

Colloquy

Vladimir Jankélévitch's Philosophy of Music

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Introduction

BRIAN KANE

Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903–1985) is a rare figure in the history of modern philosophy: much like Theodor W. Adorno, he wrote extensively in the fields of both philosophy and music. But unlike Adorno, who serves as an ongoing interlocutor for musicologists, scholars in our field have generally neglected Jankélévitch's work.¹

There are, perhaps, explanations for such neglect; in comparison to the tumultuous disciplinary changes that emerged from the reception of French post-structuralism (bearing no small trace on musicology, ethnomusicology, and music theory), Jankélévitch's writings are readily overshadowed. He holds little or no place in current histories of French philosophy written in the wake of May 1968—none at all in Vincent Descombes's *Modern French Philosophy*, which narrates how the new disciples of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud brought

1. Vladimir Jankélévitch, born of Russian Jewish parents, spent most of his academic life in France, writing books about moral philosophy and musical monographs from a perspective that might be generally characterized as Bergsonian. In the German attack on France in 1940, he was wounded in an effort to repel the advance. Although Jankélévitch had been teaching at the University of Lille since 1938, during the period of the German occupation he was unable to teach because of his Jewish background. However, he did find employment as a director of music programs at Radio Toulouse, a job which he found enjoyable, while lecturing and writing on the side. Like Adorno, who was also born in 1903, Jankélévitch was profoundly shaped by the experience of World War II and struggled to find an appropriate response to the Holocaust. The impact of the war on Jankélévitch's thought was great; although his dissertation was on Schelling, the work after World War II reveals little overt reference to German philosophy or music. In 1951, he became the chair in Moral Philosophy at the Sorbonne, where he was known as an engaging and sympathetic teacher, much beloved by his students. Despite his prolific body of work, Jankélévitch's idiosyncratic thought always remained at a distance from the mainstream of French philosophy. Only in the 1990s, amidst the renewed interest in ethics in the wake of deconstruction, did Jankélévitch's work find an Anglophone revival. For a comprehensive biographical sketch, see Andrew Kelley's introduction to his English translation of Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, vii–xiii.

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philosophy. If there is indeed a Bergsonian difference in kind between music and language, and if the latter can never exhaust the former, we are left with a situation in which no single kind of discourse may be ruled out a priori. Any bit of linguistic mediation has the potential to act as a strong deictic gesture for some, while leaving others indifferent. There is a fascinating broader question here regarding what kinds of talk might produce fleeting instants of musical presence, and for what kinds of individuals in what kinds of quotidian circumstances. Given human difference and the highly volatile nature of the transaction, it is rash to rule out—as Jankélévitch would—whole genres of talk in advance, as inadequate to any individual's project of generating presence. Temperaments differ, contexts differ, circumstances differ. We should not be surprised if styles of presence-producing talk differ too.

Jankélévitch's attacks on analysis and interpretation disappoint most, perhaps, in their dissonance with his ethical project. The author of the *Treatise on Virtues* and *Forgiveness* wrote with great eloquence on our approach to the other (Lévinas called him an intellectual "magician" for a reason).²⁵ But when it comes to our myriad situated encounters with music, Jankélévitch is uncharacteristically hostile to difference, a point Jamie Currie pursues in his contribution to this colloquy.²⁶ I find a pointed irony here, as one of the things I value most in Jankélévitch's writing is the encounter that it offers with a thinker whose habits of mind differ strikingly from my own. I would not want to be without his insights into music, precisely *because* they are often unlike mine. In the end, this must surely be one of the greatest virtues of talk about music: the opportunity it provides to experience musical sounds through the filter of another's sensibility. Thus, if we can save what is best in Jankélévitch's musical writings while discarding his proscriptions on diverse talk, we might better reconcile his musical philosophy with his ethical thought as a whole.

Ineffable Immersion: Contextualizing the Call for Silence

JAMES HEPOKOSKI

For readers concerned with the problematics of music's cultural and aesthetic connotations, the most contentious aspect of Vladimir Jankélévitch's writing is his call for silence before the epiphanies offered by the kind of music that he favors. Consider these samples from 1959, two years before the publication of *Music and the Ineffable*:

25. Jankélévitch, *Traité des vertus*; idem, *Forgiveness*, trans. Kelley. For Lévinas's comment, see his "Vladimir Jankélévitch," 87.

26. Consider his caricatures in *Music and the Ineffable* of the "silly people whose brows are furrowed with meditation as they pretend to be 'following' theme A and theme B" (100) or of the staid music analyst, retreating to the technical out of fear of music's enchanting effects (102). These slips into *ad hominem* argumentation present a striking contrast with Jankélévitch's otherwise generous tone, and raise a suspicion that his briefs against analysis and hermeneutics are rooted as much in personal animus as in philosophical conviction.

There are things that are not meant to be talked about but meant to be done, and those things in relation to which purely expressive language appears so secondary, so unconvincing, so miserably inefficacious, are the most important and most precious things in life. Are their names not love, poetry, music, liberty?

That's it—to be committed, and nothing else. Not to give lectures on commitment, nor to conjugate the verb, nor to commit oneself to commit oneself, as men of letters do, but really to commit oneself by an immediate and primary act, by an effective and drastic act, by a serious act of the whole person; not to adhere halfheartedly but to convert *passionately* to the truth, that is to say, with one's entire soul, like Plato's liberated captives.²⁷

Here and in *Music and the Ineffable* we find an embrace of the magic spell of art and the “doing” or “making” (*poesis*) of music, insisted upon as implacably opposed to its cold-eyed, theoretical explication in analytical or hermeneutic discourse. Jankélévitch's call for silence about music and the prolixity of his own prose on the subject are not contradictory impulses. They would be so if his writing were analytical or explanatory in the normative, disciplinary sense. Instead, Jankélévitch's is the manner of discourse that overflows as a result of heartfelt gratitude for the “unearned gifts” of music. “So forgive those who listen to the *Andante spianato* and do not know how to express their thanks, or to become equal to their experience; forgive them if they celebrate something incommensurable with all celebration in the wrong way: since one does not approach the ineffable except in stammering.”²⁸ Thus the words permitted, even encouraged, are those that, like testimonies, are either thankful responses to the musically affective or sympathetic framings for the reader's subsequent acts of participatory listening. This is a well-worn position within aesthetics, one typically associated with the nineteenth century's sacralization of music. In Jankélévitch's mid-twentieth-century world we reencounter it filtered through a largely orthodox Bergsonism—intuition, duration, becoming, doing, motion, flow, vitalism, objections to the metaphorical spatialization of temporality, and the like. In recent decades this once-faded Bergsonism has been recalled to life via Gilles Deleuze and others and sometimes realigned with such supplementary registers of discourse as antidisiplinary postmodernism or postsecularism.

At first blush, particularly for readers invested in the musicological enterprise, Jankélévitch's moralistic declaration is startling. Yet in his writing it recurs in dozens of extravagant formulations. It is a recurrent article of faith throughout *Music and the Ineffable* that cannot be set aside as only a secondary feature of his rhetoric. “No one truly speaks of God, above all, not

27. Jankélévitch, “Do Not Listen to What They Say, Look at What They Do,” 549, 550. The original essay (“N'écoutez pas ce qu'ils disent, regardez ce qu'ils font”) was published in a 1959 issue of *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* devoted to studies of Henri Bergson on the hundredth anniversary of his birth. In this context Jankélévitch's article was to be read as an homage to Bergson.

28. Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 99.

theologians. . . . Alas, music in itself is an unknowable something, as unable to be grasped as the mystery of artistic creation." Music is "made to be heard and not to be read," most reliably by "a heart that is chaste and simple," one that keeps alive "a great nostalgia for innocence" or a longing "for a return to the spirit of childhood" as an ethical counter to "our terrible epoch," with its "pathological attachment to trash." Music of the properly groomed, reticent kind is "a perfume not an argument," a bearer of "untellable" and "ineffable truth" that seizes us with its indecipherably alluring call; it is a "continuous miracle," a "mystery," "an immediately spiritual phenomenon," "a kind of fête, a celebration." A "musical work" exists only "in the time of its playing," and that work "means nothing and yet means everything." "Considering its naïve and immediate truth, music does not signify anything other than what it is"; it is not an "instrumental means to convey concepts." Above all, "music was not invented to be talked about"; "it is not necessary to speak of it"; "it is better not to try to say the unsayable"; and "most of the [professionalized] chatter" about it is a depressing sign of "pretentious, intolerable mediocrity."²⁹

Nobody would deny the musical experience's compelling grip on performers and listeners, its capacity for inducing rapt or trancelike fixation often coupled with a strong impression of significance. This primary effect of music is well worth pondering. It cannot be sidelined in any responsible aesthetics. But that is not what is at stake here. Jankélévitch insisted upon adding to this that it is transgressive to go further, to enter into a spuriously interpretive or analytical "metaphysics of music" that he construed as straying beyond the performative sound proper, music's fundamental reality.³⁰ Instead, we should remain grateful to live in the intoxication of music's *charme* and bracket out undecidable questions about what might motivate the power of its sway or about its registers of cultural implication or social function.

To those who do seek to reflect on such matters, Jankélévitch's impassioned pleas on behalf of the suppression of hermeneutic inquiry (despite his best intentions) carry a potential for intimidation that is difficult to ignore. What is demanded is a sidelining of critical discourse in order to urge a commitment to an abundant existential experience linked exclusively to the action of doing. One problem with any such procedure is that to fill the vacant space now exempted from external critique one may introduce any foundational doctrine that one chooses. Within the postulated discourse-free zone, where talk and argument are discouraged in the face of lived experience, an absence or darkness lurks at the center, a zone of mystery, waiting to be lit up by external illumination via a wager or leap of faith into a system of grounding authority. At bottom, such arguments are theological—or transposed from mystical modes of argument, their most natural home.³¹ The process begins with a

29. *Ibid.*, 2, 11, 18, 70, 73, 76, 79–80, 89–90, 92, 102, 139.

30. *Ibid.*, 9–15.

31. Not surprisingly, in *Music and the Ineffable* references to divinity, truth, grace, and spirituality—as metaphorical (?) analogues of the "ineffable," "unknowable" presence and depth

credo, a trust in the goodness of what one chooses to esteem. But a perilous second step—and a reactionary one, typically advanced to protect the now-illuminated center—can be the subsequent attempt to delegitimize the divergent voices of others: those probing, confrontational voices of rational modernism.

Such anti-intellectual positions, interpreted broadly, did not have an entirely savory history in the twentieth century, and liberal thinkers might well greet them with wariness. But in recent years such stances have been resurfacing, with provocative variants, in a number of different areas: in music, literature, film, art, and theology. It is the reemergence of this broader network of similar arguments that engages me here, not the details of Jankélévitch's relentless testimonials. I am interested, for example, in the several reasons put forth by which explanatory or distanced analysis—typically associated with modernism and its quest for control—has been ruled inadequate or dismissed in these various fields. On what grounds could one make such a claim? Here are four of them, all interrelated, overlapping with each other. (There are more.)

First is the *argument of incommensurability*. This contends that, in comparison with the world of disclosure that is before one in the active practice of art or religion, mere talk is idle, academic babble, an inappropriate or arbitrary response. "Saying is an atrophied version of Doing—miscarried Doing, a bit degenerate," wrote Jankélévitch, recalling Bergson's dismissal of *homo loquax* (man the talker) in favor of *homo faber* (man the doer).³² And Carolyn Abbate, in her 2004 amplification of Jankélévitch's views, similarly championed the supremacy of "real music" unfolding in "real time" and cast a cold eye on current practices of "low and soft hermeneutics" offering verbal or analytical explications that pay insufficient attention to the more elemental, "drastic" side of music as performed.³³ In recent decades similar claims have appeared elsewhere. One might recall, for instance, George Steiner's pronouncements

of music—are legion. In addition to the quotation(s) cited in the text above, see, e.g., pp. 20 (voices in polyphony that, in an iconicity of showing, "attest to the presence of God"); 72 ("the ineffable . . . cannot be explained. . . . Such is the mystery of God"); 98 (music as "divine inconsistency"); 99 (our stammering response to music, similar to the devotions of "St. John of the Cross . . . 'Balbuciendo'"); 110 (one cannot "read the enigma of death in the last breath of the dying, or the enigma of God in the blinking of the stars"); 111 (the potential appeal to "the negative propositions of apophatic theology"; or types of "virginal," "C major," and "ingenuous and wise" music [Prokofiev!] that are "present and absent, like God; and familiar yet distant, like Death"); 127 (musical inspiration as a "'point' of grace"; one of the "divine, sublime things that are vouchsafed to human beings in brief glimpses . . . at once dazzling and dubious"); 147 (the command for reverent silence linked with "the Bergsonian distrust of language . . . [and merged] with the philosophy of the apophatic"); 149 ("God, according to scripture, does not come with the noise of wrathfulness but as imperceptibly as a breeze"); 150 ("It is in the Bible every so often that hearing trumps vision, and that God at certain moments reveals himself to man in the form of the spoken Word. Hear, O Israel!").

32. *Ibid.*, 80.

33. Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?," 505–36.

in *Real Presences* (1989): "No musicology, no music criticism can tell us as much as the action of meaning which is performance." Or: "the truths, the necessities of ordered feeling in the musical experience are not irrational; but they are irreducible to reason or pragmatic reckoning. . . . When it speaks of music, language is lame."³⁴ A variant of this strategy might be regarded as the *argument from humility*—the advocacy of bowed-head, reverent moments of devotion or Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* for those occasions when words fail in the face of glowing intensities, as advocated in Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht's *Production of Presence* (2004): "[I have now come] to profess that . . . culture at large, including literature, was not only about meaning, that even in the teaching of literature and culture we should pause, from time to time, and be silent (for presence cannot use too many words)."³⁵

Second is the *argument of disenchantment*. Here the concern is that if one abandons the rapturous Eden of trusting immediacy and unquestioning assent—where real presence resides—one separates oneself from the glow of a primordial or precognitive participation with a deeper, perhaps sacred disclosure. This anxiety—this melancholy—is a legacy of modernity: *die Entzauberung der Welt*; modern scholarship as disenchantment, objectification, distanciation and analysis, ideology critique, the reduction of illusion—critical science and hermeneutics everywhere. The aesthetic aversion to all this is an old trope, found often in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, art, and music. One poetic example of hundreds that could be cited can be found in the well-known passage from Keats's *Lamia* (1819).

. Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air and gnomed mine—
Unweave a rainbow. . . .

A third strategy is the *argument of accusation*. This is the anti-rationalist's assertion that the flight to exegesis is a modern-world, bureaucratic subterfuge enabling one to turn away from the blinding revelations of spiritual, physical, or artistic experience. This charge surfaces in Jankélévitch here and there, as in his imperial sniffs at the music analyst who "means to prove by all this that he has not been duped and does not consent to bewitchmen. . . . Everyone knows the type, the cool cerebral people who affect interest in the way the piece is 'put together' after the concert. Technical analysis is a means of refusing to abandon oneself spontaneously to grace, which is the request the

34. Steiner, *Real Presences*, 8, 19.

35. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 134.

musical Charm is making.”³⁶ Or, as we find the conviction in Steiner: “The Byzantine domination of secondary and parasitic discourse over immediacy, of the critical over the creative, is itself a symptom. . . . We crave remission from direct encounter with the ‘real presence’ or ‘the real absence of that presence.’ . . . We seek the immunities of indirection. . . . We welcome those who can domesticate, who can secularize the mystery and summons of creation. . . . Commentary is without end.”³⁷

A variant of this can be regarded as a fourth strategy: the *argument of a modernist exclusion of basic aspects of human experience*. This is the familiar indictment of the post-Cartesian flight from the higher truth of the body in the world. Jankélévitch’s briefs on behalf of the flesh-and-blood corporeality of musical performance and listening within the flow of time deployed this strategy, though the usual anti-Cartesian complaint is less in evidence there. Gumbrecht, in a complementary text, was more explicit: “This fact [of the importance of bodily “touching”] had been bracketed (if not—progressively—forgotten) by Western theory building ever since the Cartesian *cogito* made the ontology of human existence depend exclusively on the movements of the human mind.”³⁸ In its most radical strains this fourth strategy accelerates into a wholesale indictment of Western modernity, liberalism, and reason as having somewhere (especially around Descartes, if not much earlier) slipped off the track of an incandescent participation in Being in favor of its own constructions of disinterested reason, which *logos* is then asserted to be no less an arbitrary *mythos* than those to which that reason had once sought to offer a critique. In the twentieth century (and of course there are many precedents before this), this sort of thing arrives in full throttle at least with Heidegger and those influenced by him—including the much-noted “theological turn” in certain schools of phenomenology along with strains of postmodernism, which, by definition, is forthrightly antimodern.³⁹

36. Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 102. Cf. pp. 2–3: “Thus, when a human being reaches the age of reason, he struggles against this unseemly and illegal seizure of his person, not wanting to give in to enchantment. . . . A man who has sobered up, a demystified man, does not forgive himself for having once been the dupe of misleading powers.”

37. Steiner, *Real Presences*, 38–39. Cf. the similar remarks on p. 49: “We flinch from the immediate pressures of mystery in poetic, in aesthetic acts of creation as we do from the realization of our diminished humanity, of all that is literally bestial in the murderousness and gadgetry of this age. The secondary is our narcotic.”

38. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 17. Cf. p. 142: “My marginal (but I hope not completely trivial) contribution is, rather, to say that [the] Cartesian dimension does not cover (and should never cover) the full complexity of our existence, although we are led to believe that it does with probably more overwhelming pressure than ever before.”

39. Some of the most instructive recent distillations of this polemic may be found in the numerous variants of current postliberal theology and the movement of “radical orthodoxy”—belligerently Christian, antimodernist ideas discussed with interest, for instance, by the otherwise secular Gumbrecht (*ibid.*, 145–49, with reference to Catherine Pickstock) and ideas that, in recent musicology, contribute among many others to the Christian-oriented musicological work of

Of interest in all of this is the recent emergence within the secular academies, in several different disciplines, of a broad network of post-rational advocacies, what Jürgen Habermas has recently diagnosed as arising from a feeling of “defeatism concerning modern reason” and its capacity to answer some of the fundamental questions of experience and art.⁴⁰ What we find are post-modern castings of this on behalf of the recovery of a presence lost to the *mythos* of modernity: ineffability, performativity, liveness, epiphany, being, God, magic, mystery, the body, the “saturated phenomenon” of “givenness,” the disclosure of the “invisible in the visible,” and so on.⁴¹ They are accompanied by familiar connotations: homesickness, the return of the repressed (or the return of the aesthetic), the recovery of that ultimate Other rigorously excluded from the explanatory projects of a demystifying modernity, and the like. All such recuperations are argued along generally the same lines, amidst which the recent retrieval and sprucing-up of Jankélévitch's second-hand Bergsonism is only one among many, albeit one that has caught our attention because it addresses specific though limited repertoires of music.

It may be that appropriating such texts as Jankélévitch's—using him charismatically, as it were—permits one to launch a simultaneous critique on two fronts. On the one hand, it remains faithful to the generational indictment of once-traditional musicology and its stock-in-trade research and analysis regimens. On the other hand, it sparks a newer, schismatic attack on the demystifying hermeneutic trends characteristic of much “New Musicology” of the past two decades. In these past decades, for many within this now-orthodox movement, the primary game in town has been one of smart prosecutorial exposure, disenchantment, historicizing, breaking the spell: the unmasking of the politics or power-agendas of the aesthetic posture, of the doctrine of autonomy, of the Austro-Germanic canon, of Eurocentric biases, and all the rest. At this recent orthodoxy's core has often been the traditional hermeneutics of

Daniel Chua, most explicitly in “Beethoven's Other Humanism”; and idem, “Listening to the Other.” For an overview of radical orthodoxy, whose founding document is Millbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, see Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*. Related antimodernist issues were promoted, at least within the United Kingdom, in such works as Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*. For a critical overview of the French “theological turn” (Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, and others) from a more orthodox phenomenological perspective, see Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn.”*”

40. Habermas, “Awareness of What Is Missing,” 18: “My motive for addressing the issue of faith and knowledge is to mobilize modern reason against the defeatism lurking within it. Postmetaphysical thinking cannot cope on its own with the defeatism concerning modern reason which we encounter today both in the postmodern radicalization of the ‘dialectic of the Enlightenment’ and in the naturalism founded on a naïve faith in science.”

41. The “saturated phenomenon” and “givenness,” Marion, *Being Given*; themes that also occur, in different registers, in, e.g., Lévinas and others. Cf. also such writings as Millbank, “Beauty and the Soul,” 2–3: “To see . . . the beautiful is to see the invisible in the visible”; “in [the world of secular] modernity . . . [however], there is no mediation of the invisible in the visible, and no aura of invisibility hovering around the visible. In consequence, there is no beauty.”

suspicion, the heritage reaching back at least to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, whose lessons have been to be mistrustful of external appearances, to seek to penetrate the deceptive façade of things—especially such alluring and “ineffable” things as music, art, and religion—in order to understand them as contingent cultural practices or, more aggressively, in order to unmask the material forces and political interests that lie underneath and support them. Because such detached, nonparticipatory explication works at cross-purposes with the intuitive factor of music prized by naive listeners—and by Jankélévitch—we find the two sides of the debate indulging in mutual crossfire. Each denounces the other as perpetuating a deeply misled discourse—on the one side, the charge of false consciousness and illusion; on the other side, the charge of the merely gnostic, an insufficient consideration of value of the real, performative experience and temporal effects of music.

While not discounting the directness of music’s impact as performed—which must remain an elemental reality for any considered reflection—one might still ask the counter-Jankélévitchian question of whether one ever approaches the captivating force of music in an unmediated way, as an isolated and independent subject emancipated from external constraints, free to recognize on one’s own terms the ineffability believed to be really there. Whose ineffability are we talking about? The framework for any experience of aesthetic plenitude is significantly determined by one’s immediate culture or at least mightily inflected by cultural expectations, training, education, and social modes of production and reception. In the end, it is difficult to contest such observations as those of Carl Dahlhaus in his early work from 1967, *Esthetics of Music* (here underscoring only one aspect of acculturation), that “consciousness of music is determined, to no small extent, by literature about music. Even people who scoff at it can hardly escape the effect of what is written. Musical experience almost always involves memory-traces from reading. And the meaning accumulated by music in its secondary, literary mode of existence does not leave untouched its primary mode, the realm of composition.”⁴²

The ineffability experience in one culture may be apprehended in a manner entirely different from that in another time or place. If the parameters of that experience are given their energizing boosts by what is permitted and encouraged within a given culture in a given slice of time—as they surely are—then we are thrown back into an examination of the systems of norms that are acculturating the individual encounter with what seems to be ineffable. We are thrown back, that is, into discourse, into the very talk and secularized examination on which Jankélévitch and others are so eager to cast aspersions. In the final assessment, the disparaging of interpretive conversation about music—that wondrous art—must be regarded as a rearguard, regressive posture.

42. Dahlhaus, *Esthetics of Music*, 62.