

# UC Irvine

## UC Irvine Previously Published Works

### Title

Review: From 1989, or European Music and the Modernist Unconscious,  
by Seth Brodsky

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6rj1c690>

### Journal

Journal of the American Musicological Society, 72(1)

### ISSN

0003-0139

### Author

Bauer, Amy

### Publication Date

2019-04-01

### DOI

10.1525/jams.2019.72.1.260

Peer reviewed

that the author does not acknowledge the disciplinary boundaries that would stymie and constrain many writers. De Souza revels in this playful intellectual collision, and the energy emanating from these pages is contagious.

There is a final, broader point to be made about the significance of method in this book. Despite the recent science-curious turn in humanistic music studies, the position of empiricism in contemporary musicology remains tenuous and peripheral. Some of this might be accounted for by the residual critique of logical positivism still reverberating from the disciplinary shockwaves of the 1980s and 1990s. But aspects of this divide may also be endemic to the very philosophical tradition De Souza seeks to reconcile with perceptual, neurobiological accounts of listening and musical behavior. As Naomi Waltham-Smith points out, “post-Kantian continental philosophy is seemingly allergic to biology”: despite recent theoretical moves in musicology toward a more materially grounded account of listening, there is still a “tension between an overriding transcendental aesthetics and gestures towards empirical analysis. Such idealist constructions of music and listening repeat an intuition . . . that the body in its biological dimension is to be transcended by something irreducible to its material condition.”<sup>2</sup> De Souza stares this seeming tension dead in the face, demonstrating a deeper level of agreement between humanistic and scientific understandings of embodied musical experience. That is to say, acknowledging that bodies and instruments are made of physical stuff does not at the same time reduce them to “mere” stuff. Beyond the masterfully conceived and executed main thesis of this book, *Music at Hand* makes an important and timely contribution to the broader intellectual project of consilience in music studies, showing vividly what we stand to gain by listening across the epistemological gap to the burgeoning sciences of the mind.

ZACHARY WALLMARK

*From 1989, or European Music and the Modernist Unconscious*, by Seth Brodsky. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. xvi, 344 pp.

An unspoken mystery haunts *From 1989*: why, after so many shifts in critical taste and so many cultural revolutions, does musical modernism endure? Seth Brodsky’s monumental effort maps the entwined destinies of music, psychoanalysis, modernism, and the year 1989. In one sense it explains the curious survival of European musical modernism as a persistent itch beneath the skin of our dominant musical culture. The introduction models the oblique line of argumentation that will follow, as questions that hover over select musical works or performances open out into a larger dialogue. Thus

2. Naomi Waltham-Smith, “Confronting Continental Philosophy’s Fears of Biologism,” *Music and Science* 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059204318758459>.

Brodsky's forced choice one Berlin evening between a performance of Nono's *Prometeo* and Mahler's Eighth Symphony ushers in a general discussion of modernism. The book is divided into fifteen chapters that fall into three parts, marked "Free," "New," and "Again." In the manner of Lacan's psychoanalytic practice, the chapters are of variable length, and incorporate internal repetition of several types. *From 1989*'s dense critique frequently pauses and doubles back to revisit and reflect on key works, debates about aesthetic modernism and the "end of history," and shifts in the content and reception of Lacan's thought. And Brodsky notes those 1989 publications and performances whose coincidence seems retroactively—as Lacan himself might have predicted—to have "always already" prepared the revolutionary event at the year's end.

Several well-chosen interlocutors greatly aid Brodsky in his task, foremost among them art historian T. J. Clark and the Fredric Jameson of *A Singular Modernity*.<sup>1</sup> The two authors share an understanding of modernism as revolving around an ontological conception of productive negativity: not simply an embrace of the New, but a rejection of the way or ways in which "cultures that already knew their New" (p. 9) had compromised or erased that knowledge. Most modernist music histories are reactive, in a manner that effaces the underlying tenets of a proper aesthetic modernism, one of "inconsistency: a de-partitioning and un-gridding of worlds, a de-regulation of differential coordinates" (p. 4). Yet the history of such a modernism betrays a desire for the law it dismantles, a celebration of the gaps in the grid as perpetually productive for a practice both new and capable of critical heft. Hence Brodsky makes the case early on for a certain logic that links the two moments of modernism: one based on the fracturing of existing fantasies of progress, the other a desirous call for a New no longer beholden to them, "a New with no know-how" (p. 9). Modernism as a story of trauma and repression invokes Lacan's particular formulation of the psychoanalytic unconscious, one Brodsky illuminates alternately by precise commentary and sublime turns of phrase, as when Kagel's radical *Fragende Ode* is characterized as including "music that sticks to the present like gum on the sole of a rented dress shoe" (p. 181).

The book skips cannily between Lacanian registers. Part I, "Free," opens in the imaginary with descriptions of three musical *Phantasiestücke* staged to mark the fall of the Berlin Wall: David Hasselhoff sings "Looking for Freedom" more for video replay than for his live audience; Mstislav Rostropovich bears down on Bach cello suites at Checkpoint Charlie as if the universe depended on it; and Leonard Bernstein performs Beethoven's Ninth—with players from Leningrad to New York—on Christmas Day. These staged fantasies of freedom are easily assimilated into a historical discussion of fantasy as

1. T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes in a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002).

genre, as “rather Beethovenian” attempts to “stage freedom as an act of beginning, and to stage that beginning *as* music” (pp. 45–46). That this history inevitably leads back to Beethoven and forward to Adorno simply means that fantasy in general—like Schelling’s transcendental subject—mimics the cyclic logic of modernism, forever repeating a futile attempt to recover unrecoverable beginnings.

A second pass through the Berlin vignettes reads them “anamorphically” (“from an angle,” p. 63) as intersubjective fantasies that borrow from the structural logic of kenosis, staging submission to the divine authority of the moment. This brief critique summons a lurking figure from the Berlin bookstores of 1989, Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, whose invigorating interrogation of Lacan by means of Hegel and ideology critique had a profound effect on cultural criticism in the West.<sup>2</sup> Lacan’s eleventh seminar of 1964 grounds Brodsky’s discussion of unconscious fantasy, the master’s discourse, and the “lack” that founds subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> But he also engages Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* of 1985, given the role it played—within the early stages of Žižek’s thought—in refashioning Lacan’s schema for cultural critique.<sup>4</sup> Part I closes with a return to the beginning: the role of music as masking, through multiple fantasy constructions, gaps in the symbolic order. Armed with Lacan’s fourfold schema of master signifier, signifying chain, barred subject, and *objet a* (object-cause of desire), Brodsky mounts a provocative thesis in his third pass through the events in Berlin, drawing on Eric Santner’s *The Royal Remains* and Joshua Clover’s work on pop music.<sup>5</sup> Beyond any simple attempt to master the signifier “freedom,” or to mark the historical moment, the Berlin performances generate a kind of fleshly surplus *jouissance* for their audiences. Like Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history,”<sup>6</sup> they are symptoms of a moment in which celebrating the triumph of Western liberal democracy is but a gambit that supplies “the unbeatable kick of an eonic melancholy” (p. 98), history as *objet a*.

Part I has cycled from a discussion of music through the fraught resonance of the signifier “fantasy,” and from history to theory. In similar fashion three premieres commissioned to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution kick off Part 2 (“New”), as dark shadows of the Berlin triptych. *Befreiung* (Liberation), a “concert scene for speaker and ensemble” by Heiner Goebbels, sits alongside *A Kaleidoscope for M.C.E.*, a

2. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

3. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).

4. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

5. Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Joshua Clover, *1989: Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

6. Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.

*moto perpetuo* cello work by Paweł Szymański, and Luciano Berio's *Rendering*, a gloss on the sketches for Schubert's Tenth Symphony (conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt). All three hijack the materials and signifiers of the more public, commercial projects—"freedom," Bach, the late symphony—for their own, ambiguous ends. Vastly different in forces, affects, and their relation to the past, they nonetheless unambiguously represent "New Music" (occupying the place of "fantasy"), an empty signifier that "comes preemptively subjectivized" (p. 108). In the following Chapter 7, Brodsky notes that recent authors on musical modernism (Daniel Albright, David Metzger, Arved Ashby, and Tamara Levitz) acknowledge their readers' understanding of modernism as "a certain aspected negativity, a negativity set to work" (p. 113).<sup>7</sup> This discussion masterfully expands to embrace modernist studies in general, from Marshall Berman on modernism's antinomies to the concept of alternate modernities in the work of Charles Taylor and his followers.<sup>8</sup> The chapter returns—again—to the subject of the "new" as an "exemplary empty signifier" in Jameson (p. 117). The contradictions, floating origins, and ceaseless antagonisms of Jameson's modernism complement the Habermas/Foucault debate that came to a head in the late 1980s: an incomplete modernity practiced by rational subjects versus one of endless variations and adaptations. Yet minimal definitions of modernity as the site of a deadlock, break, antagonism, or contingency never quite capture the replete dynamic of modernity as a—*pace* Lacan—impossible object, one "that supports a fantasy of the world" (p. 125). Such a "singular modernity" would operate in the negative, a Real that never stops "not writing itself" (p. 127) as an object of desire.

In Chapter 9, Brodsky deconstructs the shibboleth of postmodernism (at least as a fantasmatic break with or effacement of modernism) and prepares another turn of the Lacanian wheel: the modernist work not as fantasy but as clinic, one that utilizes heterotopian spaces (per Foucault) to un-master certain subjects and traverse their specific fantasies. *Befreiung*, *Kaleidoscope*, and *Rendering* employ the medium, forms, and format of older music to address the social content of musical material, the politics of harmonic language, and the homage as genre. These "heterotopian counter-text[s]" (p. 147) reach beyond music to its reception and legacy, as when Berio's *Rendering* gestures toward the Adagio final movement of Mahler's Ninth.

7. Daniel Albright, *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Arved Ashby, ed., *The Pleasure of Modernist Music: Listening, Meaning, Intention, Ideology* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2004); David Metzger, *Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Tamara Levitz, *Modernist Mysteries: Perséphone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

8. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melt into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1988); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

This leads to a fertile investigation in Chapter 10 of two composer “networks,” formed by works that invite “Other music” into their heterotopian space. Five relatively intimate “encounters” with Schubert composed or premiered in 1989 are set alongside more expansive and outwardly ambitious members of a Bach network, including Ulrich Leyendecker’s *Streichquartett Nr. 3, Ricercar zur Kunst der Fuge*, Poul Ruders’s First Symphony, and Louis Andriessen’s monumental *De Materie*. All this “freezing and fixing, husking and (death-)masking; this impossible-izing of various pasts” (p. 171) seems of a piece with Western Europe in the 1980s. But Brodsky dares us to read these works as being more than “a mere servant of the contemporary imaginary”; he exhorts us to hear “Leyendecker *with* Ruders *with* Andriessen” (p. 172) and their works as representing particular analytical traversals of their own culture, despite their relative lack of influence. He suggests productive pairings of further works meant to celebrate the bicentennial of the French Revolution: Kagel’s *Fragende Ode* for double chorus, brass, and percussion with Pascal Dusapin’s *Roméo et Juliette*, and Helmut Lachenmann’s *II. Streichquartett, “Reigen seliger Geister”* with Penderecki’s *Symphony No. 4, “Adagio.”* It is a reflective scenario, works celebrating one revolution “written on the cusp of another, all dislocated from anything like revolutionary time, and preoccupied instead with the impossibility of revolution” (p. 182). Hence we fall back into the sonic imaginary, a resonating labyrinth in which one *objet a* (“Mozart,” “Mahler”) gives way to another, staging individual antagonisms within and between compositions. Two predominantly tape works of 1989 break this pattern: *Mon 1789*, by East Berlin composer Georg Katzer, and Luigi Nono’s *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura*, a “madrigal for multiple ‘travelers’ [*caminantes*] with Gidon Kremer,” stay rooted in a restless present, while remaining resolutely modernist in their questions and desires.

Brodsky’s themes are telescoped and intensified in the final third of *From 1989* (“Again”), which—in a recursive gesture—tackles multiple meanings of “repetition” in the Schubert and Bach networks beyond 1989. From this expanded network, Brodsky turns to the inner structure of the analytic scene and its politics to support his elevation of *automaton* and *tyche* to central roles in Lacan’s practice. *Automaton* marks repetition in and of the symbolic, while *tyche* names that surplus which, as Lacan says, “resists symbolization absolutely” (p. 205), and is entwined with Kierkegaardian repetition of the ant dialectical antagonism. Here Brodsky returns to Lacan’s eleventh seminar and its overriding question: What does it mean to traverse the fantasy and lead a subject to identify with her own symptom? We are introduced to the four discourses (p. 212), derived from “turning” the discourse of the master (employed later to problematize the slippage between modernity, modernism, and the new). Three discourses are driven by an occluded antagonism located in the lower right-hand corner of each schema. The master’s discourse represses the split subject, the hysteric’s discourse represses its indifference to the master’s knowledge, and the university’s discourse promotes a repressed master ( $S_1$ ) beneath the feigned disinterestedness of

knowledge ( $S_2$ , representing *automaton*, unconscious knowledge in the symbolic). By contrast, the analyst's discourse shifts the formula for fantasy— $\$ \diamond a$ —into the upper register; the central antagonism remains, but out in the open, as it were. The whiff of the imaginary that clings to  $S_1$  is here on display, as an obvious caesura in the symbolic that prompts the analysand to embrace the “radically new.”

Brodsky begins with the upper register, asking what a modernist poetics might look like were it to adopt the fourfold schema, “Lacan's subject but a captured lack, made over, endlessly, into form” (p. 217). This “knowledge,” implied, cited in passing, and elaborated in footnotes, reclaims Lacan as modernist only after passing through its own chain of  $S_2$ : Lacan and deconstruction (Shoshana Felman), the Frankfurt School (Jameson, Perry Anderson), and the many forms in which modernism models the master's discourse (Matei Călinescu).<sup>9</sup> The first schema in which modernism can be shown to function as an analyst's discourse sees the “modernist” addressing the split subject of “modernity” (the past) to produce the “new.” Rather than a fantasized “Real” object, this “new” operates as a ceaseless tracking of that knowledge which remains veiled, unproduced, in the past; “All master signifiers spoken in analysis are in this sense *alte Meister*” (p. 225).

Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, discussed in Chapter 14, serves as an exemplar of the modernist work addressing the past, revolving around the quilting point of its “impossible” ending and the latter's reception. (This authoritative discussion becomes a tour de force in an expanded article for *Opera Quarterly*.)<sup>10</sup> The final chapter brings us inexorably back to Mahler and to the (purposely) repressed Adorno. Adorno's writings on Mahler—ranging from reverent awe to gimlet-eyed analysis—were themselves riven with paradox, as are those contemporary musical works that approach Mahler both to bury and to praise him. Brodsky turns to a peculiar premiere of 1989, in which Hans-Joachim Hespos—in the guise of the character UPEX—delivers a scathing rebuke to such attempts. UPEX strikes Brodsky as an anachronism: his burst of good old-fashioned dialectic seems to misunderstand the Kierkegaardian irony at play in most works in the Mahler network. Although Brodsky calls this rant “the historical precedent to a university modernism,” I would align it with the hysteric's discourse, in the sense in which Lacan called science a hysteric's discourse: the relentless interrogation of a master and its truth (its episteme) that hides a secret desire for the “messianic Unknown” (p. 247). Adorno, as it turns out, understood perfectly well

9. See especially Shoshana Felman, “To Open the Question,” in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading—Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 5–10; Perry Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution,” *New Left Review*, 1st ser., no. 144 (March–April 1984): 96–113; and Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1977).

10. Seth Brodsky, “Waiting, Still, or Is Psychoanalysis Tonal?,” *Opera Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2016): 281–315.

how New Music could function as an analyst's discourse, the "Old" taking its place as the barred subject, and the "natural" revealed as but a mere appearance, maintained by rigid, technical control. The musical "near misses" that characterized 1989 repeat a New Music that is obsessed with history, yet never of its time. Brodsky's summation marks yet another false closure: *From 1989* seems to end here, and then it does not, turning back to 1989 and that most melancholic of genres, the string quartet. Here we find more heterotopian networks, more false dichotomies ("Nono" vs. "Berg" quartets), and more shifting antagonisms between the expressive and the constructive. *From 1989* comes to rest on the implication that there is something zombie-like in musical modernism, so persistently alive in spite of its long-prophesied demise. A life predicated on repeating and re-receiving what remains unheard in its past.

*From 1989* marks a watershed, not just in scholarly work on musical modernism. There are few psychoanalytic explorations of culture that come close to its rigor and scope, and certainly none in the field of musicology. Its structure and critique are iconoclastic, extraordinarily self-reflexive, and at times eccentric. But that is really as it *should* be in any investigation of such a fraught, misunderstood music, forever marginalized yet beholden to knowledge unrecognized and unremembered by the wider culture. *From 1989* takes its cue from the rich tradition it celebrates, by interrogating the gaps in scholarship on modernism and music. Rather than suture them it widens those gaps, in pursuit of a new understanding and knowledge of the way music functions in the world. And it suggests that some music has "always already" been modern: that it has the capacity to traverse our fantasies as well as express them.

AMY BAUER

*Los libros de polifonía de la Catedral de México: Estudio y catálogo crítico*, by Javier Marín López. 2 vols. Jaén: Servicio de Publicaciones, Universidad de Jaén; Madrid: Sociedad Española de Musicología, 2012. xxiii, 1278 pp.

*Los papeles para Euterpe: La música en la Ciudad de México desde la historia cultural, siglo XIX*, edited by Laura Suárez de la Torre. Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José Luis Mora, Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, 2014. 490 pp.

*Carlos Chávez and His World*, edited by Leonora Saavedra. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. xx, 360 pp.

The three outstanding books on Mexican music under review here investigate many different musical repertoires, composers, performers, time