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ART MUSIC AND THE MACHINE Gustavus Stadler

Absolute Music, Mechanical Reproduction by Arved Ashby. Berkeley: University of of California Press, 2010. Pp. 336. \$26.95 paper; \$60.00 cloth. As the title suggests, the guiding figure for this compelling, insightful, occasionally head-spinning book is the Walter Benjamin of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). Arved Ashby's project investigates the status of the classical "work" after it apparently loses its Benjaminian aura, becoming disassociated from the requirement of human presence with the advent of cheap, easily available mass-produced recordings. The book examines absolute music (defined as "purely instrumental, structure oriented, untouched by extramusical elements, and with a purely aesthetic rather than social function" [6]) in its existence as a "vernacular practice" within everyday life (2). Given the extent to which Western popular music continues to dominate histories of sound recording, this is a welcome addition to a growing body of work with a more diverse focus, represented by scholars like Tia de Nora.

In approaching recording, Ashby seeks to construct a middle ground between the technological determinism of a Marshall McLuhan and what he sees as the technophobia of McLuhan's recent culturalist-historicist critics. The latter are represented most prominently here by Jonathan Sterne, widely considered the doyen of the perpetually "recently emergent" field of sound studies. And while Ashby's take on Sterne's work is by his own admission not fully developed (and in my

view ultimately off the mark), it does provide some important ballast for boosting awareness of what would be lost if media histories were to use work like Sterne's to write off the materiality and agency of sound reproduction devices as "merely cultural." Pointing out that both approaches "discuss technology as something rational and planned, a purposeful means to a certain end" (15), Ashby takes a compelling turn in the direction of philosophy, specifically citing Heidegger's notion of technology as "bringing forth," as a force that "ultimately acts to reveal the world, thereby becoming inalterable an inevitable, a project that everyone must take part in" (15). This take on the ontology of recorded classical music underlies the broad purpose of his book: to "paint perhaps the first sanguine picture of art music as it connects and will potentially connect in the future—with early twenty-firstcentury market technologies" (20). Those looking for Adornian gloom about the decline of listening should look elsewhere, as this is no desperate plea for the continuing relevance of classical music in the digital age, à la Lawrence Kramer, whose work Ashby critiques. In fact, in a number of ways, the book argues, "recording culture has actually served to uphold absolute music aesthetics into the twenty-first century" (125).

Ashby's opening chapters explore one paradoxical quality of this project, that a technology originally thought of as chiefly preservational came to undermine and disorient understandings of the work, the author, and the performance. It is axiomatic for him that "recording has had less an aesthetic influence on classical-music practice than an ontological effect" (22). The book grounds this argument in a view of recording as a Barthesian text rather than a scriptural one, and outlines the very different ways that Glenn Gould, Leopold Stokowski, and Herbert von Karajan have described and executed their willingness to employ the recording studio to manipulate the organic notion of the performance. Here and throughout, from various vectors, the book is an assault on the idea that recording's ultimate purpose is to restore a proper, "original"—even recoverable though, unlike in pop music, this notion of mechanical reproduction has dominated much of the discourse of classical recording. In one of his typically provocative points, Ashby argues that this idea began with the onset of the massscale production of classical LPs in the 1950s, which imposed a kind of linearity on thinking about absolute music. Raised in the context of ontological issues about work, performance, and authorship, this argument is convincing but is less so when used as a critique of Susan McClary's historicist reading of Tchaikovsky's queerness, which he sees as an attempt to restore a premediated, origin-laden explanation for the composer's work.

Some of the most insightful chapters in the book have their basis in Ashby's philosophical interests, from which Ashby does a marvelous job of reading outward into other domains. "Recording, Repetition and Memory," examines its concerns through the lenses of Henri Bergson, Jacques Attali, and musical hermeneutics. Here he offers a compelling reading of Attali's notion of recording as "stockpiling" labor by examining the advertising rhetoric of midcentury classical music subscription services such as the one offered by the Book-of-the-Month Club. Such services, Ashby argues, convinced consumers to buy more music than they had time to listen to but, in so doing, sold them "prestigious time spans." The move between philosophy and cultural history is deft. The next chapter, "Schabel's Rationalism, Gould's Pragmatism," contrasts Glenn Gould's approach to recording with Artur Schnabel's. Ashby aligns Schnabel with Platonic rationalism, in which "composer and the work reign eternal as central, guiding principles." For Gould, "the work seems contingent on the performance rather than the other way around" (92); Ashby elucidates this quality with an insightful reading of Gould as a Jamesian pragmatist, embracing the messiness of interpretation

rather than trying to discipline uncertainty into the notion of a pure "original."

The chapter "Digital Mythologies," in which Ashby moves more toward communication and media studies, examines some of the key utopian tropes surrounding music and property in the digital era; in another foray into cultural history, Ashby makes a fascinating and convincing argument that connects the rhetoric surrounding digital recording in the 1980s with Francis Fukuyama's "End of History?" (1989)1 thesis. Here as elsewhere, Ashby is ambivalent, on the one hand acknowledging that the era of proliferative remastering has redefined that task as a performance form, undermining the sense of an original, but a page later arguing that the introduction of any new "recording-technological paradigm," such as the compact disc (CD), means that certain qualities are deemed "authentic" and others not. If Ashby's overall argument sometimes gets lost in these twists and turns, his book continually demonstrates how richly the notion of absolute music illuminates the questions and contradictions of this moment.

The next chapter, "Beethoven and the iPod Nation," directly addresses the MPEG Audio Layer 3 (MP3) as format, and the iPod as storage and delivery device. Ashby makes an adventurous argument that the iPod "is more original than any of the music now stored on it"

(170). As many others have noted, the iPod and similar devices seem to embrace inclusive, multigenre listening; Ashby's take on this is that it should be understood as a new type of "literacy," lateral rather than vertical. There is a "subject-object collapse" (173) incurred by the ubiquitous devices, materialized by the earbuds stuck inside our ear canals. The emphasis on continuous playback blurs individual works and levels them out—gone is the sense of what not listening might be, how the absence of music structures how we hear a work. This chapter is a kind of crescendo for the book, as Ashby argues that iPod-style shuffle listening will help restore some of the uncertainty and variability with which works were performed in past eras—historical qualities that absolute music ideals have erased.

Even as Ashby makes some strong claims like the one just mentioned, his book as a whole is filled with an ambivalence that effectively—whether intentionally or not—embodies the impossibility of extricating ourselves from media enough to assess them. If the book can be a little anarchic and even seemingly contradictory at times,

it is consistently astute and smart. The two final chapters, for instance, compare historical discourses surrounding sound recording and photography, making room for much deeper analyses of the turn of the twentieth century as an overall media environment. Ashby's is a huge topic; that is why the book is sometimes baggy and recursive. Approached as a unit, it can sometimes seem like a second term is missing from Ashby's analysis—a focus on the notion of information, or medium, or format, or even originality. But the book's looseness is also the source of much of its pleasure and insightfulness. This vital work will prove immensely useful for scholars attempting to construct sophisticated ways of studying many topics in the history and theory of sound recording.

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NOTE

1. Francis Fukuyama, "End of History?" *National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18.