SHIT MUSIC

Seán Ó Dálaigh

VOL 7 ISSUE 1

Kakophonos…

Cacophony, as defined in relation to music in the Oxford English Dictionary can mean, "a discordant combination of sounds, dissonance." It can also refer to "the use of harsh-sounding words or phrases" or "an old term for a harsh, grating, or discordant state of the voice". Cacophony most likely materialised in English in the sixteenth century via the French *cacophonie*, "from a Latinised form of Greek *kakophonia*, from *kakophonos* 'harsh sounding,' from *kakos* 'bad, evil'". The Ancient Greek word *phōnē* refers to the voice or to sound (especially the articulation of sound) and *kakos* comes through Greek from the Proto Indo-European *kakka* (also *kaka*) to defecate.[1] *Kakophonos,* therefore, could be understood literally as a shit sound or shit music. In thinking about *shitness* in musical terms I am drawing on the negative valences inherent in the word shit, to describe something that is 'bad; unpleasant; highly displeasing; unskilled; of poor quality, ability, etc.'. I am also thinking of shit as a noun, about the modern plumbing and sewage system, how human waste is spirited away from us, disembodied from our physical environment.[2]

Extrapolating from these connotations, *Shitness* as an analytical framework within music and sound studies would therefore look for elements that fall outside of its central mode of listening. Elements traditionally considered disturbing or 'of poor quality', those we might try to supress. They could be hidden from view, overlooked, dark or peripheral. In attending to these elements, how might they generate alternative modes of listening? Do they contradict the central mode, asserting their own, or do they amplify it? *Shitness,* as posited in this text in relation to music and sound studies, fits within the wider concept of noise as defined by Jaques Attali, as anything that falls outside of what is considered music or is actively repressed [3] from being considered as music within a society.[4]

I am drawn to explore the affordances hidden parameters could have within a sonic practice for either dismantling a stubborn, central mode of listening or for generating alternative modes. I am especially fascinated by listening modes stemming from the sometimes-hidden aspects in the materiality of sound production: physical objects and instruments, human bodies and labour, and the complexities of social and acoustic space. Attentiveness to these as part of the listening experience can facilitate a certain kind of presence – a feeling of being situated in the space.[5] In instrumental performance, sounds that announce their own materiality are often *shit*. They can be the sounds performers learn to firstly exclude from their articulations. A string player in training might first seek to constrain extremities in bow position – avoiding the harsh, metallic sound near the bridge, and the hollow sound near the fingerboard. In Rebecca Saunder's work, *Fury* (2005) for solo double bass, the player is required to interact with the instrument in various extreme ways. The performance instructions from the start of the score give a summary of some of the more 'extended' techniques called for.[6] For example, '*Battuto violently…on the fingerboard and hear wood of bow hit fingerboard…'* and '*Vertical motion back and forwards between the fingerboard*

and bridge – complete distortion'. These types of techniques in the piece generate a complex listening experience which include an awareness of the materiality of the instrument and their production. The performer's body is also highly present in the experience of this piece. Bursts of forceful articulations with the bowing hand and sudden, wild shifts of position for the left hand jolt my awareness to the musculature of the players back and shoulders as they wrestle with the instrument.[7] These are sounds that I 'feel' as well as hear. I refer to this mode of listening as *visceral*, leaning on an analogy between the materiality of sound production and that of the human body. *Visceral* sounds are those which are so mediated by the physicality involved in their own articulation that their materiality, their *viscera*,[8] are impossible to ignore in the listening experience. Sound experienced as *visceral* is that which is not just simply heard, but felt, 'in the gut'. This refers to an affective quality of the listening experience that feels physically and/or emotionally arresting regardless of a heightened awareness of the materiality of sound production.[9]

Visceral sounds understood through the materiality of sound production are *shit* – their articulations are often those that are hidden within normative modes of performance and listening. *Shit music* would then be a music that seeks to locate these parameters and to formalise them. In doing so, challenging existing modes of listening and generating new ones. Although the formalising of elements which fall outside of an intended sonic structure seems paradoxical, *shitness* can provide a framework for a continual reassessment, a recursive process of searching for potential productive materials in a work. There is always something else lurking underneath the surface of any central mode of listening.

In the following examples I explain how certain constitutive elements that could be considered *shit* are exposed and formalised – how they function as productively generative within the specific configurations, and how they are central to the overall thrust of the works in question. I argue that the importance of these works is in how they foreground *shit* parameters, ones that could easily be overlooked from the standpoint of traditional (sanitised) modes of listening, thus engendering new modes of appreciation in their potential audiences and illuminating new potentialities for other creators.

shit cello…

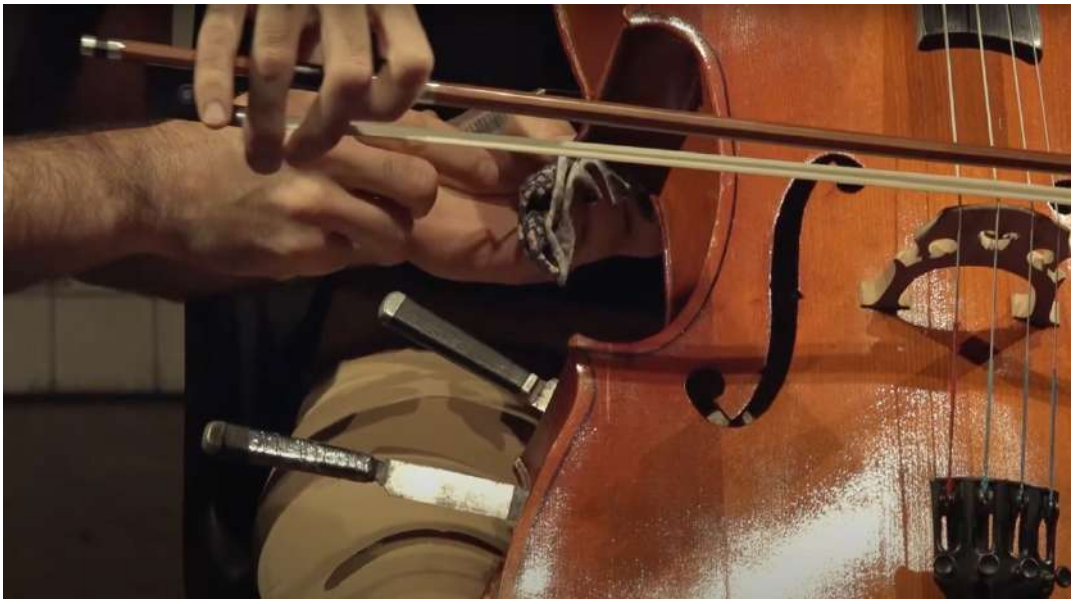

Figure 1 – Still from *SVIOLONCELLO* by Sophie Fetokaki, Brice Catherin and Robin Jousson (used with permission from the composers)

The concept of *shitness* in the context of this text is taken from the composer, poet and maker, Sophie Fetokaki's piece *SVIOLONCELLO* (2017), composed in collaboration with cellist Brice Catherin and luthier Robin Jousson.[10] In the piece, Fetokaki narrates a text which begins with a factual, technical description of the anthropomorphised cello, named 'Oleg', and his material construction.

> When we asked a Russian friend, Gérald to translate the label for us, he answered,
> "It says – you bought a shit cello".

Oleg, we are told, is a shit cello. As the amplified spoken text unfolds, poetic and sung gestures appear. Catherin plays the cello in a visceral manner while Jousson systematically disassembles the instrument, progressively intervening on the sound.

SVIOLONCELLO deals with the materiality of instruments and of the collaboration inherent and necessary in their existence. The piece also exposes the materiality of text and language, and of the performance situation itself. The textual component of the work is constantly expanded outwards into ever more distant conceptual reaches of a cello, from forests of spruce to the molecular properties of rabbit glue. This expansion is mirrored by an increasingly visceral approach to playing the cello by Catherin and the process of disassembly by Jousson. From the preamble to the score:

> *Svioloncello* is an exploration of the materiality of sound. Over the course of 55 (+/- 5) minutes the cello is disassembled with the assistance of the luthier while it is being played, exposing both the physical instrument and the source and structure of its sound. This brutal and at times violent process is accompanied by a performed text – a reflection on the circumstances and an investigation into the mythical aura of the cello.[11]

As opposed to the verb 'destroy', to 'disassemble' or 'dismantle' an object is to do so carefully, to allow the possibility for its reconstruction into its original form or a new one. Thinking of an animal's body, disassembly and dismantling are the tools of the veterinary surgeon as opposed to the destructive force of a butcher. To dismantle is also to uncover, to peel back the veil, from 'mantle' meaning a 'a protective garment or blanket', or to 'envelop, conceal or obscure'. Disassembly exposes the composite parts of an object just like destruction does, but to me it implies an aspect of care for the resultant fragments.

The cello generates a 'mantle'. This 'mantle' is the mode of listening we might expect as we are seated waiting for the performance to start. Before anything begins, we are most likely expecting music performed on the cello, melody, rhythm, gestures that we recognise from the dominant mode of listening associated with it as an object within the tradition of Western Classical music in the Global North. Musical instruments have a strong, overwhelming 'mantle' built up from years of practice – this is part of the mythical aura referenced in the score. There are two other performers besides the cellist, however, one holding a text, one sitting quietly next to a table of mysterious tools. Perhaps they are actors? The staging with the cellist is level; they are each seated on the same horizontal plane. Is the cello not to be some kind of soundtrack to a drama? They are not off-stage, backstage, upstage, they are not in a pit. They are seated in the middle, as the central protagonist. The piece opens with Fetokaki telling us the name and origins of the cello:

> Our cello is called Oleg, a name that derives from old Norse, Helgi meaning blessed, sacred or holy. Oleg was produced in the Soviet Union sometime in the 1980s by the Wholesale Musical Instrument and Furniture Manufacturers.

The text immediately draws us into a larger space of the cello's existence, into the political backdrop of the Soviet Union in the 80s and (we presume) the monotonous, flat repetition of poor-quality items produced in the Wholesale Musical Instrument and Furniture Manufacturers. We are immediately aware of Oleg's existence as a complex, geopolitical assemblage, an intersection of processes, materials and histories.

So Fetokaki has set herself up as narrator, her text is pointing to the cello as protagonist, to Oleg. The dominant mode of listening we were expecting has immediately been challenged by this relationship; by a metanarrative commenting in real-time on the materials involved in the performance we are witnessing. Immediately following Fetokakis' spoken introduction, Catherin strikes the cello strings with his right hand in a simple rhythmic pattern that is repeated. He does not bow the cello, he does not play in the traditional way with the right-hand fingers, *pizzicato*, (plucked), instead striking with his palm in a languid fashion. Analysed from the point of view of traditional cello playing technique, this is *shit*. But this *shitness* triggers a more visceral experience of Catherin's interaction with the cello. The awkward playing technique draws attention to itself, to Catherin's hand, to the flesh on his palm. We hear the soft flesh as it articulates a muted sound, one that is not rich in higher harmonics (as bowed strings might be) or one that projects effectively (as *pizzicato* might). Sounding the strings all together with his palm we immediately hear that the cello is in an alternative tuning, *scordatura.* This term is used to refer to any time a stringed instrument uses an alternative tuning to what is the accepted norm within the practice. It does however have origins in the Italian word *scordare* meaning, 'to be out of tune', short for *discordare,* meaning 'discord'. The *scordatura* affords the performance yet another foray into the *visceral.* The fourth string, usually tuned to C, is lowered by the interval of a diminished 4th (enharmonically equivalent to a Major 3rd) and this drastically changes the timbre of the open string. At this low of a tension the higher harmonics are less present in the sound and on some cellos the string might have a tendency to wobble and strike the fingerboard audibly while being played. Figure 2 below illustrates the *scordatura*, with the standard cello tuning above and the tuning devised by Catherin for *SVIOLONCELLO* below:

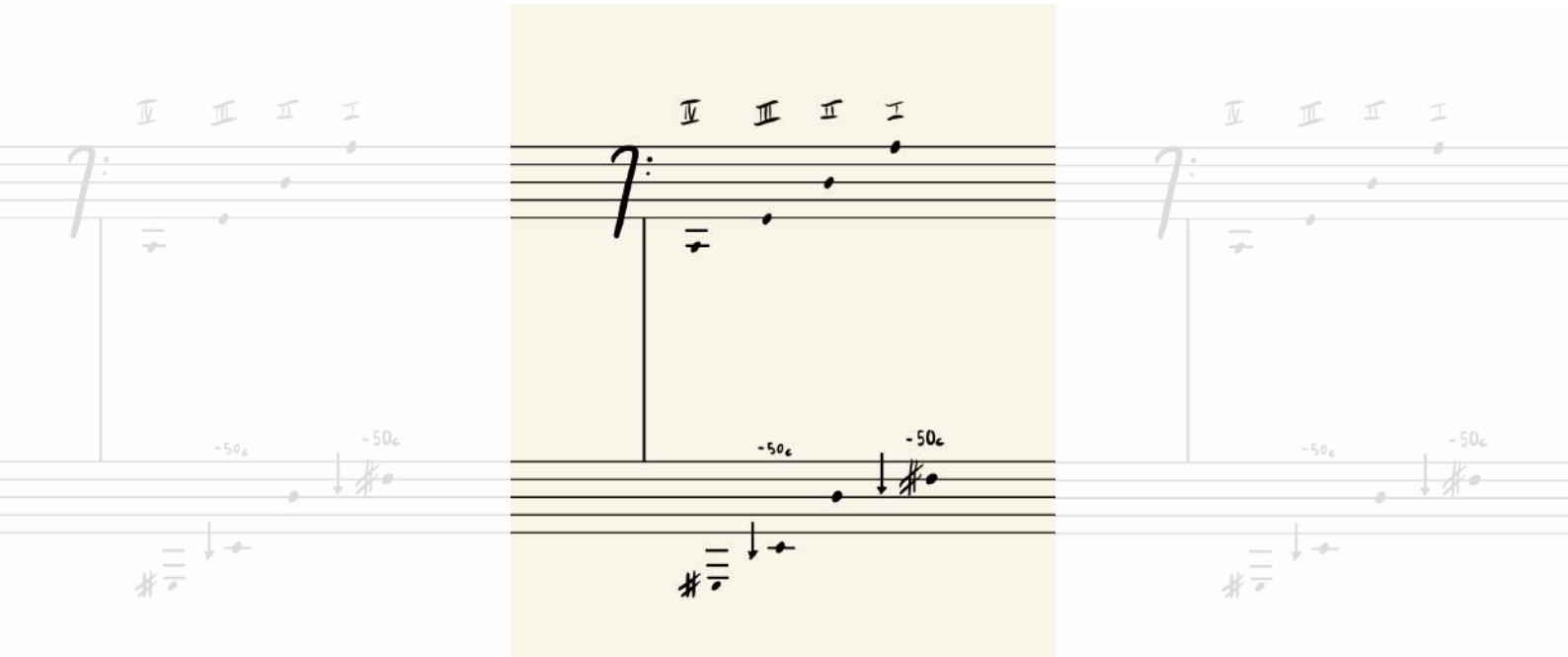

Figure 2 – Above, the standardised tuning of a cello. Below, the tuning for the cello in *SVIOLONCELLO.*

All strings bar the second, tuned to D, are lowered in pitch, quite significantly. A lowering in pitch is achieved by loosening the string tension. This *loosening* is extended conceptually to the wider aura of the cello and of the performance situation itself as the piece progresses. *Loosening* is a precursor to *disassembly*; to taking apart, a cacophonous explosion in slow-motion.

Oleg is a shit cello and this *shitness* is a fundamental feature of the work. From the preamble to the score:

> Svioloncello should not be performed on a precious or highly valuable instrument. Although the deconstruction is performed according to prescribed luthier practice, resulting therefore in no real act of violence towards the cello, the piece nonetheless heavily engages in symbolic violence, probing our notions of the sacredness and holiness of historic instruments. To perform Svioloncello on a precious instrument would push this symbolic violence to an inappropriate extreme, and would take the piece in another direction.

Oleg is not denied a role in the musical performance due to his *shitness*, rather it allows him to take part in this particular work. He is *shit* in many real, sonic ways a cellist might better explain, but also because of the cultural cachet associated with expensive, rare or old instruments. Oleg belongs instead to those cellos which are mass-produced[12] using cheap materials and labour. This *shitness* allows him, as a cheap cello, to freely take part in the work without the exclusionary cost of a traditionally 'better' instrument. The performers can afford to dismantle him. *Shitness* here opens a space in the work for Oleg's materiality to manifest. His *shitness* also has a certain mundane quality. This excludes Oleg from taking part in works that might function as a staging of 'abuse' against high value instruments. A work such as *Piano Burning*, (Annea Lockwood, 1968), employing this mode of thinking, relies on our reading of the piano as being valuable and that this value is understood as representing the cultural framework and concrete infrastructure that gave birth to it – that of Western Classical Music. The work can therefore be read as a simulated destruction of this infrastructure. Oleg, through his ordinary nature, is too *shit* to perform a work in this vein.

The cello part, in sonic terms, is also one of a progressive manifestation of materiality. The gesture beginning at 3:35 in the linked video performance of the work is a drone where the bow is moved towards the bridge. *Sul ponticello* meaning, 'near the bridge', is a playing technique which results in a harsh, *visceral* sound. It activates more of the higher harmonics of a string and in doing so emphasises its materiality. As the playing position becomes more extreme, moving literally towards the extremities of the string, near to the contact point with the wooden bridge, the transcendent musical sound, the note (in this case, the note *D*), is swallowed by the *visceral*, physical sound of its own articulation. The resultant sound exists between a traditional musical mode of listening focusing on pitch and rhythm and a mode that is heavily mediated by the awareness of the materiality of the cello, a *visceral* mode of listening. Playing *sul ponticello* could be read as many other things, depending on the context, for example, as ephemeral and physically distant music as in Igor Stravinsky's string textures in his orchestral piece, *Variations: Aldous Huxley in memoriam*. In *SVIOLONCELLO*, however, the *visceral* mode of listening is reinforced by the non-sonic elements of the work.

Jousson hands Catherin a tool. He inserts it into the f-hole of the cello and, while still playing the bowed drone, *sul ponticello*, begins to hammer at the sound post, repeating the rhythm of the works opening gesture until it sounds like the sound post has been knocked out of place. Fetokaki surtitles this process:

> The sound post / Stimmstock / staple / stemmestok or soul / âme / alma / anima in the Romance languages, is a short cylindrical rod made of spruce, fixed between the top and back plates. It serves to transmit sound waves from one resonating surface to another.

This soundpost is animated, enchanted. It is an object that needs to be situated 'just right', usually by ear and by the hand of an experienced craftsperson. Locating the ideal position of the soundpost intuitively by hand through trial and error is done because of the complexities inherent in combining the overlapping modes of vibration on two-dimensional vibrating surfaces[13], in this case, the front and back plates of a cello. These must be reconciled together with the shape of the body. There is no effective systematic solution as tiny changes between the constituent parts of even mass-produced instruments will cause subtly different ideal positions for the soundpost in each. It is the *'soul' (anima)* of the instrument. This is perhaps due to this mysterious process and the seemingly miraculous enhancement of the resonance of the instrument when you place it 'just right', a manifestation of the cello's 'mythical aura' that Fetokaki describes in the text.

Jousson sits next to a small table covered in tools. These tools are the tools of a luthier, an instrument maker. To us they most likely look mysterious; strange, specialised versions of chisels, blades and syringes. A rag and a strange bottle of chemicals (a solvent?). What looks like a butter knife and a slender, crowbar-like object. They immediately read as what they are, tools of a specialised trade. Jousson is a luthier, a highly trained craftsperson and this fact fosters an atmosphere of care in the work. As Jousson separates the parts of the cello they become sculptural objects in themselves. These objects and materials are alluded to in the text with etymological excursions, and they are accompanied by the *visceral* sonic articulations of Catherin on the cello. This process opens space through a dismantling rather than destruction within each of the work's parts.

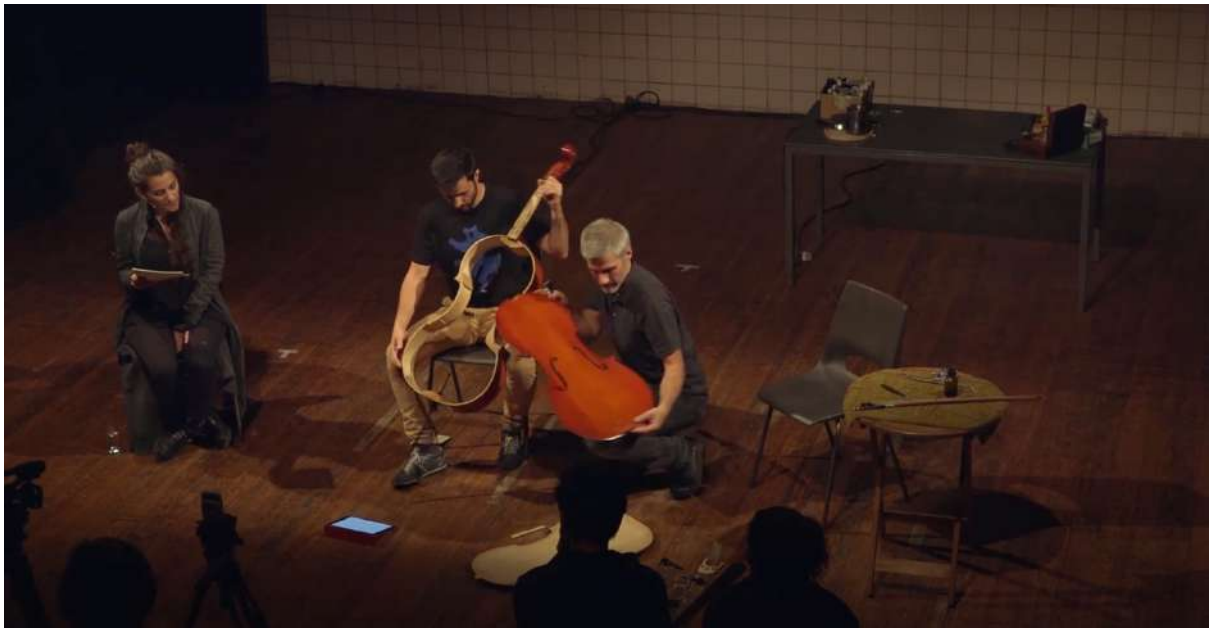

Figure 3 – still from *SVIOLONCELLO* by Sophie Fetokaki, Brice Catherin and Robin Jousson (used with permission from the composers)

The presence of a luthier, not just a maker, but a repairer of instruments, is a reminder of broken cellos. Sometimes instruments break, sometimes they have *shit* parts. Even the most expertly crafted instruments will have idiosyncrasies that a performer must learn to navigate: a nylon-string guitarist slightly adjusting the intonation of the third string to negotiate between the often dull, inharmonic resonances of this thicker, mono-filament string and how these fit into the tonality they might be playing in; a wind player learning over time which reeds suit their instrument through a process of crafting and shaping them themselves; a cello player knowing that a certain note on a certain brand of string, in a certain register, with their specific bow only speaks well with a bowing position slightly off-centre, slightly towards the bridge to engage enough higher frequencies for it to project brightly. The phenomenon known as the wolf tone, common on cellos, is a special, extreme case of the delicate balance inherent in instrument crafting and playing technique. In short, a cello is a very complicated shape made up of very complex materials interacting through vibration. Each of these parts have their own vibrational modes. The wolf tone, signifying a howl-like sound, is where (usually) the bridge of a cello acts as a Helmholtz resonator. Playing a certain note on the cello that coincides with the resonant frequency of (often) the bridge causes the bridge to audibly vibrate, cannibalise vibrational energy from the string, and produce a stuttering, weak or sometimes a '*howling*' or buzzing. The 'wolf-tone' is a *shit* sound, it is both an undesired element in the sonic world of cellos as well as being a sonic manifestation of the peripheral materials inherent in the construction of cellos. Imagining these messy, overlapping material complexities involved in the physicality of instruments is easily expanded conceptually to encompass the entire performance situation.[14] *SVIOLONCELLO* widens the ambitus of cello performance, formalising these extra-sonic elements.

The score speaks of the brutality and simulated violence in the work. The performance situation is taken apart, and the cello itself is seemingly broken into fragments. But these are not nihilistic, undifferentiated fragments resulting from destruction; *SVIOLONCELLO* strongly resists this. As the cello comes apart, the fragments communicate their own identities as sculptural artefacts or as potential objects of sound production. The fragments also always retain the possibility of again contributing to Oleg as a reconstructed cello. The narrated text is itself fragmented, yet these point to the cello, to its complex history of overlapping materials, weaving narrative threads between them. The presence of Jousson and his tools communicates a commitment to reassembly, to re-formalise the fragments of the piece anew.

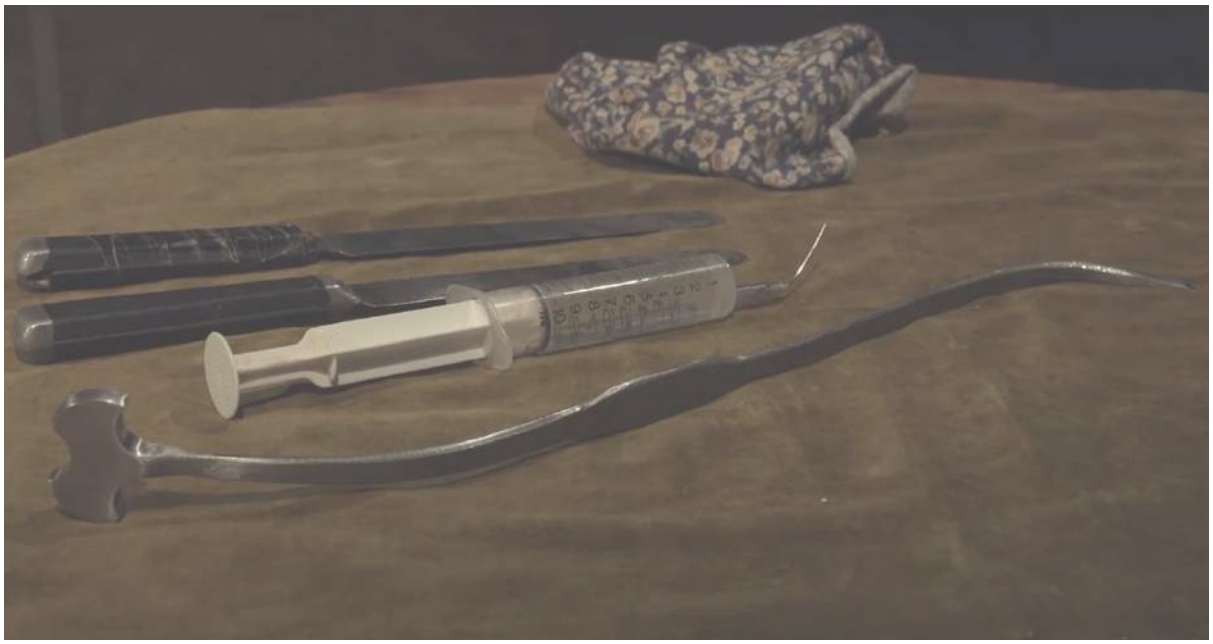

Figure 4 – still from *SVIOLONCELLO* by Sophie Fetokaki, Brice Catherin and Robin Jousson (used with permission from the composers)

Fetokaki's later work, *meta/morphē*, takes this process to a new level where the central instrument, the piano, is dismantled with a view to explicitly create a multiplicity of new artefacts, be they physical objects and sculptures, sonic works, or more. The piano itself is abandoned; it is never remade. The care towards reassembly exhibited in *SVIOLONCELLO* is still central (and signalled in the program note through a reference to it being also a project of recycling), but the process of reassembly moves into a more fluid space of possible identities. The loosening of the piano through the lens of *shitness,* like the cello before, both conceptually and literally, allows this to take place. From the description of the piece taken from Fetokaki's website:

> meta/morphē is performance art, community art, installation, experimental music, duration piece, recycling project and much more. It first took place in June 2018 in Reykjavik, Iceland, when a group of interdisciplinary artists spent two weeks disassembling a grand piano and re-configuring it into a plethora of material and immaterial objects. The artists were present in various configurations throughout the duration of the project, working both independently and in groups. Performances and performative events of various kinds took place around the central activity of the piano disassemblage, relating to and making use of the piano in many and varied ways.[15]

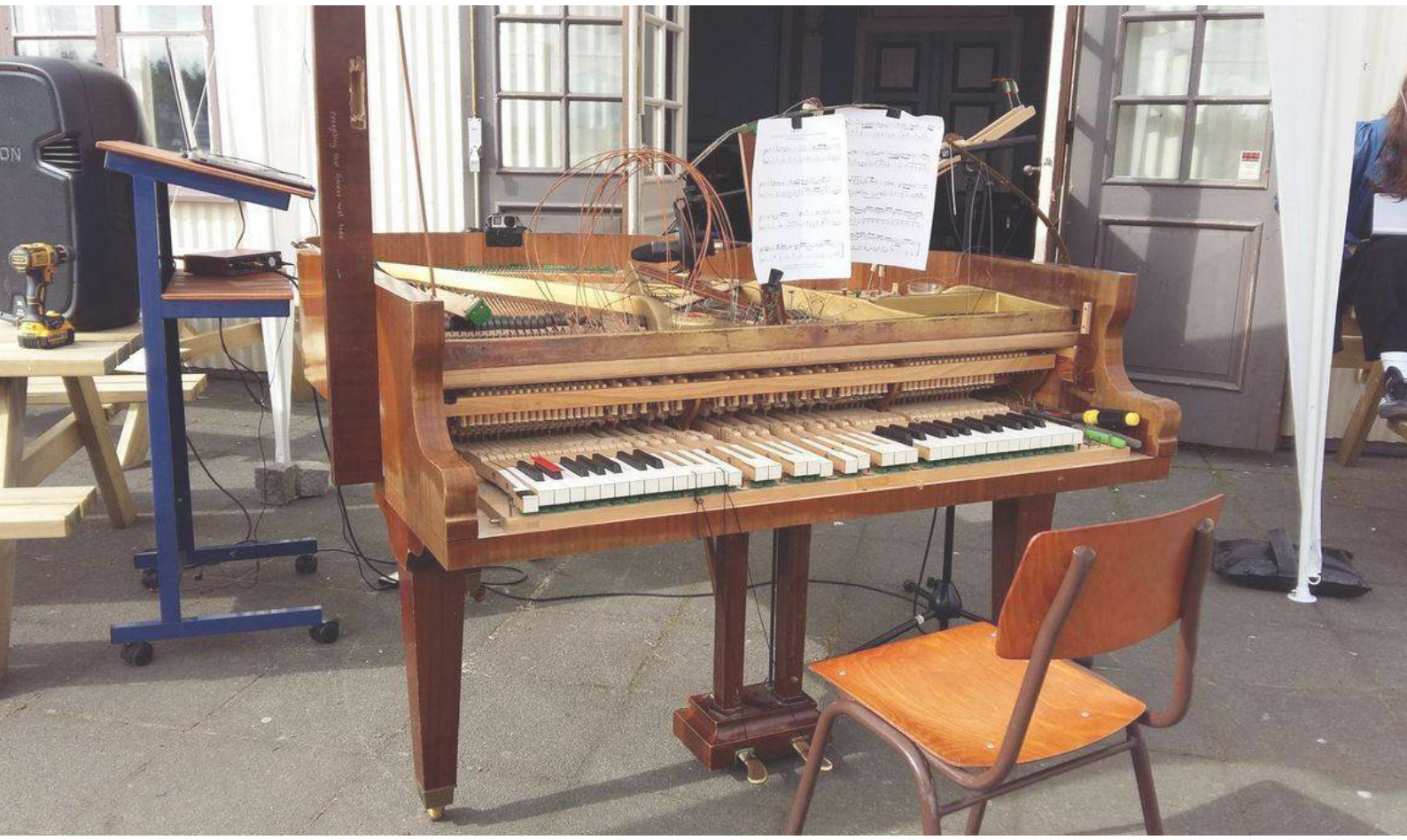

Figure 5 – still from *meta/morphē* (used with permission from the composers)

dead music…

In the composer and artist, Steven Kazuo Takasugi's text, *Warum Theater?*,[16] he suggests that the medium of recorded music, existing in opposition to so-called 'live music' could be playfully referred to as 'dead music'. If recordings are dead, is there a way they can re-animate themselves? Can we re-inject some kind of *liveliness* into the recording as cadaver through a focus on its viscera?

Some of the artist Chaim Soutine's most famous works are of dead animals, often rotting carcasses of, among others, cows, chickens and horses. Soutine spent extended time with the carcasses while they decomposed in the studio as he painted them. His close proximity to them is translated clearly and *viscerally* onto the canvas, so much so that it feels like it should be possible to smell these paintings. For the painting, *Carcass of Beef* (1925):

> Soutine bought a steer's carcass and put it up in his studio. As it rotted, his neighbours noticed the smell and called the health authorities, who suggested he inject the carcass with formaldehyde. He did so, but as the flesh dried it lost its vivid colour. To solve the problem, Soutine bought blood from the slaughterhouse and applied it to the carcass.[17]

The decomposition of the carcass is an encroaching *shitness*. The seemingly peripheral agents in the beef are breaking it down, asserting their own presence. The decomposing carcass is treated with a kind of care, first in his fervour to try and represent it on the canvas, to render the *visceral* experience of sharing a space with it. There is a tension between injecting preserving chemicals and the application of fresh blood. The blood is an attempt to revitalise the thing, perhaps bizarrely mirroring the liveliness of the thriving bacteria, in turn feeding them. The result on the canvas is a transcription of this experience as opposed to a representation of the carcass as an object; the luminous red blood is transfigured by the greens, yellows and blues of fat, sinews and rot.

Following Fetokaki, Catherin and Jousson's process in *SVIOLONCELLO* I was prompted to search for *shitness,* for peripheral, elements or sites of conceptual loosening in recorded works, and to investigate whether these elements have a lively function, reapplying blood to their sonic canvases.

distortion…

The final track on vocalist Nina Guo's EP, *blauch raüsch,* 2020, entitled *5.9.1.2. (hommage to Junko)*, is a *visceral* articulation of the human voice in a room through a microphone. The piece consists of 3 minutes and 48 seconds of screams exploring different registers, durations, textures and articulations. Guo's voice strains to breaking and we are intensely aware of the materiality of her vocal cords.

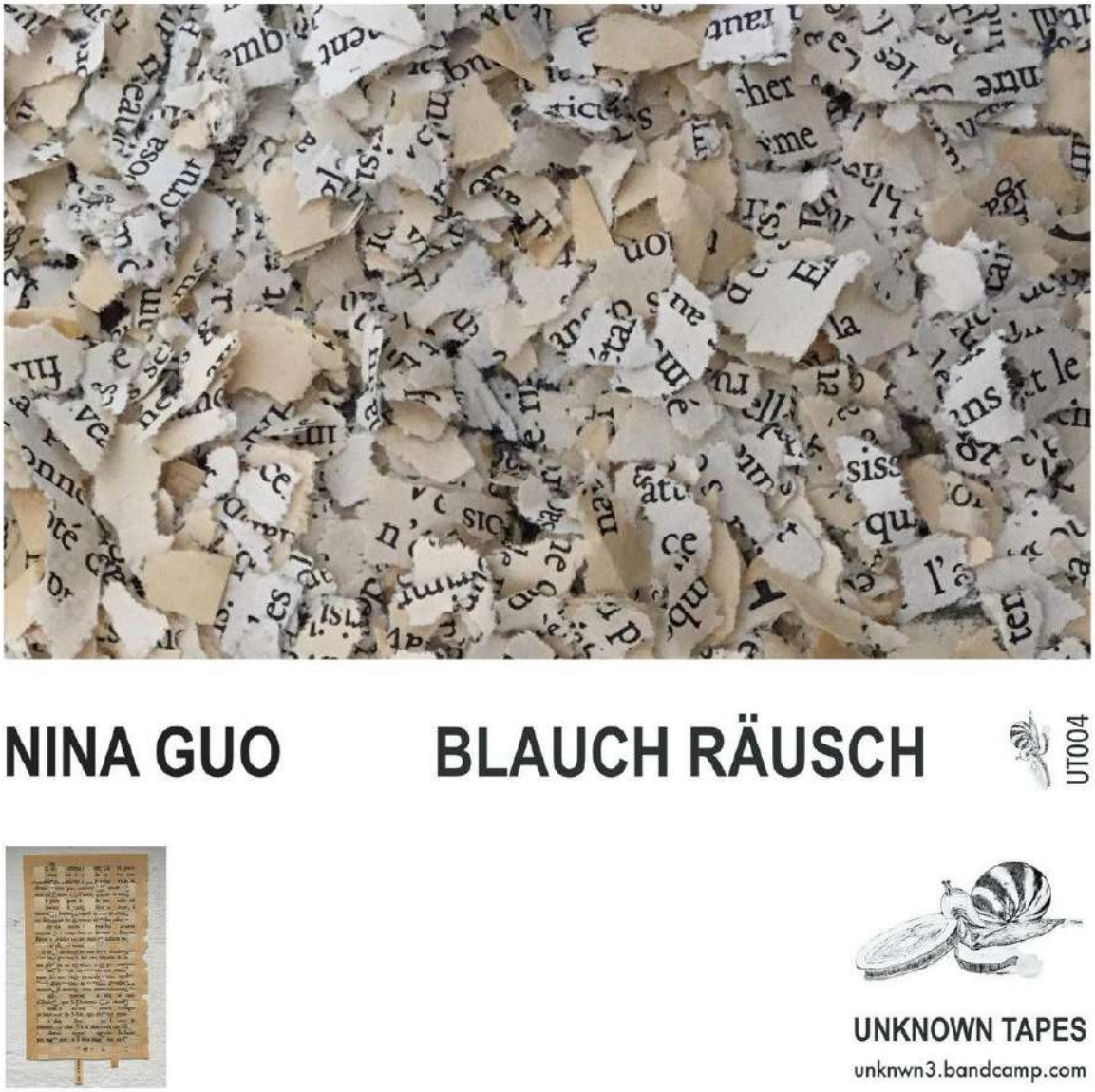

Figure 6 – *Blauch Räusch* (2020), Nina Guo, cover artwork by Guo, cover design by Gleb Kanasevich.

In sound production, distortion, overdrive or clipping means that the signal's energy has exceeded the boundaries of its medium at some point in the signal chain. Common practice recording studio technique dictates that it is often something to be avoided. Distortion can occur at many points in the recording process: too much air moving around a microphone (from an extremely loud sound) tries to force the microphone capsule beyond its possible range of motion; too much electricity driving an amplifier in boosting a microphone signal will attempt to push it outside the possible voltage range in the circuit; in a digital system, attempting to record a signal that has more volume that the system's bit depth (often 16 or 24 bits) will clip the signal. There are many ways distortion can manifest, and each has different sonic characteristics, but each is a stretching or a breaking of the medium. Distortion is a *shit* sound. Often seen as ruining an otherwise 'clean' recording it is also, in other contexts such as electric guitar performance, a sound whose timbral affordances have been extensively explored. In early methods for achieving distortion such as valve-amplifiers,

there is an inherent risk to the medium. Distort a microphone too much and you will break it, drive a guitar amplifier too hard (overdrive) and you could blow out a speaker. The advent of digital effect units has created a safer (sanitised) version of distortion; a digital overdrive effect pedal applies distortion onto a signal within its own circuitry but limits its output to an amplitude level where there is no risk to the speakers. This process appropriates the sound of systems under stress, and the lack of risk to the medium removes any notion of actual distortion.

In *5.9.1.2. (hommage to Junko),* the recording medium distorts subtly as the volume of Guo's screams are louder than the microphone can handle. This is not the sound of produced, sanitised, tightly controlled distortion, of an effect. Much like Guo's screams are stretching her own voice to its limits, this buzzing or crackling sound of distortion is the sound of the recording medium at its breaking point. It could be the microphone preamplifier circuit which is causing the cracking. Intentionally including this in the final recording is a brilliant gesture. It operates outside of the work's self-contained world, that of Guo's voice and her formal explorations of screams, but it intensifies it. It is also literally situated apart from the space of the work. The distortion is an artefact within the hardware – it is not part of the sound waves in the air of the recording studio. This fact gives the harsh sound a strange proximity to the listener. The *shitness* of the distorted gesture generates a *visceral* mode of listening. This mode opens my ear to other peripheral features on the recording. When Guo gasps in a huge breath we hear the room articulate behind her as the previous scream is dying away; resounding and reverberating in the space she was in. This sudden appearance of depth and space is striking each time it appears. There is a constant oscillation between the spaces we are experiencing; between Guo's vocal cords and lungs, the uncanny, unnaturally intimate presence of the crackling and distorted recording media, and the reflections in the diffuse, empty space behind her.

The distortion pushes the listening experience beyond a simple rendering of what happened in the studio and arguably introduces an element of liveliness into my hearing of the recording, in my home, on headphones.

careful formalising…

I would like to use the remainder of this text to explore some reflections on the potentialities arising from the concept of *shitness* and *visceral* modes of listening. The various manifestations of *shitness* in the two works discussed above, like the disassembly of the instrument in *SVIOLONCELLO*, are productive; they are explored and elaborated as formal components. I see the reflexive incorporation of *shit* elements contributing to musical form as a gesture of care.

Like Fetokaki, Catherin and Jousson's work, my own compositional process also deals with fragmentation, but most often through the medium of sound recordings and using various digital processes. There is a destructive tendency inherent in these processes, in the possibility of literally shredding all representational information from sound recordings, of discarding or ignoring their valences and aggressively conforming them to an externally designed form. I believe this can be problematic, not just because of the disregard for the representational qualities in the sound recordings (and potentially the people and places within them) but also due to the possibility of an unproductive tension in the composed piece between the content and imposed form – the possibility for this connection to seem arbitrary. To instead, like Fetokaki, Catherin and Jousson, treat this fragmentation of sound recordings as a process of disassembly, would mean paying attention to the resultant fragments with care. To examine each as having its own valence and to ask whether they suggest their own identities, trajectories or relationships and whether these can

be formalised. The ubiquitous presence of radical synthesis and processing techniques in digital music production today make this a very salient and urgent question.

In the composer and author Emile Frankel's book, *Hearing the Cloud*,[18] he argues against the unquestioned usage of stochastic generative techniques in music.[19] Frankel suggests that stochastic techniques can facilitate the process of apophenia, "The erroneous perception of patterns or correlations in random or unconnected phenomena, events, and data" to create a '*zone of uncertainty*' within the listening experience. He goes on to state that '*apophenia is a core structure behind the new prevalence of online magical thinking*'[20]. Frankel hears spectres of occultism, of *Chaos Magick* and *Discordianism* in stochastic musical forms and makes a convincing link between the audiovisual works he explores through this lens and with the evolving landscape of digital media and its increasingly problematic role in the dissemination of misinformation. He sees, for example, apophenic, magical thinking, through a series of anonymous 4chan posts, as a force at play in the rise of the alt-right and specifically in certain online narratives surrounding the 2016 US Presidential election.[21]

Outlining a history of formal development through the evolution of stochastic music practices in Western Music of the Global North, Frankel situates a starting point for the usage of stochastic processes in the work of composer, Iannis Xenakis, beginning in the 1950s. He draws an important distinction however, between the way stochastic music functions in our current, post-internet society. For Xenakis, stochastic music was a formal exploration grounded in the logic of mathematics and perhaps an implicit belief in how it relates to nature– it could be described as an attempt to find order (form) in the chaos of the natural world (modelled by stochastic processes)[22]. In Frankel's argument, deconstructed club music in the early 21st century forgoes a similar effort towards ordering, and explicitly renders an experience of confusion – of disconnected formal fragments which listeners are left to self-assemble. These are works that "*we somehow walk away from…deeply unsettled…*"[23]. This unsettling nature is posited as stemming from the listeners' apprehension of a world that is beyond their control during the process of apophenia experienced in relation to the formless, quasi-random nature of the music[24].

> While for a composer, stochastic methods are an attempt to instrumentalise chaos towards a controlled goal, for a listener, the consequent mutability of narrative interpretation encourages political inaction and belief in a reality, which is deliberately made to be out of our control. (Franekl 2019: 67)

Frankel examines the work, *LEXACHAST* (2015) by Amnesia Scanner and Bill Kouligas as a particularly illustrative example in favour of his argument.[25] The visual component of the piece consists of a large corpus of images ripped from online sources such as Flickr and DeviantArt which gradually fade from one to the other throughout the approximately 16-minute duration. The images overlap with each other with various levels of opacity. The pace of change of the fades creates an aesthetic surface consisting of an intricate play of shapes and textures, but it also facilitates a complex set of constantly changing representations given how the different images seem to relate to each other during the fades. These are images selected quasi-randomly yet the brain makes connections between them. "*There is no reason to string a narrative throughout these juxtaposed images – yet you do.*"[26]. The viewer is constructing meaning through apophenia. Every time you load the webpage there are a different set of images, drawn from what feels like a huge corpus. I am personally struck my feeling of there being a certain kind of algorithm for selection based on what I am seeing – is the image of the skull made of Lego which gradually bleeds through the surface of an image of a stranger's face indicative of an algorithm made to relate images to

one another based on a generalised facial structure? Or is this an overreading on my part similar to my apophenic intuition that leaves a sort of affective residue – one of this specific connection having '*something to do with death*'. Frankel analyses the music which, although set – as in, not generated anew with each visit to the link – creates a similar effect for the listener. He analyses the sounds in the piece as having originated in some sort of stochastic algorithm or processes of granular synthesis. These techniques create the quasi-random sounding stuttering and disconnected rhythmic structures. These taken with a sonic language that "exhibits many tropes broadly shared by a collection of artists creating futurist music,"[27] such as highly processed digital samples, lead to a confusing tapestry of representational sound. The author describes his listening experience of the piece:

> Sound glares and disrupts in jagged tension. A near-speaking voice seems to become the sound of a revving car engine. The sound of clicking insects seems to become the ripping of domestic objects flung about in terror. Borders and lines in sound fuse, one material leaks over to the next. A singing child's voice seems to become the cries of a Death Metal scream.

This is Frankel's description of his own listening experience in relation to the piece and although it is not possible to generalise it for all potential listeners, I agree with the author's assertion that the *zone of uncertainty* that this piece creates has the general texture of unease, of, as he described it, a world beyond control.

Despite his critique, from the outset of his text, Frankel advocates for a radical decisiveness in music and art making, and offers us a glimmer of hope for the future. I also share his view that the usage of stochastic and other digital processes in the service of engendering apophenia is not inherently problematic in and of itself, but that we have a responsibility to question what function it is being mobilised for, whether consciously or not. In attending to *shitness* in how we approach the fragments and debris resulting from the digital processes of fragmentation we might find previously overlooked possibilities for formalising and for approaching alternative modes of listening.

The works of Fetokaki, Catherin and Jousson and of Guo discussed above each look for musical material at the extremities of a central mode of listening or performance. Parameters that are *shit*, like a cheap, poorly made cello, allow for a collaborative dismantling, not only of the cello itself, but also of the normative approach to solo cello performance. Guo foregrounding the strangely intimate distortion of the recording medium in *5.9.1.2. (hommage to Junko)* allows for a rumination on the musical interplay between the parameters involved––Guo's body, the surrounding space and the analog/digital medium. These works serve as guides, each illustrating possible avenues for creators to find hidden parameters within existing, centralised modes of creation or listening. In short, to find generative potential in *shitness*.

Seán Ó Dálaigh is a composer and sound artist from Kerry, Ireland, based in California. He is currently obsessed with transcription.

Endnotes

1. Harper Douglas, "Etymology of Cacophony," *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Available at: <etymonline.com/word/cacophony>.

2. The following is from a 1993 interview with John McCormick, a sanitation worker in L.A, featured in a colourfully descriptive article about his profession in the Los Angeles Times: "The years have not dulled his senses. No matter how many times he goes below, McCormick's skin still crawls at the sheer power of the darkness, the stench from the potent flow beneath him and the eerie, disembodied rush of water that comes from the flushing of toilets on the surface, far away from this horrible place." See John M. Glionna, "Down the Drain," *Los Angeles Times* [online], January 24, 1993. Available at:
<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-01-24-vw-2382-story.html>.

3. The concepts of *shitness* and *noise* intersect with that of *desire* and *repression* and therefore intersect with prevalent theories from psychoanalysis, especially Freud. Although I recognise that *shitness* is in dialogue with this field, I nevertheless considered psychoanalysis to be outside the scope of this essay and my expertise.

4. The relationship between noise and otherwise is constantly shifting, and Attali argues for the reciprocal relationship between the definitions of music and noise in a society, and the ideologies at play within them and within their past and future iterations. According to Attali, "the musical ideal […] becomes an ideal of health: quality, purity, the elimination of noises; silencing drives deodorizing the body, emptying it of all its needs, and reducing it to silence […] Music is inscribed between noise and silence, in the space of the social codification it reveals. Every code of music is rooted in the ideologies and technologies of its age, and at the same time produces them" (122; 19). See Jacques Attali, *Noise*: *The Political Economy of Music* (University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

5. In music which operates at the lower threshold of hearing, utilising extremely quiet materials, there is a heightened awareness of one's surroundings. Attending the premiere of *The Book of Dust, 2023* for viola d'amore, by Evan Johnson, performed by Marco Fusi at the Darmstädter Ferienkurse 2023 was one of these particular instances of presence. The extremely low amplitudes of some of the materials in the piece means that the sounding result from their performance is at the same level as that of the sounds from the audience and the hall. The squeak of a chair in the back, the shifting of someone's posture to remain attentive during the forty-five minute duration; these all form a part of the performance. But this effect is not limited to the amplitudes; the types of articulations that are required are highly mediated by their own – often complex – physicality. The visible labour Fusi was (expertly) undergoing in navigating the piece as well as the material sounds or so called 'extended techniques' (dragging the wood of the bow in the string (*col legno tratto*), tapping and striking the body of the instrument for example) also contribute to the mode of listening I am describing – that of a highly situated and bodily presence in the space of performance.

6. See Rebecca Saunders, *Fury* (2005). Available at:
<issuu.com/editionpeters/docs/ep_12540r_rebecca_saunders_fury_ii>

7. During a lecture in Barcelona at the Mixtur Festival 2018, Saunders stated this awareness was present for her in the composition process–like a choreography for the musculature. Bassist Beltane Ruiz Molina performed *Fury* in a concert the following evening and made the decision to perform wearing a sleeveless shirt. This gesture greatly amplified the awareness of her musculature under stress as part of the listening experience.

8. Including, but not limited to, things such as wooden soundboards, steel strings, rosin, horse hair, sheeps' guts, glue, the musculature of a human body, and sweat.

9. Noise music traditionally uses sheer volume to achieve this, saturating the performance space with intense and shocking soundwaves, frequently beyond the threshold of pain and safety. According to scholar David Novak, noise's "affective power" often "requires this visceral embodiment of its extreme volume. When the sound begins, your body starts, instantly short-circuiting the public space of sound into internal response" (54). See David Novak, *Japanoise. Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Duke University Press, 2013).
10. See Sophie Fetokaki, Brice Catherin and Robin Jousson, *SVIOLONCELLO* (2017) for voice, cello and luthier. Performance
available at: <akouphene.org/bricecatherin/GFfetokakiEN.php>.
11. Fetokaki cited directly from the score by Brice Catherin. Quote used with the composers' permission.
12. Mass produced instruments bring up an interesting discussion about recycling that Fetokaki takes up in her following work *Meta/morphe* (briefly discussed in this text later). If the world is filling up with mass-produced instruments that seem to not be fit for purpose (beyond serving for a few months as a beginner's learning instrument), can we think of other ways to reuse and recycle them?
13. See Colin E. Gough, "A Violin Shell Model: Vibrational Modes and Acoustics," *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 137.3 (2015): 1210-25.
14. See Michael Mcintyre and Jim Woodhouse, "The Acoustics of Stringed Musical Instruments," *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 3.2 (1978): 157-73. See pages 160-61 for a comprehensive description of the complexity involved in sound production (and later in the article for a detailed discussion on wolf tones).
15. Description of meta/morphē cited from: <sophiefetokaki.com/meta-morphe>
16. See Steven K. Takasugi. "Warum Theater?," *MusikTexte* 149 (2016): 13-5. English version available at: <musiktexte.de/WebRoot/Store22/Shops/dc91cfee-4fdc-41fe-82da-0c2b88528c1e/MediaGallery/Takasugi.pdf>
17. See Norman L. Kleeblatt, Chaim Soutine, Kenneth E. Silver, and Romy Golan. *An Expressionist in Paris: The Paintings of Chaim Soutine*
(University
of Michigan, 1998).
18. Emile Frankel, *Hearing the Cloud* (Zero Books, 2019).
19. In Frankel's terms, "in the structuring of music, we have a direct responsibility for how it is used and interpreted" (64).
20. ibid. pg. 57.
21. ibid. pg. 62.
22. ibid. pg. 68.
23. ibid. pg. 54.
24. ibid. pg. 68.
25. See Amnesia Scanner and Bill Kouligas, *LEXACHAST* (2015). Available at: www.lexachast.com
26. Emile Frankel, *Hearing the Cloud,* 54.
27. ibid. pg. 55.

References

Fetokaki, Sophie, Brice Catherin, and Robin Jousson. *SVIOLONCELLO* (2017) for voice, cello, and luthier. Performance available at: <akouphene.org/bricecatherin/GFfetokakiEN.php>.

Frankel, Emile. *Hearing the Cloud. Can Music Help Reimagine the Future?* Winchester: Zero Books, 2019.

Glionna, John M. "Down the Drain," *Los Angeles Times* [online], January 24, 1993. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-01-24-vw-2382-story.html>.

Gough, Colin E. "A Violin Shell Model: Vibrational Modes and Acoustics," *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 137.3 (2015): 1210-25.

Kleeblatt, Norman L., Chaim Soutine, Kenneth E. Silver, and Romy Golan. *An Expressionist in Paris: The Paintings of Chaim Soutine*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1998.

Mcintyre, Michael and Jim Woodhouse, "The Acoustics of Stringed Musical Instruments," *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 3.2 (1978): 157-73.

Novak, David. *Japanoise. Music at the Edge of Circulation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

Saunders, Rebecca. *Fury* (2005). Available at: <issuu.com/editionpeters/docs/ep_12540r__rebecca_saunders_fury_ii>.

Scanner, Amnesia and Bill Kouligas. *LEXACHAST* (2015). Available at: <www.lexachast.com>.

Takasugi, Steven K. "Warum Theater?," *MusikTexte* 149 (2016): 13-5. English version available at: < musiktexte.de/WebRoot/Store22/Shops/dc91cfee-4fdc-41fe-82da-0c2b88528c1e/MediaGallery/Takasugi.pdf>.