jolla Symphony as a social event— to use Adorno’s language, one whose “antinomies” were in need of “non-ideological” mediation— *Control Flow* is to a certain degree a socially contingent piece of music. On the other
hand, Cardew might see in it all the symptoms of bourgeois decay – abstraction from the people, a fetishistic fixation on the graphical layout of the score, a tendency to skirt the political contradictions upon which the performance context rests – that this paper has cast as symptoms of the latent absolutism in contemporary music culture. The piece also aims to inspire a particular line of inquiry in the listener – namely, I hope that the listener will question the control structures in traditional modes of formal organization and extend them conceptually to the hierarchies that define the conventional orchestral concert. And in that the ideas which I try to evoke are treated as not qualitatively different from the social context or the “notes themselves,” this piece is very much an performance of Daniel Chua’s ideas. Of course, if we recall that these two poles are not generic descriptors but that each is a “dialectical force” – they are ideas about music – then it is enough to describe the piece in terms of the polarity in question. An audience member may treat the piece as an autonomous significant structure; the trumpeter may treat the three-day rehearsal/performance period as a way to get to know his stand mate; the composer may have in mind some mixture of the two attitudes. No one location on the absolute-contingent axis is the correct one, but what I can say with certainty about it is that it intends to raise questions about control and that related questions about the persistence of absolute music attitudes framed part of its composition.

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In a sense it is easier to talk specifically about what contingency means in *Contrasti*. So far the word has meant engagement with history, sociability and politics,
but the distinction can apply wherever music depends for its meaning on some external referent. In a way that locates it firmly on the contingent side of the spectrum, *Contrasti* is “about” the medieval Italian improvised theater tradition known as *Commedia dell’arte*. This tradition, with its emphasis on legibility and creativity within recognizable templates and formulas, relies heavily on techniques of “tropological revision” – techniques which it shares with the Afro-American literary mode of Signifyin(g) (Gates 1988, 103). *Contrasti* refers to one example of a classic *Commedia* formula: a *contrasto* is the scene in which two blustering males in conflict engage in a contest of *braggadocio* (“the dozens” in the Afro-American tradition). Each of its three movements, in fact, refers to a generative template that is familiar to the point of being cliché; the *Innamorati* are the star-crossed lovers familiar from Pyramus and Thisbe or countless other iterations, and *The Katabasis of Pedrolino* refers to the scene, somewhat less well known, in which a servant guides his master on a visit to the underworld. That the work addresses itself so literally to such a specific non-musical tradition identifies it almost as program music, the traditional enemy of the absolute.

The contingency in *Contrasti*, however, is something slightly different. *Contrasti* Signifies on a tradition that is itself a characterized by the same tropes of “indirection,” “ riffing” and “repetition with difference” – the very tropes that, for Henry Louis Gates, define Signifyin(g) and characterize the entire Afro-American literary tradition (Gates 1988, 106-108). *Contrasti* is thus placed in the center of a satirical conversation with a satirical tradition. In part, this is motivated by my background as a jazz musician; a sense of humor is, arguably, of fundamental importance to jazz music, which is itself a kind of extended riff on the blues, which is, in a complicated way, a form of “the dozens.” This
kind of density of reference, the joy in exploring a mystifying laminar depth to humorous
effect, is a characteristic of jazz music that I hope to preserve in this non-improvised
setting. Beyond the question of tone and a sense of humor, though, it was my hope that
the contingency of the piece – the way in which it, like Commedia, relies
unapologetically upon what Dahlhaus might call “platitudes” – might imbue it with a
concreteness and transparency which are not common in contemporary music aesthetics.
In this way the piece is contingent upon the very debates explored above in connection
with the first usage of the phrase “absolute music.” If Romanticism tipped the aesthetic
balance in the direction of originality at the expense of structural function – and if Cage
knocked the balance off the table – then Contrasti. Signifying on a tradition so baldly
dependent on templates that are absolutely unambiguous and often ludicrous simple,
attempts to recover some of the complexity lost when the demands of originality and art-
religion reduced musical materials to lovely chords and ever-shrinking, always-
expressive motifs. The templates of the Commedia dell’arte tradition enabled me to
organize musical materials in ways that strike a pronounced contrast (another register at
which the title may be heard) with the prevailing tides of contemporary aesthetics:
Contrasti is programmatic; it is bombastic, obvious and humorous; the transitions within
it are not smooth; it relies on simple templates; its motives are not interesting on their
own but rather derive their meaning from their structural functions. In addition to
affording it these stylistic features, the contingency of the piece upon the Commedia
dell’arte tropes – as well as upon the familiarity of a given ensemble with those tropes –
places it in critical confrontation with absolutist attitudes, which, as I have suggested,
remain latent in contemporary performance practice.
Of the three compositions discussed in this paper, *Work, work*, a two-piano piece for myself and Ittai Rosenbaum, is surely the most socially and conceptually contingent. Like *Control Flow*, it responds to an idea; both the idea my conceptual response in the piece, though, are smaller and more specific than the broad ideological issues raised by *Control Flow*. Most jazz musicians have at some point been asked – often by professionals making a living in the music world – “how much of that was improvised?” The question betrays a basic lack of engagement with the practice of improvisation, and anyone who has tried improvising music will know how impossible the question is to answer. Improvisation is a complicated thing whose precise philosophical definition is totally elusive. This question, and the impulse for compartmentalization that perhaps lurks behind it, are characteristic of the lack of serious engagement with improvisation in the contemporary music world, as well as of the desire – usually pernicious – to “incorporate elements of improvisation” within the confines of conventionally composed music. This piece deliberately obscures the already fuzzy line between recitation and improvisation in the hopes that audience members will think a little harder before asking the question quoted above. *Work, work*, in other words, engages the audience in a form of listening that is contingent upon a common misconception about improvisation. It is one composer offering one position in an ongoing conversation about the nature of improvisation, and its role in contemporary music.
It is also contingent upon Ittai Rosenbaum, the pianist for whom I wrote the piece and with whom I developed a way of playing it. The score by no means contains the essence of the piece, is by no means a completed aesthetic object, and if I were to play the piece with someone else I would want to spend as much time getting to know him or her as I have with Ittai. We developed the piece together over a long, slow rehearsal process. Instead of a monumental edifice emerging, complete and “better than it can be performed,” from the head of single genius, Work, work is a single response to a particular question, different every time, emerging from the slow, protracted collaboration of two improvising pianists. Where absolute music demands that one prophet-composer intimate the absolute, here two pianist-composers address nothing more universal than the broken record of contemporary attitudes toward improvisation.

**Conclusion: Absolute Music or Contingent Music**

If we accept that the idea of absolute music is part of the legacy of aristocratic ideology that Euro-American art music inherits from its origins at court, we may instinctively want to abolish it altogether. Given its origins in Christian dogma, as well as the things it led Cage to say about improvisation, it seems like a way of thinking about music that may have nothing to do with music in the 21st century. It may well be that it is the latent idea of absolute music, as much as anything else, to which George Lewis is responding when he calls for the orchestra as a “site for new aesthetic models” – just as we can see his political quarrel with Cage as a symptom of the broader aesthetic divide outlined in this paper.
To say that this paper is “aligned with” contingency as a more appropriate attitude to take toward music feels a little naïve; and yet, looking at the history of the idea of absolute music in the 20th century, it is hard to hear the charge of naïveté without wondering how much of one’s anxiety in that regard is motivated by the absolute music idea itself. Without making a claim as reductive as that Theodor Adorno, Cornelius Cardew and Susan McClary were right, we can attempt to raise questions about how accurate a picture of the modern world, how effective a discourse, and how interesting an art form music can be if our performance practice continues to accept implicitly absolutist ideas of silent rapture, interiority, purity and non-referentiality. Since Adorno at least, the idea as a critical framework has been under siege; yet our performance practice, educational methods, and culture as a whole have roundly rejected the idea of music as socially contingent. When we go to see a concert of contemporary music, where does the music reside? When does it take place? What does it mean, and what does it depend on for its meaning? Absolute music has a very clear set of answers to these questions, whose consequences are as concrete as the idea is ethereal. They are a set of answers that, in my view, still basically succeed in casting themselves as self-evident and unassailable. This paper, as well as my compositions – and, we have seen, the two are not as distinct as they seem – attempt to demonstrate the political consequences and historical antecedents of absolute music, while offering another position as equally viable. If music can be an intimation of the infinite, it can also be a way of being together. Disagreement on which it should be continues to define contemporary music discourse in ways we do not always appreciate. Whichever attitude
we choose to adopt, we should try to understand the social and political element that will always be at stake.

Bibliography


