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Article abstract

Inspired by recent interdisciplinary studies of music and the visual arts, this article is broadly based on the permeable boundaries between the two that are characteristic at the *fin de siècle*. I concentrate on scenes of music-making depicted on two painted canvases : Pierre Puvis de Chavannes's *Le Chant du berger* (1891) and Henri Matisse's *La Musique* (1910). The principal aim is to suggest how these illustrations of music and musical performance, as well as critical responses to them, resonate with perspectives from some of the most prominent aesthetic and intellectual concerns of the day. An additional aim is to extend our understanding of live musical engagement, considering what it might mean to obstruct empathetic identification, deny the sensuous properties of sound, and negate aesthetic experience.

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IN AUDITORY ABSENTIA: MUSIC(OLOGY), MODERN ART, AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Davinia Caddy

The past two decades have seen a steady stream of scholarly literature on music and the visual arts, galvanized by enthusiasm, across the humanities, for interdisciplinary modes of enquiry (Kaduri 2016; Shephard and Leonard 2019; Grant, Matthias, and Prior 2021). With a focus on the long nineteenth century, this literature tends to prioritize two connected theses. One, a historical argument, traces a period of transformation, from the early nineteenth century, when conflicting claims for superiority dominated aesthetic discourse and artistic creation, to the early twentieth century, when collaboration between music and the visual arts became newly *de rigueur* (Morton and Schmunk 2000; Rubin and Mattis 2014). The other, an argument more conceptual than chronological, configures itself in contradistinction to modernism's principal themes (the sanctification of the pure, the autonomous, and the rational), also promoting synaesthetic accounts of the visual and the auditory from the *fin de siècle* (Brougher et al. 2005; Vergo 2012; Albright 2015).

Inspired by these two arguments and the expanding literature that promotes them, this article seeks to put some pressure on their point of intersection: the permeable boundaries between visual art and music in the years immediately around 1900. For reasons of methodological expediency, I concentrate on scenes of music-making within modern art—scenes that explicitly thematize aesthetic experience by staging imaginary musical performance. Indeed, aesthetic experience is the blood-red thread of this article. The scenes depicted are my starting point: in philosophical parlance, they enact an alternative *ekphrasis* in which the visual (rather than the literary, as is customary in ancient *ekphrastic* practice) insinuates another artistic dimension—in this case, the musical. But viewers' own experiences are also implicated, projecting a further layer of engagement onto the visual scene. In these pages, I relate my own experience; but I am especially interested in viewers from the past, for whom these artworks—and their evocative acts of *ekphrasis*—were rooted in a historical context, its socio-political realities, and prominent strands of cultural influence. Focusing here on canvases by two French artists of the period, I suggest how visual depictions of music and music-making, as well as critical responses to them, resonate with perspectives from some of the most

prominent aesthetic and intellectual concerns of the time. More specifically, I seek to explore and extend the experiential paradigm: what it might mean to envisage a world within and beyond the parameters of human experience—a world, in an extreme case, absent of an experiencing self. Music, I argue, can exist in absentia not only acoustically: no sounds accompanied the exhibition of these artworks in their original gallery space. The absence of music can be marked phenomenologically: while one artist might aim to recreate the presence, intensity, and immediacy associated with live musical engagement, another might want to void the experience altogether.

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Chant du berger*

A recent encounter with Pierre Puvis de Chavannes's 1891 oil-on-canvas *Le Chant du berger* (The Shepherd's Song; figure 1) came courtesy of fineartamerica.com, an online store for "curated" collections of wall art, home decor, stationery, and so forth, items emblazoned with the printed image (or fragments of it) of hundreds of thousands of paintings, posters, and photographs. For example, a face mask of Puvis's canvas featured only the three foreground figures: without the background musician, the title character).[1] At first glance, the cropping might seem illogical, distorting the painting's expansive pastoral vision while making the figures on show redundant. Yet it also focused attention on the pictorial fulcrum of the painting: not the pipe-playing shepherd, but those three foreground figures—or rather the aesthetic experience of those three foreground figures, for their response to their musical surrounds is what the painting is about. What we see are two women and a man, all classically draped, all in thrall: susceptible, absorbed, and immersed in an arcadian wilderness, a harmonious musical milieu. The three seem to exist in a reverie or dream-like state, their interior consciousness identifying with the music performed. Individually attuned to the shepherd's song, they are also somewhat detached from one another, despite their physical proximity. It is difficult to put a finger on what they are doing. The right-hand figure, leaning forward with right arm outstretched and left hand clasping a bucket, seems caught in action: about to water a potted plant, which might appear out of place in the barren landscape. But her posture—the bent knee, elbow, wrist, and waist—is also reminiscent of expressive Grecian dance, its gently rhythmic motion and free-floating transience. The crouching figure is also looking down, but at an unknown object: her crossed arms suggest a posture of nurturing, even tenderness; but they might also signify submission, a giving in to the sonorous scene. As for the male figure, he adopts a conventional "thinking" posture; yet with his lower chest pressed against a rocky outcrop, he appears the most dynamic and vigorous of the three, an effect as much of his upward-tilting chin and muscular back as of his feet—both balancing on tiptoes.

Puvis's painting began life as part of a larger visual scene, a mural, titled *Vision antique*, that he created in 1886 for the main staircase of the Musée des

1 See https://fineartamerica.com/featured/the-shepherds-song-pierre-puvis-de-chavannes.html?product=face-mask-flat

Figure 1: Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Chant du berger*, 1891; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437344

Beaux-Arts in his hometown of Lyon. While he is relatively little known today, at least among the general populace, Puvis was a leading figure of his time, recognized mainly for his public art: grand-format classicizing commissions for Lyon, Paris (the Panthéon, the Sorbonne, and the Hôtel de Ville, among others), Amiens, Rouen, Poitiers, and even Boston (the Public Library). Indeed, such was Puvis's popularity that his paintings were applauded by a cross-section of polite society: conservative critics, the avant-garde, royalists, Republicans, and radicals. To the French left-wing leader Jean Jaurès (1900), for example, Puvis inaugurated democratic socialism; Marius-Ary Leblond, the pseudonym of a pair of cousins from the French colony of Réunion, extended the analogy, considering Puvis's work the epitome of "the happiness of communist life" (Leblond 1905, xiii–xiv). In stark contrast, the nationalist author and politician Charles Maurras (1895) understood the painter to signify an originary Frenchness, an ideal of *enracinement* that helped counter a prevailing foreign influence in *fin-de-siècle* art and culture by reference to the purification of a classical spirit and the dignity of the ancients.

As art historian Jennifer L. Shaw (1997) describes in her account of Puvis's critical reception, despite this wide array of socially and politically inflected meanings, commentators of all stripes tended to depend on their felt reaction to the works before them, rather than on purely academic criteria: details of craftsmanship, perspective, proportion, or verisimilitude. In other words, critics mobilized their subjective responses, describing Puvis's paintings in terms of the sensual and personal fantasies they inspired. It should be said that not all of Puvis's works explicitly embodied or vivified aesthetic experience, as did *Le Chant du berger* with its musically minded and seemingly susceptible figures. But Puvis's output in general seems to have triggered and sustained viewers' creative imagination, enabling and encouraging a critical focus on what Leblond called "voluptuous feelings and altruistic dreams" (1905, xiv). The latter were of special significance to Puvis's critics, almost all of whom remarked on the impulse to dream. Something about Puvis's paintings—their scenic serenity, simplicity of design, overall restraint, large expanses of colour, limited detail, monotone backdrop, and diaphanous atmosphere—encouraged critics to imagine and to fantasize. This is not to mention the figures depicted, their enigmatic and languorous bodies, their indistinct and generalized physical form. As the Republican art critic André Michel summed up, "They dream, and they make us dream" (1888, 42–3). In the case of *Le Chant du berger*, the result of this identificatory process was an experiential vertigo: viewers inserted themselves into the visual scene as if they, too, were present as listeners to the pastoral pipe music.

In this historical context, Puvis's critics saw in his work an ideal of contemplation and quiet repose that offered a sharp contrast to what they regarded as the overstimulation and nervous hypersensitivity associated with the contemporary condition, including the threats of mass consumer society. In this sense, Puvis offered an antidote to modernity, a soothing anaesthetic that could also inject joie de vivre: his canvases were almost unanimously regarded as healthy, presenting "a naïve and uncomplicated happiness of life and of nature … a golden age of sublime innocence" (French poet Léon Duvauchel 1895, 40). As mentioned, dreaming was central to this "psychic atmosphere." For the art critic Étienne Bricon, Puvis's *Vision antique* (from which *Le Chant du berger* was derived) ushered viewers towards the promised land of their dreams (Bricon 1900, 12); for Ary Renan, Puvis's disciple, his work evoked a utopia in which all of society, from the richest to the poorest, could live and dream (Renan 1895, 441). Many critics thought Puvis himself something of a dreamer, an artist absorbed in reverie, his creative imagination carried along by an instinct he did not fully control. While Camille Mauclair, a prominent conservative critic, situated Puvis firmly among the "aristocracy of dream" (Mauclair 1895, 2), the painter Marcellin-Gilbert Desboutin (otherwise known as Baron de Rochefort) depicted a more private, almost priestly dreamer. In a portrait from 1895, Puvis sits relaxed in an armchair, dressed in monk-like robes and with half-closed eyes, the muses from one of his murals visible in the background—directly above Puvis's head, as if figments of his fantasy (see figure 2).

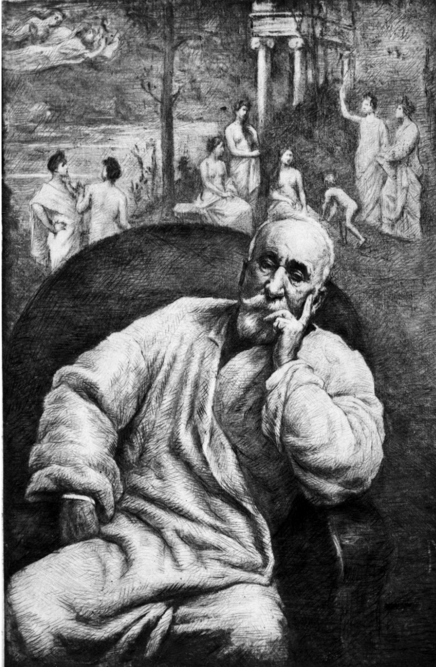

Figure 2: Marcellin-Gilbert Desboutin, *Portrait of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes*, 1895; Brooklyn Museum, New York City. https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/104367

The collective critical emphasis on reverie was inspired by the formal qualities of Puvis's canvases and their suggestive subject matter. But the wider cultural milieu no doubt played a role in shaping critics' interpretive encounters, as well as contemporary artistic practice. As Margaret Werth (2002) describes in her study of the painted idyll in modern art, the 1880s and 1890s saw the reformulation of aesthetics and art-historical discourse under the impact of contemporary psychological research. Of particular importance was what Henri F. Ellenberger (1970) has called "the discovery of the unconscious": a new understanding of human subjectivity based not on the workings of a bounded or autonomous intellect, but on the stimulation of sensations, feelings, and desires—unconscious desires that decentred the traditionally impenetrable subject (the Enlightenment model of the self). A specifically French *psychologie nouvelle* (Silverman 1989, 75–106) began to infiltrate aesthetic discourse and the emerging social sciences as writers sought to challenge the notion that "high" art provided an aesthetically disinterested intellectual experience, championing instead the importance of the psychological interior, the sensuous properties of art, and the processes underpinning empathetic identification. At the same time as the diffusion of this new French psychological theory, Symbolism emerged as a literary movement and a broader attitude of mind, with the same objects of attention: the inner psychic world, the phantasmagorical aspect of representation, the suggestiveness of art, and the predominance of a dream state virtually indistinguishable from life itself (76–7).

Puvis's work—and its critical reception—was fully evocative of this context. His painted dream worlds, their unknowable figures and overall indefiniteness of rendering, seemed to tap into contemporary interest in the interiority of the human organism, promoting a model of the creative subject that embraced a condition of imaginative compensation rather than an act of conscious intellect. This appealed especially to the Symbolist world view, Puvis's works seeming to illustrate Odilon Redon's assertion of ambiguity as central to the art object ("the sense of mystery": Redon [1902] 1961, 100) and, further back, to Stéphane Mallarmé's words on suggestion ("Poetry resides in the contemplation of things, in the image emanating from the reveries which things arouse in us": Mallarmé [1861] 1956, 21). Certainly, Puvis's critics observed the association: as Werth describes, his canvases functioned as screens on which contemporary critics could project Symbolist ideology (Werth 2002, 23). The Belgian writer Edgar Baès, for example, considered Puvis's work to be both modernist and Symbolist: it stimulated an "unconscious turmoil … among those for whom the most fugitive vision provides a long series of philosophical panoramas" (1899–1900, 146–7). On the occasion of Puvis's seventieth birthday, the Symbolist journal *La Plume* (15 January 1895) issued a special edition dedicated to him, with Puvis on the front cover dressed as he was for the Desboutin portrait. Symbolist writers also collaborated on a book of poetry presented at a banquet in his honour held at Paris's Hôtel Contemporain, attended by over 600 artists and writers (see Clement 1996, 48).

This contextual frame can be at once expanded and more precisely attuned, for Puvis's work also suggested common ground, even a reciprocity, with contemporary discourse on music, its nature, meaning, and cultural significance. Let us recall, in basic terms, what we learn about music from Puvis's pastoral scene. A first principle is almost too obvious to mention: the painting is an exercise in synaesthesia; its *mise-en-scène* offers a visually compelling, if matte and muted, *décor synthétique*. A second principle, related to the first, is rooted in a model of efficaciousness or agency: music as an originary stimulus, a catalyst for the visual scene. From here there is a small step to a third principle, already mentioned: it is not music but its sensory effect that Puvis wants to depict. What we see on the canvas, through broad strokes of unmodulated colour, is music's sonorous suggestiveness as an art form, its ability to evoke, allude, and insinuate. Fourth, this suggestiveness inspires an involuntary dream-like state in the listener; music, Puvis seems to say, acts on the listener's psychological interior, on affective states, feelings, and sensations.

With these points in mind, as well as the wider cultural milieu sketched above, it is easy to envisage a common ground: namely, correspondences between Puvis's visual incarnation of musical experience and contemporary thought on the subject. The Symbolist movement was wedded to the reciprocity of the arts, an ideal captured most famously by Charles Baudelaire ("What would be truly surprising is that sound *could not* suggest colour, that colours *could not* give the idea of a melody, and that sound and colour were unfit to translate ideas" [1861] 1992, 227). Also axiomatic within Symbolist discourse was the priority of music over the other arts, an assertion made most famously

by Walter Pater ("All art constantly aspires to the condition of music," [1877] 1986, 86) and French poet Paul Verlaine ("Music, before all else" [1874] 1884, 23), then echoed by critic Francis Viélé-Griffin ("Music made Symbolist expression possible" 1908, 198). The reasoning behind this musical prioritization (what contemporary writers described as a kind of kernelhood) recalls the third principle, above: the suggestiveness of music as an art form, an unseen, transfiguring medium. On this, Symbolist thought was rooted in Romantic ideology, a belief in music as inherently "other," not an imitation of the phenomenal world but an allusion to an elsewhere more real than the routine reality of life. For the Symbolists, this musical "otherness" opened a window onto what Baudelaire called the "au-delà," the beyond; music, as a result of its non-representational nature, became a code word for the ineffable, the mysterious and allusive. The Symbolists based their literary project on evocation rather than the specificity of description: as Mallarmé stated in an interview, "*To name* an object is to suppress three quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which derives from the pleasure of step-by-step discovery; *to suggest* it, that is the dream" (quoted in Huret 1891, 60). Music, then, was the ultimate suggestive medium. The opposite of a language, according to philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch (1961), music was emulated not only by visual artists but by linguists, as Symbolist poets and dramatists sought to obfuscate their literary meanings behind a screen of elaborate metaphors, sonorous syllables, and distinctly musical, rather than traditionally poetic, structures. A related topic is that of the dream world, noted here by Mallarmé and, as the previous pages have shown, by most commentators on Puvis's corpus. Within Symbolist art, literature, and ideology, music and dreaming were fully reciprocal, the former celebrated for its vagueness, indeterminacy, and sensuality, for the fluidity of its sounds and lack of sculptural clarity. Debussy comes easily to mind as a prominent voice on this reciprocity (see Lockspeiser 1962): not only his personal statements about dreaming and its relation to his compositional technique, but also critics' comments, both positive and negative, on his music's kindling of "states of vague reverie" (Cor 1910, 12) and "mists of dream" (Bruneau 1895, 3).

While a voluminous literature (see, for example, Jarociński 1976; Antokoletz 2004; Acquisto 2006) intertwines Symbolist aesthetics with music, mystery, vagueness, the otherworldly, subjectivity, and sensations, the psychological context might offer a less familiar backdrop onto which these same ideas can be projected. In brief, the Symbolists were not the only thinkers of the period to show an interest in music and the interior life of the subject—instinct, intuition, and the unconscious. As psychologists and philosophers embraced a newly materialist understanding of the mind as a physical object that could be understood through empirical observation (rather than through metaphysical and loosely conceived "states of the soul"), music emerged as a primary tool, an artistic medium-cum-metaphor for the unconscious itself. Consider, for example, the work of the widely read philosopher Théodule Ribot, who devoted considerable attention to music, arguing for its exceptional ability to translate and transform interior mental states (Ribot 1905). In contrast to the legacy of German Romanticism, Ribot valued "program" music over "absolute." While

the latter, he thought, was empty of (unconscious) thought and (intuitive) feeling, the former captured and communicated pure affective states: "program" music could be "composed entirely of the vibrations of human passions, their contrasts, their brusque leaps, their infinite nuances, their perpetual transformation" (137). The philosopher Julien Benda entertained similar ideas in his review of Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Benda 1902). To Benda, drawing on Ribot's earlier work, music was to make perceptible, and to act upon, the hidden depths of the unconscious mind, with Debussy's music the paradigmatic example. As for the significance of Debussy, Benda fell back on the idea, common among materialist philosophers, of simultaneity: that the mind existed as multiple mental states, the majority of which were unbound to systems of logic, language, and intellectual thought. Debussy, Benda argued, best captured this simultaneity of mental conditions: the composer's complex harmonies, individualistic instrumental timbres, and fractured settings of words and music (each with a distinct expressive profile) achieved the same "coexistence of diversities" as did the unconscious mind, saturated with coinciding sensations (392).

More could be said here: about Alfred Bazaillas's *Musique et inconsience: introduction à la psychologie de l'inconscient*, a text that explores how music—free from "superficial games of representation, the chimerical constructions of abstract reasoning"—entails "a return to the spontaneous, to the primitive, to the fundamental" (Bazaillas 1908, 143); or about Henri Bergson, for whom music was a metaphor for durée, the lived experiential reality of time (Bergson 1896). Both writers are discussed by music historian Alexandra Kieffer in her recent account of the critical reception of Debussy in the early twentieth century (Kieffer 2019). For the moment, though, it is sufficient to draw together the strands of these pages and make a suggestion: that *Le Chant du berger*, as well as other canvases by Puvis that feature musical performance (including the Lyon mural *Le Bois sacré cher aux arts et aux muses*) can be productively "read" alongside texts of the period that deal centrally with musical experience and aesthetics. In other words, what we see on the canvas, despite its pale colours and remote arcadian world, is a striking pictorial instantiation of contemporary discourse on music, its (non)representational import and imaginative reconstruction. There is a simpler point to make here, one that will be useful to remember as we go forward. The aesthetic experience offered by Puvis—to his painted figures as well as his viewers—is anchored to the hidden depths of an eminently subjective interiority; as a result, this experience is one of absorption, identification, and reverie, a psychological openness or susceptibility to simultaneous sensations and unconscious desires.

Henri Matisse, *La Musique*

One impulse on viewing Matisse's 1910 canvas *La Musique* (figure 3)—measuring a massive 260 by 389 centimetres—might be to recall the Egyptian block statues found in, among many other places, the British Museum. Consider figure 4, a statue from the museum's collection dating from circa 1900 BCE,

Figure 3: Henri Matisse, *La Musique*, 1910; The Hermitage, St. Petersburg. © Succession H. Matisse/Copyright Agency, 2022. https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/01.+paintings/28424

carved out of limestone at a height of about 43 centimetres, a width of 20 centimetres, and a depth of 26. With smooth shoulder-length hair (presumably a wig) tucked behind relatively large ears, this adult male squats on the ground, knees drawn up in front of the chest, arms crossed and placed over them. His body is largely covered by a cloak, so that most of the detail is reserved for the face: rounded eyes with what looks like prominent liner on the upper lids, ridge-like eyebrows, a broad nose, wide mouth, and pursed, gently upturned lips. Feet are also prominent, flat on the ground with long toes splayed forwards. The overall impression is of a compact, weighty body, a "closed" physical form, yet one with a non-intimidating appearance.

Similarities between the statue and the Matisse relate principally to the latter's three right-hand figures, those also squatting on the ground, feet flat and almost prehensile, knees drawn to the chest with arms crossed over the top. Matisse's figures, too, have a solidity or weightiness about them and a "closed" physical appearance similar to the ancient Egyptian statue. The sense of timelessness may also be a shared feature, for Matisse's canvas has the look of a primitive pastoral scene, an ancient time when life was simple and surroundings stark. Besides, there is something statuesque about Matisse's figures, although they convey none of the grandeur or dignity of the Egyptian statue. What Matisse presents are five bodies, larger than life, but frozen in time: neither resting nor caught in mid-action, they could almost be cardboard cut-outs.

Figure 4: Egyptian block statue, c. 1900 BCE; The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA570

There are prominent differences, of course, which tell us as much about the gigantic display as the basics described above. Matisse's figures are rudimentary: most of the barely articulated bodies are almost fetal in appearance—certainly less block-like than pear-shaped, as well as flat. Faces are the most detailed, but, in comparison to the statue, features are brutally simplified, reduced to bare (and blackened) outlines. There is also something austere about the scene against which the figures are set: the startling colours, cobalt blue and emerald green, are as prominent as the figures themselves, as if the two parts of the painting's background—the slightly mottled land and almost patchy sky—are competing for foreground status with the saturated vermilion.

Perhaps the most glaring difference concerns the presence of what we might call discourse or narrative—even presence itself. Look again at figure 4. The statue features two areas of incised text, both written in hieroglyphic script. The two columns on the front of the statue include the invocation "Revered one before he who is upon his mountain, foremost of the god's booth, lord of the sacred land"; the continuous horizontal line of text along the edge of the statue base is an offering to Osiris, "Lord of Djedu." These prayer-like inscriptions are in keeping with what is known of the original placement and function of such statues: most were funerary monuments, dedicated to specific individuals (the official Sahathor in this case) and situated in ritual places, often the forecourts of temples.

The Matisse features no individuals: the figures are striking, not only in their physical crudeness and vivid orangey-red, but also in their anonymity. What does matter is the lack of discursive content. We might be tempted to say, borrowing a phrase from art historian Rosalind Krauss, that the painting announces modern art's "capacities to repress" (1979, 55); that, in its flatness, its startling simplifications and subversion of decorative tradition, the painting is "antinatural, antimimetic, antireal" (50). *La Musique* is also lacking the one feature we might expect to define it. Yes, there are two instrumental musicians: a rigidly upright and comparatively slim man on the far left, playing a miniature violin; and, on his left, a half-crouching pipe player, also with visible (if crudely drawn) genitalia. The other figures, crouching (and hiding their private parts), might at first appear to be singing along, given their proximity to the instrumentalists and their open mouths. Yet they are noticeably detached or isolated from one another; despite the physical proximity, there is little sense of musical ensemble. Moreover, the open mouths are black holes, depth-less blots of a startling deathliness, a repetitive (non)signifier of absence or void. And as for the standing figure, given the position of his bow (before the downstroke) and his upward-tilted left eye, it is easy enough to imagine that he is about to play his violin, rather than actually playing it: no sound emanates from his instrument. Or from any of the figures. The overall impression is not only of stasis, starkness, and vacuity; it is also of silence. What we see on the canvas is the absence of music, the negation of sound—the negation of any animation or lived engagement. Aesthetic experience is barred or blocked.

This reading resonates with reported reactions on the unveiling of the canvas at the Salon d'Automne, Paris, in October 1910—if not with the general

theme of Matisse's confessions of the period. While the artist, in a letter of 1909, commented on the effect of "silence" he hoped to achieve with *La Musique* (Estienne 1909; see Flam 1995, 55), he wrote elsewhere of the importance of the "expression of feeling," the "condensation of sensations," and "an expansive force which gives life to the things around it" (Matisse 1908; see Flam 1995, 37–43). As for his most oft-quoted lines, also from his 1908 essay "Notes of a Painter," "What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art that could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair that provides relaxation from fatigue" (see Flam 1995, 42).

According to Matisse's biographer Hilary Spurling, the artist's contemporaries found statements such as this deceptively controversial, even insane (Spurling 2005). Certainly, reviews of *La Musique*, exhibited in the first room of the Grand Palais alongside its companion piece *La Danse*, were not all in agreement with Matisse (Wright 2004). Henri Pellier (1910, 4), for example, spoke of the shock—"not precisely in the order of artistic emotions"—received on entering the exhibition and the "ferocious" and "violent" colours of both of Matisse's canvases. Other critics invoked madness, puppetry, caricature, poster design, nationalist dissension, newspaper advertisements, and even culinary metaphors, as well as the canvas's relation to the traditional decorative panel (a genre represented at the Salon d'Automne by the work of French painter Maurice Denis, almost unanimously praised). Particularly evocative, for the present purpose at least, are comments made on a sense of nihility, an emptiness of meaning that unseated the conventional viewing position. To the prominent Symbolist writer and art critic Charles Morice, for example, "It [the couple of panels] is no longer anything appreciable, no longer anything with regard to which one could speak of Painting, nor of Music, nor of the Dance.... It is nothing" (Morice 1910, 154). André Fontainas, also of Symbolist orientation, commented similarly: "At present, by dint of wanting to simplify the accidental, [Matisse] annuls it to the point that all determination is impossible: Where are we? Who is it? No expression, no look, no life!" (1910, 329– 30).

If Puvis, with his classicizing canvases, had offered viewers an immersive experience, a pictorial fantasy designed to promote a state of reverie, identification, and enthrallment, then Matisse offered a fierce alternative. Both on the wall and in the gallery, the younger artist staged the absence of presence: in the words of art historian David Lewis (2009, 53), the "morbid negation" of life itself. As a result, there was no plunging into the depths of the psychological interior—of those painted in red or those peopling the gallery. Despite what Matisse himself had said, "feeling" and "emotion," to visitors at the unveiling, were terrifyingly absent.

From here, it would be easy to gesture towards the wider context of early twentieth-century modernism, hinted at earlier in the words of Krauss. Matisse's canvas, indeed much of his oeuvre, can be brought into line with the prerequisites for modernist art: abstraction and the opacity of representation; autonomy and the purity of means; radical and arbitrary colourism;

objectivity; discipline, order, and precision; inner consistency; immunity or freedom from interpretation; and the dedication of art to what mid-century critic Clement Greenberg famously called "eyesight alone." One characteristic is worth particular focus here: the modernist cult of impersonality, the extirpation of the psychological subject. While early materialist psychology displayed an unprecedented preoccupation with the interior landscape of the subject, resulting in the unveiling of the unconscious mind, that mind (and that subject) was brought newly to attention as a seat of instability and fragmentation. Difficult questions were asked. How was the nature of consciousness to be conceptualized, still less analyzed in an empirical sense? Was there a self distinct from the reality of the sensations received? Or did the outer world exist only in the mind? What if the world could be experienced without a self? What would a world without selves look (and sound) like? For some scholars, the experience of the self had no central core, resulting in the attenuation of individual consciousness, a weakening of the will ,and a state of perfect docility. As historian Judith Ryan (1991) has argued, the dissolving self (or "vanishing subject") of empiricism strongly affected the emergence of literary modernism, as authors looked to dramatize the displacement of individual consciousness. More recently, Jessica Burstein has described a "cold modernism" (2012)—in literature, art, and fashion—that does without selves and psychologies, a strand of modernism in which the world is "complete without us"—the individual does not even exist. A similar mode of "mindless modernism" defines a 2013 article by Joshua Gang, in which the author tries to reconsider literature's relation to selfhood and psychological introspection. Chipping away at the characterization of modernism as a psychological turn inward, Gang describes an aesthetic of mindlessness that explores the "dark places of psychology" yet finds them disquietingly inaccessible (Gang 2013, 116).

Exemplars presented by these scholars range widely, from Joris-Karl Huysmans to Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf; or, less canonically, to fashion designer Coco Chanel, German doll sculptor Hans Bellmer, and the reclusive French artist known as Balthus. In twentieth-century French painting, Matisse might provide an early example in this history of "modernist refrigerating apparatus" (Scott 2014, 387). In *La Musique*, at least, the terms "apsychological" and "ahuman" might be helpful: selves and psychologies are gaping black holes. "Cold" also seems appropriate, given the frozen postures of the figures and their vacant or mindless stares. In addition, there is a sense in which Matisse is refusing to indulge the conventional connotations of music-making: community, togetherness, intuition, interpretation, enjoyment, engagement, communication, expression. The initial stages of the canvas are revealing on this point. As celebrated curator Albert Kostenevich notes in his "new interpretation" of both *La Musique* and *La Danse*, in the first stage of the former, the figures are "not yet quite separate, and thus the composition is given a certain restlessness" (1974, 510). Four men and a woman are shown looking at each other, linked in what art historian Yve-Alain Bois describes as "a skipping rhythm, a great arabesque … joining the figures together in a counterpoint" (Bois 1994, 110). In the second stage, the figures "begin to lose their

nice harmony" (110); moreover, here we find features later painted out: flowers along the hillside; and a dog lying at the violinist's feet, soothed by his music. In the final version, all the figures are male and isolated from one other. All are shown frontally and appear heavier.

So Matisse changed his tune—or rather, silenced it. Whereas the first and second stages of the canvas convey a sense of musical ensemble and an arabesque-like motion (the presence of sound the presumed stimulus of that motion), the finished canvas is both mindless and mute. What we learn about music from Matisse's *La Musique* is very little or nothing at all—perhaps the "nothingness" noted by critic Charles Morice. As mentioned above, even the bold-coloured scenery seems to want to eclipse the foreground musicians, as if the earth and the sky are intent on pursuing the roles of protagonists. How Matisse came upon these ideas of nothingness and detachment, and at such a relatively early stage in the "cold" modernist trajectory outlined above, is unknown: correspondence, interview transcripts, and other primary sources do not refer to any proximate stimuli. Yet, in the context of French music and musical aesthetics, the following examples are evocative—hinting at a broader movement of ideas that affected French intellectual and cultural life as much as the arts themselves.

The first returns us to the music of Debussy. While the composer was firmly ensconced within a Symbolist ideological context, associated with the evocative dream state of the *psychologie nouvelle*, his music was not immune to the charge of "nothingness"—a lack of basic content that thwarted conventional expressive trajectories. To some commentators, it was his emphasis on surface details—decoration, ornamentation, and the arabesque—that disclosed a startlingly empty interior, a hollowness beneath the atmospheric effects, shimmering waves, and (as was often the case) striking instrumental virtuosity. Gurminder Bhogal, in her account of the decorative in French music and art, aligns the arabesque with the "wayward" and "self-indulgent" (Bhogal 2013, 66), questioning whether ornament can be any more (meaningful?) than Jankélévitch describes: "Music prefers superfluous circular motions, notes for nothing…. Futile perambulation, dawdling without a goal, musical discourse is velocity that slows itself down and that goes nowhere" (Jankélévitch 2003, 67–8). Yet Bhogal also draws out the complexity of her argument, for it was these same decorative innovations (she describes them as surface-consuming figuration) that resulted in the creation of an aesthetic experience that, for listeners of the time, could be characterized by empathetic identification. Julian Johnson pursues this tension in his recent study of Debussy, describing the frustration felt by a listener for whom modern music, which "appears to refuse the [normative] communicative function," makes "no sense," and deliberately so (Johnson 2020, 17–18). He is concerned at base with "just such an idea of music—one that has nothing to do with communication or representation, that makes no statements and carries no messages" (18). As Katherine Bergeron puts it, this music "has almost nothing to say" (Bergeron 2010, viii).

A second and strikingly different stylistic example may come as no surprise, given the ferocity of its reputation within early modernist culture and

its association with Matisse. The creation of choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky, composer Igor Stravinsky, and designer Nikolai Roerich, the 1913 Russian ballet *Le Sacre du printemps*, premiered in Paris, is often cited by art historians for its affinity with Matisse's canvas *La Danse.* As mentioned above, this was the canvas exhibited alongside *La Musique* at the 1910 Salon d'Automne. The association is easy to grasp: Matisse's dancers exude a similar propulsion, primitivism, rhythmic intensity, and brutal austerity as the dancers in *Le Sacre.* But Matisse's *La Musique* might present a correspondingly evocative connection. As for the canvas's depersonalization of its subjects, it is tempting to cite Nijinsky's famous comment on the ballet: "There are no human beings in it" (Nijinsky 1913). Critics at the premiere spoke similarly, describing the dehumanization of the dancers, especially the Chosen One: even her death was de-sentimentalized, devoid of thought and feeling (Rivière 1913; see Bullard 1971, 269–307). Jacques-Émile Blanche, reflecting on the ballet at the end of the 1913 season, put the matter in stark terms: "*Le Sacre* remains as anonymous as a gothic cathedral" (Blanche 1913; see Bullard 1971, 336). As did those of Matisse's *La Musique*, critics spoke again and again about newness: the ballet caused "a basic upheaval in music itself"; it was "completely off track"; "a new kind of music"; "a strange aberration"; "something entirely different" (all quoted in Bullard 1971). More important for the present purpose, critics floated the idea that there was something, to quote Adolphe Boschot, "eminently *amusical*" about Stravinsky's score (Boschot 1913; see Bullard 1971, 14). Besides being discordant and cacophonous, replete with strange harmonic progressions (yet a lack of melody), the score bore no relation to music as most of the audience understood the term. Stravinsky had brought about the destruction of music as an art—even the "torture of Art," undertaken with prehistoric cruelty (Capus 1913; see Bullard 1971, 81). The music in addition offered "nothing, or at least nothing important" (Capus 1913; Bullard 1971, 80). Commenting on the Ballets Russes productions in general, Pierre Lalo expanded the point: "There is nothing more hostile and pernicious to music than the productions of the Russian ballet. It is an intruder and almost a stranger there; the public tolerates it because it would be difficult to omit it entirely; but it is in a state where it cannot raise its voice: the spectacle is everything and the music, nothing" (Lalo 1913; see Bullard 1971, 245).

There we have it: "the music, nothing"; "it cannot raise its voice." Unknowingly, Lalo echoes comments made three years earlier about Matisse's *La Musique*. Like the canvas, the ballet—scandalously dubbed "le *Massacre* du printemps" (see Postel du Mas 1913; and Bullard 1971, 103)—staged the negation of music as an art form, the absence of any expressive or communicative experience. Listeners were at a loss, their generic expectations unconfirmed: as Lalo continued, "There is nothing sought out in this music" (Lalo 1913; Bullard 1971, 248).

Conclusion

Perhaps the most obvious inference to draw from these pages is the basic tension between the two paintings and their staging of musical experience: as has been argued, Puvis's canvas embodies the empathetic, sensory, and subjective aspects

of experience, while Matisse's mural models the cold, mindless, and futile. As for what we might learn from this tension, a revisionist maxim looms large: early twentieth-century modernism was not psychologically monolithic; an array of scientific hypotheses, intellectual rationales, aesthetic strategies, and philosophical entailments circulated, jostling uncomfortably and competing for the attention of artists, viewers, and critics. Modernism itself was a dynamic, unsettled, and mutable condition: the introspective mind, as much as the mindless mind, was not a self-evident truth or an a priori state of affairs; it was a radical contingency. As Gang reminds us, to lose sight of this contingency is not only to distort the record of modernism's relationship to culture, aesthetics, and intellectual thought—and thus to deny ourselves, as scholars, new avenues of enquiry (Gang 2013, 129). We also lose sight of the stakes—psychological, philosophical, sociopolitical—that were attached to the rise and fall of what Virginia Woolf called "every feeling, every thought, every quality of brain and spirit"—to Woolf, "the proper stuff of fiction" ([1919] 2009, 12).

In the spirit of this volume and its pursuit of "alternative musicologies," I should like to end by throwing out for consideration a question of disciplinary significance: what might musicology have to gain from the examples offered here? Certainly, we can celebrate the provision of new and different source material: at base, this article suggests that paintings (and, more broadly, visual phenomena) can function as lightning rods for debates about contemporary musical aesthetics, modes of performance, experiential trends, and critical currents. As musicologists have argued, the study of visual culture opens up a broader vista of musical and pictorial imagery, while speaking to artists' synaesthetic intentions and viewers' habits of feeling. But we might also contemplate a critical procedure, a hermeneutical impulse or mode of musicological discourse that begins where this article leaves off: with Matisse, "cold and uncompromising" (to quote art critic Roger Fry; see Spurling 2005, 51), determined to block any phenomenological encounter and to excavate the "I" from lived experience.

In a new and original study of interwar musical thought, Ben Steege ponders something similar: an anti-psychological mode of music criticism (Steege 2017). Recognizing the long tradition of interior-minded intellectual thought (the Hegelian view that music's "proper element" is the inner life as such), Steege asks—through the mouthpiece of Spanish philosopher and critic José Ortega y Gasset—what it would mean to move beyond a musical experience based on the primacy of our inner selves. Envisaging a music that brackets out personal interest and disables identification—a music that functions as a "distant object, located completely outside our 'I' or 'ego'"—Ortega points to Debussy: "Music had to be relieved of private sentiments and purified in an exemplary objectification. This was the deed of Debussy. Owing to him, it has become possible to listen to music serenely, without swoons and tears.... So decisive is this conversion of the subjective attitude into the objective that any subsequent differentiations appear comparatively negligible. Debussy dehumanized music, that is why he marks a new era in the art of music" (Ortega 1925, 29–30; Steege 2017, 79).

Another basic tension emerges, Debussy's music now sounding almost schizophrenic: on the one hand, it inspires states of reverie and enthrallment,

inciting multi-sensory subjective impressions; yet on the other, it remains something external to us, something that wrenches us away from psychological interiority.

As Steege recognizes, Ortega's principal focus of enquiry is less Debussy and his music as "a transformation in the practice of perception itself" (Steege 2017, 79): in other words, "emergent possibilities for aesthetic engagement" (80). These, for Ortega, centre on a basic desire to return to the world, to escape the limits of the self and its psychologizing introspection, and instead move into the street—"not as part of the agitating masses, but rather as alert citizens who need to be more and more on guard against them" (77). Ortega's idea of "outward concentration" (1932, 317)—not *on* music, but *from* music—thus betrays his principal interest in activating sound for sociological gain: texts by the philosopher tend to be socio-political, associating art with principles of a liberal democracy. If inward concentration has "poisoned our artistic experience" (Geiger 1928, 42), then dehumanizing music takes us out of ourselves and into the world—as Steege writes, away from "traditional 'psychologizing' values of expressivity, interiority, or private affect" (Steege 2017, 79).

With the examples of this article in mind, we, too, might begin to envisage an artistic experience guided by the critical controls of our (inter-)disciplinary past. As is well known, following a period within the humanities characterized by the "hermeneutics of suspicion"—an interpretive paradigm associated with plumbing depths and searching for hidden meanings—scholars across disciplinary boundaries declare themselves ready to embrace "postcritical reading": in the words of trailblazer Rita Felski, "an embodied mode of attentiveness that involves us in acts of sensing, perceiving, feeling, registering, and engaging" (Felski 2015, 176). "Affective engagement," Felski argues, is a means of reorienting scholarship and reconfiguring the reader, as well as furthering art's entanglement with personal and social life. If the ultimate ideal, as Felski argues, is not to reduce but to expand our scholarly toolbox, along with what she calls "our repertoire of critical moods" (13), then the time is surely ripe for a consideration of what we might call negative sensibilities: the impersonal, the impassive, the zero degree.

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by recent interdisciplinary studies of music and the visual arts, this article is broadly based on the permeable boundaries between the two that are characteristic at the *fin de siècle*. I concentrate on scenes of music-making depicted on two painted canvases: Pierre Puvis de Chavannes's *Le Chant du berger* (1891) and Henri Matisse's *La Musique* (1910). The principal aim is to suggest how these illustrations of music and musical performance, as well as critical responses to them, resonate with perspectives from some of the most prominent aesthetic and intellectual concerns of the day. An

additional aim is to extend our understanding of live musical engagement, considering what it might mean to obstruct empathetic identification, deny the sensuous properties of sound, and negate aesthetic experience.

Keywords: visual art, musical engagement, aesthetic experience

RÉSUMÉ

Inspiré par de récentes études interdisciplinaires sur la musique et les arts visuels, cet article s'appuie largement sur les frontières perméables entre les deux qui caractérisent la fin de siècle. En particulier, je me concentre sur des scènes de musique représentées sur deux toiles peintes: *Le Chant du berger* (1891) de Pierre Puvis de Chavannes et *La Musique* (1910) d'Henri Matisse. L'un de mes objectifs est de suggérer des façons dont ces illustrations de la musique et de la performance musicale, ainsi que les réponses critiques à celles-ci, résonnent avec les perspectives de certaines des préoccupations esthétiques et intellectuelles les plus importantes de l'époque. Un deuxième objectif est d'étendre notre compréhension de la performance musicale en direct, en considérant ce que cela pourrait signifier d'entraver l'identification empathique, de nier les propriétés sensuelles du son et l'expérience esthétique.

Mots-clés: art visuel, engagement musical, expérience esthétique

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