

# Parts to Sing Empty

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I PROBABLY READ ADORNO TOO YOUNG. AS A BEGINNING COMPOSER in college, reading essays like “On Popular Music” (1941) and “On the Fetish-Character” ([1938] 2002) left me with a lingering embarrassment at my enjoyment of treble melodies, songs with beats, and singers with big voices. I found myself flinching at regular meter, uncomfortable with the idea of my automatic response. Later, much practice at listening to the car radio and studying non-Western music afforded me more perspective on the pleasures and sorrows of mindful as well as mindless listening. At some point I realized that my dodging meter had very little to do with fighting social injustice or capitalist work cycles. And that sense of guilt over my complicity in the culture industry had as much to do with social pressures of a particular aesthetic environment as the texts I was reading. Still, the analysis of listening as an experience—the idea of breaking down initial reactions and flashes of recognition, tracing out the paths of distraction and concentration—stayed with me. Though at first distrustful of my own automatic, seemingly standardized, reactions, I became interested in the particularities of passive listening. If

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inattention was so easy, what were its parts, and how might it be mediated, ornamented, or parried? How might I have a conversation with what a listener brings to the table—automatically or not?

I considered boredom and distraction as aesthetic experiences. I practiced writing whole notes. I dug up traditional harmonies and playing techniques, to see what might pass in familiar clothes. I found perfect fifths and repeated them. I read Walter Benjamin's depictions of boredom as a gray blanket from which a dreamer emerges unable to articulate the arabesques of its inner lining (1968, 204), and his image of Proust writing in bed in a darkened room with artificial lighting to perpetuate nighttime and its corresponding activities of dreaming and forgetting, likened to Penelope's nightly work of weaving and unweaving. Proust would send galleys back to the publishers webbed with notes—no corrections, all additions—because remembering is infinite (1968, 202). There is a Bashō poem in which a cicada sings itself utterly away, to shell (Miyamori 1932, 216). I listened to older music for most beloved parts, to sing empty.

Based on my conviction of flutist Berglind Tómasdóttir's secret identity as a pop star, "Britney Whitney Clark Kent Is Not a Disguise" was a dance dance concerto for flute and orchestra on tape (Chen 2012). Amid play-along Mozart concerto excerpts, the flutist maneuvers through mash-up passages of classical favorites and the storied introduction to "My Heart Will Go On" (Dion 1997), culminating in a captioned dance cadenza highlighting important moments in the history of the flute and its repertoire. I wanted to be informative. I wanted to connect the dots between most remembered pieces, writing through recognized bits repeated with enough variance to blur that recognition, to unfix or mobilize it. I wanted to walk into the heart of Celine Dion and take a field recording.

In making pieces for supermarket (Chen 2010), I found help explaining the immersive totality of the shopping experience in Deleuze's continuous flows of pure sensation and Leibniz's swooning perception and memory loss in the face of overwhelming multitude (Deleuze 2005; 2006). Pacing with gliding cart in hand, under shadowless fluorescent lights through aisles of seemingly endless food packages parceled to transcend temporal and geographic limitations, seemed the quintessential expression of insatiate, seamlessly unpeaked desire. I dispersed pieces throughout the store, overlapping run times, flowing without teleology as many small, divisible parts, each full of their own

motion: singing the aisles from moving carts, tuning tomato sauces by sugar content, tuning to freezer hum, assembling monochrome carts. Through these actions I sought to acknowledge the supermarket's undercover identity as a sublime nature and a space for art.

My first tape piece (Chen 2005) was spliced from a glitchy recording of Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1968, 217–51) read into different resonant containers and recorded through a faulty microphone cord. It is mostly indecipherable. Does it matter that it was Walter Benjamin and not the ingredient list of my preferred breakfast cereal? The text is not audibly discernible, but at the time, its presence made the act of pushing little clips around in ProTools seem a little more purposive. I thought, in some metaphorical way, aura might sound like reverb.

Why read theory at all? I wanted a way to justify making music. I wanted a rationale that would give this small corner of work that I found so enticing a way to speak to more urgent concerns. I felt then (and still do) that there are parts of the world that are unspeakably wrong, and that I can do so little about it hurts. Theory does not fix, but it can describe, and imagine. This can connect the smaller parts to the larger, and because all I can access are the small parts, it seems useful to try to connect.

Reading about professional wrestlers or soapbox design or the history of prisons, these stories retired in my memory as fairy tales. But these stories hidden within the mundane showed me how our everyday lives might connect to power and the larger shapes the world takes on. Like theory, composing is a kind of practicing at organizing the world, assembling connections, testing out models. Music allows us to reconfigure sounds and their associations, taking in the breadth of everyday life, drawing out unheard context and potential.



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