

## **Entendez-vous la musique?**

**Peter Dayan: *Music Writing Literature, from Sand via Debussy to Derrida*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.**

### **Review by Robert Samuels**

It is in the title. Or rather, it is not in the title. It is in what the title does not say; what the title says, by not saying. Three words (a book so much occupied by French writing naturally writes what it wants to say *en trois mots*): music, writing, literature. Like three stones cast, one by one, into water where ripples cross, or into a chamber where their resonances may combine. What are these three words? They are separated not by commas, but by enigmatic silence. Perhaps they are nouns, announcing the three categories which will form the theme of the book – an index or taxonomy, mirroring the litany of authors given in the second half of the title. Interpretation is invited before the book's cover is opened, before the reader has traversed the apparatus of acknowledgement and attribution, before the opportunity to note the reification of the book's subject matter in the technical description of its library data ("1. Music and literature 2. Music and language 3. Music – Philosophy and aesthetics" – another replication of the three words and the three proper names that constitute the title). Appropriately, the reader encounters the title of the book three times before reaching the Contents page. What, then, are these three? Music. Music is first; it has priority (as in the Library of Congress's descriptions of the subjects of the book). We are assumed, therefore, to have an idea already of what music is. Literature. The third term of the list, equally familiar and unfamiliar. It is because both music and literature are unstable terms, because they are both notoriously difficult to define, to assume, that they have the properties of resonance with which this title plays. But what about the other term, the middle, the one that links these two (which have been so frequently linked in recent scholarly titles, as attested by the bibliography, and by the genealogy acknowledged in foreword and footnotes, of this book)?

Not music *and* literature (“Word and Music Studies”); nor any such coupling as *is*, *as*, *or*, *in*; but another term, another noun or a participle verb: music *writing* literature. It is writing that links music with literature; writing that differs from both and yet is essential to both – one *writes* music, one *writes* literature; writing that is a practice as familiar and as contested as the other terms that form the title. Immediately, the litany of names written to complete the title resonates. Does the one half map onto the other? Is Sand the emblematic name of literature, Debussy of music, and Derrida of writing? Is the journey through those names (*from* one *via* the next and *to* the third) more than a chronology? Is it also, or primarily, an intellectual journey, a discovery of the practice of writing? Writing initially appears to be a supplement to artistic creation, the preserve of the critic, reader, or listener, rather than the musician or author; but is it in fact the ground of both music and literature, and their secret link? Perhaps it is writing that connects the other two, perhaps writing is the bridge that translates music *into* literature, or perhaps writing is the means by which literature leaves its trace within music.

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A close reading of the title of this work is not conducted for no reason. The lapidary effect of the title is the first instance of the practice that it names. The subject of the book turns out to be, as much as anything, the enigmatic silences that separate those three words. In the ambiguities of syntax and connotation is to be found an effect of music in literature. This is music writing literature. It comes closest, perhaps, to the music within the poetry of Mallarmé, someone whose presence is evident in so many pages of the book, and whose proper consideration comes at its heart, in the fifth chapter of eight (“On the Evidence of Mallarmé’s Music” – at least this essay has now got as far as the Contents page). Mallarmé is absent from the litany of names in the title of this book, but his vision of music as central to the problematics of poetry in the time of his writing is crucial to Dayan. This vision is complex; it involves a constellation of ideas, principally those of rhythm, and the simultaneous address of the Ideal or universal and the unique or individual within the poem. Dayan finds one formulation in

Mallarmé's own words, taken from the "Observation relative au poème" published with the work that so fascinated Boulez in the 1950s, *Un Coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*. The words are given, as with every one of the many quotations in this book, in French and then in an English translation both literal and elegant, appropriate to the particular needs of the commentary at this point (Dayan several times apologizes for the quality of his translations, as if forgetting the purpose for which they are provided, although also necessarily given the theoretical distrust of translation discussed elsewhere in the book, and of which more below):

[...] *"la tentative participe, avec imprévu, de poursuites particulières et chères à notre temps, le vers libre et le poème en prose. Leur réunion s'accomplit sous une influence, je sais, étrangère, celle de la Musique entendue au concert; on en retrouve plusieurs moyens m'ayant semblé appartenir aux Lettres, je les reprends"* ["the venture shares, with something unforeseen, in pursuits particular and dear to our time, free verse and the prose poem. They are joined together under an influence, I know, foreign, that of Music heard in concerts; several of its resources are found here having seemed to me to belong to Letters, I retrieve them"]. (p.74)

This summation, so specific to its moment in intellectual history (1897, the year before Mallarmé's death) and yet also part of a discourse which raises apparently universal questions concerning the nature of music, thematizes an abiding preoccupation of the book. As the defining conditions of literature become less stable, as poetry wavers towards free verse and the prose poem (genres which call into question any attempt to rely on a universal or general definition of poetry), so music appears as a possible source of the poetic nature of poetry; a means of enabling value judgments to be made in contexts where standards of value appear not to exist. Such a possibility, looking to a practice outside of literature in order to preserve its integrity (and this, unsurprisingly, turns out to be a reversible process in which literature also comes to write music), requires a particular sort of writing: what Dayan calls, self-effacingly and self-deprecatingly, "imbecility" in the first sentence of the Foreword. This is a style of writing different from the scientific, sociological rigor of cultural studies, different from the academic rigor of literary criticism or musicology, different from

the sort of writing easily recognized by the Research Assessment Exercise.<sup>1</sup> For Dayan, this is a discourse specific to time and place: “I have found that other way of writing exemplified in a coherent French literary tradition which was born at the time of George Sand, between 1830 and 1850” (p. ix). But, as he implies and as I have just inferred, the dialogue that he traces with such expert sensitivity through a multiplicity of texts in French can be read as exceeding the self-imposed bounds of the book’s topics. Put another way, the first half of the title implies a universality that exceeds the individuality of the second half. I shall return to this.

If music and literature can be said to be in dialogue in Dayan’s book – perhaps it would be better to say that they harmonize in counterpoint – then the same is true of the relationship between this essay and the book. After a very slow introduction, I have set out a first subject. Here I inaugurate a second subject. Dayan wraps himself in imbecility, an excuse for a practice which refuses to excuse itself, at the outset of the Foreword, borrowing the word from Louis Aragon in the first of countless self-aware attempts at legitimization through quotation. Later, he finds something similar in the “risibility” that Baudelaire was unafraid to court in writing to Wagner; and again in the “puerility” that Sand and Berlioz find in the practice of imitation in music, and which Derrida attributes to himself in asking forgiveness of the dead Roland Barthes. I want to pursue this imbecility myself, and acknowledge here and now, as part of my second subject, that this essay is a result of friendship, an importunate (and impertinent) outcome of shared concerns and debate already conducted at conferences, via email, in person. I have described some of Dayan’s over-arching concerns in this book already, and attempted to respond to the wonderfully provocative, weighted ambiguities of the title, as it in turn attempts to demonstrate before the (admirably scholarly) investigation within the pages of the volume, the balance between the musical and the literary by which the nineteenth century worked out, or worked through, universal conundrums of human artistic

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<sup>1</sup> The Research Assessment Exercise is conducted periodically by the UK government, and is ostensibly a peer-review process. At the time of writing, the current RAE is due to pronounce on the relative merits of university departments at the beginning of 2009.

production. I will continue to address Dayan's arguments, because I intend also to supplement them a little by providing some additional close reading from the perspective of a musicologist. But I here want to address Peter's constant tendency to personalize his writing. Almost at the outset, he writes,

And if one thing may be said to have inspired this book, it is my reflection on a more or less repressed frustration felt by generations of music students, who love music and feel in their bones that they know what music is, that they know when they are in the presence of true music; and yet they find that musicology, as they study it, is incapable of addressing that love and that feeling; doubtless because, in order to preserve its intellectual integrity, it shies away from the question of what music is. (p. viii)

How is it that I feel so much simultaneously in agreement with this (long, but expertly balanced) sentence, and also challenged if not insulted by it? Dayan's contention that my own discipline is incapable of understanding the nature of its primary object of investigation borders on the offensive; no musicologist could fail to wish to respond, and that is a primary motivation for this essay. But Peter's compassion for the unnamed students (unnamed and apparently innumerable, since they span "generations") poorly served by the enterprise of academic study of music immediately awakens my sympathy, since I like all my colleagues have observed this frustration at closer quarters than he, have experienced it and feel it as we all do, in every moment that we attempt to account for music, to bear witness to music within our own experience. The personal always lurks beneath the consideration of the universal, or historically specific, in the course of this book; it returns as an explicit theme more than once, and increasingly so towards the end as Dayan considers the uses made of music by Barthes and Derrida, which are indissolubly tied to their own refusal to disassociate the personal from the professionally disinterested. I shall return to this, as well.

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Having concluded a second subject, this dialogue or counterpoint can now develop. I began in the middle of Dayan's book with my earlier mention of Mallarmé; it is now time to look

in a more orderly fashion at the progression suggested by the title. The book does indeed unfold according to a litany of names, but this litany is more extended than the three chosen for the cover. The list proceeds something like Chopin–Sand–Baudelaire–Wagner–Berlioz–Debussy–Mallarmé–Proust–Barthes–Derrida. These are the writers whom Dayan subjects to close reading (a better verb would perhaps be “treats” – indeed, treats as one treats a favored child). In addition to these writers, all of whom have left traces in words, even those who are better known for their music, there are parts to be played by musical texts as well, notably texts by Beethoven and by Schumann. To develop my themes, I want to bring a couple of these texts (deliberately left unread by Dayan) to speech; I wish to see what they may contribute, as texts, to Dayan’s compelling discourse.

The first theme I wish to develop is that of translation. Does music translate, and if so, what does it translate and into what? This is a question asked by George Sand of Chopin’s “Raindrop” prelude; asked by Sand’s fictional creation Consuelo of her beloved, Albert de Rudolstadt, as he plays the violin; asked by Baudelaire of Wagner. Music’s capacity to translate is central to the nineteenth century’s conception of music’s capacity to carry meaning. Chopin’s angry denial of Sand’s apparent association of the rain falling on the roof of the villa in Majorca with his own image (described as a dream) of “icy drops of water [...] falling rhythmically onto his breast,” seen in a kind of trance as he played (composed?) his prelude, inaugurates a debate which Dayan will pursue tenaciously. Chopin’s anger is directed at the idea that music (his music) should contain anything as puerile as imitation of natural sounds. Dayan’s first exercise in close reading is directed at assuaging Chopin’s anger, posthumously reassuring the composer that his companion did not say anything quite as puerile as Chopin apparently assumed. Rather, Sand uses that word, *traduire*, to bridge a gap; to identify a contiguity of things whose relationships are undeniable, but also obscure, indirect. Her comment associates rain, dream and music; and while something, it would seem, has been translated (in the sense that something has passed from one medium to another), the nature of this translation is left unsaid. Chopin’s dream has intervened between rain and music, and this both guarantees that there is a link, and demonstrates the

indirectness of that link and the puerility of assuming that the piano prelude imitates or represents the rain. One proof of this indirectness is the lack of certainty, in which Dayan delights, over which of the preludes Chopin was playing when he fell into his reverie (pp. 7–8). Translation is the name Sand gives to this relationship, and Dayan accepts the term as naming a process that escapes (or evades) the semiotics of everyday (non-literary) language:

So the rain should be perceived in the music, not as a static sense [i.e. not as the “meaning” of the music], not as a signified (still less as a referent), but *as it is translated*, in the process of its own transformation into something else; the music is full of the rain only to the extent that the rain becomes unrecognizable; and that is its value. (p. 10)

There will be many translations in the subsequent course of the book, all of them raising the same question as Chopin’s music. What is it that has passed between music and literature? Sand’s account of the rain – which is not just rain, but her dangerous journey with her son through the rain, returning to the despairing, dreaming, piano-playing Chopin – is certainly a literary construct. Chopin’s dream might also be described as literature, although it lacks the same degree of narrative composition; perhaps better, the dream should be described as writing. There is something between the rain, or rather the journey through the rain, and the music. Sand locates this “something between” in Chopin’s dream, or rather the dream-state of the composing genius. In this her account replicates Dayan’s title: writing is between music and literature, this is music writing literature. The dream emblemizes the writing which accounts for the link between music and rain, and also accounts for Chopin’s anger at the suggestion that the rain “inspired” the music.

It is a consequence of Dayan’s argument, indeed it is essential to it, that the music which is caught in the act of writing is unheard, and to that extent no longer music. It is perfectly plausible that Sand’s account of these events is non-fictional at least to the extent that Chopin was indeed playing one of his own preludes at the piano, and one of them in particular rather than another. What is important, both in Sand’s account and in Dayan’s close reading of

it, is that it is of no matter whether we identify the piece in question or not. Knowing the identity of the “Raindrop Prelude” would be a distraction from understanding the process of translation. The music must become an unheard music before it can be translated, before it can write literature. To identify the piece in question would be as trivial, in itself, as to observe the undeniable connection between the raindrops falling on the roof of the villa (which Chopin denied hearing) and the “icy drops” falling on the drowned Chopin’s breast in his dream. However, my musicological reading of this argument cannot but wonder whether Peter has lost something here, in not wanting to ask Chopin’s text to speak. A musicologist who wished to identify the prelude in question in order to understand the nature of raindrops would incur derision not only from Chopin. But this text that has the capacity to write nevertheless has this capacity to a certain extent and in a certain way. It has something to say, and the musicologist in me mourns not being able to bring it to speech. This ambition is different in kind from the investigation of how a piece came to have value for the composer, his companion, and others of their intellectual milieu; it is also different in kind from the reception history of the piece, and the uses made by publishers, writers of program notes, radio announcers and others of the title “The Raindrop Prelude.” These are concerns for the scholar as historian, or as practitioner of what Dayan terms “cultural studies.” Dayan describes how three of Chopin’s preludes have been suggested as the text that figures in Sand’s narrative (p. 8). Liszt proposed no. 8 in F sharp minor; an alternative proposal was no. 6 in B minor; and no. 15 in D flat most consistently bore the title in twentieth-century criticism and sleeve notes. I do not want here to arbitrate between these contenders or attempt to decide the issue; as I wrote above, knowing which prelude was being played by Chopin would add nothing more than a passing detail to Sand’s account and would not increase our understanding of the process of translation that she describes. Dayan quite correctly and logically demonstrates that there is no reason, on the basis of Sand’s account, to think that any of the published preludes was necessarily the piece she heard Chopin break off playing when she returned to him at the villa. But it is not accidental that these three preludes, and not, for instance, no. 1 in C or no. 7 in A, have been



suggested. It is significant that Liszt was among those who joined in the guessing game of identifying the prelude, even if this seems not to have concerned him enough to wish to ask Sand to confirm his guess (as Dayan discusses, p. 9n). The guesses may go beyond the feature of repeated pedal notes which these three preludes share and which might be taken as a puerile imitation of raindrops. Each of the three texts (nos 8, 6 and 15), or indeed any of the other preludes, might have something to say, something more to write, on the subject of Chopin's apparent disagreement with Sand over the nature of musical semiosis (for this is, to some extent at least, what is at stake in Sand's memoir and in Dayan's discussion). But at this stage in the development of my response to Peter's book, I can do no more than mourn the possibility that Chopin's musical text might have had something to say concerning music's potential to write.

Not so with the second phase of my development. In the first examples Dayan employs of music which is translated into literature, the music is unheard and irrecoverable. He follows Sand's account of Chopin's dream with a discussion of her fictional account of translation of the spirit of a people into an improvisation on a violin in her novel *Consuelo*. When music appears as an identifiable text for the first time in the book, it is the appropriately portentous *Tannhäuser*, in Baudelaire's 1861 article on the work. Dayan finds here and in Baudelaire's other writings on Wagner the same movement of thought as in Sand's account of Chopin's prelude. Having established that "Baudelaire's famous article [...] appears at first quite defiantly to maintain that Wagner's music contains a translatable meaning," Dayan continues, in another long but wonderfully crafted sentence:

It takes a careful analysis of Baudelaire's reasoning, and a perverse and obstinate interrogation of the nature of the apparently translated meaning, to bring out the truth: that just as Sand does not say, or rather, appears to say and then un-says, that Chopin wrote a prelude that imitates the sound of the rain; so Baudelaire does not say, or rather appears to say and then un-says, that Wagner's music expresses ideas and conveys images which are positive enough to be translated; and his genius, like Sand's lies in appearing to ascribe representational value to the music in order to make us see it as full of translatable meaning, then quietly erasing all specificity from that representational value, so that writing about music becomes

the creation of a meaning in perpetual expansion towards the horizon of what language can contain. (p. 27)

We are still, at this point, concerned to preserve music from the puerile attempt to represent in sound an observable phenomenon or a “positive” (i.e. unambiguous and translatable) image or idea. Chopin was not attempting to portray raindrops in his prelude; Baudelaire expresses his “translation” of Wagner’s music only in metaphorical terms and describes the attempt to describe them at all as “risible,” as doomed to fail. So much for the naïve belief that music’s “meaning” can be summed up in a title, or expressed unambiguously in words. We have the idea, by this point in Dayan’s investigation, that music calls forth a creative, metaphorical response, which it cannot fully determine but in the creation of which it nevertheless participates. But what if there should be no such uncertainty about what music “means,” about the images it contains? What if a composer should explain, clearly and responsibly, what he intended his music to portray? Could this music be anything except puerile? The second phase of my development is concerned to engage with Dayan’s discussion of just such an example, and this time I shall attempt to bring the musical text to speech.

Just as Dayan’s first chapter began with a quarrel, with Chopin’s anger at Sand’s apparent misunderstanding of his craft, so his fourth chapter, “Keeping the Nightingale Alive” also rests on a quarrel. This time, however, the quarrel is one which he has to stage manage. It is a disagreement, across a space of some fifty years, between Berlioz and Debussy, and it concerns Beethoven’s representation of bird song in the *Pastoral Symphony*. All the movements of Beethoven’s symphony carry descriptive titles of one sort or another, and the second movement, *Szene am Bach* [Scene by the Brook] contains imitations of the songs of the nightingale, the quail, and the cuckoo. In brief, these imitations were accepted by Berlioz and condemned by Debussy. For Berlioz, the experience of listening to this movement convinces him that absolute beauty must exist, and that he would “think most unflattering thoughts” of anyone who did not hear this movement as beautiful; although Dayan also quotes another text in which Berlioz criticises Beethoven’s representation of the nightingale for

failing to capture the essence of the bird's song, which is "*jamais posée*" [never settled] (this seems only an apparent criticism, since this quality makes it impossible to capture within the confines of musical scales and notated rhythms). Whereas Debussy derides the imitations of birdsong as "the wooden nightingale" (I suspect that this image was reinforced by the fact that at the date of the concert in question, 1903, the flute was likely to be made of wood rather than metal), and the "Swiss cuckoo," an image which combines two latent accusations: that Beethoven is abandoning his proper, native voice; and that this passage of music is mechanical rather than musical – puerile, indeed.

Dayan proceeds to show, convincingly, that the difference of opinion between these two French composers reflects their different historical moments in post-romantic aesthetics. What is enrapturing for Berlioz is deeply threatening for Debussy. His discussion goes a long way toward accounting for the fact that this symphony has been treated with a fair degree of mistrust ever since its premiere (in the same concert as the much less distrusted Fifth Symphony) – what David Wyn Jones, in a 1995 introductory study, refers to in his conclusion as "the trivial and distorted images of previous generations."<sup>2</sup> But what about Beethoven's text? What might the symphony itself tell us? Dayan comments that the passage of the symphony in question "has always been read as containing imitations of birdsongs" (p.46) and he is certainly right on that point. What is not immediately obvious from his comment (nor, to be fair, from what Debussy or Berlioz write) is that there is little room for doubt, since Beethoven took the trouble to write *Nachtigall* [nightingale], *Wachtel* [quail] and *Kukuk* [cuckoo] in the score. At this point I convict Peter of the only deficiency I really find with his book: that he includes no musical examples. Here are Beethoven's three birds:

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<sup>2</sup>Wyn Jones 1995, 88.

Example 1. Beethoven, *Pastoral Symphony*, *Szene am Bach*, mm. 129–136.

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system includes staves for the following instruments: fl. à 1 Nachtigall, ob. à 1, cl. in Bb à 2 (at pitch), and strings, horns, bassoons. The flute part begins with a trill (tr) and a 'Wachsel' (change) in the second measure. The oboe part features a 'Kukuk' (cuckoo) call in the second measure. The second system continues the flute and oboe parts, with the strings/horns/bassoons providing a harmonic foundation.

This passage is certainly unusual. But the nature of its oddness is worth a closer look than Dayan is able to give to it, and a closer look enables it to comment in its own way on the dispute emblemized by Berlioz and Debussy. Example 1 occurs towards the end of the movement. In formal terms, it is placed in between the end of the second subject group (the movement is in slow sonata form) and the coda, into which it leads. This is itself a curious feature. These measures have no discernible formal function – they are sometimes labelled a “cadenza,” which is a musicological means of ducking the issue of what purpose they

serve. The chord that ends the recapitulation, on the first beat of m. 129, could perfectly well be followed by the final cadential phrase, which occupies the last four bars of the movement (mm. 136–39), without any disruption to the form or disquiet to the listener. The fact that the three birds' appearance is in this sense superfluous to the movement is reinforced by the suspension of meter, and of tonal progression, which marks Example 1. These bars are, indeed, supplementary to the musical argument of the movement, which makes it all the more striking that they should be the bone of contention between Berlioz and Debussy.

While Dayan acknowledges admiration for and indebtedness to Derrida more than once, and uses Derrida's texts as the destination of the journey implied in the book's title, the Derridean notion of the supplement hardly figures within the book. Yet here, in these bars, Beethoven allows his birds to sing (and indeed, to bear their proper names as a signature, another Derridean gesture) in a passage which is, incontestably from the point of view of musical process, a supplement to the *Szene am Bach*. Will it, in truly Derridean fashion, turn out to be not just a supplement to the text, but simultaneously the ground of the text's signification? The answer to this question is also the answer to some of the unease with these bars felt by commentators, since Debussy is far from alone in his distrust of this moment. While the explicit presentation of birdsong is reserved for this passage at the end of the movement, it is not unprecedented in what has gone before. The quail is the simplest of the birds, in musical terms, since it sings on a single note. What distinguishes it is its dotted anacrusis rhythm, and this is anticipated within the accompanimental figures earlier in the movement. The first of these anticipations comes at mm. 27–28:

Example 2. *Szene am Bach*, mm 27–28.

fl. à 2, ob. à 2

cl. in B $\flat$  à 2 (at pitch)

strings

The woodwinds here do not have the dotted rhythm of mm. 129–32, but the aural connection is not distant. The cuckoo is only slightly harder to find. At the first extended cadence of the second subject group – a significant moment in the form of the work – Beethoven interrupts the constant triple-time motion of the movement with duple-time figures in the strings and then an extended cadential trill:

Example 3. *Szene am Bach*, mm. 38–40, *strings*.

*f*

*dim.*

*p dim.*

tr.

This cadence, with its parallel passage in the recapitulation, and the appearance of the birdsongs at mm. 129–32, are the only moments in the movement at which the gentle triplet momentum is suspended. It is rhythm, once again, which brings the birdsong – almost – to audibility, as the duplets emphasize the falling thirds with which the cuckoo sings in the coda. This musico-ornithology now needs only to pursue the nightingale, the most musically complex, and semiotically significant, member of the trio (Dayan pursues for himself the nightingale elsewhere through music and literature). While the quail and the cuckoo are anticipated by fragments earlier in the movement, the nightingale is everywhere. The song, when Beethoven notates it, consists of three distinguishable motives (as Example 1 shows). First, syncopated repeated notes, rather like these:

Example 4. *Szene am Bach*, mm. 7–8, horn.



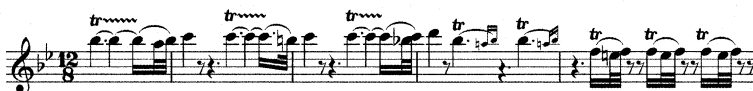
Secondly, emphasised whole-tone appoggiaturas, rather like these:

Example 5. *Szene am Bach*, mm. 1–4, first violins.



And thirdly, a trill ending with a flourish, rather like these:

Example 6. *Szene am Bach*, mm. 7–11, first violins.



These pre-echoes of the nightingale's song perhaps demonstrate, paradoxically, why Berlioz criticized Beethoven's attempt to represent it in music: because it is more extended and more complex than the songs of the quail and cuckoo, any musical representation of it must already be disposed according to musical categories; it must be composed of detachable motives susceptible to musical variation and repetition, and to that extent, the birdsong is not capable of capturing the life of the real bird even when it is presented in its supplementary passage outside of formal or harmonic musical processes. So, is Beethoven having his cake and eating it here? Perhaps, in fact, his text is less puerile and more aware of its own problematics than either Berlioz or Debussy were willing to recognize. Beethoven's engagement with the history of pastoral imagery has been much analyzed,<sup>3</sup> and his simultaneous reliance on and distancing from visual imagery is summed up in his own description of the work in the program for its first performance as "*mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Malerei*" [more an expression of feeling than painting]. This last word, *Malerei* is nearly always translated by musicologists as "tone painting," but it is worth pausing over what Beethoven actually wrote. The music is more the expression of feeling, than the expression of painting, of visual images. Those images are invoked, certainly – the phrase is correcting an emphasis in the listener's perception, not directing that the music should be heard as "the expression of feeling and not of painting" – but it is feeling that matters, in Beethoven's opinion. And the expression of feeling, here, precisely in the movement from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, is also an ambition of literature. The birdsong emerges from the musical material; it is allowed its moment of "puerile" imitation only after and outside of the musical process which it has animated. It has something of the character of an imaginative response to the text, within the text. Chopin reacted angrily to Sand, perhaps not wishing to allow music to write literature; here Beethoven has angered Debussy, and has placed doubt within Berlioz's admiration, as he allows literature to write music.

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Kirby 1970 or Jander 1993.



The third phase of my development is played out by and through piano works by Robert Schumann. Whom else could I possibly choose, after all, since I (nearly) bear his name? This accidental, personal link is not irrelevant, strangely, to the matter under discussion here. Whom else but Robert Schumann should I wish to bring to speech in a debate where Dayan reads closely Roland Barthes' attribution of the semantics of the French *arraché* [torn off] to Schumann's German tempo indication, *Rasch* [quick], and where later he quotes Derrida's essay on the death of Joseph Riddel, which reads his work as "riddle" (pp. 124–25)? It is Barthes who brings Schumann to Dayan, and who also brought Schumann to Derrida, as we shall see later. Peter allows himself a moment of relaxation as he introduces Barthes's comments on Schumann:

Barthes tells us that he hears a sense in the word 'rasch' which, as he is perfectly well aware, it probably did not have for Schumann, because it is rooted in French, not in German. I might say that this is rather rasch of him; and the un-academic awfulness of my pun might appear to echo Barthes's refusal to be limited by faithfulness to primary sense [...]. (p. 104)

In part, this is similar to the point in many an academic paper where the audience is allowed to laugh, as a means of varying the level of concentration and letting the personal engage the attention. But it is also the point in Dayan's book where the question of musical signification becomes more urgent, because it is voiced closer to our own day, away now from the battle with shifting aesthetic conditions which marks the nineteenth-century authors and composers who have peopled the book up to this point. Barthes is asking why it makes a difference that Schumann uses the word *Rasch* rather than a more standard musical term (i.e. an Italian term such as *vivace* or *presto*). The meaning of this term, the reason why this difference of nomenclature is meaningful, is something Barthes brings to the text; it does not pre-exist "within" Schumann's text and yet it cannot be said to be entirely arbitrary, since it would not arise except for that text. Dayan uses this to unite musical meaning with meaning *per se* in Barthes's work, seeking to show why music is for Barthes the medium which demonstrates the existence of a meaning, always metaphorical, that

goes beyond the dictionary meaning of the words of a text, toward a meaning which engages the individuality of the reader or listener, addressing them as a bodily incarnated being. Music should force a listener to stop, to arrest the unseemly rush from music to meaning, to acknowledge that the signification attributed metaphorically to the music is a personal one: “There is never any assurance that the music itself justifies the metaphor. That is why the other term for such images in his work [...] is: hallucination” (p. 102). And again:

It does often seem that for Barthes, when we divert our gaze to look not through the signifier to the signified, but at the signifier and the truth of the work it does, what we see deprives us of a comfortable and phallic belief in our ability to penetrate language and reach a reality beyond. If we read the text as a text, as composed of signifiers – and this is what we must do if we are to appreciate music or literature – it allows no proper reading; its truth, like the truth of the signifier, is always already improper, metaphorical, as if, ‘comme si’. (p. 105)

The text by Barthes which inaugurates these readings is “Rasch,” translated in *The Responsibility of Forms* (one of my very few complaints of this book’s excellent notes and index is that Dayan only gives references to Barthes’s works from the *Oeuvres complètes*, when knowing the original publication would help the linguistically challenged locate the English translation). Here Barthes is reacting to Schumann’s *Kreiseriana*. Dayan quotes and translates thus:

dans la première des *Kreiseriana* cela fait la boule, et puis cela tisse, dans la deuxième, cela s’étire; et puis cela se réveille: ça pique, ça cogne, ça rutile sobrement [...] (III p. 295)

in the first of the *Kreiseriana*, it rolls itself into a ball, and then it weaves, in the second, it stretches; and then it wakes up: it stings, it thumps, it forms a splendid sober torrent [...] (p. 102)

Dayan introduces this quotation with the comment, “[...] it is clear from the outset that the mode of this hearing can only be expressed in metaphor,” and he follows it with “Where he cannot think of a metaphor, he cannot say what he hears.” My suspicion is that Schumann’s text has even more to say about these

metaphors. Here is the first of the *Kreisleriana*, rolling itself into a ball:

Example 7. Schumann, *Kreisleriana* Op. 16, No 1, *mm.* 1–2.



Then it weaves:

Example 8. *Kreisleriana* No. 1, *mm.* 25–26.



Here is the second piece, stretching:

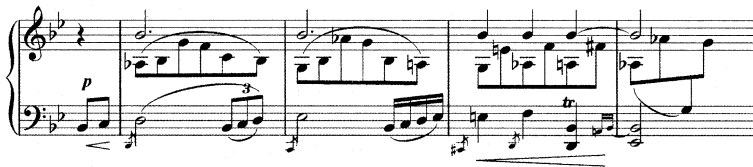
Example 9. *Kreisleriana* No. 2, *mm.* 1–2.

Sehr innig und nicht zu rasch.



I could go on, because these are a paragraph of writing and a musical work which I have spent time with before now.<sup>4</sup> But this is enough for Schumann's text to speak. Of course these are metaphors, as Dayan remarks. But, as a pianist of similar ability to Barthes, I can testify that they are also not metaphors, but literal description of one's fingers, rolling themselves up into a ball, weaving in and out of each other, stretching: those parallel octaves that begin the second piece and are only the first of many stretches; someone such as me, who is usually the entire audience of their own performance, is tempted just to imagine the sounds when the piece becomes even stretchier:

*Example 10. Kreisleriana No. 2, mm. 10–13 (original published version).*



Barthes's description is, one should remember, of *musica practica*, which he had outlined some years before writing "Rasch":

There are two musics (at least so I have always thought): the music one listens to, the music one plays. These two musics are two totally different arts; [...] the same composer can be minor if you listen to him, tremendous if you play him (even badly) – such is Schumann.

The music one plays comes from an activity that is very little auditory, being above all manual (and thus in a way much more sensual). It is [...] a muscular music in which the part taken by hearing is one only of ratification, as though the body were hearing [...]: seated at the keyboard or the music stand, the body controls, conducts, co-ordinates, having itself to transcribe what it reads, making sound and meaning, the body as inscriber and not just transmitter, simple receiver.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, not all of Barthes's metaphors can also express the physical production of meaning by his (or my, or the pianist's) body. All we

<sup>4</sup> Samuels 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Barthes 1977, 149.

amateur lovers of Schumann must have our own “splendid sober torrent;” here is mine:

*Example 11. Kreisleriana No. 7, mm. 41–47.*



Peter has not misunderstood or misrepresented Barthes here, but the “improper truth” of the music appears to be inaccessible to him, in his text, as one who cannot claim (or admit) to playing Schumann badly. This truth, this meaning, can be observed in my score examples latent in the body’s performance, as much as (or more than) latent in the hearing. Where is the music’s meaning? Not (just) in its sound; not “in” its text; but neither is it (just) in its hearer’s imagination; nor even (just) in its performer’s curling and stretching fingers. It is emergent, found in the body’s encounter with Schumann’s demands, and the mind’s ratification of the sounds which are the lamentably evanescent traces of that encounter. The *cela* of Barthes’s sentence is marvellously unlocatable; and that is Barthes’s (and Dayan’s, and my) point.

To continue to develop this third theme: there is a later point at which a work by Schumann lies silently at the margin of Dayan’s text. Again, Schumann has spoken through a text to Barthes; but this time, Barthes’s text has spoken to Derrida, and Derrida’s text to Dayan. The texts by Derrida with which Dayan is principally concerned in his last chapter are those concerned with death, especially the generally late “tombeaux” written on the occasion of

the deaths of Derrida's friends and colleagues.<sup>6</sup> In them, Derrida confronts time and again the collision of the personal and the ideal, and the connection between the conditions of meaning and death itself. And time and again, he turns to music to articulate the problematics of meaning, to ask the question of what and how a dead friend can still speak to us, and how we, the receivers of their surviving texts, bear responsibility towards them. These were questions which seem first to have come to Derrida as he wrote "Les morts de Roland Barthes"[The Deaths of Roland Barthes], in 1981, and from the opening question, music is evoked:

*Comment accorder ce pluriel? À qui? Cette question entend aussi selon la musique.*<sup>7</sup>

Several times in the book, Dayan makes play of the double meaning of the French verb *entendre*, which means both "to hear" and "to understand." The verb *accorder* has a similarly suggestive semantic range, as the published English translation of Derrida's essay tries to capture:

How to reconcile this plural? How to concede, grant, or accord it? And to whom? How to make it agree or bring it into accord? And with whom? And such questions must also be heard with an ear to music.<sup>8</sup>

Derrida's encounter with the uniqueness of Barthes's voice, and the simultaneous universality of his thought, are part of the justification of the plural of the title, and they are also the poles which Dayan discovers defining music and literature in the texts of his history, from Sand via Debussy to Derrida. And within Barthes's writings, it is his own encounter with the death of his mother which raises these same concerns, encapsulated in a photograph described (but, significantly, not reproduced) in

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<sup>6</sup> These essays take several different forms, ranging from eulogies given at funerals to personal correspondence. They are collected in Derrida 2001. For the later French edition (Derrida 2003), Derrida chose the title *Chaque fois unique, le fin du monde*, and included an introduction explaining this choice.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida 2003, 59.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida 2001, 34.

Barthes's text *La chambre claire*.<sup>9</sup> And it is in looking at this photograph, writing about himself looking at his mother through this photograph, at his mother as she never was for him (the photograph was taken when she was a small child), but also seeing her as she always was for him, that Barthes hears, or wants to play, Schumann. Dayan quotes the passage:

this photograph of the Winter Garden was for me like the last music Schumann wrote before he went under, this first *Dawn Song*, which is in harmony [here Dayan gives a footnote on the verb *accorder*] both with the way my mother was, and with the pain that her death gives me [...] (p. 128)

The text which lurks behind the layers of quotation here is not named by Dayan, although it is identified by Richard Howard:<sup>10</sup> Barthes is thinking of the first piece of the five *Gesänge der Frühe* (Op. 133). Dayan translates Barthes's verb *sombrer*, which describes Schumann's fate after writing these pieces, as "going under"; Howard prefers "collapsing." It is a euphemism for the onset of Schumann's terminal illness (the last stage of syphilis), the psychotic state for which he was confined to an asylum for the last period of his life. He wrote the *Gesänge der Frühe* in October 1853, at which time he had already experienced psychotic episodes. They turned out to be not quite the last pieces he wrote, but they were the last pieces whose publication he supervised. He was admitted at his own request to the asylum at Eendenich in February 1854, where he died in 1856. Death, therefore, is written into Barthes's encounter with this music before it is heard or played. We cannot know the essential nature of Barthes's mother, or the essence of his grief, by playing Schumann, any more than by seeing the Winter Garden photograph – and this is part of Barthes's point. But we can pay attention to Schumann's text, and observe, perhaps, some of the grounds of this irrecoverable signifying force – and this must be part of Barthes's point, too, and I suspect it is part of Derrida's point in reading this particular paragraph from *La chambre claire*, and part of Dayan's point in reading this paragraph from Derrida's *Les morts de Roland Barthes*.

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<sup>9</sup> Barthes 1980. The English version is Barthes 1981, titled *Camera Lucida*.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes 1981, 70.

The title, *Gesänge der Frühe*, is itself arresting. Schumann, young but knowing himself to be potentially at the end of his life, writes short piano pieces but calls them songs. While the “song without words” had become established in piano music of this time, the textures of these five pieces are not particularly close to the typical melody-plus-accompaniment of Mendelssohn’s famous examples of the genre – this is especially true of the second and third pieces. Schumann’s songs are further away from the mechanics of the texts’ construction – this is music written by literature, perhaps. Schumann’s choice of title is probably related to Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*, a novel that Schumann had just read: the manuscript originally had “Diotima” (the hero’s beloved, an ideal of beauty, in *Hyperion*) as its title.<sup>11</sup> Barthes’s French version of the title is *Chants de l’aube* (literally, *Gesänge der Frühe* is “songs of early morning”); perhaps in turn this is suggesting to Barthes the *Aubade*, the lament of lovers parting at the break of day. Equally, psychologists identify a common pattern of anxiety in which the sufferer wakes in the early morning, a time typically laden with anxiety over death and also the most common time of day for death to occur.<sup>12</sup> This confluence, of love, ending, and the dawn – which is, of course, each time unique and also each time the same – surrounds the death of Barthes’s mother, our possibility of sharing in the significance of that event for him, and invokes, also, the question of whether signification is ever truly possible. As Dayan expresses it,

Between Barthes and his mother, words do not serve to signify or to create images, they work neither like a hermeneutics nor like a photograph; as they shed the burden of sense, they become music, and as they become music, they become the space of love. (p. 127)

Barthes could probably have played – probably did play – the first of the *Gesänge der Frühe* with little difficulty. It is short (39 bars), slow (*Im ruhiges tempo*), and not taxing for the fingers. It is also decidedly odd. The first phrase consists of a simple four-bar

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<sup>11</sup> See Daverio 1997, 455.

<sup>12</sup> These different resonances underlie the bitter irony of the title of Philip Larkin’s poem *Aubade*.



melody which is repeated; the end of the first phrase, however, merges slightly disconcertingly with the beginning of the second (technically speaking, the dominant chord in bar 4 is treated not as a half cadence, but as a kind of harmonic phrase overlap – a curious, off-balance quality results from the interaction of melody and harmony,<sup>13</sup> so that the exactly repeated melody does not sound like a repeat of the opening); the second phrase then repeats a motivic detail in sequence, so that the whole first phrase is nine bars long rather than the eight bars more usual for an opening phrase of this sort.

*Example 12. Gesänge der Frühe, I, mm. 1–9.*

*Im ruhigen Tempo.*

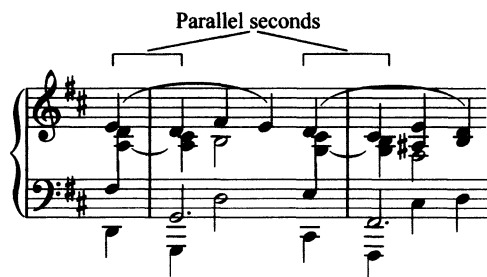
This nine-bar phrase is then repeated almost exactly, but starting a third lower (the first two notes, D–A, become B–F sharp). This, inevitably enough, leads to a third statement a third lower again (starting G–D; actually this is transposed so that it sounds a sixth higher rather than another third lower). This third phrase is slightly modified so that it is the “expected” eight bars in length, and it leads to a climax and coda, all still based on the musical motives that made up the opening melodic phrase. Schumann’s music is

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<sup>13</sup> Daverio comments that “the bass and inner voices become curiously dislodged from the melody, as if to imitate the overlapping and clashing of sonorities in a great reverberatory space.” Daverio 1997, 481.

both predictable – domestic, even – and utterly surprising. Is this like death? Is this like Barthes's mother? Is this just like music? Is this just, like music? Perhaps the meaning which arises out of this text was found by Barthes's fingers, stumbling over:

*Example 13. Gesänge der Frühe, I, mm. 7–8.*



To play these bars, so simple on the page and so untroubling to the ear, is to stumble; the parallel seconds in the right hand are quite extraordinary for quiet, unambitious domestic piano music of the 1850s. They are disconcerting (especially for the amateur player), though the nature of their disquiet is extremely hard to define or to express. Perhaps the same was true of Barthes's grief.

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To recapitulate: “Neither in general nor in particular is music self-identical.” Dayan makes the comment in the course of his discussion of Mallarmé (p.72), and it stands intellectually as well as physically and discursively at the heart of the book. Music is always different; it is never the same twice. Performers understand this, which is why it is the aim of each and any performance to be different from all other performances, to be *that* performer’s interpretation of *that* work. The quality of being unique and unrepeatable, as well as being simultaneously faithful to the text, is an accepted standard of value applied by critics to performances and recordings. In this, music is identified with life, against the deadening effect of mechanical reproduction – something which

gives criticism of recorded performances a decidedly equivocal edge. Barthes recognises that photographs are allied with death, since they reproduce images which are already gone, of people or scenes already dead, as soon as they are produced at all. Derrida extends much the same critique to language (spoken or written) in general: any communication is like the legacy of the dead, addressed to the dead. The heroic opposition of life to death found in music stretches from the most practical concerns of the recording industry, through the aesthetics of artistic production, to the commentary on signification in Barthes and Derrida when they turn to music. Dayan expresses it with some humor in his discussion of Mallarmé:

It could be argued that the dominant theme in the arts since the long twilight of romanticism has been precisely an unholy wedding between the mechanical and the living, in which the living, rationally, always comes off worst – and yet never quite lies down dead for long [...] (p. 72)

Here Dayan is perhaps seeking to reassure those students left so frustrated with musicology in the Foreword. Their belief in the value of their musicianship, seemingly ignored by musicology because that belief escapes the categories of scientific representation and hermeneutic language, is not only proof that they are alive, but is in tune with, accords with (in French I would want to use the verb *accorder*) the project of both music and poetry in the last couple of centuries. Dayan returns to the theme, in a much more mournful tone, at the end of the book as he tries again to encapsulate the work that music can do in expressing the inexpressible, an aim also of poetry but only possible to it at great cost; which is, Dayan believes, why Derrida, like Barthes, repeatedly turns to music when trying to act responsibly towards the dead:

Music names no one. Music does not remind us that it cannot represent. We can appreciate the analogy between its singularity, and the singularity of the loved one, without being constantly aware of the heterogeneity of those two singularities, real though it is; in music, we may be almost effortlessly carried away, borne away, to the space between two infinities where the poem only arrives after the work of pardon and sacrifice. (p. 129)

So how can one treat music responsibly? Dayan points out that all this commentary on the power of music can only take place in words; the experience inaccessible to words can only be shared through them. But the writing which is aware of this interaction of music and literature will be different in kind from the writing of musicology, or of social sciences or cultural studies. How will it be different? Dayan's answer appears to be, quite simply, by being different. Different, that is, from the text which gives rise to the writing. Rather than judging writing on music according to how well it represents the music, as musicology generally does, this response to music is open to the signification which escapes such attempts to represent, to describe or explain. In poetry, this signification is the "music" within the poetry; it is the trace of music inscribed within literature. Equally, writing on music should perhaps risk approaching poetry as its model for responsibility towards the inexpressible nature of the signification of music. Such writing cannot say just anything, certainly; it must acknowledge the musical text as the source from which it springs. But it does not have to attempt to replicate the meaning of music in words; its fidelity to the text is in responding, poetically perhaps, differently certainly, to the provocation of the musical text. Such writing will bear the trace of music within it, and carries the hope, too, of respecting the literature which writes music. Peter's aspiration is to find such a mode of writing, one that is at once both a scholarly consideration of its subject and a poetic and personal response to it. Such an aspiration is one which I share, which is why this essay has extended Peter's text at such length and why it has been punctured at intervals by personal reflections most improper to its discourse. As a final, cadential gesture, I can express the conviction that by this kind of reading – reading with the apparatus of the scholarly critic, reading with the detailed eye of the systematic music analyst – texts of all kinds, musical, novelistic, poetic, philosophical, can be allowed to write, and by this writing to demonstrate and prolong their value for us, for our students, for our inheritors.

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