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LOVE AND FAITH IN THE THEATRE OF MUSIC PHILOSOPHY

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Prelude

When Marcel Cobussen (2008: 4) writes, ‘the secret of all music, perhaps, is to make you believe that it possesses some sayable secret’, he is invoking one of music philosophy’s oldest ironies: what is the mysterious essence or significance of music if not the entire inner life of human sentience? Coming before Cobussen, Vladimir Jankélévitch (1961/2003) ambiguously proclaims the meaning of music’s meaning to be ineffable truth in the hope that the inexpressible mystery of its charm would be emancipated from the orders of anthropocentric logocentric thought. Yet, for Michael P. Steinberg (2014), all music is melancholy in its desire to speak what it knows. However suspect for music philosophy, such universalising humanisation finds a natural home in the art world, for example, in Guy Maddin’s film, *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003), and Michael Nyman’s piano piece, ‘Big My Secret’ (*The Piano* 1993). In the wake of twentieth century aesthetics’ heady preoccupation with music as unthinkable and unknowable, such namings appear as satirical spectres, or as absurd ironies, that are haunted by, and masquerading as, a metaphysical history they can never entirely escape. The anthropocentric musical meaning appears to be wildly adept at repeating, in both theoretical endeavour and artistic practice.

Music’s anthropomorphism is undoubtedly the work of the ineffable. Yet, in the desire to speak the significance of the musical encounter, is it possible that our love and faith in the inexpressible mystery becomes humanised to such an extent that thought itself becomes intensely theatrical? This belief in the sentience of music, in the spirit of music, resonates with what Gilles Deleuze calls, following Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, the theatre of philosophy (Deleuze 1968/1994: 8); a theatre within which the philosopher performs beneath variously tragic, ironic and burlesque masks. In the works of Jankélévitch, Cobussen and Maddin, more precise images of the music philosopher gesture toward the possibility of a theatrics of the ineffable, where the mask works to elevate both the musical mystery and the philosopher into the realm of the divine. In this essay, I take up this peculiar theatre of the ineffable, in order to open out, rather than resolve, the existential connection between the love for music, the mystery of its meaning and the drama of thought. Across four stages, I bring other voices to bear upon the core themes, most prominently those of Nietzsche, Deleuze, Susanne Langer, Steinberg and Albert Camus, to develop a complex image of the music philosopher, and thus a complex image of philosophy’s love for (and belief in)



the ineffable spirit of music. In thinking the philosophical pursuit of musical meaning across the multiple platforms of love, faith, theatre, anthropomorphism and ineffability, I hope also to open out the enduring problem Marion Guck critiques regarding the relation between the affective power of music and the divisive politics that surround musicological confessions of love ([Guck 1997](#)).

This essay then, in the spirit of both complexity and theatre, performs a very particular thought experiment, one which is contingent upon a self-reflective gesture of play between the basic human attachment to a universalising truth and philosophy's mask of intellectual hubris: its work is invested in movements of conceptual foraging and gathering, of contemplative immersion, rediscovery and experimentation. In another way, I approach the serious anthropological attachment to existence (and, correspondingly, philosophy's enduring pursuit of the mysterious relation between music and the human spirit) through a pluralist understanding of the concepts of anthropomorphism, ineffability, spirit, suffering, absurdity and faith, each of which is historically connected to theology. These components, intrinsic to music's ineffable aura of sentience, are also connected to the seriousness with which the human believes, deeply and unquestionably, in the significance of one's inner self. If, as Jankélévitch argues, there exists a certain pathos between music and the inner self, within which the dramatic nature of thought, and its contours of belief, reason, scepticism, curiosity and hope all perform, there is also a mode of brutal self-reflection and self-examination available to us through this problem and its historically sacred components. Thus, as a contribution to existential aesthetics, the essay affirms a kind of contemplative restlessness and incertitude that moves between three stations: the experience of loving music, the discipline of thinking music, and the need to recognise the poetic theatricality that is implicit in the significance of existence. As a work that is searching for the possibility of thought's transformation through the process of a more poetic style of philosophy, this essay allows the ideas and elements in play to remain in play: if music's mystery, like the human spirit, remains irresolvable, the task becomes one of reaching beyond the philosophical love for pure logic and categorical resolution, and into those pathways that allow us to hear the artist within philosophy. I begin then, by introducing the enduring belief in the sentience of music through its historically spiritual context, which prepares a sense of music as both ineffable and uncannily human, and which naturally extends into the philosopher's own imaginary identity in relation to music.

Love and Faith in the Spirit of Music

Our kingdom is not of this world, say the musicians, for where do we find in nature, like the painter or the sculptor, the prototype of our art? Sound dwells everywhere, but the sounds, that is, the melodies that speak the higher language of the spirit kingdom reside in the human heart alone.

—E.T.A. Hoffmann 1813 in [Rumph 1995: 50](#).

The ambiguity of music's spiritual nature may well be embodied in Michael Nyman's piano title, 'Big My Secret', its simplicity capturing the strange irony of music's enigmatic ontology amidst the belief that it speaks Hoffmann's 'higher language of the spirit kingdom'. Hoffmann's renowned conjuration of divine messenger, calling from beyond the finitude of death, captures the sublime rapture of his time. Becoming sentience itself, music is believed to be, to feel, to speak. Beyond and before Romanticism, similar gestures repeat throughout western history which are equally guided by the sense of a felt presence within music, that is, by a belief in music's deeply spiritual (thus meaningful) centre. Preceding Wagnerian longing, archetypes such as Orphic enchantment, Pythagorean cosmic harmony, Socratic suspicion and Augustine's confessions ensure music's genealogy as sonorous mirror to both the eternal soul and the infinite cosmos ([Godwin 1987; 1993](#)). Between Platonic idealism, Christian mysticism and the Romantic spirit, music's existence inhabits the realm of the imperceptible and the invisible: like the human soul itself, the musical mystery is, for philosophical thought, a problem which is in continual negotiation with its mythical dimensions, and, as such, in continual negotiation with mysticism and its figures of wisdom ([Cobussen 2008](#)). For example, with Plato's eternal Idea of true being, Schopenhauer's quintessential copy of a ceaselessly desiring Will, and Nietzsche's Dionysian spirit of earth, time and feeling, philosophy works through the anthropological belief that music possesses, or is possessed by, the esoteric message of a divine soul or cosmic spirit: one which acts upon and affects other souls and spirits, one which affirms the absolute, infinite and unbounded truth to an all-encompassing cosmological unity, and one which is principally human ([Jankélévitch 1961/2003](#)).

Nietzsche's own love for music, his belief in a free-spirited, joyous existence, his plurality of voices, postures and characters, and his dramatic remonstrations against the 'theological instinct' ([Nietzsche 1881/1974: 134](#)) of philosophical hubris and imposture, may be thought as a preparation for approaching the irony of a poetics, a theatrics, of the ineffable, within which the anthropomorphic tendency is



rife. 'Night has come,' writes Nietzsche ([1883–1885/1978: 105](#)), 'only now all the songs of lovers awaken. And my soul too is the song of a lover.' In the sublime spirit of the Romantic artist, such openly amorous declarations move well beyond an accidental humanisation, their confessional intimacy deliberately, and dynamically, displaced in the passionless rites of orthodox academia. At other times, Nietzsche will himself, as if to cannily and self-reflectively counter this poetic self, become the serious philosopher and, in so doing, distinguish precisely who it is, within his own mind, who believes in the sentience of music:

In and of itself, music is not so full of meaning for our inner life, so profoundly moving, that it can claim to be a *direct* language of emotion. Rather, it is its ancient connection to poetry that has invested rhythmic movement, loudness and softness of tone, with so much symbolism that we now *believe* music is speaking directly *to* the inner life and that it comes *out* of it. ... No music is in itself deep and full of meaning. It does not speak of the "will" or the "thing in itself." Only in an age that had conquered the entire sphere of inner life for musical symbolism could the intellect entertain this idea. The intellect itself has *projected* this meaning into sound ... ([Nietzsche 1878/1984: 128](#)).

If Nietzsche's divergent modes of address, one of euphoric poetry, love and symbolism, the other of refined reason and critical composure, appear to be strange bedfellows for the traditional logician, he himself will continue to develop the necessity of one to the other, especially in matters concerning an ethics of spiritual existence. In *The Antichrist*, and as the scathing critique of the false cult of western philosophy, we see that the endeavour to divine 'truth from the belief that something is true' ('two totally separate worlds of interest, almost *opposite worlds*') ([Nietzsche 1881/1974: 152](#)) is outstripped by a more primary catalyst: love. 'Love,' writes Nietzsche ([1881/1974: 153](#)), 'is the state in which man sees things most widely different from what they are. The force of illusion reaches its zenith here When a man is in love he endures more than at other times; he submits to everything'. In the case of loving music then, what force of illusion comes to rescue thought from such endurance and submission, which, in itself, implicitly suggests an ordeal of suffering?

As we shall soon see, for Jankélévitch it is precisely this private love for music which compels the so-called puritan philosopher towards illusion, and to create false spiritual masks, masks which mime the great poet or the divine mystic, beneath which the intolerable evidence of his unadorned humanity (his love and suffering) is hidden. For Jankélévitch, this is the territory of music's ineffability, as it works its ambiguous charms on the drama of thought. Duped, the philosopher of logic wants to say and thus to know, for the belief in illusion is more consoling than the excruciating ordeal of suffering, be it sensual or psychological. Following Nietzsche, we could say that this is the height of a 'theological instinct' as it chokes on its own love for music: if, as Nietzsche ([1881/1974: 134–5](#)) writes, 'philosophy is ruined by the blood of theologians', Jankélévitch's idea that this ruination is due to a continuing confusion regarding the nature and purpose of the ineffable becomes all the more remarkable when we harness, and problematise, Jankélévitch's own theatricality of thought. Before further opening out this theatre, it is important to first emphasise the seriousness that philosophy (understandably) remains committed to regarding the complex relation between music, spirituality and the ineffable, and how this returns to Nietzsche's integral qualification of love. This is the necessary preparation for understanding not only Jankélévitch's musical theatre of thought, but also those further images of the music philosopher offered by Marcel Cobussen and Guy Maddin.

Following Romanticism's legacy of the sublime, and the reactionary formalist debates begun most famously by Eduard Hanslick, twentieth-century music philosophy critiques the ineffable as an intrinsic component of music's ontology, as both the obstacle for knowing music and the affirmation of its transcendental truth. As Michael Gallope ([2017: 33](#)) most recently reminds us, this is the '*paradox of the ineffable*', wherein (again) music speaks deep and absolute meanings to us beyond language. As Jankélévitch himself argues, we could initially consider the history of music philosophy as being principally guided by the mystery of this paradox of the ineffable. We could qualify that this genealogy depicts the spiritual seriousness of the ineffable, and its movements toward and away from Christian faith. With God's own paradoxes, the ineffable originally grounds the sacred language of the negative divine, where God Himself, going beyond representation, exceeding concept and transcending language, is Unnameable, Unthinkable, Ineffable ([Stace 1952: 24](#)). Yet with a deliberately Nietzschean gesture of irony, we could also immediately qualify that as ineffable paradox, and within this sacred genealogy, unknowable music remains obstinately and uncannily human, all-too-human. With the theomorphic image of Man, and the anthropomorphic image of God, the sentience of music thus becomes, ironically and inevitably, divine, all-too-divine. Nietzsche declares ([1881/1974: 153](#)), 'In order that *love* may be possible, God must be a person'. So too then, it would seem, must music: if God is Love, one cannot understate the spiritual significance of an art form so readily anthropo-theo-morphised. In this explicitly transcendental sense,



as theological mystery and thus the height of philosophy, music remains bound to the kind of illusory, impossible, utopian love preserved and defended by both the poet and the mystic: in short, the serious theological self that longs to overcome ordeals of suffering, and to know the one true mystery of existence.

From the Romantic wellspring, the irresolvable problem regarding our intimate communion with the musical mystery continues to undergo variations and reinventions which also animate more corporeal mysteries of life and time. Oliver Sacks ([2008: x](#)) speculates that if we are, by nature, 'musicophiliacs' (lovers of music), we might equally be biophiliacs (lovers of living things), 'since music itself feels almost like a living thing'. In the mid-twentieth century, Susanne Langer had already theorised the relation between music, sentience and the ineffable in organic rather than spiritual terms. Langer ([1953: 126](#)) too believes music to feel almost like a living thing, 'because feeling only exists in living organisms'. Here, Langer moves the musical mystery well away from the eternal being associated with the soul and the spirit, and toward the becoming of life intrinsic to Bergsonian duration. In this affective sense, music becomes the acoustic 'image of time' rather than sublime messenger of an inaudible, otherworldly eternity ([Langer 1953: 109–10](#)). That both music and feeling are rhythmic forces unfolding in qualitative time, that both are intrinsically beyond the order of rational thought and prosaic language, that we cannot speak the fullness of their meaning, but simply live them as experience, places their intuited sameness within the order of the living rather than the dead or the undead. In this sense, the ephemeral existential bond between music and sentience no longer entails the anthropomorphism of music, but an isomorphic bond between form and feeling, made manifest through their shared durational movements, flows and intensities ([Addis 1999: 24](#)).

With Langer, the ineffable no longer summons imaginary spiritual worlds. Even so, a language of the uncanny spirit, of the animistic, still haunts the idea of a feeling of the living. Like Nietzsche, Langer recognises in music the more universal power in art and mythology to animate the glass darkly of aesthetic paradox, poetic illusion and symbolic truth. Possessed by the 'strange guest' ([Langer 1953: 41–51](#)) of *Schein* (shining image), music exudes both the 'peculiar air of "otherness"' and the strange feeling of the familiar: not only does it become the audible 'image of time', but also the acoustic mirror to feeling, the semblance of organic movement, the sonorous illusion of sentience. For Langer, such poetic paradox, residing in the provinces of art and religion, must not lure philosophy away from its task (that is, philosophy must not become mythical itself). The philosopher must abstain from the poetic, adhering to a process of logic that resolves the premises of the paradox: 'the real challenge to the philosopher is to expose and analyse and correct them' ([Langer 1953: 16](#)). Hence the movement from anthropomorphism to isomorphism. Without such corrections, the ineffable will almost certainly lead philosophy astray.

Now, with continental studies so keenly attuned to the need for complexity, I wonder if the real challenge to the philosopher entails a return to the inner poet who loves music and longs to speak its significance, and who, like Nietzsche, knowingly harnesses performative masks to do so. As we will see with both Jankélévitch and Cobussen, the inner poet of the music philosopher is already active in both a theatrical and an enamoured sense, as both tragic and ironic. Yet it is Guy Maddin, the artist film-maker, who illuminates the dramatic nature of this love to the degree of burlesque. The philosophical return to the poetic love for music need not be thought as naïve, simplistic, or regressive, nor might its anthropomorphic participation be considered misogynistic, as Jankélévitch argues. Rather, the return to the poetic self understands both the history of the ineffable that precedes it and the complexity of the affective experience, which, as Jankélévitch himself ironically attests, is nothing less than theatrical. Toward the difference between this tragic poet-philosopher of music, and the more self-reflective, satirical, jesting poet-philosopher found in Maddin's film, Gilles Deleuze provides a fitting preparation; one which affirms, rather than negates, the transformational possibilities of philosophy's theatrical masks.

Deleuze and the Theatre of Philosophy

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze develops the idea of a theatre of philosophy, within which he believes the future of philosophy resides ([1968/1994: 5–9](#)). Taking up the dramaturg's repository of masks, disguises and costumes, tricks, gestures and poses, poems, plays, dialogues and songs, Deleuze makes the distinction between two opposing modes of theatre. In the 'theatre of representation', philosophy puts on the false mask of imposture, miming the pious clergyman or the noble sage, to impose its ideals ([Deleuze 1962/1983: 5; 1968/1994: 10](#)). In the 'theatre of repetition', a dynamic Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean theatre of movement, a new, self-consciously playful figure of the dramaturg-philosopher emerges, one who 'lives the problem of masks, who experiences the inner emptiness of masks and seeks to fill it, to complete it' ([Deleuze 1968/1994: 8–10](#)).



Repetition here, in the context of metaphysics, means precisely not what it presupposes etymologically: reimagining the Latin *repetere* (*re-back*, *petere-see*): repetition is no longer the appearance or copy of an unchanging, original essence: it is not another term for the concept of representation which languishes within the metaphysics of presence ([Deleuze 1968/1994: 1](#)). Nietzsche and Kierkegaard instead ‘make something new of repetition itself’ opposing it to all forms of generality (laws of nature, morality, habit and memory), and charging it with the theatrical atmosphere of irony, satire, lyricism and humour that would parry with the most serious of philosophical adversaries ([Deleuze 1968/1994: 6–7](#)): the irresolvable paradox between the meaningfulness and absurdity of existence in the world of time and feeling ([Ramey 2012: 14](#)), and the ethos of a spirit of immanence that would challenge and even overcome the forces of nihilism.

In this new theatre of repetition, we meet archetypes of faith and figures of transgression, jesters and hermits, reluctant heroes and hollow false men. With Kierkegaard ([1941/1954: 49](#)), the ‘true knight of faith’ believes steadfastly that, in surrendering the finite to the infinite (such as the life of a loved one to God), that which he sacrifices will absolutely be returned to him, not in the afterlife, but in this world of time, through ‘faith, by virtue of the absurd’, by virtue of that which human reason simply cannot fathom. This is what Kierkegaard calls the practice of repetition, where one repeats gestures and acts, the ‘movements of faith’, for the creation of the future (rather than the recollection or restoration of the past). While Kierkegaard will make repetition the task of authentic selfhood in this life through the contemplation and confrontation with despair, Nietzsche’s eternal return, embodied in the forces of Zarathustra, will unleash a more macabre game of loss and salvation, annihilation and rebirth, making repetition the freedom of a euphoric Dionysian will whose forgetting creates and destroys its life over and over again ([Deleuze 1968/1994: 6](#)). Where one’s repetition occurs only once, the other repeats infinitely, and, in *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze crystallises this essential difference:

The Nietzschean repetition has nothing to do with the Kierkegaardian repetition; or, more generally, repetition in the eternal return has nothing to do with the Christian repetition. For what the Christian repetition brings back, it brings back once, and only once: the wealth of Job and the child of Abraham, the resurrected body and the recovered self. There is a difference in nature between what returns ‘once and for all’ and what returns for each and every time, or for an infinite number of times ([Deleuze 1969/1990: 300](#)).

In the manner of dramaturg and director, both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche stage the pathos of their respective modes of repetition in order to disclose and shatter the falsity of representation they find rife in the interloping systems of religion and philosophy. Here, the nature and problem of faith is rendered as play, musical comedy, poem, farce, satire and tragedy, and thus becomes a matter for the senses. By burlesquing the serious self, by playing with the problems of absurdity and despair, by developing roles, scenarios and compositions, philosophy is able to become affective as it joyfully, tragically and ironically performs the suffering of existence, thus animating the drama of faith with a peculiar musicality: where Kierkegaard’s true knight ‘leaps’ to Mozart, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra ‘dances’ to Wagner ([Deleuze 1968/1994: 8–11](#)).

This theatre of the future, where repetition not only ‘belongs to humour and irony’ but is intrinsically musical for Deleuze ([1968/1994: 5](#)), is the ‘overcoming of philosophy itself’ because of its dynamic, affective reach: if, historically, philosophy has privileged the intangible, infinite, unthinkable, ineffable realm of transcendence, it now gives itself over to what Deleuze calls ‘the unthought’, that is, to the forces of life itself, to the body of immanence, feeling and time, through which an ethical spirit — of possibility, choice and freedom — strives to become, thus overturning the fatality and determinism of the moralised soul ([Deleuze 1985/2010: 170–3](#)). Through poetic script, song and fable, rather than prosaic treatise or turgid critique, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche animate the force of real movement itself, creating a kind of kinaesthetic reciprocity for the reader to feel: they ‘put metaphysics in motion, in action ... inventing vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind’ ([Deleuze 1968/1994: 8](#)). Thus, philosophy develops a musical quality which uncannily and ironically summons, reciprocates and burlesques Hoffmann’s spirit kingdom:

In the theatre of repetition we experience pure forces, dynamic lines in space which act without intermediary upon the spirit, and link it with nature and history, with a language which speaks before words, with gestures which develop before organised bodies, with masks before faces, with spectres and phantoms before characters — the whole apparatus of repetition as ‘terrible power’ ([Deleuze 1968/1994: 10](#)).

Thus, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche unleash a new mode of discourse within which the relation between self and cosmos is questioned and performed. With direct relation to the mystery of music’s sentience, and again in the spirit of irony, we could say that amidst the theatre



of the ineffable, another theatre of the unthought vibrates, leaps and dances, one which understands the necessity of the mask in the process of its own spiritual movements and evolution. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze ([1962/1983](#)) further develops a sense in which the transformation of the philosopher occurs through both the faith in the mythical power of the mask, and the resilient refusal to remove the mask:

[T]he philosopher can only be born and grow with any chance of survival by having the contemplative air of the priest, of the ascetic and religious man who dominated the world before he appeared. The mask or the trick are laws of nature and therefore something more than mere mask or trick. ... philosophy itself does not throw off its ascetic mask as it grows up: in a way it must believe in this mask, it can only conquer its mask by giving it a new sense which finally expresses its true, anti-religious force. We see that the art of interpreting must also be an art of piercing masks, of discovering the one that masks himself, why he does it and the point of keeping up the mask while it is being reshaped ([Deleuze 1962/1983: 5](#)).

Toward this transformation of faith through the mask, toward this movement from piety to irony and humour, from the ineffable to the unthought, and from transcendence to immanence, I believe the paradigm of theatre to also have provocative possibilities for reimagining the figure of the music philosopher, for whom the ineffable and anthropomorphic desire continue to play serious roles. Here then, I do not attempt to enforce a strictly Deleuzian reading on those philosophers and artists assembled here, but allow Deleuze's distinctions to set the stage, so to speak, and to echo through the mystery of music's sentient allusions, to prepare a sense in which a theatre of masks and disguises animates music philosophy. Recall Cobussen's uncanny insight: 'the secret of all music, perhaps, is to make you believe that it possesses some sayable secret.' Cobussen's gesture toward the theatricality of the musical mystery is subtle but significant. Animating the make-believe of imagination, our faith in the sayable secret may be thought of as the drama of thought, a drama that is devised and directed by the desire for significance in the tragicomedy of life itself. Belief, as a kind of sublime self-deception, has always been the premise of the theatre of existence. This is what captivates Nietzsche in the ancients' love for theatre, and what he calls the Greeks' tragic culture: beneath the pathos and illusion of the play, through its masks of illusion, all truths may be surrendered, contemplated, burlesqued, endured, reimagined ([Nietzsche 1872/1993](#)).

Jankélévitch's Ineffable and the Sober Puritan

It is within this dramatic historical context that I present my reading of Jankélévitch, who, in *Music and the Ineffable*, reluctantly suggests that even Nietzsche himself surrenders to the role of serious sober poet:

There is no doubt that Nietzsche continued to love what he disavowed, very much so: he is still secretly in love with the flower maidens who bewitched him. Like all renegades, the man who disavowed Wagner's romanticism, disavowed Schopenhauer's pessimism, and blasphemed even Socrates's moralism, nonetheless cannot bear to be parted from his own past and takes perverse pleasure in tormenting himself ([Jankélévitch 1961/2003: 7](#)).

So, as the new voice of a Nietzschean theatre of music philosophy, as a kind of spiritual ironist and interventionist, Jankélévitch develops his own series of masks with which to oppose an endemic philosophical sobriety and theological hubris that continues to grossly abuse the secret object of its affection.

Through Bergsonian differences in kind, Jankélévitch ([1961/2003: 11](#)) hopes to preserve the musical mystery against the secrecy of the gnostic philosopher, the one who hides his love for music beneath the false mask of the mystic poet, 'a mask', he writes ironically, 'behind which divine figures are hidden'. As the self-appointed true messenger of the ineffable, Jankélévitch takes up the role of dramaturg himself, his own poetic persuasions steeped in ironic parable, and in the dramatized flaying of reason which lays bare a theatre of philosophy on both sides:

The mask, acting as pseudophysionomic double for a real and changing physiognomy, does the mask not hide vehement emotions? Music does not conceal meaning to reveal it: that is the strategy of coquetry. Rather ... music reveals the meaning of meaning in concealing it, and vice versa renders this meaning volatile and fugitive in the very act by which it reveals it ([Jankélévitch 1961/2003: 46](#)).



This rhythmic play between revealing and concealing offers a sense of Jankélévitch's sophisticated engagement with techniques of dramaturgy, where such satirical wordplay finds a natural home. Sharing a clear affinity with Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean storytelling, and prelude Deleuze's own theatre of philosophy, Jankélévitch presents yet another contour to the irony and paradox of the ineffable: music needs to be freed from the drama of philosophy, but such freedom only comes by invoking the theatre of the burlesque.

When translator Carolyn Abbate introduces Jankélévitch, she emphasises the irreconcilable difference between musical affect and intellect:

Music has a power over our bodies and minds wildly disproportionate to its lack of obvious or concrete meaning Nonetheless, music [is] always bound to the "world down here below," to a human experience of time, to human bodies and human spirituality, to culture and to past ([Abbate 2003: xiii](#)).

The human distinction here is, again, ironic: against the hubris of philosophy, Jankélévitch aims to differentiate between a metaphysics of music and its affective *charme*, and to do so beyond the prolific tendency to humanise. Jankélévitch argues that the history of western philosophy has treated the musical mystery as a kind of metaphysical cipher for the secret meaning of a universe contingent on the belief in eternity. The difference between the mystery and the secret, here, is crucial. Secrecy entails that which is hidden, that which may only be exclusively revealed to an elite few. As Steven Rings explains, the secret is knowable, but

known only to some. For those not "in on the secret", the barrier to knowledge can take many forms: a secret might be enclosed in a riddle or a puzzle; it might be hidden by acts of dissembling; or it may be accessible only to privileged initiates (Jankélévitch cites exclusive religious orders) ([Rings 2008: 178](#)).

The mystery, however, is 'fundamentally unknowable': it cannot be revealed in the time of life, and, as such, is collectively shared by all, 'for all, and for all time' ([Rings 2008: 178](#)). From this principle distinction, Jankélévitch understands music to be a mystery of the positive, an affirmation of life and time, love, freedom, space, innocence, soul and God, rather than the untellable, negative mystery which is death, the absolute unknown:

[T]he mystery transmitted to us by music is not death's sterilising inexplicability but the fertile inexplicability of life, freedom, or love. In brief, the musical mystery is not 'what cannot be spoken of,' the untellable, but the *ineffable*. ... If the untellable, petrifying, all-poetic impulse induces something similar to a hypnotic trance, then the ineffable, thanks to its properties of fecundity and inspiration, acts like a form of enchantment: it differs from the untellable as much as enchantment differs from bewitchment. Ineffability provokes bewilderment, which, like Socrates's quandary, is a fertile aporia. ... Among the promises made by ineffability is hope of a vast future that has been given to us ([Jankélévitch 1961/2003: 71–2](#)).

For Jankélévitch, therefore, the ineffable escapes language while calling it up, drawing philosophy into its heady cacophony where, as Rings elsewhere describes

a vast plurality of discourses can proliferate in music's presence, without threat of closure. ... Jankélévitch's ineffable 'unleashes a state of verve': as we are pulled asymptotically closer to the ineffable, language is released in ever-greater quantities ([Rings 2012: 219](#)).

Such verve, for Jankélévitch, turns upon 'a metaphorical psychology of desire', which begins its intellectual pursuit through the anthropocentric connection between the highest order of the human and the highest order of the cosmos, that is, through the name of the soul ([Jankélévitch 1961/2003: 10–13](#)). The task to distinguish the musicological tendency to siphon ideas, images, emotions or stories from a great musical depth begins by dismantling the dialogues of Plato, with special attention to the connection between philosophical idealism, music and morality, within which the rational, truth-seeking soul is central ([Jankélévitch 1961/2003: 1–7](#)).

Jankélévitch's own spiritual relation to music is nothing if not complex. He does not jettison the existence of soul, but, following Bergson, understands it as an intensified vitality in the transformational flux of life, as a process of becoming within the psychophysiological



sphere. As a 'diffuse presence' ([Jankélévitch 1961/2003: 52–3](#)), the soul wanders beyond the grasp of language while paradoxically calling language up. If the soul is like music at all, it is because it too, is ineffable. If Jankélévitch renounces transcendental paradigms, metaphorical meanings and an acoustically privileged universe, it is because music is not of the logocentric order of gnostic Saying that has come to define the practice of hermeneutic interpretation, but of the order of drastic Doing ([Jankélévitch 1961/2003: 77–9](#)). Dynamic affective acts of listening, composing and playing preclude a divine essence which allows the intelligible realm of ideas to master the sensible world of bodies. With an emphatically moral ruling on the 'anthropomorphic and anthroposophic' drama that unfolds between the mystery and the secret, and between the gnostic and the drastic, Jankélévitch proclaims, with an imposing irony, the meaning of music's meaning to be ineffable truth, in the hope that the inexpressible mystery of its charm would be emancipated from the violence of anthropocentric, logocentric thought ([Jankélévitch 1961/2003: 14, 73](#)).

Throughout Jankélévitch's invective, the pathos of the philosophical predicament shines through in his own method of poetic persuasion. Against the violence of intellectual imposture, against those historically centric gestures of music philosophy (theocentric, anthropocentric, logocentric and phallogocentric) Jankélévitch satirises the figure of the high-priest philosopher whose secret longing for a clandestine communion with music, swathed in immortal desire, also reveals the histrionic inclination to perform the role of sage poet and mystic. 'The Puritan grudge against music', writes Jankélévitch, 'the persecution of pleasure, hatred of seduction and spells, the antihedonist obsession: in the end, all these are pathologies, just as misogyny is pathological' ([Jankélévitch 1961/2003: 10](#)). Philosophy is too orthodox, too duplicitous, and too sexualised for Jankélévitch, as it mistakes the affective feeling for clandestine concubine, as it condemns this scandalous conjurer who seduces, hypnotises, and leads reason astray. Against so many vilifying secrets spoken, Jankélévitch hopes to silence the roaring cacophony of those sober poets who, failing to keep at a linguistic distance from the musical mystery, are yet to know the ineffable as such. With Jankélévitch's own ironically poetic remonstrations, the continual disfigurement of the ineffable of time is revealed through the dramatisation of the tragic philosopher, whose ascetic mask disguises his secret love for the forbidden fruit of feeling. Against the pillars of music philosophy, Jankélévitch conjures a vision of the pathos, disillusionment and purification that marks the grave intellectual pursuit to master the ineffable:

A man who has sobered up, a demystified man, does not forgive himself for having once been the dupe of misleading powers; a man who is abstaining, having awakened from his nocturnal exhilaration, blushes for having given in to dark causality. ... Strong and serious minds, prosaic and positive minds: maybe their prejudice with regard to music comes from sobering up. ... Music means nothing and yet means everything. One can make notes say what one will, grant them any power of analogy; they do not protest. Music ... lends itself, complaisant and docile, to the most complex and dialectical interpretations. ... Music has broad shoulders. In the hermeneutics of music, everything is possible, the most fabulous ideologies and unfathomable ... meanings ([Jankélévitch 1961/2003: 3, 11](#)).

This is heady prose, instilled with the purpose of the poet, and in this way, Jankélévitch creates a cast with which to perform the drama of thought. Philosophy, he continues to caution us, is flanked by false characterisations of the mystic, by misguided invocations of the poet, by tall tales of prudish denial and brute self-preservation. Beware true lovers of musical mystery, for, in philosophy, music becomes a reticent Atlas bearing the metaphysical weight of the sensual world, a dotting marionette and acquiescent messenger in the hands of the great tragedian. Such false solemnity is taken to task for mistaking not merely the ineffable for the untellable, and the mystery for the secret, but affect for ontology, and unknowingness for certitude. Here, there is the glint of a lilting Kierkegaardian contempt for what we might call the 'false knight' or the 'tragic hero' of philosophy ([Kierkegaard 1941/1954: 86–90](#)). Again, reminiscent of Nietzsche's pantomime invectives, Jankélévitch's sophisticated irony is delivered through knowing gestures of humanisation, through an inverted mirror which unmask the serious predicament of the duplicitous ascetic thinker. Upon music's so-called broad shoulders, the theatre of faith reveals its adversarial positions: with the historical tendency to anthropomorphise music, a tragic philosophy dramatises the mystery, believing it to be the secret. With Jankélévitch, the theatrical gesture of burlesque responds, one which mocks false solemnity for the sake of an ultimately serious ethics of the ineffable.

The Melancholy Musical Soul: An Uncanny Resurrection

In light of the complexity that plagues the relation between music, anthropomorphosis and the ineffable, it is remarkable to come upon the following relatively recent declaration by Michael P. Steinberg ([2014](#)). Not only does it appear to violate the ineffable in music,



it also appears to wilfully ignore (or chooses to be defiantly indifferent to) both its problematic communion with sentience, and the anthropocentric, logocentric order intrinsic to it:

Music seems to be better at being than at knowing. ... melancholy *is* the condition of music—all music. ... Music is melancholic in relation to its own desire. To riff, then, on another Freudian question: what does music want? Music wants to speak and to speak importantly, and that unfulfillable wish is the source of its melancholia. Musical melancholia is an epistemic predicament, an attribute of the musical desire to know. ... If melancholy is the condition of music, then music of any period, place, genre, and style can be considered through this lens ([Steinberg 2014: 289–90](#)).

With a sweeping endorsement of music's humanisation, wherein all music is melancholy in its desire to speak what it knows, does Steinberg involuntarily perform Jankélévitch's gnostic Saying? Or is this a belligerent and defiantly righteous anthropomorphism, intent upon a great musico-cosmological unity against its impossibility, one which would drastically revive a Romantic Schopenhauerian musical spirit for our own time? As the affirmation of Jankélévitch's 'metaphorical psychology of desire', and Nietzsche's lover of music, is this the post-structural sign that the precarious crossing between poetry and philosophy, between symbolism and logic, has once more collapsed?

Toward the dramatic spirit of music philosophy, and toward the love for music, perhaps we could think of Steinberg's belief as wilfully performative, as the intellectual refraction of the inner poet who leaps beyond the ineffable to become the poet himself, so as to speak once more of secret things. As a mirror, Steinberg's melancholy musical soul reflects the same soul in musical practice itself, calling up the intensity with which the artist participates in the seriousness of sentience through the mystique of music. What is melancholy in the life of time, what troubles the boundary between the living and the dead, what lies before, beyond or beneath death (still) comes in the name(s) of musical sorrow. In the Wagnerian desire of Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), in the *Lacrimosa* (Latin for 'weeping') of the Requiem Mass, in Henryk Górecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* (1976), in Nick Cave's 'Weeping Song' (1990), in Elton John's 'Sad Songs (Say So Much)' (1984), in the murder ballad, the Celtic folk lament, and in the blues, the melancholy musical soul is endlessly reconstituted, the intuitive existential bond between music and feeling at once embodying and transcending the ineffable.

In the wake of the twentieth century aesthetics' heady preoccupation with music as unthinkable and unknowable, Steinberg's melancholy musical soul appears as a kind of absurd spectre, one that is both haunted by, and masquerading as, a metaphysical history it can never entirely escape. Animated by a certain pathos regarding the existential stakes of melancholia, this restoration of the ineffable paradox unsettles a musical spirit that moves mysteriously between religion and philosophy, exhuming the being of an older (Christian) soul, and the echo of an older (Socratic) voice, who obstinately and defiantly remains, endures, against a-theological or non-transcendental beliefs in the ineffable, such as Langer's. In contrast to Jankélévitch, for example, Steinberg's uncanny resurrection appears to occupy a mode of thought that is yet to encounter and recognise the ineffable, and its paradox, as such. As the post-structural mirror to both religious dogma and philosophical righteousness, as the return of a Schopenhauerian copy of the will, as the strangely familiar restoration of the serious mode of tragedy, that is, as the unsettling repetition of a deeply felt belief in music's essentially sentient nature, Steinberg's distance between the ineffable and the paradox would thus appear to preserve the fundamental drama of existence. Directed by the inner tragic poet and performing the paradox unknowingly, Steinberg casts the musical spirit of sorrow back into the theatrics of the ineffable. Resonating with Cobussen's ([2008: 4](#)) 'sayable secret', we could say that the mystical aura of music is still beholden to the pleasure of its discretions. Breaching the unknowable meaning of music itself, breaching the voice that ironically remains unspoken, this problem of the sayable secret remains significant for a post-structural philosophy of non-religious spirituality which, in this theatrical sense, is ironically aware of its ineffable and anthropomorphic genealogy, and is thus able to burlesque, rather than solemnise, the mystery of music.

Cobussen's Coltrane: The Wandering Musical Mystic

We have been moving between philosophy, music, theatre and religion to understand the complex relation between the musical mystery and the image of the philosopher. So far, I have tried to emphasise the ways in which the ineffable paradox compels philosophy to assume the gestures, masks, doubles and guises of the theatre. In Jankélévitch's mid-century aesthetics, the dominant philosophical attitude is presented as the emulation of an already existing puritanical pose, whose appropriated communion with wisdom ensures a faith in music itself. When Steinberg revives the melancholy musical soul in our own time, it appears as the uncanny double of the most serious, the most tragic, belief in the meaning of life and music. Let us now look more closely at the image of the musical mystic as it



arises in *Thresholds: Rethinking Spirituality through Music* by Marcel Cobussen (2008), whose own liminal approach invites a transition from the tragic self to the ironic self through the mode of wandering. As a point of comparison, let us recall Jankélévitch's image of the duped philosopher who falsely mimes the mystic. If Jankélévitch hopes to silence the hubris he finds in a puritanical style of philosophy, its original model, the mystic of a perfectly harmonised universe is now entirely displaced in Cobussen's world.

Drawing from both Christian mysticism and the legacy of Nietzsche, including Heidegger, Derrida and Deleuze, Cobussen is in search of a sense in which one might still speak of music as spiritual when one is set adrift from the orders of religion. Here, in the wake of the death of God, and with the failed promises of the institution, Jankélévitch's ineffable with its 'hope of a vast future' (1961/2003: 72), is displaced to reveal a darker lacuna for thought. Like Jankélévitch, Cobussen seeks a discourse which reroutes the stable consolations of logos. Yet, contrary to Jankélévitch, Cobussen argues for the continued presence of language, rather than its absence. In so doing, he takes up the gauntlet that the spiritual significance of music, as ineffable, throws down for serious thought:

Although spirituality may involve a sense of the ineffable and the unnameable, and although it lacks apt categories, these are not arguments relieving us from the task of bringing it up. ... poststructuralists and philosophers of language have pointed out the paradox: only *through* language, only *through* categorical frameworks will we ever be able to catch a glimpse of this realm outside or beyond language and its accompanying institutions. To reach the unthinkable through thinking, the unspeakable through speech, the space-between through classifications, the ineffability of spirituality and music through language — this possible impossibility, this paradoxical task, is awaiting us (Cobussen 2008: 67).

Cobussen's paradoxical task to speak the unspeakable naturally contravenes Jankélévitch's call for silence. The displaced relation between the self and the spiritual can only become something new by breaking with the laws of logos, by experimenting with new modes in which to live, by stuttering through an unformed script, by reimagining the purpose of one's instrument, and whether one has something to speak through or with it. The love for music is now loaded with a new kind of accountability: the attachment to music's mystique now serves a deeply ethical purpose within which improvisation and experimentation are tools of possibility and transformation. With Jankélévitch, the imposture of the ascetic philosopher imposes a bad theatre of faux-mystical divination upon music's ineffability, where the unconvincing performance of cosmic belonging continues to receive false accolades and ovations. With Cobussen, the relation between the roles becomes ruptured, revealing a new figure of religion whose wisdom is dispossessed, and whose sense of purpose is derailed through the unsettling experience of ambiguity and uncertainty. Yet Cobussen's mystic is not an absurdist or an existentialist in the philosophical sense: there is no great epiphany regarding the negation of transcendental belief, nor an affirmation of, say, Kierkegaard's true knight of faith against its rampant imposture (Kierkegaard 1941/1954: 89). With Cobussen, the mystic becomes uncannily aware of an imperceptible tremor in one's divine calling, a hairline fracture in the formerly ordained organisation of the cosmos. Though the mystic still needs a spiritual life, the sublime paradox that Albert Camus describes no longer appropriately captures his purpose. 'Mystics,' writes Camus, 'find freedom in giving themselves. By losing themselves in their god, by accepting his rules, they become secretly free' (Camus 1942/2005: 56). With Cobussen, freedom, lostness and secrecy entail a rather different kind of ordeal. Now, the mystic, the original lover of the ineffable, becomes a shadow of this formerly immutable faith: bereft of this purpose, bereft of the rapture of mystery, bereft of an ecstatic musical practice, the mystic gropes blindly, without direction, intervention or redemption:

[H]e who deals with spirituality, music, and their mutual relation should be a wanderer, repeatedly deviating from the normal, ordinary, lawful course, way, or path. He is not only a heretic who transgresses but also a subversive who breaks (the power of) the law, who strays from the correct path, the right direction, the rule of rectitude, the norm. Having forsaken the straight and narrow and given up all thought of return, the wanderer moves to and fro, hither and thither, with neither fixed course nor certain end. Such wandering is erring — erring in which one not only freely roams, roves, and rambles, but also strays, deviates, and errs. Free from every secure dwelling, the unsettled, undomesticated wanderer is always unsettling and uncanny. He is forever liminal, marginal; he is curiously ambivalent, shifty, and slippery (Cobussen 2008: 73).

Cobussen's figure of the mystic is now quite distinct from the archetype who inspires Jankélévitch's puritanical philosopher, that false tragedian who gets beneath the masks of music to exhume 'the place where music is hiding its messages' (Jankélévitch 1961/2003: 51).



The mystic's musical practice no longer opens toward ecstatic, shamanistic flights of the spiritus, as it did for Renaissance Platonism (Cobussen 2008: 44). Now, the itinerant mystic gropes through the existential no man's land of directionless ideological freedom: it is a kind of musical vertigo, a discordant unsettling of the formerly harmonised self of divine truth. And although the departure from a theocentric regime opens music itself toward a new freedom of identity, in that it need no longer be, speak, feel or know, neither music nor the mystic are entirely free from the residue of religion. As uncanny and displaced, music now inhabits more dangerous thresholds, moving between sacred, a-theological and atheistic thought, for example, 'between Heaven and Earth' (Cobussen 2008: 41–7), between beliefs in eternity and those of time, impossible thresholds that can only be spoken by taking up the old language of negation (the ineffable and the unknowable of theology) and creating something new with it (Otten 1999: 438).

One also finds with Cobussen that the musical poet is no longer purely tragic. The serene speaker of mysteries now assumes a more haunting quality through which to experiment with the irony of secrets, to play carefully in the folds of music and spirituality, to move between the monotheistic, transcendental ineffable and more complex beliefs of archaic animism. Speaking of John Coltrane's own spiritual awakening, Cobussen writes:

Like many other jazz musicians, Coltrane combines elements of Christian, Islamic, Hinduistic, and animistic African religions in order to come to a total personal belief. ... The spiritual quest that Coltrane was on included and prompted the search for new sounds in his music. In other words, the religion was nothing without the music and the music needed the religion as a source of inspiration (Cobussen 2008: 92).

With Coltrane's revelations (notably the 1965 album, *Meditations*), the discovery of the new comes through a return to more ancient ideals, to modal and melodic meditations, to a more independent freedom of expression, which 'rescues improvisation from the severe straitjacket of fast changing chords and extended harmonic progressions' (Cobussen 2008: 92). Cobussen is intrigued by the ideological disturbances that emerge in the thresholds of Coltrane's intensifying religious commitment and a music that seeks to be free from every institutionalised convention and articulation. In the transformation of those jazz conventions of Coltrane's time, Cobussen's (2008: 94) hears no arrival at 'a final destination called God' but sounds that occur

at the fringes of a gaping hole, a staggering abyss, an empty space. ... The more Coltrane stands up for his belief, the more inaccessible and innovative his music becomes. No sweet-voiced sounds, no tensionless consonants, no slow and slumbering, long-drawn-out melodies; instead his later music in particular can be characterised as ultimately corporeal, intransigent, and dissonant (Cobussen 2008: 93–4).

In other words, Coltrane's spirituality of music is the antithesis to the indoctrinated conventions of a mysticism of music: deviating, straying and erring from the laws of both jazz and religion, improvisation becomes a renunciation of the strictly Christian order of the ineffable as it searches out a less comfortable practice of unknowing.

Recalling Deleuze's 'creation of the new' through repetition, we could say that Coltrane's practice, as a mode of meditation, necessarily repeats the gesture of irony. Ultimately, between technical prowess and this frenetic improvisational groping, and through Coltrane's absolute mastery of both body and mind, Cobussen finds another sense in which music reaches the unnameable, wherein an inevitable suffering, an ordeal of existence, endures without the consolations of the religious community. Following Lyotard, Cobussen distinguishes this peculiar kind of suffering from that which is previously understood anthropologically and universally (for example, Plato's suffering body of time, or Schopenhauer's insatiably suffering will). Here, suffering is an indication of individuality, of one's own private journey; it is 'a mark of true thought' wherein

music-making is thinking ... his improvisations are a form of instant thinking ... in his music, that is, his thinking, everything is questioned, including thought, and question, and the process (Cobussen 2008: 95).

When thinking becomes musical in this sense, when musical practice becomes a mode of thought through the suffering intrinsic to it, the sentence of music goes beyond representation. Now, it no longer parodically mimes a real spiritual music, nor does it wear false masks



of piety or quietude, nor is it the ecstatic anthropomorphic gesture of an all-consuming cosmic participation that preserves the immortal. Shedding the identity of representation, shedding the skin of the melancholy musical soul, it is not so much music that thinks, speaks and feels, but the musical mystic for whom mediation and meditation is still essential to the spiritual process, who thinks, speaks and feels through the instrument, and through the conduit of improvisation.

We saw how Jankélévitch exposes the ineffable paradox and dramatises its seriousness, unleashing dulcet remonstrance to preserve the mystery. Cobussen's new mystic improvises on the thresholds of belief, with the practice of improvisation, as a mode of authentic thought, performing an intervention regarding what it means to be and become spiritual. With Cobussen, the poetic voice wanders: it surrenders to the ethics of listening in the world of time even while a residue of the old Christian mysticism remains. Here, thought must move (im)possibly between the two, between thresholds of affect, identity, belief and imagination which cannot be spoken until language itself is embraced as an experiment, as an improvisation, with music as its conduit. If thinking through music may be understood as a kind of suffering, this is also the strength of Cobussen's own poetics when he moves beyond the seriousness of his own inner tragedian to satirise the 'sayable secret'. In the drama of philosophy, this critical gesture moves the ineffable paradox away from the tragic mask of piety, and toward a curiosity regarding music as a medium for true thought, toward a self-affirming, self-conscious irony that collapses the distance between one's own longing to believe in the musical mirror and one's own existential incertitude.

With Nietzsche and Deleuze's guidance, between Jankélévitch and Cobussen, and through the further examples of Steinberg and Coltrane, I have tried to open out the identity of the music philosopher toward a more self-reflective, performative freedom of spirit. If such leaps into the unknown, into experimentation and improvisation, and into a radical reimagining of music and spirituality appear difficult and daunting, perhaps a vital step in our own transformation from serious puritan to free spirit is still missing. Here, I am reminded again of the figure Kierkegaard calls the true knight of faith, and the stages one might take to live into one's 'faith, by virtue of the absurd' (Kierkegaard 1941/1954: 59). 'Humour,' Kierkegaard believes, 'is the last stage of existential inwardness before faith. ... Humour is not faith but comes before faith — it is not after faith or a development of faith' (Kierkegaard 1941: 258–9). With our own peculiarly musical conception of faith in mind, let us now make a final turn through Guy Maddin's 2003 film, *The Saddest Music in the World*, where the serious love for music, and the saying of its spirit, goes well beyond irony and into a kind of macabre burlesque. If, recalling Jankélévitch, philosophy cannot but speak of music's significance, if, as Cobussen goes on to demonstrate, a poet or a mystic is still required to direct the craft of true thought, and if, as Kierkegaard believes, humour is the last stage before faith, perhaps we might look to Maddin's burlesque tragicomedian, who knows how to play with the seriousness of existence against its potential absurdity. Let us then introduce Maddin's world via Albert Camus' connection between anthropomorphism and absurdity, which gives us the necessary context for thinking an ethics of the burlesque.

An Open-Ended Conclusion: *The Saddest Music in the World*

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where Camus (1942/2005) takes up the absurdity of existence, anthropomorphism is once more presented as the necessary conduit for retaining the illusions of eternal belonging, cosmic unity and connection. Here though, anthropomorphism does not perform the ecstatic role of participation against the finitude of mortality. Now, in the theatre of existentialist despair, it veils the catatonia and entropy of absurdity, of the profound sense of a gaping silence between the significant self and an indifferent world. Following Nietzsche, Camus would see anthropomorphism for its vanities and distortions, his own flair for pathos registering another sense in which an intrinsic theatricality accompanies poetic illusion:

The mind's deepest desire ... parallels man's unconscious feelings in the face of the universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity. Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal. ... The truism 'All thought is anthropomorphic' has no other meaning. ... If thought discovered in the shimmering mirrors of phenomena eternal relations capable of summing themselves up ... in a single principle, then would be seen an intellectual joy of which the myth of the blessed would be but a ridiculous imitation. That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse for the human drama (Camus 1942/2005: 15–16).



We have already seen how, as the principle tragedian of the absolute, music too becomes this shimmering mirror that coronates the intuited depths of the human soul, ensuring the consolations of familiarity and unity against the finitude of existence. As with Steinberg's tragic poet, the pathos and gravity of musical melancholia directs belief toward this dramaturgy at the helm of life, accidentally affirming its imperceptible irony: in the same way that the human is created in the image of the divine, and the divine is created in the image of the human, music is humanised to speak the language of the soul, and, in so doing, affirms its own divine mecca against the anxiety of time, even while (as Langer and Jankélévitch both agree) time itself forms the ground for both music and feeling. In the unseen crossing between ineffable mystery and the strangely familiar hauntings of sentience, music once more consoles the desire for an absolute significance of self, thus affirming a faith in the absolute truth of the soul's acoustic mirror. Following Cobussen's musical mystic, could we continue to think of the drama of philosophy as just such an experimental space, as a mode of improvisation, wherein the sayable secret of music transfigures Camus's silence between the self and the world?

Camus believes in the scornful defiance of absurd existence, in the philosophical position of revolt, and in a self-deprecating laughter thrown against the harrowing truth of time's corrosive force ([Camus 1942/2005: 12, 52–3](#)). Like Steinberg's melancholy soul, and like Coltrane's improvisational ethics, this too gives something new to music's ineffable paradox. With Jankélévitch, philosophy is still swamped in imposture: it needs to become self-reflective, to know not to speak. Cobussen finds a way, through music itself, to pervade the paradox with a more haunting irony. And now, with Camus, one senses that a philosophical voice exists beyond the false guise of the tragedian, as long as we can see the predicament of our serious self clearly. He writes:

I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. ... I can understand only in human terms. And these two certainties — my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle — I also know that I cannot reconcile them ([Camus 1942/2005: 49](#)).

For Camus ([1942/2005: 90](#)), the world needs its smiling illusionists, its existential satirists, to set the self free from the weight of the mortal drama of existence, and from death's inevitability. The Danse Macabre may unite us all, but the inclination to mock the serious self reveals the inner poet to be aware of the dance, that is, to be deep in combat with the impasse of those two certainties, mortality and existential incertitude, which Camus finds irreconcilable. Transposed into the case of music, we could say that it is not only Jankélévitch's ironic poet and Cobussen's improvisational mystic, but also the self-conscious absurdist who recognises ineffable paradox and incommensurability, who consciously practices a pluralist drama of thought, and who voices a love for the spirit of music beyond false tragedy and piety. To burlesque the pathos and gravity of musical melancholia means that one wears both the tragic and the comic mask, and is able to move deftly between them, ever reaching toward a self who can embrace the incertitude of existence, in all its complexity.

This is the conceptual subterranean of Guy Maddin's film, *The Saddest Music in the World*, its dark satire on the ethical devolution of an all-suffering humanity grounded in the theatrics of the ineffable. With Maddin, the drama of musical thought is illuminated, with the image of the tragic music philosopher especially returning the belief, and the love, for the spirit of music through the force of burlesque. The premise of *The Saddest Music* is already soaked in an absurdist sensibility: on the eve of the end of Prohibition, beer baroness Lady Port-Huntley announces an exorbitant cash prize for the saddest music in the world: from Siam to Mexico, and from Berlin to Broadway, quasi-patriotic ambassadors flock to Winnipeg's beer-addled tournament to peddle and pawn their sacred cultural wares. Maddin's film is undoubtedly the sophisticated critique of capitalist exploitation in the era of the Great Depression. For existential aesthetics, it also becomes the canny mirror to our own absurdly anthropocentric world, with the sobriety of humanity's suffering existence vetted and contested in the sweaty inebriations of Port-Huntley's hippodrome of nihilism, where the melancholy musical soul is exhumed and performed.

As if to mock the tragic imposture of Jankélévitch's purified poets, as if to toy with both Steinberg's melancholia and Cobussen's suffering-thinking musician, sadness is arbitrarily assumed to be intrinsic to all forms of music, be it within the lyrics of a Mexican mourning song, the purely instrumental homage to Siamese tragedy, or the infinite interpretations of 'The Song is You': from quirky cabaret lament to funereal cello solo, from extravagant Broadway spectacle to choral military march, Maddin stages the essentially musical drama of existence. Mocking the inevitability of finitude, *The Saddest Music* craftily petitions the resolute assertion of this seemingly universal



belief: that the medium of music expresses otherwise inexpressible secret truths to human existence, truths that find their most potent deliverance in extreme moments of crisis. With the spiritual ordeal of death, loss and mourning, music is restored as humankind's faithful companion, confidante, and consolation, as our own melodic marionette who would sing our unspeakable sorrow for us, and who would earnestly give voice to death's own silence. Bound to this anthropological imperative, music performs its dual role as grave harbourer of secrets and solemn messenger of absolute truth, as healer and herald of a profound communion between the feeling of the living and the land of the dead. In this anthropological sense, *The Saddest Music* presents not merely the western world, but the whole world, as one that is yet to become emancipated from the image of a divine, omnipotent, rationalist, narcissistic, egocentric, suffering humanity which fails to see the true irony and nonsense of its collective serious self.

Directed by the satirist, rather than the serious dramaturg, *The Saddest Music* not only gazes at its anthropological model, but also at a philosophy that remains tragic, where the ineffable, as complex concept, is yet to intervene, and to brutally unveil, the uncanny mask of anthropomorphic desire. Running through this is a deeply Nietzschean irony for all the bodies of sorrow and for all the inebriated amnesiacs of the suffering world. With Maddin, poetry and philosophy collide and collude with one another. The world he creates does not worry about what it might mean for us to say that music is sad: the world already intrinsically believes that sorrow remains within the music itself, that the unthinkable magnitude of death morphs into the ether of musical secrecy, for it is death itself that originally summons such music into being.

Flouting the ineffable, revelling in the divine human crime to speak all that is unspeakable through music (and thus to know all that is unknown and unknowable about being and becoming), Maddin would appear to play devil's advocate for a post-anthropocentric, post-religious sensibility. As if to grant all the puritanical sober poets absolution for their own crimes of tragedy, *The Saddest Music* is the messenger of the same revealed secret, but with a key amendment: bearing its deep melancholic wound, musical truth now becomes the crude joke of humanity, the Achilles heel of an adversarial, desperate species which proffers its cultural soul in a time of wretched spiritual devolution.


As the defiant cacophony to Jankélévitch's call for silence, Maddin's burlesque is instructive for reimagining the spiritual seriousness of the ineffable: the otherwise unthinkable proposition of music's own absurdity here becomes the means with which to harness a new, and entirely unorthodox, spiritual sensibility. The inescapability of anthropomorphic desire now opens toward the reimagining of music's traditionally solemn spiritual role. Going beyond Cobussen's suffering musical thought, the otherwise taboo territory of existential anxiety becomes a kind of errant playground for our more satirical, jesting self, the loitering figure of the divine human becoming the clown of ecstatic self-ridicule, with the spirited work of irony joyfully demolishing the egocentric narcissism of the serious self. Ultimately, Maddin's burlesque ironically performs the triumphant failure to evolve beyond the tender trap of anthropomorphism. As theatrical mask, rather than philosophical essence, the sentience of music is no longer bound to the script of solemn tragedian. The leap to meaning is no longer the graceless lunge to one impermeable truth, but the finessed placement of any number of uncanny masks upon the unknown face of music. As sacred fool, and amidst the throng of so many decadent postures of disorderly existential nonsense, the formerly tragic puritan-philosopher has at least a shot at redeeming those misogynous pathologies of desire so divulged by Jankélévitch.

Through the mode of absurdist burlesque rather than tragedy, the drama of thought is ultimately free to relinquish the imperative for mystical certitude: that is, although we cannot know the truth to music and existence, we are now free to play with the beliefs that give them their bond. Not unlike the inner self, music is both absurd and significant at one and the same time: this is the true theatre of experience as ironic, and the paradoxical joke of the epic human musical drama. Recalling Deleuze, Maddin may well embody the absurd faith of repetition, where, following Kierkegaard, humour comes before faith. 'We need an ethic or a faith,' writes Deleuze, 'which makes fools laugh; it is not a need to believe in something else, but a need to believe in this world, of which fools are a part' ([Deleuze 1985/2010: 173](#)). In this sense, *The Saddest Music in the World* may be the ironic homage to not only Deleuze's theatre of philosophy, Jankélévitch's difference between ineffable life and untellable death, and the belief in Cobussen's sayable secret, but also the relentless pursuit of seriousness itself.



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I present a unique, interdisciplinary contribution to the continuing discourse on music's spiritual significance by developing, after Gilles Deleuze, a theatre of the ineffable for music philosophy. The purpose of this work is to open out, rather than resolve, the existential complexity of the Romantic belief in the spirit of music, a belief which enjoys tragic, ironic, and burlesque transformation in contemporary arts theory and practice.

I begin by forging and extending connections between Nietzsche, Jankélévitch and Langer where the ineffable is writ large, where the logician's imposturous, theological aura is at stake, and where the sublime magnitude of love, faith, and mystery creates the poetic framework for rethinking anthropocentric, logocentric ontologies of music. I then introduce Deleuze's theatre of philosophy to show its remarkable suitability for reimagining the seriousness of the ineffable, and for working with the forms of tragedy, irony and burlesque, which together render a more complex, poetic image of the music philosopher. I then look to the following works in contemporary music studies and film practice, each of which further extends the theatrical and spiritual complexity of a love and faith in the spirit of music: Steinberg's theory of musical desire from 2014, Marcel Cobussen's poststructural jazz studies of 2008, and Guy Maddin's 2003 film *The Saddest Music in the World*. Throughout, and toward the interdisciplinary possibilities of complexity, I approach each station as an exercise in collaborative, experimental thinking, within which plural images of the music philosopher emerge.

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This essay opens out a peculiar connection between musical feeling and philosophical thought which emerged in the research and writing process of my PhD dissertation. To now allow this connection its full voice, I have extracted, and amended or revised where necessary, key passages from my original exegeses on the works of Deleuze, Jankélévitch and Cobussen. The full dissertation, entitled 'Between Time and Eternity: Reimagining Spiritual Complexity through Musical Meaning and the Cinematic Human Figure' is available to read through the open access digital repository of the University of Sydney Fisher Library.

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Keywords. ineffable, anthropomorphism, love, spirit, theatre, faith

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