The Death of the Performer: Thoughts Towards a Barthesian Theory of Contemporary Music

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When examining a particular creative work, one has to be aware of a number of hidden relationships embedded within that work as a whole. Who created this work? What was their goal in doing so (if there ever was an established goal)? How am I supposed to interpret this work, given the nature in which it was created? Going down these paths of inquiry can serve to make the relationship between the audience and the work itself murkier, turning the simple act of consumption into something much more sinister and perilous. But it is necessary that we [the global “we”] head down such paths, if for no other reason that the artistic climate of the last several decades has in many ways become dependent on such introspective lines of inquiry. This can be seen clearly in several avenues of philosophical thought, and it is the goal of this paper to explore one particular example of such contemplative navel-gazing: Roland Barthes’ *The Death of the Author*.

To start, I will offer my own take on the central concepts of Barthes’ article, with a secondary goal of reconciling his ideology with current trends in contemporary Western art music. In the end, I plan to establish a connection between recent and on-going trends in the contemporary music world and the reader-centric philosophy of Barthes.

Perhaps the easiest place to begin when analyzing Barthes’ article is the literal beginning—the title of the work itself. Although the full impact of Barthes’ title isn’t felt until the end of the article, the conscious choice to name this writing *The Death of the Author* already says a lot about the ideas found within this article. Taken at face value, this title makes a firm statement about the ultimate goal of Barthes’ text; this will be no subtle appraisal of the role of the author in relation to a given text, but rather a wholesale refutation of the idea that the author is the prime voice of creative authority. The title also gives a sly indication of Barthes’ goals, as the pun on the work *Le Morte d’Arthur* lends the article further meaning (or does not give the

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1 I am using the term “navel-gazing” in the most positive way imaginable—as will become apparent throughout this paper, I believe that introspective questioning is incredibly important in the reception and discussion of a given work of art.
article meaning; this distinction will become clearer as we discuss the ideas found in the article). Barthes gives some insight into the necessity of a violent shift in the traditional role of the author with a quote from Balzac’s Sarrasine: “describing a castrato disguised as a woman, [Balzac] writes the following sentence: ‘This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, he irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuousness boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.’”² Barthes considers the problems encountered when one attempts to assign a source to the preceding passage—is it the protagonist saying these words, or Balzac himself? Who claims that these ideals are considered the height of womanhood, the hero of the story or society at large? Which society? Although the text in question comes from Balzac, these are questions that can be asked of any number of creative works; the text (in any format, whether written or unwritten) is by its very nature a form in constant motion.³ Barthes ultimately decides that these answers are unanswerable: “We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.”⁴ This is what Barthes means by decreeing the “death” of the author—the negation of the author is not something that must actively be done, but rather is an activity has already taken place within the act of writing itself.

To return to the Balzac example, it is the multiplicity of questions that arise from a reading of the text that lead toward the rebuttal of the author as an authoritative indicator of textual meaning. Balzac may have intended to impart a specific meaning onto this passage, but

³ Or, to put it another way—a text is a fixed form of something that is essentially unfixable, as the multitude of viewpoints that go into interpreting the text ensure that an “ultimate meaning” can never be given. Barthes will deal with this notion in greater detail throughout the article.
⁴ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 142.
these intentions are negated by the mere act of reading; the reader brings their own viewpoint(s) to the text, any number of which necessarily takes precedent over those of the author. Barthes’ argument for this conception can be broken down into three inter-related ideas, summarized as such: 1) language can do no more than signify itself, 2) bestowing a text with an Author (and everything that entails definitive authorship) closes the writing to any further signification, 3) the reader is the ultimate point of unity for a given text. The first point is demonstrated by pointing out the ultimate futility of attempts to give a text an authorial intent: “Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I: language knows a ‘subject,’ not a ‘person,’ and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together,’ suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.”

The lynchpin of this passage is the line “language knows a ‘subject’…and this subject, empty outside of the enunciation which defines it,…” By emptying the text of meaning, Barthes lays the burden of interpretation onto the readers themselves. In traditional readings (as demonstrated in many forms of literary criticism), the author is given ultimate authority over the meaning of a text. The Author in this instance (or Author-God, as Barthes is wont to call him or her) gives the work its final significance, limiting the input of the reader. Often, this is not necessarily a viewpoint espoused by the authors themselves, but rather one that is assigned to the text by third parties after the fact.

Regardless of the origin of the Author-God construct, there is still the issue of the burden of meaning. The negation of linguistic meaning is, in Barthes’ view, not a sudden upheaval of conventions, but rather a result of the growing recognition of the inherent emptiness of the text:

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5 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 145
6 Barthes goes on a lengthy diatribe against “the new criticism,” claiming that proponents of the Author-centric view of literature have sought, consciously, or unconsciously, to solidify the view of the Author as the God-figure of the work. Although Barthes was referring to criticism as it stood in his own time, many of these critiques (pardon the pun) could be leveled at criticism as it stands these days.
“The fact is (or, it follows) that *writing* can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, ‘depiction’ (as the Classics would say); rather, it designates exactly what linguists…call a performative, a rare verbal form…in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered – something like the *I declare* of kings or the *I sing* of very ancient poets.”

By refuting the notion of a fixed meaning for a given text, Barthes is seeking to eliminate the tyranny of the Author-God over a work’s reception. Let’s go back once again to the quote from Balzac’s *Sarrasine*. If one were to interpret this quote as pertaining solely to the author’s biographical input, then one would get a very narrow view of the work as a whole; everything contained within the cover of *Sarrasine* would be seen through the lens of Balzac’s life, stamping the work with a tacit best-by date. If, instead, the work is seen as merely a collection of words, devoid of any implicit meaning other than the linguistic properties inherent in such a collection of words, than the text gains the ability to take on any number of meanings (as assigned to the text by the consumer). Such a book could be seen variously as an allegory about mid-19th century views on gender, an exposé on Balzac’s love life, a biographical sketch about someone in the author’s life, a proto-modernist fable, and so on. By offloading the meaning of a text away from the author and his/her choice of words and towards the reader, Barthes is allowing the text to grow into something much greater than the sum of its parts. He says as much, especially concerning the role of the Author in constraining literary meaning: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.”

When viewed in this context, the “death” of the author is thus not a means of eliminating the input of the author, but rather a way to let the work live on its own merits.

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Barthes goes so far as to suggest a re-conceptualization of the author, opting instead for the more fitting term “scriptor.”⁹ This figure is one that does not attempt treat their work as a conduit for personal and emotional release, but instead simply treats the text as what it ultimately is (or, rather, what Barthes theorizes the text to be): a collection of words that symbolize nothing more than themselves. As he says: “Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred.”¹⁰ Thus, the scriptor takes the place of the Author, just as the structure of language takes precedence over any implicit meaning.

As established before, Barthes argues that the language of a text does not contain any inherent meaning on its own, but instead is given meaning through the act of reading/interpretation. The question now must be asked, what (or, more accurately, who) imparts meaning onto a text?¹¹ And even more to the point, how does the reader find meaning in a text if language is, to use Barthes’ conceptualization, devoid of meaning? To answer this, Barthes considers the cultural origins of literature: “The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.”¹² This does not mean that Barthes’ theoretical text is simply

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⁹ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 147
¹⁰ Ibid.
¹¹ One could go further and ask, “Does a text need to have a meaning at all?” If we’re offloading the responsibility of creating meaning onto the reader, then it only makes sense that a reader could choose not to impart any meaning onto a given work. That simply leads us down another theoretical rabbit hole; is it even possible to consume a work without giving it a meaning? Is it possible to decipher any coded message (language being, at its core, a series of coded messages) without imparting something of our own biases and experiences? And if not, is it even possible to draw a baseline of transferred meaning (i.e., is there a “minimum” amount of meaning that we can impart to a given work?) Those are all valid questions; nevertheless, they are secondary to the aims of this paper.
cobbled together from surface-level intercultural quotations, but rather that the meaning of a text is dependent on a number of inter-related concepts and ideas that are applied to the structure of language. Moreover, the expression of these hidden (and sometimes not-so-hidden) meanings is not dependent on the text or the author, but instead relies on the active participation of the reader. This gets to the third major point of Barthes’ article; the reader is the ultimate focal point of the meaning of a creative work.

“…a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.”

Once again, Barthes’ theories run counter to the traditional conception of a creative work: in the highly Romanticized view of a work of art, the author (and all that is contained within the author) is sacrosanct, giving the work its sole meaning and substance. Barthes argues instead that the meaning of a work is borrowed from the reader’s own experiences, as they are ultimately the ones that consume a work. Here we finally see the apex of Barthes’ ideology; because the text has been shown to be a series of constructs devoid of implicit meaning, the reader is ultimately

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14 Incidentally, my own reading of this article proved this theory. While reading, I noticed that Barthes solely used masculine pronouns whenever needed (his text, his writing, and so on). Noticing this caused me to think about the article as a product of its time in regards to gender terminology, a meaning which would surely have not been a part of a valid conceptualization of this work had Barthes’ intentions been the sole arbiter of literary meaning. Instead, it is my own experiences that lend the work this meaning, demonstrating quite nicely the validity of Barthes’ concepts.
the one that imparts meaning onto a given work of art. Because of this, the role of the author is eliminated, (or, to put it in Barthes’ language, the author dies). The end result of these ideas is a new conceptualization of a given work of art as a nexus of meanings, imparted onto the work through the active participation of the reader.

Given the literary focus of The Death of the Author, it would be simple to assume that Barthes’ concepts would only be valid in a critique of the written word. However, the ideas put forth in this article carry the ability to have a life beyond just the linguistic realm described by Barthes, and it is the goal of the rest of this article to examine how to best adapt Barthes’ concepts to the realm of contemporary music.15 The first step would be to examine how the idea of “author” and “reader” can be applied to such an area, and whether or not Barthes’ ideas carry the same weight. Unlike the cut-and-dry binary of author/reader found in literature, the world of music carries a much different division of creative labor. Between the author/composer and reader/audience, there exists in music a third role—that of the performer. The question now must be on what side the performer falls—does the performer act as a member of the audience (since, after all, the performer is receiving the music from the composer, just like the non-performing members of the audience), or as an author (the performer is as much, if not more, responsible for the creation of music)—after all, music often consists primarily of time and sound, both of which

15 The term “contemporary music” in this article is, admittedly, a somewhat broad term. Within the context of this paper, I will be using the term to refer to music that has been written within the last several decades, and which demonstrates a clear goal of pushing at or beyond the boundaries of the “mainstream” of Western art music. More specifically, I will be referring to music which has become the lingua franca of a certain breed of new music specialist found in the global West; some might describe this music as “complexist” or as being a part of the “New Complexity,” but ultimately this term is used to describe a certain kind of music that exhibits an inquisitive (and occasionally uneasy) relationship with the boundaries of Western art music. Additionally, this type of music has found a niche audience, one that is not beholden to the dualistic worlds of “art” and “pop” musics. Such an audience is often steeped in the history of Western art music, and the performers espousing this type of music tend to exhibit a certain hyper-virtuosity and DIY aesthetic that has, in actuality, come to characterize much of the contemporary music world.
come from the performance of the interpreter)? Or perhaps the performer is a kind of creative switch hitter, oscillating back and forth between these two roles as demanded by the music being realized? Because of the danger of stamping the act of musical performance with arbitrary limitations, I am inclined towards the latter answer. In many ways, the performer synthesizes the experiences of both sides of the creative equation, creating a bridge from the composer/author to the audience/reader. As a result, the performer must navigate the two roles set forth by Barthes; the interpreter must recognize the inherent emptiness of the text (or music notation, in this case), yet must also allow for their own perceptions to give the work a meaning (or meanings) of its own. Of course, this is not a simple fix for the problem at hand, as the balance between reader/author is incredibly delicate and prone to being mishandled. Even so, this brings up yet another round of questions: how much authorial intent can a performer wield? If they are acting as an author proxy, wouldn’t their contributions be negated, given Barthes’ theories of the negation of the author? And if the performer has some authorial intention, why even bother with the composer in the first place? These questions demonstrate the uneasy fit that Barthes’ ideologies have with music, particularly when looking at the dualistic aspects of his formulations. That said, there is still much to learn from Barthes’ article, and many of these lessons can be found in the realm of contemporary music with some digging.

One possible avenue for the reconciliation of contemporary music and Barthes’ ideology is to be found in the structural emphasis common to both literature and music. As demonstrated throughout *The Death of the Author*, Barthes views the written word as blank scaffolding, ready to receive other meanings and associations. Much the same can be said about music in its various forms. If we borrow Blackings’ definition of the term, music is defined as humanly organized
sound. This definition says nothing about the meaning of those sounds, only that they are organized by some form of structure imposed by a human agent. In the way that written texts use language to create form, music uses sound. This sentiment has found a home in much of what could be called “contemporary music,” and in particular a certain niche of new music that explores the various complexities of physical performance. The music of composers such as Aaron Cassidy, Dmitri Kourliandski, Rebecca Saunders, and countless others takes as it fundamental base the act of musical performance itself (an act that Cassidy refers to as “performative physicality.”) Indeed, Cassidy often speaks of the “morphology” of music, particularly in regards to the physical gestures inherent in performance: speaking of his own music, he says that “… the primary morphological unit—not only in my music but also in music in general—is not merely the aural gesture, but far more importantly, the physical gesture.”

Thus, his music (and the music of many other composers working in the same explorative venue) dwells on the structural potential of the performative act itself. This is an important distinction to make, precisely because it helps to suppress or eliminate the implicit meanings that are said to exist within a “conventional” musical performance. By pinpointing the physical gesture as the prime carrier of musical significance, we come closer to a theory of musical meaning that aligns closely with Barthes’ conception of literary authorship. That being said, the issue of authorship

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18 Ibid.
19 Consider the following quote from a review of that bastion of Western classical commercialism, Lang Lang: “You don’t hear all of Tchaikovsky’s “The Seasons” played as a cycle too often, and Lang made it an experience of contrasts as varied as the weather itself—turning on the hammering drive in “August” and “September,” ruminating through “April” and drifting through “May” with lots of expression. The most familiar piece, the “June” Barcarolle, was taken at a glacial tempo, as if in a dream.” What is he ruminating about? How can someone “drift” through a piece of music with expression? What is he expressing? This only serves to prove that Barthes’ critique of criticism is just as valid today, while also demonstrating the ability of the reader/audience to posit their own meanings onto a performance. (Source: http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-lang-lang-review-20150323-story.html)
in music is obfuscated by the ways in which music is disseminated. If we are to state that the
performer is reader and author (as established by Barthes), then the text (music) being created by
the performer contains the sum total of the act of performance. It follows then that the
performative physicality of the work is essentially devoid of meaning, as the reader/audience is
the one that ultimately gives the work its total meaning. The complicating factor here is the
three-part structure found in contemporary and Western art music, that of composer-performer-
audience. Because of this structure, the performer (established before as the bridge between
composer and audience) must contain within themselves both parts of the Barthesian
author/reader construct; as the audience to the composer’s composition, they must first act to
give the music their own meaning (even if that meaning is relevant only to their own experience
of the music). Upon the act of performance, they switch roles over to that of the author, realizing
the music as a work of organized sound (to paraphrase Blacking). This performance is essentially
a blank slate, allowing for the listener to fill in the work with his or her own meaning. This
tripartite interpretive structure is the key differentiator between music and literature, as defined
within Barthes’ concepts, and it is precisely this difference that gives music an identity separate
from the written word (even if it is possible to import literary conventions over to a musical
context, albeit with a little bit of philosophical retrofitting).

There still is one part of the equation left to address in our Barthesian appraisal of
contemporary music: the audience/reader construct. In Barthes’ view of literature, the reader is
the one that gives a work its total meaning. Unlike the murkiness of the Author-
Composer/Performer analogy, this is one area where Barthes’ ideas can make a relatively clean
transfer to the world of contemporary music. The audience/listener instills their own meaning
onto a piece of music in the same way that the reader interprets and disentangles their own
meanings from a text. Consider the following; a listener hears the opening strand of the “Hoe-Down” from Aaron Copland’s *Rodeo*, and instead of thinking of the balletic and narrative meanings originally intended by Copland, they immediately think of beef (or, more accurately, are subconsciously primed to think of beef through the associations created by the rather successful ads promoted by the Beef Checkoff Program in the early 1990s). This work is given its meaning through the application of the multiplicity of viewpoints present within the listener, in the same way that a text is given its meaning through the act of reading. For contemporary music, the audience does retains their agency, yet a distinguishing factor of this niche of Western art music is an increased awareness on the part of the composers and performers towards the influence of the audience on the reception of their music. By focusing inward on the pure (or impure, as it were) act of performance, composers like Cassidy, Ray Evanoff, and Katherine Young are moving away from the stereotypical Composer/Author role and more towards what Barthes called the “scriptor”; the composer here is less the voice of authority, and more a scriptor of events that are ripe for the application of meaning by the listener/performer. In this way, many of the current strands of contemporary music (as defined before) exhibit the ideas espoused by Barthes in *The Death of Author*; the music is seen by composers to be essentially empty of meaning beyond the pure act and sound of performance, and the listeners themselves supply their own meanings to the work. The performers act as an intermediary between the two, with a foot in both worlds of author/composer and reader/listener. Thus, the ideas found in *The Death of the Author* not only apply to literature, (as Barthes understood it during the 1970s), but have also flourished within the world of contemporary music.

Although the claims made in *The Death of the Author* have been met with equal doses of praise and criticism, it is much harder to say whether the ideology espoused by Barthes has
found a home outside of the realm of literary criticism. At its base, Barthes argues that the “death” of the author is essential to the liberation of the text from pre-ordained meaning. Furthermore, Barthes demonstrates that the language of any given text is essentially devoid of meaning; in his view, language is “empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it.”  

Finally, Barthes argues that the meaning of a text is given by those who read the work, as the reader is “simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.” Although a pure transfer of literary concepts between mediums is necessarily not possible, many of these ideas hold relevance for the field that some call “contemporary music” (itself being a construct largely defined by those who take part in that community). The primary modification that has to be made in this transfer is the addition of the performer, who acts as a bridge between composer and listener (Author and Reader in Barthes’ concept). Beyond that, there are many connections to be made between literature and contemporary music; the composer carries many of the same responsibilities as the author, and the listener and reader are alike in their active interpretation of the medium at hand. Ultimately, both music and literature deal with largely the same constructs; the respective mediums are shaped and structured by rules both conscious and unconscious, which are then presented to the audience via written text or musical notation. In Barthes’ conception, the audience bears the burden of creating meaning for the work, as opposed to the Romantic conception of the Author-God as the provider of ultimate meaning and context. There still remain some questions about such a union: does the author really have to “die” in order for the text to be liberated? Is it enough to simply write a musical work based on the act of performance itself, or does there need

to be some sort of ulterior motive behind the creation of a work? More to the point, do Barthes’
thories carry any philosophical weight anymore? Such lines of inquiry are beyond the scope of
this article, yet they deserve to be discussed, if for the simple reason that to ignore possible lines
of investigation would be to tacitly state that the previous arguments have reached their
culmination, and can be considered closed. Regardless, the least that can be said about this issue
is that Barthes’ ideas provoke the asking of questions about the basic nature of our medium, and
of how our work is perceived by the very people that seek it out. In a highly personal and social
field such as music, that type of questioning is as vital as the act of creating music itself.

Bibliography

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