

# BEYOND LACOUÉ-LABARTHE'S *ALMA MATER*:

## MUS(E)IC, MYTH AND MODERNITY

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This article addresses the question of the role of music in Lacoue-Labarthe's œuvre, from the well-known 1979 essay "L'Écho du sujet" through to the succinct but lucid transcript of a talk given through the "Petites conférences" series at the Nouveau Théâtre de Montreuil: *Le chant des Muses: petite conférence sur la musique* (2005). Aimed, as it is, at a young and non-specialist audience, the style and register of the latter are apposite to the context, and thus the absolute opposite of the rigorously academic and exceedingly technically and philosophically dense "L'Écho du sujet"; and yet very little, *theoretically*, is found in one that isn't in the other. Indeed, both focus on several clear themes: the (essential) relationship between music and philosophy; the fundamental link between music and language; and most obviously, both apparently reach the same conclusion: that the specifically *musical* aspects of the "catacoustic" subject – the subject that is given to "itself" pre-specularly through echo, rather than through reflection – are profoundly and inescapably linked to the maternal. Between these two texts which frame the musical considerations at hand there are a number of other texts – most obviously *Musica ficta*, which is without doubt Lacoue-Labarthe's best-known work concerning the question of music. This article, however, considers Lacoue-Labarthe's engagement with music primarily, though not entirely, as it occurs in texts other than *Musica ficta* – though many of the central commitments of *Musica ficta* resonate with the perspectives advanced elsewhere. In particular, the focus will be on two texts from the recently published edited collection by Aristide Bianchi and Leonid Kharlamov, *Pour n'en pas finir: écrits sur la musique*: "Pour n'en pas finir" and "Une lettre sur la musique".

The reason for such a focus is the clarity with which a central tension is exposed in Lacoue-Labarthe's musical considerations, and most poignantly with regard to the constitutive relation between myth and modernity: on the one hand, from "L'Écho du sujet" through to *Le chant des Muses* Lacoue-Labarthe remains committed, as noted, to the (absent) maternal or uterine origins of music's emotional essence – music is the attempt to *retrouver* the very first *émoi* (*é-moi*). On the other hand, in works such as "Une lettre sur la musique" and "Pour n'en pas finir" Lacoue-Labarthe is concerned with the way in which music, in its distinctly modern construction, is figured in relation to a nostalgic attempt (through a "perfectionnement technique") to recoup the emotive power attributed to the mythological ancient model it assumes as its (illusory, absent) origin. The structural similarity in these constructions is unambiguous: in both instances a nostalgic loss or absence (and thus, as Lacoue-Labarthe is well aware, we are immediately dealing also with desire) impels, or rather *compels*, creation – the *artifice* of *techne poiesis*. But the different emphases placed on the way in which these constructions relate specifically to the subject – one as descriptive of musical ontology (in general, at least within the West) and the other of a particular historical epoch (i.e. modernity) – bring us to an arguably irresolvable but nonetheless productive tension that pivots around a constellation of terms: music, myth(ification), modernity and the maternal.

As Bianchi and Kharlamov suggest, Lacoue-Labarthe "fut de ces rares philosophes après Adorno à avoir eu et assumé une oreille"<sup>1</sup> – indeed, though music is a recurring interest or topic in Lacoue-Labarthe's thinking (as well as one of his great passions), the extent to which this is the case has perhaps been insufficiently noted to date. More precisely, it is not only, as Lacoue-Labarthe suggests in *Le chant des Muses*, a question of asking fundamental questions about music's ontology, but also that for Lacoue-Labarthe, music itself appears to be "la trace même de l'origine en nous", evocatively haunting us in its ability to reactivate the trace of what is always already lost.<sup>2</sup> It is striking, if not surprising, then, that so many of Lacoue-Labarthe's

musical considerations are intimately associated, or put into a fundamental relationship, with the supposedly conditioning role played by infancy; in this regard, the specifically musical texts must be read against the backdrop of *Phrase*, which explores, as Christopher Fynsk describes, the “singular articulation (‘writing’) of a pre-symbolic inheritance which inscribes itself with the subject’s advent or birth to existence, thereby bringing something like a distinctive rhythm and pitch to the experience that takes form there.”<sup>3</sup> In short, music is cast as the emotive “echo” of an originary opening which is traceable (theoretically, if not empirically) to infancy: to the archaeological pre-history of the not-yet-subject. Music thus affords Lacoue-Labarthe not only the possibility of destabilizing philosophy’s representational schema, but the musical experience is also uniquely able to “toucher à une origine et à un commencement antérieur au point où se séparent mythe, philosophie et littérature.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, all that remains to be said before outlining in more detail the two lines of musical thought identified above, is that though the focus of this article is certainly on the role of music for Lacoue-Labarthe’s thought vis-à-vis modernity and mythification (and thus politics and aesthetics), the way in which this question appears in Lacoue-Labarthe’s œuvre necessitates a brief acknowledgement of the substantial role the maternal plays for Lacoue-Labarthe’s thinking more broadly. As Avital Ronell recently described, “[i]t should no longer confound his readers if Lacoue’s thinking of the unrepresentable has a default position: ‘Mother.’ Morphs of Mother emerge at different stages of his œuvre, including as a backdrop for the political scene, as figure for unfigurability and dearth of representation. She’s the end-station that no one really makes it to, though she structures a whole train of events.”<sup>5</sup> With this in mind, this article deploys a movement that operates both with and against Lacoue-Labarthe (and Nancy – I have elsewhere noted a similarly musical-maternal construction in Nancy’s musical considerations<sup>6</sup>): in a joint paper from 1983, “Le ‘retrait’ du politique”, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy set out five “traits” that would allow for a retracing or rethinking of the political, the

fourth of which is “la question de la mère” which they “maint[iennent] avant tout comme l’index d’une *question*.”<sup>7</sup> However, as Ian James notes speaking of Nancy’s *La communauté désœuvrée* – though I think the same observation would apply more broadly, and also to Lacoue-Labarthe – it is this trait alone that “falls by the wayside”.<sup>8</sup> This article thus begins to answer a question posed, though not explicitly answered, by Lacoue-Labarthe himself, and most crucially, perhaps, suggests ways in which Lacoue-Labarthe’s own work – despite its tireless returns to a pre-specular maternal reserve – indicates simultaneously a scepticism of this very construct and points towards ways in which we might move beyond the mus(e)ical maternal.

### ***Music, Myth and Modernity***

In “Une lettre sur la musique” and “Pour n’en pas finir”, Lacoue-Labarthe attends to the distinct configuration of myth and music (and consequently politics and aesthetics) that emerges in the modern period (this line of thought evidently also underpins the central argument of *Musica ficta*). His focus is, in particular, the invention of opera as a genre; indeed, one of the major claims is that it is no accident or mere chance that the “paroxysme du Moderne” was attained through music-drama (i.e. Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*).<sup>9</sup> As Lacoue-Labarthe goes on to explain, much of what Wagner was trying to achieve was already in place – was simply a repetition of – its Florentine/Mantuan incarnation: it is written into the story of the birth of opera itself. Lacoue-Labarthe draws our attention to the distinctly modern paradox upon which much of this is built: a *new* genre is founded in order to return us to the tragic dramas of ancient Greece and thus, from the off, opera is caught between the nostalgic ‘perfection’ of the ancients and the modern need of “perfectionnement technique” aimed at surpassing the (already perfect) model which it is trying to revive: “C’est ainsi que naît l’opéra.”<sup>10</sup> He highlights the way the

Florentine Camerata engage in a sustained attempt to resurrect ancient tragedy; through the discovery of ancient texts (primarily Plato and Aristotle) their attention was drawn to the profound effects that music was apparently capable of in the ancient world. As Lacoue-Labarthe attests, this is not only reflected in the choice of subject matter for the earliest operas (Peri's *Euridice* (1600) and Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607) being cases in point) but in the attempt to (re)construct musical techniques for the excitation of the passions inspired by the ancient association of particular modes with particular affects, and a mythological conception of music's incredible powers. It is an explicit attempt to create a more expressive music that is nonetheless founded on the recovery of a music that is, in its essence, (already) expressive.

The vibrant socio-political context was no doubt vital to the creation of a distinctly hybrid form – the combination of not only musical and dramatic but literary, mythological and theoretical aspects – made opera a focal point not only for the Renaissance revival of antiquity but also for questions about the relationship between art and politics at large. Though the intellectual climate was indispensable to the birth of this new genre, it was by no means an entirely abstract or theoretical endeavour but rather one that plays between what we might think of as theory (*episteme*) and concrete practices (*techne*): indeed, though the Florentine Camerata were informed by ancient music theory, the techniques they sought were an overtly musical practice. And of course the word “opera” itself means “work” – both in the sense of the work carried out, the labour involved, and the resulting work itself: the *œuvre*. In short, that music is figured as an inherently nostalgic attempt to recoup an original or arche-original emotional immediacy through technical means *is* the constitutively modern myth that Lacoue-Labarthe highlights. The creation of various techniques (e.g. *musica ficta*, *seconda prattica*, *stile rappresentativo*) is understood as the search for a technique capable of re-presenting, and perfecting, an already perfect, ancient model of music – music, from the early modern period onwards, is thus subjected to a representational, rather than sonorous, logic. Whereas the

ancient model attributed music's emotive power to an ostensibly psychagogical model whereby music plays a central role in shaping, moulding, and training the psyche (in order to achieve psychical, social, and even cosmic harmony) – its essence is synonymous with its effects – the distinctly modern conception relies on a constitutive rupture which inverts or at least diverts this relation to the search for techniques that are distinct from, but nonetheless capable of, recreating music's lost but still essentially affective immediacy.<sup>11</sup>

And of course, it is precisely this constitutive impossibility that Lacoue-Labarthe is trying to highlight, the “paradoxe du progrès en art”, or “l'injonction de la perfection et celle du perfectionnement.”<sup>12</sup> Though Lacoue-Labarthe is keen to remind us that the very concept of Art “est un phénomène récent”,<sup>13</sup> he nonetheless insists also on a continuity between the early modern (i.e. especially the invention of opera) and the modern period, which reaches fruition in Romanticism around 1800, and of which music is the privileged vehicle. Lacoue-Labarthe tirelessly highlights the inherent impossibility – the artifice – upon which the entire project of Art (in its Romantic, singular, absolute sense) is built: though “[o]n l'a saluée comme une naissance; elle était peut-être mortifère, ou suicidaire. Et l'Art, comme le Moderne, sont peut-être mort-nés, ou avortés.”<sup>14</sup> Its own crisis is built into its (illusory) auto-conception, whereby it is charged (by philosophy) with manifesting the absolute, but all it can manifest is its capacity to manifest the absolute (and not the absolute itself).

Similarly, it would seem that in substantial passages of “L'Écho du sujet” Lacoue-Labarthe brings music into a more thoroughgoing relation to mimesis (and thus representation and imitation). Rather than framing music (or its essence) as natural and immediate, it is understood as fundamentally imitative (but, crucially, as with his figuring of originary mimesis, without origin) and mediate; this is achieved “selon des critères au reste fixes, traditionnels, soit (et cela concerne principalement l'harmonie) des traits ‘éthiques’ (mollesse, supplication, violence, courage); soit, quant il s'agit du rythme, des *caractères*”.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, it also

allows, as Lacoue-Labarthe makes abundantly clear, for an account of how the (musical) writing subject also always writes an other: style, whether musical, literary, or philosophical, betrays the duplicity of the subject, and the ever present other that can be traced in any (auto-/allo- or bio-/thanato-)graphical gesture. Crucially, this is the case just as much with music as with language or literature, and is why, Lacoue-Labarthe claims, music “n’excède en rien les limites officielles de la psychanalyse”.<sup>16</sup> There is, therefore, an implicit if undeveloped way of thinking a political and ecological philosophy of music – in the sense that music is a spatio-temporal, technical and aesthetic way in which humans (inter)relate to, create, or constitute, their socio-economic, cultural and historical environments – in Lacoue-Labarthe’s formulation of what he describes as a “catacoustic” musical subject.<sup>17</sup> Insofar as it relates absolutely and unremittingly to the social, this concept offers a compelling way of thinking about music’s role – and a role, moreover, that does not differ substantially from literature, the visual or plastic arts, philosophy, science, or psychoanalysis – in processes of meaning making, mimesis, the creation and upholding of values, and the formation of minds, bodies and desires in irreducibly cultural, aesthetic and political ways. Lacoue-Labarthe’s careful and patient tracing of the deeper history of rhythm as intimately linked to “*la forme ou la figure*”, and thus to sculpture, offers a powerful image of, or way of thinking about, music’s role in sculpting or forming citizens in line with the cultural and social values of the time. From this vantage point, even the most abstract aesthetic partakes in the sculpting of bodies, minds, desires and values. In this respect, Lacoue-Labarthe’s choice of *katakouein* (meaning “to listen” and “to obey”) seems particularly apt, inviting as it does a consideration of how music is imbricated in the socio-politic and also relates to power, control, and ideology. It gestures towards the compelling “nature” of music whilst also suggesting that this arises from the co-individuation of social and personal norms, values and aesthetic preferences, rather than from an extra-worldly reservoir of truth, spirit, or pure, unbridled emotion that only music has direct access to.

The emphasis Lacoue-Labarthe places on the constitutive technicity of music – the need of instruments, organs, training, practical and compositional techniques – is extremely welcome, as the mediating material, practical and technological bases of music’s ontology, particularly when it comes to *musique savante*, are still often ignored or overlooked in philosophy. Of course, it is precisely this type of omission that has been central to narratives that privilege a Romantic transcendental conception of music, demanding instead that the social, economic, material or technological conditions and constraints are independent of “the music itself.” Though it is beyond present constraints to consider the topic in anything like the detail it deserves, it is pertinent to our considerations to briefly highlight work by Brian Kane who has made a strong case for absolute music’s acousmatic construction, and especially the sense in which this reaches its apex with Wagner who of course not only wanted an invisible stage, but also constructed the recessed pit which hides the orchestra from sight at Bayreuth.<sup>18</sup> Such considerations resonate with Lacoue-Labarthe’s concerns because this is one of the techniques by which (distinctly modern) music is constructed as an autonomous or transcendental manifestation of the absolute in line with the modern mythological that Lacoue-Labarthe is so steadfast on critiquing, especially given that it culminates with the “paroxysme du Moderne” as realised through the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is emphatically not that (absolute) music is acousmatic, but rather that the hiding of the orchestra – as one particularly powerful example – is a constituent *techné* or technique that helps to create the phantasmagorical illusion of the music coming from a transcendental elsewhere, unaffected by the material practicalities of the mundane. Or in Wagner’s own words, the “phantasmal sounding music from the mystic gulf, like vapours rising from the holy womb of Gaia.”<sup>19</sup>

***“La clôture maternelle”***



The concluding section of “L’Écho du sujet”, entitled “La clôture maternelle”, however, desists from this patient tracing of music’s unremitting relation to the social in order to make the claim, developed more fully in *Le chant des Muses*, that music, or what is essentially musical, attests to a pre-specular rhythm (i.e. not the sculpting of social, cultural, and political forces as rhythm is broached by time) but rhythmic patterning transmitted through the mother’s *melos* or prosodic aspects of her speech *in utero*. It is in this conception of musical pre-specular rhythm that Lacoue-Labarthe locates music’s emotional power, because of the way it incites a reminiscence of the pre-specular experience of the mother’s voice; he writes: “De quoi d’autre que la mère pourrait-il y avoir au juste réminiscence? Quelle autre voix pourrait nous revenir? Quoi d’autre pourrait en nous résonner, faire écho, nous apparaître familier?” And a few lines later: “Je l’ai déjà entendu donc.”<sup>20</sup>

This is effectively the central argument of *Le chant des Muses*: music is essentially, and originally, song. He deconstructs a clear distinction between music and language, with prosody (thus *odos* or song) being a shared point in common. This allows for the claim that each type of music corresponds to its language “type,” which is supported with the example of European orchestral music; he states that after listening to only a small excerpt, even if one doesn’t recognise the particular work or composer, one will recognise whether the work is, for example, Russian or Italian.<sup>21</sup> And not because the music is texted, he says (he is speaking particularly of symphony, it seems), but because of “la mélodie et la prosodie, le rythme,” which are based on, or imitate (“calqué sur”), the language from which they come.<sup>22</sup> Not only does this seem naively simplistic, but one is immediately struck by a plethora of examples that seem to refute this claim: what, precisely, in a Bach fugue corresponds to his Germanic mother tongue? Or in Purcell’s *Fantasias* for viols to his English mother tongue? Or in Berio’s fiendishly virtuostic *Sequenzas* to his Italian mother tongue? Or in John Cage’s aleatoric music to his American English mother tongue? And what about when Bizet writes music that is meant to sound like

southern Spain – where, then, are we meant to locate his French mother tongue? His central claim here – that music is recognisable as, and is traced from, the *melos* of the mother tongue – is either untrue, or positions music that doesn't “work” according to this framing as non-music or, at least, unmusical music.

Perhaps an even more striking example of Lacoue-Labarthe's claim here is that of jazz developing from gospel music or the blues – which themselves, he states, derive from work songs. He asks his reader/listener: “qu'entend-on dans cette musique?”, replying, “[l]a langue des Noirs américains [...] l'anglais parlé – mal, si l'on veut, avec un accent, une élocution “étranges” – par des Africains déportés d'Afrique de l'Ouest aux États-Unis comme esclaves et qui ont gardé, forcément, l'accentuation, le rythme, la prosodie de leur langue d'origine.”<sup>23</sup> Evidently, this characterisation skates over – or wilfully ignores – the complexity of the emergence of jazz and blues music.<sup>24</sup> It seems particularly problematic to ignore accounts that have demonstrated a history shared with minstrelsy; the fetishization of “primitive” orality; and the construction of “authenticity” through the cataloguing gaze of white men and their recording equipment. It seems to be a transparently mimetic, essentializing and naturalized account that is troubling both politically, and in terms of Lacoue-Labarthe's own critique of mimeticism. Comparably, Lacoue-Labarthe finds a similar phenomenon with rap and hip-hop, which he claims to be another vocal music that derives directly from the vernacular of young blacks, this time living in the suburbs of Los Angeles, which when transposed to France, becomes the vernacular of the Maghreb or other Africans living in the *banlieue*. Does rap thus correspond to (“badly”) spoken English or French? Or are black American and black or Maghrebi French all so generically “other” that it ceases to matter to distinguish between them? And does the rap *music* have nothing to do with it after all? His justification seems to be, indirectly, that (implicitly white?) people find it much harder to rap successfully – “ceux dont la langue natale est le français ont beaucoup plus de mal à s'y faire”<sup>25</sup> – and therefore it must

have something to do with the way non-white people *speak*; their (lexical) *style*. No doubt, stylistics has something to do with the overall aesthetic but, firstly, there are many rappers that *do* in fact speak French as their native language (white or not); secondly, this characterization erodes the complex socio-economic and cultural conditions with which this music is linked as well as its (often) engaged politicism; and thirdly, it completely ignores not only the musical/instrumental (where present) but also the richly literary and complexly crafted reliance on various techniques, such as word play, extended metaphor, alliteration, double entendre and lyricism in exchange for a homological mapping onto the prosodic aspects of the vernacular. This analysis seems to be so completely at odds with the careful attention Lacoue-Labarthe accords the construction of music in modernity elsewhere. Of course, the reason for this line of argumentation is not only because of the link that Lacoue-Labarthe wishes to draw expressly between music and what he sees as its maternal-uterine origins (and this is obviously where *Le chant des Muses* rejoins “L’Écho du sujet”) but also because Lacoue-Labarthe is offering a theory of the subject – and this, I would like to suggest, is where things become a bit more complicated.

Underlying this, then, there appears to be a complicity – when it comes to music – between Romanticism, German Idealism, and the psychoanalytic conception of the subject. In pursuit of the absolute – as we well know – this philosophical legacy detached music (only ideologically, of course) – or at least what is *essentially* music – from the mundane, material, technological and the worldly, locating in it, instead, an extra-worldly reserve of spirit, truth, or will, etc. In this, Martin Scherzinger has located what he describes as philosophy’s “sonotropism,” noting the way in which sonotropism “proceeds as if music held a metaphysical valence in excess of the usual mediators of language, culture and history.”<sup>26</sup> What begins in Kant’s ambivalent identification of music’s “‘*unspeakable* wealth’, set adrift from conceptual determination, took on affirmative and increasingly idealized tones in much

nineteenth-century metaphysics.”<sup>27</sup> As Scherzinger notes, this trajectory continues, then, via Wackenroder, Schelling and Kierkegaard through to the transcendental idealism of Schopenhauer’s essentially musical “Will” – itself a “precursor to the Freudian unconscious”<sup>28</sup> and ultimately, via Nietzsche *et al*, onto notions such as Kristeva’s *sémiotique*, whereby the pre-symbolic is conceived of as not merely sonorous, but explicitly musical. With this in mind, it becomes clear how easy it is for “music” (or at least its essence) to become synonymous with a generic pre-symbolic capacity for expression; in short, an idea is conflated with a repertoire in such a way that the cultural “products” of a particular historical configuration are rendered universal, timeless and ahistoric.

Consequently, a philosophical legacy (Idealism’s emphasis on music as an expression of interiority and its detachment from the mundane) coordinates with a psychoanalytic account of the subject that places the musical, chronologically and logically, in the pre-symbolic and pre-specular (and is thus asocial, ahistorical, etc.). Though Lacoue-Labarthe pays such careful attention to modernity’s nostalgic projection of its artistic origins in ancient Greece – a construction that relies on the lack or loss of an originary emotional immediacy – he nonetheless enlists a similar construction vis-à-vis music’s relation to the subject. In short, in one version of the story, music – in its modern configuration – is founded on the attempt to find the technical means by which the mythical power of the ancient model can be re-presented – a move which thence subjects music to a representational logic; in the other story, what is claimed as music’s emotional essence (i.e. its prosodic origins in the womb) is figured as a comparably nostalgic projection of subjective loss or lack. In so doing, a split is occasioned between music as it appears in the material world – instruments, techniques and all – and what is essentially musical – a sonorous and emotive immediacy mapped onto a timeless maternal-feminine that also appears to be independent of cultural, historical, and socio-political formulations: this, I wish to suggest, is also part of a distinctly modern mythologizing of music

as being located elsewhere and in need of re-presentation. The only difference between the two narratives is that one is identified as a distinct historical formulation and the other, by taking “un petit tour du côté de la science,” as non-historicizable fact.<sup>29</sup> In *Le chant des Muses*, Lacoue-Labarthe cites (unidentified) scientific studies that have apparently shown the only sense properly available *in utero* is the sound of the mother’s voice (and heart) and in “L’Écho du sujet” he turns to a short 1927 text, “Musique et inconscient”, by the physician, psychoanalyst, and founder of psychosomatic medicine, Georg Groddeck, to make his case.

To be clear, the central claim of this article is not that music is entirely subsumed to representation or the symbolic in such a way that it never bears trace of a rupture, failure, caesura, or break with the specular, but that what “subsists” pre-specularly is not music – or indeed, even music’s essence. Though Lacoue-Labarthe resorts, in both *Le chant des Muses*, and in the concluding section of “L’Écho du sujet”, to a subjective nostalgic fantasy, I think it is abundantly clear elsewhere that music is inherently contingent, and technologically and socio-culturally mediated, and this includes the possibility of being appropriated to/by myth. As Lacoue-Labarthe himself claims elsewhere, “la musique [...] étrangement, n’est jamais la question de la seule musique.”<sup>30</sup> It is not a case, then, of excavating the “true” nature of music from a philosophy that has simply held it hostage, but instead to recognise that though particular musics may often have an identifiable point of origin (e.g. opera, absolute music, or jazz), that does not mean, to rephrase Derrida, that there is an ahistorical essence of music. It even means the opposite.

The risk of this nostalgic projection, otherwise, is made plain in Groddeck, whom Lacoue-Labarthe cites in support of his argument in “L’Écho du sujet”. The excerpt offered articulates the point Lacoue-Labarthe has been so keen to make: the role of the uterine sensory environment in forming the essential musicality – and thus music’s essence – of the not-yet-subject. Groddeck states:

Les données physiologiques de la période qui précède la naissance, où l'enfant n'a rien d'autre à découvrir par ses impressions que le rythme régulier du cœur maternel et du sien propre, mettent en lumière les moyens dont se sert la nature pour inculquer aussi profondément à l'homme le sentiment musical [...] le musical trouve son origine avant la naissance.<sup>31</sup>

If we turn to the rest of the Groddeck text (uncited in Lacoue-Labarthe's text) the results are quite illuminating. From the beginning there is an "unworlding" of music or at least its withdrawal into unconscious desires and drives when he states: "la musique ne vient pas de la partie consciente de l'âme et ne s'adresse pas au conscient, mais sa force afflue de l'inconscient et agit sur l'inconscient."<sup>32</sup> More significantly, after a long etymological meditation on the word "clef," he is able to make what seems to be his major point: that music is both fundamentally linked to maternity – specifically the pregnant maternal body – and also to the mechanics of the reproductive act itself. He states that:

[L]'étymologie a toujours de semblables affirmations quand elle touche à la reproduction et à la grossesse. De toute manière la clôture concerne un espace vide, elle est réalisée grâce à la clef [...]. Prenons alors les cinq lignes et les quatre intervalles où sont les notes, on obtient le nombre neuf. Et neuf est le nombre de l'achèvement, de la grossesse. L'espace des notes serait par là le symbole de la mère nourricière, et la clef le symbole du masculin, qui féconde et ferme l'intérieur féminin.<sup>33</sup>

This passage is no doubt worthy of extensive commentary, but for now let us focus on two of the most striking aspects: firstly, through the analogy between the period of gestation and the musical score, music (as an idea or concept in its ontological or metaphysical determination) is unambiguously considered to be equivalent to literate high art music produced in Europe over a few hundred years. Secondly, although this occurs in explicitly gendered terms, it is the

choice of *mère nourricière* (rather than simply *mère*) that strikes me as most interesting and instructive: it suggests, obviously, a foster mother – or even a wet nurse – an *alma mater*, all of which are supplements or stand-ins for a “real” mother. This implies that just as Lacoue-Labarthe is keen to stress the essential splitting or doubling of the Father (as both symbolic and real) in the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework he draws on in “L’Écho du sujet”, the mother (or the “mother”) is necessarily also (at least) double. The (symbolic) nurturing provided by the *mère nourricière* is distinct from, or at least supplementary to, the “real” space of gestation, and yet this is never clearly delineated (as it is with the father). I wish to suggest, then, that it is important to understand this mus(e)ical maternal fantasy as a nostalgic, cultural – and perhaps autobiographical – configuration that has little, perhaps nothing, to do with the biological uterine environment. As so much feminist scholarship has bountifully noted, “theories that de-center the (masculine) subject paradoxically privilege the feminine by turning her into a seductive figure of absence. To put it simply, they celebrate woman by effectively making her disappear.”<sup>34</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe’s desire to “remonte[r] de Narcisse à Echo” now seems particularly apt; for what else is the myth of Narcissus and Echo than the celebration of Narcissus’ tragic death (a death that nonetheless allows him to flourish – to flower – symbolically, and thus poetically) and simultaneously, to follow Lynne Huffer again, “the story of a woman disappearing?”<sup>35</sup> Echo’s voice remains, but idealized, disembodied and, significantly, acousmatic.

### ***Beyond Lacoue-Labarthe’s Alma Mater***

To conclude, then, and to move beyond – as far as we can – Lacoue-Labarthe’s *alma mater*, it is necessary to return to Lacoue-Labarthe’s texts, to the stories they tell aside from themselves, and to the (m)others inscribed therein. Firstly, as Lacoue-Labarthe himself claims in “L’Écho

du sujet”, it is always possible to perform an autobiographical reading of a philosophical text – it is “même probablement constitutive [...] de l’énonciation philosophique comme telle.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, both Fynsk and Ronell have remarked on the “biographical substance” subtending *Phrase* – and in such a way that similar analyses could be performed on these specifically musical texts.<sup>37</sup> In this way, Lacoue-Labarthe’s patiently persistent writing recounts as much his own nostalgic projection of irrecoverable origins as it does a theory of the subject – though of course, for Lacoue-Labarthe, these are axiomatically indistinguishable: the subject of theory and the theory of the subject are necessarily conterminously produced. In this way, and without defending the maternal fiction he claims as fact – a fiction that for all its emphasis on mat(t)er, dematerializes the female body leaving only the acousmatic imago of the “living” feminine as necessary supplement to the (dead) male subject – Lacoue-Labarthe’s account is, nonetheless, deceptively coherent. Indeed, just as Lacoue-Labarthe claims Reik’s failure, paradoxically, as his success, perhaps Lacoue-Labarthe’s failure is also *his* success, revealing precisely one way in which the “subject” is worked into a form by a figure. Music, as he states, primes: “elle déclenche le geste autobiographique. C’est-à-dire, aussi bien, le geste théorique.”<sup>38</sup> “L’Écho du sujet”, in particular, is beguilingly honest: it is all about his (m)other.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the tensions that Lacoue-Labarthe unapologetically puts into play point, with a little close reading, towards Lacoue-Labarthe’s own ambivalence with regards to the mythological – if not the biographical – maternal. In *Musica ficta*, he states:

Selon une très ancienne, très profonde et très solide équivalence – peut-être indestructible –, c’est [la musique] un art féminin, et destiné aux femmes ou à la part féminine des hommes. C’est un art, en tous sens, hystérique. Et c’est pour cette raison, essentiellement, que la musique est l’hystérie. Tout au moins une certaine musique.<sup>39</sup>



In the way that Lacoue-Labarthe makes his claim, he asserts with authority that music, fundamentally or essentially, *is* hysteria and/or feminine; and yet, at the same time, entirely undermines this claim. By restricting the purchase of his earlier claim to that of “une certaine musique” he identifies the constitutive aporia of this trope: though music is defined as feminine, by delimiting the scope of that supposed “essence” to only certain music, it no longer holds as a definition for music at large. (It is significant, I would suggest, that a similar and de-essentializing gesture is also at play *vis-à-vis* gender). Indeed, as Lacoue-Labarthe continues, this anxiety over music’s (potentially feminine or feminizing) essence does not lead Plato to condemn all music: again, he condemns only *certain* music. From the beginning, then, “music” has been a matter for both politics and philosophy, and thus a question of disciplining dissonance – of setting the boundaries of the *polis* and of knowledge. It is a narrative that points us towards philosophy’s problematic desire for universal truths (for “un *dire pur*”, to cite Lacoue-Labarthe) uncontaminated by the messy unpredictability and contingencies of the mundane. This much is, for the most part, known – indeed the anti- or post-metaphysical approaches of both Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe are indebted to this kind of observation – even if, as this article aims to have shown, it is sometimes (constitutively) forgotten.

Finally, and briefly, then, it is in the possibility that the “clôture maternelle” functions not as a statement of fact but as an opening or questioning that we are pointed most clearly beyond the mythological musical-maternal as a natural, biological, or ahistorical essence. Rather than indicating a tireless (and timeless) musical-maternal reserve, it seems equally feasible that the “clôture” serves to indicate instead the extent to which this trope is exhausted, that “les possibilités initialement inscrites dans un programme sont épuisées.”<sup>40</sup> Crucially, then, this is not a “clôture” that demands a “simple renversement,” nor does it mean that music has not been able to bear witness to “une tout autre capacité que celle que lui reconnaissait le discours qu’on tenait sur lui.”<sup>41</sup> But rather that it is this “clôture” which marks, as both Lacoue-

Labarthe and Nancy describe, “l’achèvement d’un programme *et* la contrainte d’une programmation” and consequently that which finally “mérite question”.<sup>42</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Aristide Bianchi and Leonid Kharlamov, “Présentation”, in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Pour n’en pas finir: écrits sur la musique*, ed. Aristide Bianchi and Leonid Kharlamov (Paris: Bourgois, 2015), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Aristide Bianchi and Leonid Kharlmalov, “Présentation”, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Fynsk, *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s Phrase: Infancy, Survival* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2017), p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Aristide Bianchi and Leonid Kharlmalov, “Présentation”, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Avital Ronell, “La Malédiction: The Sentencing of Lacoue-Labarthe”, *MLN*, 131.3 (2016), p. 582.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Hickmott, “(En) Corps Sonore: Jean-Luc Nancy’s ‘Sonotropism’”, *French Studies*, 69.4 (2015), pp. 479-93. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Nancy’s emphasis is more emphatically on the resonant space afforded by the belly-womb-matrix, whereas Lacoue-Labarthe, as we will see, focuses more on the *melos* of the mother tongue which

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shapes and forms (musical) subjectivity through time. I am grateful to comments by John McKeane that allowed me to clarify this key difference.

<sup>7</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, “Le ‘retrait’ du politique”, in *Le Retrait du politique: travaux du Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique*, ed. Jacob Rogozinski (Paris: Galilée, 1983), p. 197 (Lacoue-Labarthe’s and Nancy’s emphasis).

<sup>8</sup> Ian James, “On Interrupted Myth”, *Journal for Cultural Research*, 9.4 (2005), p. 337.

<sup>9</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Pour n’en pas finir”, *Pour n’en pas finir*, p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Une lettre sur la musique”, *Pour n’en pas finir*, p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> See Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) for more on the changing relation between music’s essence and its effects.

<sup>12</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Une lettre sur la musique”, pp. 60, 61.

<sup>13</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Pour n’en pas finir”, p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Pour n’en pas finir”, p. 99.

<sup>15</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “L’Écho du sujet”, *Le Sujet de la philosophie (Typographies I)* (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1979), p. 292.

<sup>16</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “L’Écho du sujet”, p. 293.

<sup>17</sup> Eric Prieto has similarly described a socio-cultural and performative account of music that is implicit in Lacoue-Labarthe’s (mis-)use of the term *musica ficta*. See Prieto, “Musical Imprints and Mimetic Echoes in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe”, *L’Esprit Créateur*, 47.2 (2007), pp. 17–32.

<sup>18</sup> See Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). For clarity, the extent to which it is possible to subsume the distinctly theatrical Wagnerian project to the logic of absolute music is far from clear; nonetheless, both Lacoue-Labarthe and Kane identify Wagner as the culmination of a certain trajectory. Secondly, that absolute music is *constructed* as acousmatic reveals little about how such works are played or experienced, or indeed about historical listening practices.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Wagner, cited in Frederic Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “L’Écho du sujet”, p. 297.

<sup>21</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le chant des Muses: petite conférence sur la musique* (Paris: Bayard, 2005), p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le chant des Muses*, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le chant des Muses*, p. 31.

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- <sup>24</sup> Though he does offer a different description of jazz in the brief “Remarque sur Adorno et le jazz, d’un désart obscur”, in *Pour n’en pas finir*, pp. 73-90.
- <sup>25</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le chant des Muses*, p. 33.
- <sup>26</sup> Martin Scherzinger, “On Sonotropism”, *Contemporary Music Review*, 31.5-6 (2012), p. 350.
- <sup>27</sup> Martin Scherzinger, “On Sonotropism”, p. 346. It is striking that Fynsk asserts that “[t]oo much of *Phrase*,” a work which has much in common with both “L’Écho du sujet” and *Le chant des Muses*, “is devoted to the *unsayable*” – which is also described as “resonance”; Christopher Fynsk, *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s Phrase*, p. 14 (my emphasis).
- <sup>28</sup> Martin Scherzinger, “On Sonotropism”, 346.
- <sup>29</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le chant des Muses*, p. 24.
- <sup>30</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica ficta: figures de Wagner* (Paris: Bourgois, 2007), p. 12.
- <sup>31</sup> Georg Groddeck, “Musique et Inconscient”, *Musique et Jeu*, 9 (1972), p. 6, also cited in “L’Écho du sujet”, p. 297.
- <sup>32</sup> Georg Groddeck, “Musique et Inconscient”, p. 3.
- <sup>33</sup> Georg Groddeck, “Musique et Inconscient”, p. 4.
- <sup>34</sup> Lynne Huffer, “Blanchot’s Mother”, *Yale French Studies*, 93 (1998), pp. 177-78.
- <sup>35</sup> Lynne Huffer, *Maternal Pasts, Feminist Futures: Nostalgia, Ethics, and the Question of Difference* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 75.
- <sup>36</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “L’Écho du sujet”, p. 223.
- <sup>37</sup> Avital Ronell, “La Malédiction”, p. 581.
- <sup>38</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “L’Écho du sujet”, p. 233.
- <sup>39</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica ficta*, p. 198.
- <sup>40</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Une lettre sur la musique”, p. 69.
- <sup>41</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Une lettre sur la musique”, 70.
- <sup>42</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, “Le ‘retrait’ du politique”, p. 187.