

## *Strange Music*

### Notes toward a Dialogic Sociology

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**Call me a sentimentalist**, but I love Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. One of my favorite moments in it is the harp solo that immediately precedes the "Waltz of the Flowers." Here, a waterfall of lush arpeggios holds the ear back for a moment, building anticipation for the great tune that follows, which I am listening to as I write these lines. This wash of notes is one of the best-known passages of the harp literature. But nevertheless it must be regarded as a musical curiosity—and, as I will come to, a sociological one as well. As everyone knows, the first principle of classical music is that the musicians play what is on the page. Classical music is text-based music, devoted to the performance of the inscribed. But not in this case. 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. Yet the way every harpist plays it—and every classically trained harpist does play it—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 more than a hundred years. (See Figure 1.1.)

I say for more than 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 the change. The concert harp, to be

a. PRINTED SCORE

b. AS PERFORMED

**FIGURE 1.1** Above, the version of the harp solo near the beginning of the “Waltz of the Flowers” as it appears in the printed score, and, below, the version of the solo as it is conventionally played. (Source: Adler 2002.)

sure, is an odd instrument, with its masses of strings and foot pedals, 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. Besides, he had marked the passage “*ad libitum*” anyway. Still, 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—despite it being marked “*ad libitum*.” After all, Tchaikovsky said to play it that way.

I get this story from Samuel Adler (2002, p. 93) who, in *The Study of Orchestration*, tells it as a cautionary tale about the difficulty of writing for the harp. I retell it here because of what it suggests about classical music as a social performance. What this harp passage points out to us is that the deeper first principle of classical music—its *first* first principle—is that you do what you are told, even when what you are told is not on the page (as, indeed, it never completely is). We hear in this passage the beat of classical music’s dominantly monological cultural rhythms: the composer-author as authoritarian-author.

But not only monologue. Although it is clear enough that classical musicians continue to grant Tchaikovsky great semantic author-

ity when they perform his musical texts, the story of this harp passage points as well to dialogue between Tchaikovsky and the original harpist, a dialogue that continues to lend a polyvocality to this most iconic of classical pieces as contemporary harpists continue to read beyond its text. Which points to other reasons behind my retelling: to pursue a dialogical analysis of the musical act and to sketch a dialogic mode of aesthetics. I thus retell the story of this harp solo as an overture to a sociology of music and a musical sociology that express a dialogical theory of social tonalities—as a recomposition of what we have long regarded as the sociological task that offers a new regard for the social act, a regard I term *strangency*.

My materials for this sociological performance are not the usual ones. I offer here no ethnographic report of events seen and participated in; no survey of audiences, performers, or composers; no close study of a sample of texts, musical or otherwise. Rather, I 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 as well to practice the art of sociology through the creation of sociological art.

Such an endeavor has considerable resonance with the stance that Andrew Abbott has recently termed *lyrical sociology*—an effort to present to the sociological audience the “recreation of an experience of social discovery” (2007, p. 70), in contrast to explanatory narrative. I, too, am impatient with the continued conception of sociology as merely an “explanatory science,” to quote the common phrase. And I, too, seek to widen the communicative possibilities of sociology. But, as will emerge, I am not “against narrative,” as Abbott proclaims himself. Nor am I opposed to explanation. Rather, I ask for a sociology that is not *only* explanatory and not *only* narrative (especially such opaque and listless narrative). Plus, I try to do more than re-create the experience of social discovery. I try to *create* it and to understand the conditions of the unexplainable that creation, in contrast to mere reproduction, entails.

Sociology nowadays is less rigid about maintaining the standard distanced attitude of subject and object toward its area of interest. We are getting better about admitting our place within what we are describing and recognizing the consequences of that position for

sociological work. Nonetheless, sociology still typically holds to the notion of method as investigation, not social creation—except to the extent that sociology inevitably has consequence for the objectified subject, through what Anthony Giddens (1984) calls the “double hermeneutic” and through our disciplinary faith that what we do as social scientists might have some consequence for the world. We still normally conceive the creations that sociology brings about as lamentable and inevitable accidents of the sociological position—a position that is never without what it tries to get within, from the without: a position as philosophically tangled as this sentence’s syntax, if not more so. We do not actively try, as sociologists, to create the social: to attempt our art as art.

And not without reason. Such a project certainly has dangers. Arrogance, self-indulgence, puffery, politics: 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. Unlike the humanities, we do not have established routines and structures for contending with artistic pretence, if pretence it be. We do not 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, a humanity, or, what I think right, as both—as what Mikhail Bakhtin (1986b) liked to call a “human science.” The disciplinary mood seems now to be shifting toward this more human understanding of the social, though. Abbott’s recent intervention is a case in point, and Norman Denzin has been speaking up on the subject for some time now (for example, Denzin 2000 and 2003). The rise of the Sociology of Culture as a flourishing subsection of the American Sociological Association indicates a renewed concern for 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 at least make the attempt here. And regardless of whether we know how to evaluate it, I hope that one consequence of what I offer here is to further and to extend the sociological engagement by bringing not only humanistic

topics into our purview but humanistic practices as well, encouraging thereby a more sociological society through a sociology that is itself, well, more social. The consequences may be strange, but they may be, I believe, more musical as well.



**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 purpose, its subject, 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 debate in the field. For example, recent annual meetings of the American Sociological Association have focused on such themes as “Public Sociologies” (2004), “Comparative Perspectives, Competing Explanations: Accounting for the Rising and Declining Significance of Sociology” (2005), “Is Another World Possible: Sociological Perspectives on Contemporary Politics” (2007), “The New Politics of Community” (2009), and “Toward a Sociology of Citizenship: Inclusion, Participation, and Rights” (2010). Recent issues of major sociology journals continue to emphasize these themes (cf. Abbott 2007; Burawoy 2005; Charles and Smith 2010; Duster 2006; Friedland et al. 2010; Helmes-Hayes and McLaughlin 2009; Holmwood 2007; Roscigno and Hodson 2007; Thacher 2006; Tilly 2004; Vallas 2006; Vaughan 2006). Although John Levi Martin (2003, p. 1) lately worries that “what is most striking and perhaps troubling is the absence of theoretical crisis,” a sense of urgency has apparently since renewed, at least on the part of disciplinary troublemakers (among whose number I hope to be counted).

Whence come these three intertwined problems? I have been winding up for a massive generalization. Here it comes: The origin of these problems lies in the continued authority of a nineteenth-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 will have at least a short go at it 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 four features of the conceptual apparatus of total sociological 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 to find hidden structures of predictability not apparent to the social actor
4. The moral need for neutrality 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 many of us increasingly regard them—justly, in my view. A good number of scholars have been trying to find ways to rework these practices in the face of critiques of sociology's continued modernist orthodoxy, critiques often called *postmodernist*. I am far from alone here, as the existence of the debates over what I label the “three problems” of explanation, agency, and engagement indicates.

Mustafa Emirbayer (1997), in one of the most sociological widely read articles of the last twenty years or so, traces the troubles of explanation and agency to the “substantialist” philosophy of conventional social science, in which discrete entities move by virtue of their own self-action and then bang into one another in interaction. He advocates instead a “trans-actional” or “relational” approach, drawing heavily on the pragmatism of John Dewey (1928; Dewey and Bentley 1949), in which contexts dynamically constitute the unfolding relations actors experience and embody. As a result, argues Emirbayer, we can break free of the mechanical causality of independent variables, for nothing in society is independent, and we can under-

stand agency as a relational process and avoid the problem of free will and independent rational choice.

Martin (2003) offers an approach that is similar in its antisubstantialism, locating agency always within the context of active social structures and the “fields of organized striving” that constitute these active structures. The conflictual dynamics of a field lead to considerable social differentiation, contends Martin, as the structures of the field locate and motivate actors differently, much as the rules of a game lead to players who are arrayed across a field and striving differently within it. Martin is explicit about the game metaphor but uses it in a contextual way in which structure and agency motivate each other, as opposed to the “voluntarist” individualism of the rational-choice version of game theory. The result allows Martin to embrace the difference that is plain around us, but as evidence of commonality—not a threat to it.

Emirbayer’s and Martin’s work is truly great stuff. Sociology is considerably opened up because of it, without slipping on the post-modern peeling away of everything. But I would like to challenge their lines of reasoning to go further. Although Emirbayer and Martin cogently recognize the troubles that total explanation gets us into and invite us into what I regard as a much-needed appreciation of the relational and contextual dynamics of social life, in the end, they return to the modernist disciplinary comforts of predictive generalization and even mechanistic explanation. Relational sociology, argues Emirbayer, will allow us “to develop causal explanations more self-consciously within a unitary frame of reference” (1997, p. 312) and to continue “the search for causal generalities in social life” (p. 308). Martin, for his part, suggests that “we may say fields emerge whenever we find a set of institutions that individuals tend to traverse in predictable ways, with minimal dislocation of subjectivity” (2003, p. 42). Moreover, he writes that “field theories may be seen as provisional theories that we are happy to replace when adequate knowledge of mechanisms is gained, should this be the case” (p. 12). Thus returned to modernism, neither elaborates a sociology that is much engaged with society.

So here is my challenge: that we directly 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 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, no agency would exist, nor any need for it, theoretically or morally. It is the familiar problem of free will again, in this case with regard to a sociological god. If, however, we keep ourselves apart from the laity—if we keep them sitting orderly 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 can only survive through its rituals of avoidance of the messiness, contradiction, incommensurability, motion, surprise, and originality that seem so evident and relevant in the everyday life and concerns of the social actor. Thus engagement becomes a threat to the total explanation vision of sociology’s project.

My case is that dialogics is a way out of the modernist worship of predictability, for sociology and for society.



**The social sciences** are taking an increasing interest in dialogue, 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, largely based on the work of Martin Buber ([1922] 1970, 1992), Paulo Freire ([1970] 2000), Donna Haraway (1991), and especially Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986a, 1986b). Yet scholars have written comparatively little about what dialogics might hold for the epistemology and theory of the social sciences in general, and sociology in particular.<sup>1</sup>

To locate dialogics within sociology would be to encounter a contextual but nondeterministic epistemology of social life as an ongoing process, articulated through 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” (2000, p. 53). 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 (1984, p. 287). 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, and you do the same in kind. 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 Bakhtin writes (1981, p. 279).<sup>2</sup> 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 in a multi-texture of conflict and cooperation. 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 (1984) calls “unfinalizability.”

When we are participating in dialogue and not monologue, that is. For dialogics equally recognizes that much about the world, like total explanation, tries to constrain and deny its messy unpredictability, its contradictions and conflicts, 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 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 in 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” (1984, p. 189), and similarly for monologic action more broadly. Monologue, then, is the articulation of semantic power.

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 the existence of others. A “word is a two-sided act,” according to Valentin Volosinov ([1929] 1973, p. 86). Like dialogue, monologue depends upon the shared territory of the

history of meaning that words represent. Monologue as well depends upon the response of the audience, to which the monologic actor must in some way conform to act purposefully. The paradox of monologue is that it denies and needs the other, for something must be there, recognized, to deny. As even Francis Bacon, that great advocate of the monologic universalism of science, noted, “Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed” ([1620] 2005, p. iii). 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 is thus: “There is neither a first nor a last word” (1986a, p. 170). And herein lies a core of our humanity, for, as Freire writes, “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” ([1970] 2000, p. 88).

But just as monologue depends upon at least a degree of dialogue, so dialogue depends upon at least a degree of monologue. 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 the reframing might be understood. Our very consciousness depends upon some degree of acceptance of the history of conversation that precedes our coming into the world, and thus its semantic power. As Bakhtin phrases it, “I realize myself initially through others: from them I receive words, forms, and tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself” (1986a, p. 138). 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 world, without losing our analytic eye for its regularities and impositions. We do not experience an  $R^2$  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 chapter 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.



**That messy in-between:** The reason why we do not experience an  $R^2$  of 1 is that life is not a one-ness. A dialogic tonality of sociology does not distance itself from this most everyday sonority of sociality. Now here is some more good news. Neither has total explanation sociology completely distanced itself from it.

I learned of this (to me) surprising appreciation recently when flipping through a statistics book from 1991, the fifth edition of Jack Levin and James Alan Fox's *Elementary Statistics in Social Research*, which I must have picked up along my way through graduate school. I had been pondering the notion of the  $R^2$  and idly thought to remind myself of the statistician's deeper language for it. And I turned to the page—page 395, as it happens—where Levin and Fox introduce that monologic motto of total explanation sociology, the name for the mathematical phrase  $R^2$ : the *coefficient of determination*. I saw there as well that equally emblematic language: Deviation from prediction,  $1 - R^2$ , is to be regarded as *error* in the model. What a sociology we have wrought where deviation from what we predict is an error, I gloomily mused—the error of nondetermination.

But casting my eye further among those lines, now made foreign by the passage of years attuned more to the rhythms of ethnographic research, I found, thunderstruck, a wonderful phrase I did not recall at all from my graduate student days, an alternative name for  $1 - R^2$ : to wit, the *coefficient of alienation*.<sup>4</sup> I have since found that I am not alone in my lack of recall of this lovely bit of statistical lingo. Not even my colleagues in demography recalled it, although a couple immediately looked it up in their own aged statistics books and found it there, mentioned in passing, before the books returned to their determined embrace of determination.

A more dialogic sociology, however, would not give alienation from determination such passing concern. A more dialogic sociology,

it seems to me, would give equal consideration to two broad circumstances of social life: the conditions under which people do what we expect them to do versus the conditions under which people do what we do *not* expect them to do. It is our almost exclusive focus on the former that has left us so incoherent, so speechless, so floundering in our analysis of what we have come to term *agency*.

And agency itself is all-too-often a category of leftovers: the remains of the day, after we have determined what we have determined. Agency easily dissolves into a lost category somewhere in between the error of the sociologist who has not brought everything necessary into the model and the error of the social subject who has not followed what the model has said. Agency then is a negative sociological moment, further negated by total explanation's faith that, had the model been more complete and the data better, the shouts of agency would echo away into complete silence and emptiness. Such an agency was never really there to shout out its coefficient of alienation, total explanation comforts us, if comfort it be.

Moreover, and perhaps even more problematic, the common description of agency as choice—a kind of internal marketplace of decisions, of supposedly democratic and capitalist freedom—is by no means contrary to total explanation. What we seek so very often to explain, and explain totally, is why people make the choices they do. Coke versus Pepsi. Democrat versus Republican. A share of Apple versus a share of Microsoft. Totalistic models aplenty are out there for all these options and so, so, so many more, identifying the power of choice while at the same time predicting its outcomes. Thus we may have choice, and agency, but no alienation from determination.

Emirbayer and his colleague Ann Mische in part intend a relational sociology as a response to the choice-making vision of agency, seeing choice as a substantialist myth of independence, freedom, and means-ends instrumentalism. Rather, they argue, “agency is always agency *toward* something, by means of which actors enter into relationship with surrounding persons, places, meanings, and events” (1998, p. 973; their emphasis) through the contextual application of habits of the past, imaginations of the future, and judgments about the present. Martin similarly contends that “agency, according to field theoretic accounts, has little or nothing to do with the philosophic ‘freedom’ of the will from sociological determination” (2003,

p. 37). Instead of “a voluntaristic residue in opposition to structure” (p. 25), Martin envisions “directed action in the field—an ‘aim path’ of striving” (p. 18) in which social action can be seen “as a ‘game’ in that it involves striving toward consensually validated goals guided by rules” (p. 33).

There is much to be applauded in this actively contextual understanding of agency as agency *toward*, as an aim path of striving, in a relational world. No agency as error term here. But in their concern to step past the bourgeois economism of free agents exercising individual choice in the market place of social life—of agency as the purely undetermined—Emirbayer, Martin, and Mische portray a sociological gravity toward which all actors rush. Habit, imagination, judgment, striving, and even choice all become amenable to the explanabilities of sociology. We are left with agency without alienation, emptying agency once again.

Agency surely is always agency *toward*, but it is also always agency *from*. The motivational sense of agency *toward* is humanistically empty without a concomitant capacitational sense of agency *from*. Nor does recognition of the need for capacity for agency, if agency is to have social consequence, necessarily imply an acontextual philosophical freedom. Capacity has its social conditions as much as motivation does. But it is also the potential source of movement away from the gravity of our explanations of what others, and we ourselves, do.

I would like, then, to offer a neologism that may start us along on finding a way to conceptualize the social unexpected as more than a negative category of leftovers—as neither error nor economic choice—and also as something we cannot always herd into the pens of explanatory sociology. The historian’s often single-minded taste for contingency is too incoherent and random for the sociological task and keeps our eye too closely trained on individual events. We want something more conditional, I think: a recognition that there are conditions under which people are harder to herd into either a model’s predictions or into its error terms. But we want as well a recognition that the unexpected is never completely so, for at the very least we need some means to recognize it as unexpected, which implies a degree—indeed, a considerable degree—of the regular. Action is never without social conditions that conduct its beat, pitch, and timbre, for

all its surprise, lest the unexpected be not only error but mistake. The unexpected is not empty either.

Such a term, then, would be one that gives a nod to structure without reifying it, to the strange without herding it, to agency without emptying it. Such a term, I suggest, might be *strangency*.



**Considering its first principle** (and its *first* first principle), classical music today could hardly be said to represent a paragon of dialogics and the strange music of the unexpected. To be sure, performers have always been given scope to put the music across through subtle shifts in tempo, tone, and dynamics. Indeed, classical musicians are expected to do so. As many a teacher has told many a pupil, this variation is what makes the difference between a musician and a technician. Classical music is in the notes, but it is not 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, even when recorded, that 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. Even well-known performers who stray from the score-as-altar can expect some infamy as recompense, such as the critiques of pianist Glenn Gould's "sometimes cavalier disregard for composers' markings" (Kimmelman 2004, p. 10) or the earlier opprobrium for the loose "transcriptions," as he calls them, of the pianist and composer Ferruccio Busoni (1905, p. 17).

And that devotion is, by some measures, stronger today than in the past. 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, as is the debate over whether and where baroque musicians used vibrato (Kelly 1995; Kim 2005; Ransome 1978). But earlier classical musicians were not so troubled by the musical text and the inevitable limits to its monologic authority (which is why debate exists now). A performer, for example, may study each nuance of a Mozart cadenza as a kind of musical obstacle course to textual glory. But, in fact, Mozart did not write down all his cadenzas, because he expected the performer to be able to improvise them, as he generally did himself. And there is reason to believe that those cadenzas

that he and other composers of the time did write out were meant only to provide some ideas for the player. Contemporary composers, by contrast, 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. 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” (2002, p. 158). In the work of late-twentieth century composers like Karlheinz Stockhausen and Milton 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” (2002, p. 157).

A devotion to text is not necessarily aesthetically bad. The cadenzas that Mozart did write out are wonderful music. Performers can produce some delicately lovely sounds on original baroque instruments or by adhering to the textual admonitions of ultra-rational music. In addition to the power of the composer’s conception, there is a certain sporting excitement in being audience to an attempt at Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto no. 2 in C Minor. And there is abundant scope for performers and audience 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. It is an aesthetics of monologue.

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. (2002, p. 2; my emphasis)