

QUESTIONING *ASSUMPTIONS*
Notes Toward a Musical Sociology

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Notes Toward a Musical Sociology

The first principle of classical music is that the performers do what they are told. At least that is the usual first principle of the tradition as we know it today. You play what is on the page.

Thus there is a famous harp solo in Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* that must be regarded as a musical—if not a sociological—curiosity, because you're not supposed to play what is on the page. This is the passage of lush arpeggios that holds the ear back for a moment, building anticipation for the great tune that follows, towards the beginning of the "Waltz of the Flowers," which I am listening to as I write these lines. Tchaikovsky wrote the passage as a series of four-note runs with contrary motion, falling in the top voice and rising in the lower, steadily extending an A-major chord up the harmonic series. But the way every harpist plays it—and every harpist does play it; it's one of the classic passages of the harp literature—is as a series of eight-note falling runs at twice the speed with no contrary motion, one hand following the other on down to create the shimmering, flourishing quality that has delighted audiences for over a hundred years. (See figure 1.)

I say for over a hundred years because the passage has been played this way right from the first performance in 1892. During rehearsals for the work's premiere, with Tchaikovsky conducting, the harpist suggested this revision. Tchaikovsky agreed that the revision sounded better, and approved of the change. The harp, to be sure, is an odd instrument, and even a master orchestrator like Tchaikovsky did not imagine all its ins and outs. (Tchaikovsky was himself a flutist.) Tchaikovsky died the next year, and apparently did not get around to changing the score before it was published. But this

altered way of playing the passage has been passed along harpist to harpist, country to country, orchestra to orchestra, generation to generation ever since. After all, Tchaikovsky said to play it that way.

I get this story from Samuel Adler and his *The Study of Orchestration*, who tells it as a cautionary tale about the difficulty of writing for the harp.¹ I re-tell it here because of what it suggests about classical music as a social performance, and most specifically classical music's dominantly monological cultural rhythms: the composer-author as authoritarian-author. I re-tell it because I wish to pursue a dialogical analysis of the musical act, and to sketch a dialogic mode of aesthetics. I thus re-tell it as an overture to both a sociology of music and a musical sociology, using a dialogical theory of culture's tonalities.

My materials for this sociological performance will not be the usual ones. I offer here no ethnographic report of events seen and participated in, no survey of audiences or performers or composers, no close study of a sample of texts. Rather, I will illustrate this dialogical sociology of music and musical sociology through an act of my own dialogic composition: a piece I call *Assumptions*, which I extend as a sociological method in its own right. My attempt, then, is to practice the art of sociology through the creation of sociological art.

As sociological endeavors go, the sociology of culture has been less rigid about maintaining the standard distanced attitude of subject and object toward its area of interest. Sociologists of culture are better than most sociologists about admitting their place within what they are describing, and the consequences of that position for sociological work. Nonetheless, we in the sociology of culture still hold to the notion of method as cultural investigation, not as cultural creation—except to the extent that

sociology inevitably has consequence for the objectified subject, through what Giddens called the “double hermeneutic,” and through our disciplinary faith that what we do as social scientists might have some positive consequence for the world. We still conceive the cultural creations that the sociology of culture brings about as inevitable accidents of the sociological position as never without what it tries to get within, from the without. We do not actively try, as sociologists, to create culture: to attempt our art as art.

And not without reason. There are certainly dangers in such a project. Arrogance, self-indulgence, puffery: These come all too easily to mind. Plus the institutions of sociology, by which we find and discipline the boundaries of our endeavor, are ill-equipped for evaluating sociological art. We have organs of hierarchy and legitimacy aplenty in our field, by which we sort through the potential arrogance, indulgence, and puffery of any sociological author, and debate our disciplinary politics. But unlike the humanities, long accustomed to having in their midst those who pretend to the throne of art, we do not have routines and structures for contending with such pretence, if pretence it be. We don't know how to evaluate sociological art as a professional endeavor.

It is, I suppose, a matter of our legacy of seeking our legitimacy through another form of pretence: that of pretending to the throne of science. But sociology, as many have argued in various ways, has long felt some tension over whether to conceive itself as a science or a humanity, or, what I think right, as both—as what Mikhail Bakhtin liked to call a “human science.” The disciplinary mood seems now to be shifting toward this more human understanding of the social, though. The rise of the Sociology of Culture as a flourishing subsection of the American Sociological Association itself

indicates an engagement with this traditionally humanistic realm, however much we may yet seek to assemble the cultural shards we inspect in the glass cases of science.

So maybe the time is right for sociological art. I will at least make the attempt. And whether we know how to evaluate it or not, I hope that one consequence of what I offer here is to further and extend the sociological engagement by bringing not only humanistic topics into our purview, but humanistic practices as well, encouraging thereby a more sociological culture through a sociology that is itself, well, more cultural.

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But first a bit of theory, to better indicate my sociological purpose.

Sociology as a field of endeavor faces a number of nettlesome and interrelated problems concerning its conceptualization of its subject, its purpose, and its practices. Perhaps principle among them are what we may call the *problem of explanation*, the *problem of agency*, and the *problem of public engagement*, all currently under vigorous debate in the field. For example, the August, 2004 issues of *Sociological Theory* and *Theory and Society* featured articles on sociological explanation and on the question of agency and social change, and the theme of the most recent annual meeting of the American Sociological Association was public engagement.

Whence come these problems? I've been winding up for a massive generalization. Here it comes: The origin of these problems lies in a 19th century conceptualization of the scientific project, centered on the goal of *total explanation*—the sense that scholarly work is not finally complete until all aspects of a topic are explained by a theory or model, and $r^2 = 1$.

Perhaps that pitch did not impress. And unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), I am not in a position in this paper to attempt to convince the skeptical at any great length that our problems so descend upon us. But I'll have at least a short go at it now in the usual language of scholarly debate, saving room for my argument by art, later on.

Any goal, I think we can accept, requires the conceptual apparatus that makes it thinkable. Let me underline 4 features of the conceptual apparatus of total explanation:

- 1) sociology's typically mechanical and orderly vision of cause and effect;
- 2) the gold standard of predictability as the mark of social scientific success in identifying the mechanics of cause and effect;
- 3) the rituals of distancing from everyday life in order to find hidden structures of predictability not apparent to the social actor; and
- 4) the moral need for neutrality in order to maintain that distance, and to claim an explanatory space allegedly beyond the realm of social power.

These features of total explanation are, I believe, familiar to all sociological practitioners, however impatiently they may—justly, in my view—regard them. A good number of scholars have been trying to find ways to rework these practices. I am far from alone here, as the existence of the debates over what I labeled the “three problems” of explanation, agency, and engagement indicates. I have been particularly influenced by the efforts of Mustafa Emirbayer, John Martin, and Dorothy Smith. But I don't want to engage in a comprehensive review of this work here. Let me say my own piece.

And that is, that we need to confront the way total explanation puts sociology at a serious disadvantage for comprehending even the possibility of agency, and for tolerating even the possibility of engagement. For the “gold standard” of both agency

and engagement must be their disorderly *unpredictability*. If the mechanics of our theories were, one day, so finely tuned that we could indeed predict every social outcome, there would be no agency. Nor would there be need for engagement, for it would serve no purpose to connect with the purposeless. It's the familiar problem of free will, in this case with regard to a sociological god. If, however, we keep ourselves apart from the laity—if we keep them behind the rood screen and do not translate our texts for them—we can perhaps continue to fool them and ourselves about our priestly rectitude. Total explanation, then, can only survive through its rituals of avoidance of the messiness, contradiction, incommensurability, motion, surprise, and originality that seem so evident and relevant to the everyday life and concerns of the social actor. Thus engagement both serves no purpose and is a threat to the total explanation vision of sociology's project.

But as the three problems make clear, total explanation isn't working. My case is that dialogics is a conversation that sociology would do well to enter for a way out.

There is increasing interest in dialogue as a focus of research within the social sciences, associated with the "civic" turn embodied in studies of participatory and deliberative democracy, social capital, and participatory research. Most of this work has hinged on questions of dialogue as a concrete social practice, which is certainly a worthy topic in its own right. But there has been less consideration of *dialogics*—that is, using the concrete practice of dialogue as a source of epistemological and theoretical insight. Dialogics has an enthusiastic and increasingly widespread following in the humanities, based on the work of Paulo Freire, Martin Buber, Donna Haraway, and especially Mikhail Bakhtin. Yet there has been little written about what dialogics might hold for

the epistemology and theory of the social sciences in general, and sociology in particular.²

Locating sociology within dialogics would lead to an interactive and non-deterministic epistemology of social life as an ongoing process, situated in the practice and metaphor of conversation. For dialogics is, as Michael Gardiner has described, “a practical rationality, rooted in the concrete deed, and not detachable from specific situations and projected as some sort of speciously and decontextualized ‘Truth.’”³ Dialogics is not static and apart, a theory of tweezers and pinning. Nor is the social actor static and apart. “To be means to communicate,” in Bakhtin’s widely quoted phrase.⁴ But this is not communication in the narrow way we commonly understand the word today, in which I merely tell you what I am thinking. Rather, dialogics emphasizes the way all the participants in a dialogue call forth words from each other—the way the word is “territory shared” and “is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it,” as Bahktin liked to put it.⁵ When participants in a dialogue communicate, they say things that neither could have absolutely predicted ahead of time, for they proceed in the conversation through a continual taking into account of the other, and the messiness and contradiction the other represents, constantly reframing and reshaping their words and deeds accordingly. Herein lies surprise, social agency, the reshaping of categories and structures and their constraining histories, and the live and unfinished quality of the world that Bakhtin called “unfinalizability.”

When we are participating in dialogue, and not monologue, that is. For dialogics equally recognizes that there is much about the world which, like total explanation, tries to constrain and deny its messy unpredictability, and the opportunity for a “living rejoinder.” Sometimes those among us attempt to speak and not to listen,

to impose categories and other structures of existence upon the other, without engaging their differences, disagreements, and situations. The other becomes the audience, the object of the speaking subject, with little chance to participate in the active potential of communication, at least at that social moment. Monologic speech, in Bakhtin's words, "is directed toward its referential object and constitutes the ultimate semantic authority within the limits of a given context," and similarly for monologic action more broadly.⁶ Monologue, then, is the realm of control, power, dominance, and hegemony.

But the good news for a sociology that embraces unpredictability and release from total explanation—and the good news for a democratic politics—is that monologue is never pure, never perfect, never absolute. Monologue "presupposes a *we*," Bakhtin noted. Monologue is dependent upon the shared territory of the history of meaning that words represent. Monologue is as well dependent upon the response of the audience, which the monologic actor must in some way conform to in order to act purposefully. The paradox of monologue is that it both denies and needs the other, for there must be something there, recognized, to deny. As even that great advocate of the monologic universalism of science, Francis Bacon, noted, "Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed."⁷ This ultimate unavoidability of the other always keeps open the possibility of the "living rejoinder," of *critique*, even in the most monologic of situations. Bakhtin's own rejoinder to monologue was thus: "there is neither a first nor a last word." And herein lies our humanity for, as Freire wrote, "it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it...[and] achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity."⁸

But just as monologue depends upon at least a degree of dialog, so dialogue depends upon at least a degree of monolog. For one to communicate, another must

listen. For one to speak, another must, at that moment, be silent. For one to reframe the categories of our lives—which is the entire purpose of communication—one must speak with those categories, so that reframing might be understood. Our very consciousness is dependent upon some degree of acceptance of the history of conversation that proceeds our coming into the world. As Bakhtin phrased it, “I realize myself initially through others: from them I receive words, forms, and tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself.”⁹ Moreover, to engage in conversation with another is to limit conversation with still others, denying them a recognized moment in dialogue. The ability to deny some others a speaking place in our interactions is a central power we seek from the conditions of our lives, one that we do not lightly give up. We cannot have dialogue with everyone, everywhere, all the time. Nor would we want to. Monologue too is an existential necessity.

Dialogics, then, is not a simple matter of dialogue good, monologue bad. Rather, it is an invitation to understand the living, unfinalizable character of social life, as it is experienced in the everyday, without losing our analytic eye for its regularities and impositions. We do not experience an R^2 of 1, or of any decimal fraction of 1. We do, however, at turns in our daily lives, experience dialogue and monologue in their many degrees, overlaps, and ever-changing interdependencies. The goal of this paper is to bring such an understanding both to an account of everyday social practice and to the development of an epistemology not of disorder, and certainly not of order, but of the messy in-between of human vitality and situated freedom.

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Considering its first principle, classical music today could hardly be said to represent a paragon of dialogic culture. To be sure, performers are given scope to put

the music across through subtle shifts in tempo, timbre, and dynamics. Indeed, classical musicians are expected to do so. As many a teacher has told many a pupil, this is what makes the difference between a musician and a technician. Classical music is in the notes, it isn't the notes themselves. Classical music listeners search out and applaud performances precisely because they are that: performances, by live performers. It is fundamentally live music, at least for most of its fans, which brings a definite measure of the indefinite to classical music as a social act. Nevertheless, that scope for performance is strictly limited by classical music's deep devotion to the text: to the score, and its author.

And perhaps more so today than in the past. Mozart never wrote out many of his cadenzas because he expected the performer to improvise them. (Many of the cadenzas we have today for Mozart's concertos were written out later by others, including Beethoven in several instances.) The current fashion for playing Baroque music on original instruments is in part an effort to recreate the composer's intent as faithfully as possible. Contemporary composers have often given textual definition huge weight in their compositional projects, inventing a complex array of notation schemes to specify minute differences in timbre, pitch, and rhythm. The musicologist Eric Salzman has called this approach to composition "ultra-rational" and "totally organized" music, which he defines as "the idea of a piece of music being totally controlled in every dimension by its creator."¹⁰ In the work of composers like Stockhausen and Babbitt, notes Salzman, "What had long been the prerogative of the performer or lay within the domain of 'tradition' now became part of the articulated compositional process."¹¹

The devotion to the text remains the case with much contemporary composition and performance. To be sure, the cadenzas that Beethoven wrote out on Mozart's

behalf are wonderful music. To be sure, performers can produce some delicately lovely sounds on original Baroque instruments, or by adhering to the textual admonitions of ultra-rational music. To be sure, there is a certain sports competitiveness to being able to get through Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto without making a fool of oneself. There is some scope for performers to articulate a self in these events. But it is almost entirely a referential self. The ultimate semantic authority lies elsewhere, in the voice of the composer.

The *avant garde* music of the twentieth century, with its shrieks and squeaks that seemed to shatter our traditional values for music, in this sense was deeply rooted in the sensibilities of the nineteenth century. Salzman is incisive on this point:

Like our nineteenth century forebears, we think of the composer as a creative individual communicating personal, original, and unique thoughts in a distinctive style and with a particularized point of view and expression. This lingering concept of the composer as a romantic culture hero has led us to place greater emphasis than ever on creative individuality, originality, and freedom....The very notion of the "avant-garde" as it is usually understood is a nineteenth-century, Romantic conception.

In this regard, the total explanation sociology of the twentieth century has much in common with the totally-organized music of the twentieth century, and on into the twenty-first. We sociologists continue to exalt the great theorist as a romantic hero of our disciplinary culture, whose individuality leads to blinding flashes of original insight, mixed with the hard work and perspiration of all good inspiration. Composers too are exalted for their work ethic, represented in the length of their list of compositions. The

storybook of classical music is filled with tales of incredible compositional feats, such as Haydn's 104 symphonies and Verdi's 23 major operas, in some clear resonance with admiration for Max Weber's vast sociological output. The free, personal qualities of the composer hero do not extend into sociology, however, I suspect because of the positivistic conception of the sociologist as the neutral observer. But the composer hero and the theorist hero are united in their fulfillment of the romance of individual, monologic, total control.

Which doesn't sound so romantic if it's put that way. It is even less romantic if we consider that this monologic achievement is not just toward performers, both musical and sociological. (By sociological performers, I have in mind the rank and file of graduate students and empirical researchers, who put into practice the theorist's compositions.) It is as well toward the respective publics of classical music and sociology. Both fields of endeavor have been strongly marked in the twentieth century by a vigorous distancing from the perspectives and everyday lives of their audiences—a distancing already in evidence in the nineteenth century, but which gap grew steadily wider in the twentieth.

In classical music, the serialists—and especially Milton Babbitt—are the standard target for my line of argument, and not without reason. Serial composers are those who compose by placing various parameters of music—usually pitch, but sometimes also rhythm, dynamics, and other musical elements—in a series, and using them only in that series, or in variations of the series. The most common form of serialism is twelve-tone technique, in which no pitch is repeated before the other 11 have been sounded, resulting in a continuing disruption of any sense of a tonal center. Serialism was long the most widely used technique for atonality, and during the middle

decades of the twentieth century, serialism reigned as the defining sound of the “serious” composer. But in the minds of most of classical music’s audience, even after nearly a century of having to listen to it, serialism is not just atonality; it is a-musicality. Vast swaths of classical music fans still hate the stuff. Not surprisingly, it seldom appears on the classical airwaves.

Babbitt is the biggest target, though, because of an infamous article he published in 1958, under the title “Who Cares if You Listen?” Babbitt was professor of music at Princeton at the time—he is still active and teaches at Julliard today—and wanted to make the case that composition should be considered an academic specialization in its own right, on a par with physics and other “pure” fields of study. His own title for his article was “The Composer as Specialist,” but upon reading its lines, the editor did a bit of editorializing and changed Babbitt’s title. Upon reading lines like these, much cited since:

I dare say that the composer would do himself and his music immediate and eventual service by total, resolute, and voluntary withdrawal from his public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition. By so doing, the separation of domains would be defined beyond any possibility of confusion of categories, and the composer would be free to pursue a private life of professional achievement, as opposed to a public life of unprofessional compromise and exhibitionism.¹²

This vision of the academic’s position in society has, of course, been soundly criticized in recent years, in music, in sociology, and in other fields, as the academe

struggles to rediscover a public voice. And I am trying to amplify this critique here. But a position like Babbitt's was not solely monologic in the usual modernist sense of the term, in which the composer comes down from the mountain to tell the masses what is good music and what is not. There was plenty of posturing of that sort in twentieth century composition, and particularly serialism—the composer as individualist culture hero, as semantic authority over public taste, however much the public complained and engaged in the passive resistance of simply no longer showing up at the concert hall. Babbitt had his measure of that posture as well, with his sense of the composer's art as an elite craft. But Babbitt was also making a new argument: that the composer-as-specialist shouldn't have to worry about public complaints, and should be under no obligation to attend to "the public and social aspects of musical composition." There isn't any need for social consensus on what is good music. Universalism was thus unseated, or at least confined to the walls of the university.

What Babbitt was suggesting, then, was a kind of proto-postmodernism in which the notion of music as a universal language (and even *the* universal language) is tossed to the scrap heap of utopian modernist musings. With such a retreat into the "private life of professional achievement," it is not even clear that one should attend to one's colleagues' standards of composition, for it is a *private* life.

Babbitt was not the only one thinking along these lines. John Cage's experiments with indeterminacy in music made much the same case, albeit with very different musical materials than Babbitt's privatized and totally organized serialism. Where Babbitt liked to specify everything and even to eliminate the performer, Cage wanted to open everything up, and built a number of compositions around chance—most famously his 1952 piece *4' 33"*, in which the performers sit silently on the stage for

four minutes and thirty-three seconds and the audience takes in the rustling and shuffling of the crowd in the auditorium, and any noises that happen to seep in from outside. By stripping away control, Cage made the case, as Morgan describes, “that there were no longer any shared guidelines, that each composer had to make entirely personal—and thus essentially ‘arbitrary’—choices.”¹³ No standards, and thus nothing to control. For Babbitt, by controlling the music completely through serialism and the use of electronic performance, as opposed to human performance, the composer could be freed from the standards others might try to impose. Everything could be controlled, thus no standards.

At any rate, from the 1960s onward it has become increasingly difficult to ascertain any common standard of what composition is, a trend variously called “post-serialism,” “post-classic,” or “downtown music” (this last as opposed to the “uptown music” of the modernist formalists at the university)—in addition to “postmodern music,” the phrase sociologists of culture will likely be most comfortable with.¹⁴ As Morgan describes, “If serialism was a final (and, some would say, desperate) attempt to impose centralized conventions on the musical community, post-serialism disdained all aspiration to universality, and often to coherence as well.”¹⁵ Now all sonic materials were fair game for the composer. Pop, rock, jazz, folk, Indian ragas, African drumming, playing the violin with your feet, amplified recordings of the stress and strain of a building’s walls leaning in the wind, the sounds of audience members coughing and shifting in their seats as they check their watches, whatever. It is all potentially music.

With this “extreme pluralism,” as Morgan terms it, the term “classical music” has been so bent and stretched that for most composers today it is no longer worth identifying with. People who compose what others might, with a quizzical look, call

“classical music, right?” are now far more likely to call their art “new music” or “contemporary composition” or “concert music.” This last opens the stylistic door the widest of all, referring only to the social organizational traditions of classical music—the orchestra, opera cast, or chamber group which the audience is supposed to sit quietly and listen to—as the point of continuity with the past. And even this door some find constraining, trapping the music so defined in an old, unfortunate *double entendre*: that of being class-based music, open only to those able to pay for \$50 seats and culturally comfortable, in Bourdieu’s sense of *habitus*, with sitting quietly for so long.

What we once knew as classical music has become the music with no name.

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At least among most composers today. The public still embraces the term, and still switches on and shows up, albeit in steadily declining numbers in most of the English-speaking world, if not elsewhere. But the postmodern, post-serial, post-classic, downtown composer in many ways is no freer of the cultural sensibilities of the nineteenth century vision of classical music. For all its eclecticism, postmodern composition is still infused by the Romantic culture hero vision of the creative individual, monologically claiming semantic authority. True, the postmodern composer does not claim monologic control over the semantic judgment of others, who are free to interpret the music by any habits of taste. Rather, it is the monologue of the “entirely personal” on the part of the composer, the performers, and the audience, each finding individual authority in a solipsistic withdrawal from dialogue.

I want to contribute to a different tonality of musical relations, one that is neither modernist nor postmodernism, and is thus in some ways both of them. In part, this contribution can be seen as a working out of whether there is indeed another way to

hear and write music. But also, I confess, I take an advocacy position: that of welcoming the search for that way, in both our music and our sociology. That other way that is—or, really, ways that are—neither and both modernist and postmodernist is, and are, dialogics. I attempt this search here through the musical sociology that I will spend most the rest of this paper describing.

But first let me say that I do not intend to offer a musical prescription for how or what dialogic composition is. Dialogics is not a single form of social relations. Nor, I believe, should it be a single stylistic canon of music. For dialogue is not just in the qualities of the speaking. It is equally in the qualities of the listening.

Those tonal qualities are to be found in a manner of engagement that I have elsewhere called “response ability”—the social conditions that welcome others’ responses and the commitment to respond to them.¹⁶ The commitment that goes with the welcome is what distinguishes response ability from a mere are-you-through-yet engagement. But these are never clear matters, for we will often disagree as to what constitutes a response from the glib reply, the blow-off, the disingenuous, and the plain wrong. Indeed, we will never agree about anything in any absolute sense, from a dialogic point of view. Nor should we want to, for to agree absolutely is to experience a diminution of the pleasures and possibilities of unfinalizability. Not to worry: There is no way to know, absolutely, that we have absolute agreement anyway.

The conditions that encourage such dialogic qualities of response are as complex as the lives of those one is seeking to engage, and the lives of those seeking engagement. What I mean, in plain English, is the piece I am about to describe is just the way I’ve done it. There are lots of other ways.

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In *Assumptions*, I try to compose a dialogic musical sociology in two broad ways: through the use of dialogic musical materials, and through using the music to depict the dialogics of everyday life. It is dialogic both in its compositional techniques and in its compositional subject.

I'll take up the dialogic techniques first. Principle among these are my use of three kinds of notes, what I term *a priori*, *a posteriori*, and *ad libitum* notes. (See figures 2 and 3.) The *a priori* passages I mark with normal notes, and I pretty much expect the players to play what the score says, in line with the conventional response of classical performers to the text. The *a posteriori* passages are marked with diamond shaped note heads, and the score notes that "in these sections the player should feel welcome to embellish or slightly modify what I have written, according to her or his own experience and judgment." The *ad libitum* sections are marked both with diamond shaped noteheads and with a dashed line above, marked "*ad libitum*." The score notes that "In these cases, the player should take what I written as suggestions or ideas to consider, and should feel free to play these passages according to his or her pleasure, altering, recomposing, or improvising something quite different." Through the use of this notation, I try to encourage the performers to enter into a dialogue with the score, rather than treating it as a fixed and final text. I have my word, both in the *a priori* sections and in the notes I suggest in the *a posteriori* and *ad libitum* passages. And I also note in the score that "a player should also feel welcome, again according to her or his experience and judgment, to play the *a posteriori* and *ad libitum* passages as I have written them." But they don't have to. The text is not final. The first principle of classical music does not everywhere apply.

Why not open up the whole piece to the “experience and judgment” of the performers? Why not a kind of free classical music, like “free jazz” or the total indeterminacy of Cage and others? The point of dialogics is not to consume the self, to make it subservient to its social context, either ethically or as an account of the empirical world. I see my dialogic role in *Assumptions* as raising some ideas, shaped by the myriad assumptions I need to make to even state an idea, and then welcoming the responses of the players to those ideas: the composer as conversation starter. Or, rather, the composer as conversation re-starter, for dialogics underlines for us that any conversation is necessarily based to a large degree on the history of conversation. The point here, then, is to argue that elements of both dialogue and monologue are existential necessities.

One could perhaps do a fully undetermined composition from a dialogic point of view, perhaps to depict the monologues of the uncategorical, or to argue that we are never without categories, as even the performers of undetermined music would have some musical language in common, and likely quite a bit. Their playing would not be fully undetermined. Moreover, there is categorical determination in determining to be undetermined. Maybe I, or someone else, could take the point of view in another composition. I don't want to rule out such an approach. But I think it would have more meaning in response to a piece such as *Assumptions* that traces dialogics through a musical situation in which dialogic and monologic aspects are more in balance.

I realize my compositional role as a conversation re-starter also through the use of familiar—or at least relatively familiar—cadences of musical speech. *Assumptions* makes use of the musical tension between repetition and variation, between expectation and surprise, and between consonance and dissonance. I do not attempt to overturn

received categories of musical communication as both modern and postmodern composition do, the one to claim priority for its own categories and the other to claim no priority for any categories. The piece has centers of tonality. I make decisions throughout about when to use consonance and dissonance, and how to direct the ear toward the tonal centers that serve as the reference point for consonance and dissonance. I try to provide musical elements that are comprehensible on first hearing, derived as they are from the cadences of the familiar and the assumed, but then try to take them somewhere that the listener's ear would not have predicted, at least not entirely. I try to use what people know to say something that they don't, on the notion that if you speak in a language others don't understand they, well, won't understand you. To communicate something which is not shared you need to communicate via that which is. It's a dialogic paradox, but the result is not static. Far from it. It is here that the unfinalizable finds its vitality, for our categories are reshaped through their reuse and application to different social conditions, providing new communicative possibilities for the future.

Another way that I try to locate *Assumptions* in shared musical language is by basing its tonalities in part on folk idioms, largely in this case the folk idioms of Eastern Europe. All three movements of *Assumptions* draw heavily on flat second and flat sixth steps of the scale, and frequently play those steps off of a major third. The folk idioms of Eastern Europe are not as familiar to most ears as, say, American country music—in America, at any rate. A flat second step is rare in Nashville. But there is enough correspondence with the familiar here that, I hope, I am in a position to connect through expectation and then to deepen the ear's sense of connections through going somewhere unanticipated, yet understandable, and thereby contribute to unfinalizability.

These flattened steps also allow me to unsettle the ear's sense of the tonal center, without disheartening the ear's faith that there is one. Imagine a major triad, B-D#-F#, for example. Now raise the B to a C, and the Western ear at any rate will tend to hear that D# and F# now in relation to the C, translating it to an Eb and Gb, with a kind of tonal yearning for that Gb to go to G and allow the whole to become a C-minor chord. In the first movement, I use this unsettlement to provide the main source of harmonic tension and release, rather than the familiar relations of dominant and subdominant chords, giving hints that shift the sense of tonality from B to C and back again. (See figure 4.) I also generally place a B on top of the C-Eb-Gb so that the ear does not resolve itself onto a diminished chord, which is a commonly recognized sound, and also to up the harmonic tension to either move that upper B to a C or to get the lower C down to B. In the other movements I use related unsettlements, with greater emphasis on the flat sixth step.

I call this technique *polyvocal tonality*, for it dialogically calls to more than one tonality at once. I think of it as related to "polytonality," a technique widely used in twentieth century composition, in which a piece is in two or more keys at once, generally with the different keys located in different octaves and voices. Polyvocal tonality as I conceive it is not fully in any one key, except when the composer resolves the tonal center to one location or another. Also, as I use polyvocal tonality here, most of each movement plays off the same polyvocal chord, resolving it here and there (and always at the end) to give the ear some peace and comprehension. For me, the dialogic value of polyvocal tonality is that it continually questions that most basic of assumptions in musical comprehension, that of the tonal center, without throwing out

the possibility of comprehension. It helps give the music a way to talk about something, a basis for narrative.

I also use an old compositional technique for constructing a musical narrative: catchy tunes—maybe not very catchy, in the sense of the pop tune, but something that I hope sticks in the RAM of the brain long enough that it can be recognized the next time it comes around. To put it in the kind of language one might see in an introduction to music appreciation, I mean that I use linear sequences of pitches and rhythms that are so arranged as to be comprehensible as units.

But as I look over the previous paragraph, I can't help but think that it offers a woefully inadequate definition of what I mean. A tune has an argument; it makes a case for itself as having a logic about where and when each note in succession should go. And it does so by making reference to broader arguments about musical logic within which it asks to be understood, and in turn giving those arguments a kind of validation. Plus it is somehow transportable beyond the performance. It catches not only long enough to be comprehended within the musical act in which the listener first encounters it, but also has the potential to be hummed and run through the brain afterwards, or at least fragments of its statement.

From a dialogic point of view, then, a catchy tune is the good line of the musical argument. It is *memorable*. Say one has a good conversation with a close friend or advisor. One may very likely come away with a dramatic turn of phrase, or even all or most of a sentence, that really hit home and put the point well. "Nicely said," we may remark at the time. And we may repeat that fragment, perhaps in somewhat garbled or adapted form, in other contexts. So too with the "catchy" bit of music. It makes its case, but it makes it with reference to the dramatics of category. The catchy tune sticks in

the mind both because it references the expected, but makes some new connection through and beyond those categories. The catchy tune, like any good story, stays with us both because it has been heard before and because it has not. The catchy tune, then, is a dialogic tune.

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Using these dramatics of category, I narrate the dialogics of social life through three musical dialogues or movements. Each movement describes a different mode of everyday life. “First Dialogue: The Ideal” portrays an open, free-flowing conversation, with music that reflects those qualities. “Second Dialogue: The Material” depicts a more monologic situation in which the instruments find themselves caught up in highly structured musical environment. “Third Dialogue: The Real” shows life as I think it most often experienced—that is, as an interactive combination of the ideal and the material, the open and the structured, the uncategorizable and the categorized.

My point in referencing these three modes is to point to another feature of dialogic analysis: what I have elsewhere termed *ecological dialogue*.¹⁷ As sociological readers of this paper will be aware, for some years there has been a vigorous debate in the social sciences between those who hew to a more materialist understanding of social life and those better find their ken with a more idealist interpretation—between those who point to the importance of social organizational factors like economy, law, bureaucracy, political process, technology, and demographic distinctions, and those who point to social constructionist factors like categories, beliefs, ideas, and culture. Ecological dialogue makes the, I hope unsurprising, point that each side shapes the other in a never-ending, ever-changing interaction. Real social situations are rarely, if

ever, a matter of one or the other. Thus, social organization and social construction are not opposites in contention, but rather *each is in the other*, and calls the other forth.

In the first dialogue, I illustrate the ideal side of ecological dialogue through a conversation between the flute and the cello, each taking their tune at the melody, while the harpsichord and violin try to keep everyone polite and in good humor. The flute states the melody immediately at the outset in an unmeasured section that follows a *doina* structure, a Romanian form with free rhythm and simple chordal accompaniment. I call this section the “proposition.” The flute then follows with an “explanation” that extends and embellishes the tune, now in measured form. Then the cello follows with its reaction to the idea, in a section labeled “evaluation.” Back and forth, the cello and flute continue to debate the topic, with each one’s take on the melody continuously morphing, sometimes taking up elements of what the other has stated and sometimes going in new directions. Eventually, though, they get pretty annoyed with each other, and start over-talking and moving further apart, musically. In response, the violin intervenes and tries to get them to settle up a bit. In the final section, the flute and cello give their last, exhausted takes on the original melody. They speak together, though, and find that while there are still considerable differences to be worked out, they actually harmonize better than they thought.

My point in the first dialogue is to suggest that, however much we might to seek a kind of Habermasian free space where we can talk it all out, and come to a consensus, such absolute freedoms are not allowed to us. People get tired. They need to go to bed while there is still more talking to be done. They find that applying the insights of the other to their own experience does not necessarily lead to greater agreement, as those differences in experience will throw different light on the same insight. And they find

that dialogue does not necessarily free us to reconstruct categories in ways that draw on all experience, everywhere, at the same time. Dialogue too has its monologic necessities, which is why it must be unfinalizable.

In the second dialogue, I present a monologic conversational situation. Virtually the whole movement is tightly structured by a 14-measure ostinato, or repeating musical line, that runs 14 times through the piece. Rather than a free-flowing and ever-changing melody, such as the first dialogue discusses, the melody of the second dialogue is also tightly structured. It fits harmonically with the ostinato, and can be played as a 4-part canon on top of the ostinato, which I present in the 6th repetition of the ostinato. (See figure 5.) (At this point, the ostinato is carried by the right hand of the harpsichord, freeing the left hand to join with the other three instruments to perform the canon in four parts.) In the 7th repetition, though, things open up a bit and the canon morphs into a 4-part fugue and then into some rushing upward cries for air and release in the 8th repetition. The 9th repetition finds the ostinato structure cowed and slowed to a quarter of its normal speed, allowing the violin and harpsichord each to break through with extended unmeasured cadenzas. But in the 10th through 14th repetitions, the ostinato is back in full force, and even greater force, as it gets played eventually with four different metrics at once, with the melody locked in on top. (See figure 6.) Finally, at the end of the 14th repetition, the instruments join together in unison to defeat the ostinato, more or less by collapsing it under its own weight. In the Coda that follows, the 4 voices sing the melody as a canon without the ostinato, having learned some joy in group effort, and then toy with the melody a bit on their own. The ostinato makes one last effort to overtake the movement again, but is firmly put down, and the movement ends in quiet consonance.

My argument here is that even within a situation of severe monologic control, represented by the ostinato (a word which comes from the Italian for obstinate) and the 4-part canon, the existential necessity of dialogue can come through. Indeed, without dialogue, monologue itself collapses. But I have tried as well to avoid the notion of monologue as inherently brutish, mean, and nasty. There are indeed pleasures in the categorical, for it does allow for coordination and organization, which has definite advantages in its just proportions. Thus, I have presented what I think is an attractive sounding rendition of monologic semantic authority, using a more consonant language than in the first dialogue and what I think is a catchier melody, and by keeping the ostinato a light pronouncement.

In the third dialogue, I try to bring the postmodern, constructionist, and idealist mood of the first dialogue together with the modernist, organizationalist, materialist mood of the second, presenting them in ecological dialogue with each other. I begin on a constructionist footing, with a doina-like presentation of the principle subject of the dialogue, again introduced by the flute, against the polyvocalic harmonic background of an extended G-augmented chord (G-B-Eb) undergirding a melodic focus that often stresses D, and sometimes Ab. (See figure 7.) After the flute's suggestion of a topic, the other three voices briefly consider it before they all reflect on the harmonic tension, finally deciding to release the ear from two minutes of polyvocality with a solid G-major chord. From this constructionist position, the dialogue widens out to allow a more materialist understanding of the possibilities of the melody. The cello introduces a four measure ostinato figure, starting off on the polyvocal footing of the original suggestion, but this time presented as a descending run (G-Eb-D-B). On top rides the original melody, now more precisely categorized in evener timings. As the new mood

builds, the flute enters with a counter melody, and the harpsichord offers the ostinato at half-speed and double speed, while the cello continues at the initial speed. This is a looser ostinato than in the second dialogue, though, and it spreads out into a variation of itself after two repetitions, and fairly quickly collapses back to the reflective frame of mind that preceded it. Each voice then in turn proclaims a cadenza on the materials of the dialogue. The ostinato figure returns and builds to three speeds as before, while the violin and flute play the main melody as a canon, with their own embellishments. (See figure 8.) Finally, the four voices take control of the ostinato, extending it, varying it, and toying with taking it into the C-minor that has been polyvocally suggested throughout the piece, but pulling back at the last moment through a false cadence. Laughing at their joke, and confident of their collective agency over the ostinato, they conclude by loudly announcing its G-Eb-D-B descending line, transformed using their own harmonic capacities, before ending the story in the solid certainty of the G-major chord the entire piece has been reaching for.

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After some 8000 words describing a dialogic response to total explanation in sociology and total organization in music, one has some reason to ask, hasn't this been an awful of explanation of the unfinalizable? Hasn't this been an attempt at an r^2 of 1? Isn't there a contradiction in offering such heavily programmatic music as a statement of the sociological necessity of incompleteness,? Is such programmatic complexity really likely to engage the public any better than the latest issue of the *American Sociological Review*?

My brief, though, is not against explanation and organization. It is against the faith and pretence of *total* explanation and *total* organization. Although I certainly had a

lot to say about *Assumptions*—a kind of self-musicology—there is far, far more that I did not say, because I could not say it.

I did not say this far, far more in part because of the embodied constraints on even the highly monologic context of an academic paper. I cannot expect the reader to read on forever, nor can I hold my self as my own audience long enough to achieve total explanation. And total explanation would take a very, very long time. The only complete representation of anything is the thing itself, with all its myriad contextual connections. It took me several months to write *Assumptions*, but I have only spent a week writing this paper. I can't put all those months of life into even 100,000 words. Just for a start, the full account of *Assumptions* as a social and musical act would have to include all my own changing interpretations of the piece—interpretations that changed even as I wrote them down in this paper, changed by the very act of articulating the logic of the piece, in many places leading me to quite different interpretations of what a particular passage represented, and in some cases giving me an interpretation where none before existed. Nor do I present here the dialogue I had with others about the piece as it took shape, repeating, I fear, the standard meta-narrative of the individually creative culture hero. But I don't even remember most of those conversations now. I am forced, therefore, to present only the most partial of views of both the dialogics and monologics of the piece.

I also did not say this far, far more because there is so much that I do not understand myself. Foremost in my mind is my lack of understanding of why I made the aesthetic choices that I did in the piece. There are as many ways to articulate dialogics in music as there are people, and their changing social conditions, to do it. So why did I find my musical agency as I did? Why did my fingers fall on the keyboard of

the mind differently than they had before? How did I come to envision this particular arrangement of notes as musically right out of the infinite number of such arrangements that could equally have fit all the explanations I give above? I haven't a clue.

So let me reign things in here a bit in the conclusion. First, I do not offer a total explanation of *Assumptions* as a sociological act. But I don't think I could or should. I do, however, try to explain what I can of it, within the embodied constraints of the academic paper. Second, I am not a culture hero. Not only are there many ways to articulate dialogics in music, lots of other people have done it, are doing it, and will go on doing it—more and more, I hope—although they may not describe it in the terms I offer here.¹⁸ I do not, and cannot, offer the last word on dialogic music. Indeed, it would be completely counter to my dialogic purpose to try to do so. Third, I have not offered any theory of agency. I have only offered a theory that allows us to conceive of agency's existence as something more than an epiphenomenal lacuna in the current development of our sociological apparatus, and that welcomes its confounding presence in social life. But that's a start at least.

And fourth, I have left unanswered the most delicate question of all: Is musical sociology either good music or good sociology? That too I can't answer. But I have been trying to offer throughout these pages a way to consider the question. If it promotes our considered sociological engagement, with the sociological public and with other sociologists, *without* having to read a paper such as this, then I think the answer a most musical and resonant yes.

Endnotes

¹ Adler (2002: 93).

² Some exceptions include Bell and Gardiner (1998), Gardiner (2000), Nielsen (2002), and Steinberg (1999).

³ Gardiner (2000), 53.

⁴ Bakhtin (1984), 287.

⁵ Bakhtin (1981), 279. The phrase “territory shared” is actually from Volosinov (1973), 86, a close colleague of Bakhtin, once thought to have been a pseudonym for Bakhtin.

⁶ Bakhtin (1984), 189.

⁷ Bacon (1590 [2005]), iii.

⁸ Freire 1993), 69.

⁹ Bakhtin (1986), 138.

¹⁰ Salzman (2002), 158.

¹¹ Salzman (2002), 157.

¹² Babbitt (1958), 39.

¹³ Morgan (1991), 408.

¹⁴ On “post-serialism,” see Morgan (1991); on “postclassic,” see Kyle Gann’s music blog in the on-line artsjournal.com; on “downtown music,” see Salzman (2002); on “postmodern” music, see Lochheed and Auner (2002) and Salzman (2002).

¹⁵ Morgan (1991), 408.

¹⁶ Bell (2004a), 185.

¹⁷ Bell (2004b).

¹⁸ Paul Stapleton is one who appears to share a similar vision of what he too calls “dialogic music,” although he bases his dialogism mainly on Buber, in contrast to my Bakhtinian and Freirian take. I haven’t had a chance to explore his writings on the subject (Stapleton, 2004) much yet, however. Salzman, in still further contrast, uses the term “postmodern” to point to the kind of orientation I advocate here. For Salzman, “postmodern” music is not the individualist eclecticism I describe it as, but efforts to reconnect to audiences with a musical language that is more broadly understood. For Salzman (2002: 195), postmodern music “refers to the reentry of common language or languages into musical discourse.” But most others describe postmodern music closer to how I do, such as Kramer who emphasizes eclecticism, intertextuality (as in the extensive use of quotations from other sources), and a rejection of attempts for coherence and unity—all efforts at exploding categories. For Kramer (2002: 13), Salzman’s vision of postmodernism, and likely my vision of dialogic music, “is not so much postmodernist as anti-modernist,” as Kramer finds the effort to connect with the audience through a common language “conservative” and “nostalgic” searches for an old order. My case has been that what I (and perhaps Stapleton) call dialogic composition (and what Salzman calls postmodern) is best understood as neither anti-modernist nor anti-postmodernist, but rather the bringing together of the two into, well, dialogue. And my broader point is that, although terms and interpretations differ, lots of composers are making similar efforts to my own, and I believe always have.

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