Parody, allusion and desire in Ligeti’s *Le Grande Macabre*

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When Ligeti was invited to participate in a congress on form at Darmstadt, he took the assignment quite seriously, brushing up on his Adorno, and securing Carl Dahlhaus as editor.\(^1\) “Form in der Neuen Musik” begins by relating musical form to cognitive categories of temporal and spatial perception.\(^2\) According to Ligeti, we experience form from an inverted, illusionary perspective: although musical shapes and events themselves create a sense of “space,” the listener imagines them as placed in a *space that already exists*. Once we begin to process this music— to make associations, abstractions, memories and predictions— time becomes space and form, as we know it. If all musical parts relate to their larger wholes, Ligeti reasons that any individual work itself is related to the sum total of musical history; the musical present is thus a potent concentrate of “all music previously experienced.”\(^3\) In Adorno, musical tradition subsisted as sedimented structure, a substrate latent within the musical material, which the subject acted upon. But Ligeti’s metaphor assigns the weight of the past a role external to the work. The compression of history, as accumulated and represented time, acts *on* the temporal level of a composition to produce an “imaginary time of a higher power”; history is always already an imaginary space, one that unites musical substance, rhetoric, and affect in each individual work.\(^4\)

Ligeti does follow Adorno in asserting that musical syntax “is transformed by and through history.” Verb and subject are co-extensive: what is formed in music is already “form,” not mere material to be acted upon. Yet if musical objects are already pregnant with spatial implications and allusions, what represents semantics in music? Ligeti’s

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3 Ligeti, “Form in der Neuen Musik,” pp. 185-86.
4 Ibid., p. 783 and p. 187 (trans. mod.).
Saussurean answer asserts that musical meaning comes solely from difference, and that music as a syntactic system is not only “pervaded by gaps and internal inconsistencies” but “open to every transformation.” Here he leaves behind analogies with language, and invokes the Freudian unconscious, with the declaration “Musical meaning and musical logic relate to actual meaning and actual logic like dreams to reality.”

“Oh long-lost paradise, where are you now?”

Ligeti’s only completed opera, Le Grande Macabre (1974-77; rev. 1996) is such a dreamlike mediation on “all music previously experienced,” especially the operatic tradition from Monteverdi to the late nineteenth-century. As his sole work based on collage and pastiche, the darkly comic Macabre incorporates quotation and allusion on a dizzying number of levels. Its libretto was based on Le Balade du Grand Macabre by the Flemish playwright Michel de Ghelderode, an anachronistic twentieth-century dramatist, in love with the “Legends of olden days, … when Flanders staggered itself in war and danced in orgies of the flesh.” Its premise—a dissolute kingdom threatened by apocalypse—was spacious enough to hold numerous quotations and stylistic allusions, objets trouvés lodged within a story that itself draws from diverse genres, among them animated cartoons, Baroque and Romantic opera, commedia dell’arte, and Restoration

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6 The original libretto, in German, was a combined effort by Ligeti and Michael Meschke of the Swedish Royal Opera. Although Ligeti originally advised that the opera be performed in a native language where possible (György Ligeti, György Ligeti in Conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel and Himself, trans, by Gabor J. Schabert, Sarah E. Soulsby, Terence Kilmartin and Geoffrey Skelton (London: Eulenburg Books, 1983), p. 115), but upon the 1996 revision, declared English the preferred libretto (Richard Steinitz, György Ligeti: music of the imagination (London: Faber & Faber, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), p. 222).

In the following essay I define the opera’s particular relation to parody, then analyze three *scenas* rich in allusions and signification—Piet and Nekrotzar’s entrances in Scene 1, and Mescalina’s lament in Scene 2—before returning to the topic of music as historicized form.

*Le Grand Macabre* adopts a critical, deliberately constructed distance from its freighted contents that can be called parody in more than one sense of the term. Neither full-blown pasticcio nor stylistic pastiche, it functions as a recursive homage and critique of operatic conventions through the ages. Baroque constructive principles house a medieval fantasy, while Verdi’s Romantic homage to Mozart’s Don Giovanni, the vainglorious Falstaff, serves as the template for the pompous villain Nekrotzar. Citations such as Offenbach’s “Galop Infernal” themselves look back to earlier conventions with the alienated gaze of Romantic irony. Each instance of a topic recalls a specific scene in opera history as well as a general convention, from the palindromic car-horn prelude modeled on the toccata that opens Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* to the stately passacaglia that closes the opera, sans Nekrotzar, on a didactic chorus ala *Don Giovanni*.

Two related theories aid my discussion of the ways in which parody and lament intersect in *Le Grand Macabre*. Drawing on the term’s earlier, specifically musical meaning of the term, Linda Hutcheon identifies parody as a significant way in which contemporary artists come to terms with their legacy, with roots in classical and

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8 Ligeti provides extremely detailed notes on set, costume design and stagecraft, and has been openly critical of productions that deviate too widely from the ambiguous moral and commedia dell’arte spirit of his intentions. The most infamous example is Peter Sellars’s premiere of the 1996 revised version at the Salzburg festival, well documented in print; cf. Steinitz, 240-43, and Amanda Jo Sewell, “Blending the Sublime and the Ridiculous: A Study of Parody in György Ligeti’s *Le Grand Macabre,*” M.M. thesis (Bowling Green State University, 2006), pp. 44-53. His many interviews regarding the opera cite a long list of interdisciplinary influences, from the films of Chaplin to the drawings of Saul Steinberg; notes on the libretto MS cite Pink Floyd next to Piet’s plea for mercy in Act I, Peter von Seherr-Thoss, *György Ligetis ‘Le Grande Macabre’—Erste Fassung –Entstehung und Deutung* (Eisenach: Karl Dieter Wagner, 1998), fn pp. 163, 271.
Renaissance imitation. Parody as a unique twentieth-century form of historical consciousness represents a particular theoretical perspective, both formal and pragmatic, in which an art form is created to interrogate itself against its precedents. This critical distance is usually signaled by irony, but carries no satiric ethos or specific intent to ridicule its source.

Yayoi Uno Everett narrows this focus to twentieth-century art music, proposing a scale of aesthetic motivations for parody in on a continuum from the expressively neutral to the explicitly subversive. At one end, quotations appear simply as part of a narrative program. At the far end is music that incorporates overtly subversive elements through the topical opposition between musical referents. Peter Maxwell Davies’ *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969) serves as an example of Everett’s analysis of irony and satiric ethos, with an inverted correlation between atonality and tonality, as they map onto reality and illusion. Whereas atonality is conventionally considered a musical signifier for madness and decay (as in Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*), King George’s moments of lucidity are marked by dissonant passages, while his loosened grip on reality is set to the trite and anachronistic vaudeville tunes.

“For there will be blood”

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11 Ibid. David Metzer discusses conflicting musical allusions in *Eight Songs for a Mad King* in the context of other twentieth-century works that combine quotation with portrayals of madness: *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 102ff.
The opening car-horn tribute bears explicit, subversive intent, yet honors Monteverdi’s inspiration on several levels. The first scene features four topics associated with seventeenth-century Italian opera: a comic aria for stereotypical lovers, an ombra scene complete with ghostly chorus, a trumpet aria, diegetic music and a mad scene based on Baroque models. On a broader scale Monteverdi’s operas serve as a musical dramatic template at odds with the conventions of Romantic and twentieth-century opera, a series of small musical and dramatic situations that are discontinuous on the surface, yet from a distance form a coherent whole.

Piet the Pot’s opening aria mixes buffa topics with the signifiers of lament. His comic aria invokes a dance topic, with a triplet rhythm that shifts meter to reflect his ever inebriated state. Yet accompanied by three bassoons, in an echo of Berlioz, he skips along to the “Day of Wrath,” its chromatic denouement taking a tumble with him (shown in Ex. 1). Per Baroque convention, Piet’s aria functions as a measured, somewhat formal drinking song, replete with protestations to the audience, burps and hiccups, his revel interrupted by the entrance of archetypal Baroque lovers.

[Ex. 1]

As the lovers withdraw from the stage, the demonic Nekrotzar enters from a tomb and, encountering the wine taster, prepares him for a fateful message. Midnight strikes at rehearsal 59, with the start of a metronome and a subdued, metric accompaniment marked andante misurato e misterioso. The clock and Nekrotzar’s mode of entry to the outer world recall two famous scenas: the Windsor forest scene from Verdi’s Falstaff, and the famous arrival of the Il Commendatore in Mozart’s Don Giovanni.\(^{12}\) The denatured tonal lament that accompanies the first proclamation of apocalyptic doom cites

\(^{12}\) Comments on Ligeti’s libretto suggest Verdi’s Falstaff, and imply the famous arrival of the Il Commendatore in Mozart’s Don Giovanni, von Seher-Thoss, p. 245. Steinitz comments on this as well, p. 225. Other notations in the MS include “Requiem,” likely a reference to Ligeti’s own work, “Walk?,” short for Walküre, and “Mahler V 1-2.
both of these influences, yet the general tone of the scene recalls standard depictions of the fantastic in eighteenth-century opera.

Piet’s mocking reference to death as worse than sobriety (on a prescient middle C, reh. 55+5) foreshadows Nekrotzar’s threat, intoned—as in a mass—on a middle C recitation tone, the same note assigned to the Oracle in Mozart’s Idomeneo. An equivalent monotonous chant, accompanied by low brass in particular, and the deep tones of winds, strings, harp and keyboards in their bottom registers, were staples of the oracle scenes in eighteenth-century opera.\(^\text{13}\) The obsessive repetition of a simple rhythmic pattern, supported by a low, creeping orchestral accompaniment, often attended the eruption of evil and the marvelous into the lives of ordinary mortals.\(^\text{14}\) With this ominous reiteration we can chart the parallels to Mozart’s spectral judge and Verdi’s feckless lover, mirror images of the holy fool and the damned rake.

A fully-diminished seventh chord tonicizing the dominant, accented by a clap of thunder, greets the Commendatore’s entrance to the Don’s private dinner party. The statue’s greeting in D minor is accompanied by the familiar descending lament tetrachord, forcing Don Giovanni to reply on the dominant. But the gist of the Commendatore’s threat—his determination that the “hour” has come—is delivered over a rising bass line that halts only when the Don speaks. The longest rising passage begins with “Tu m’invitasti a cena” (Thou didst thyself invite me) to “tu a cenar meco?” (When shall I claim thee?). This passage traces a chromatic ascent from A2 to G-flat3, harmonized by irregularly-resolved fully-diminished seventh chords, a sequence that comes to rest on an unstable and fluctuating B-flat 6/4 chord, only to begin the climb again three bars later on A. Ligeti’s gloss on these conventions employs a repeated descending lament bass with C/B-flat/C-A/C/E-flat, which begins as a slightly modernized, expanded prolongation of the dominant, heralded by the Commendatore’s


entrance. The diminished triad on A slides down to a jazz-flavored A-flat add6 chord, but as the bass continues its descent the harmonies congeal into a static mass.

Nekrotzar’s prophecy transforms into yet another version of Ligeti’s ubiquitous canonic forms, as the line that began on middle C is imitated at different pitch and rhythmic intervals. As shown in an analysis of reh. 59 (Ex. 2), the downward-stemmed lines travel according to the talea ♩♩♩♩♩♩♫, while the upward stemmed lines—after a “false start” in the second bar—take either two half-notes or a half and two quarter-notes. Ligeti assigns each line its own pace; he thus achieves a similar effect as that expressed by a contrapuntal texture that juxtaposes completely different notated rhythms (e.g. the Intermezzo at Reh. 606). As in his earlier micropolyphonic compositions, the changing densities and dynamics generated by shifting horizontal lines are more significant than the phenomenal harmonies that result. This generalized chromatic technique, in the form of descending lament topics and ascending scales, appears in works of the mid-1950s as well as in the Études pour Piano of the 1990s. What makes Nekrotzar’s scene unique is its witty allusion to iconic scenes of operas past, as well as the ‘stickiness’ of each entering pitch, which adheres to middle C as the descending sonorities growing louder and thicker with each ensuing threat delivered sotto voce, “gloomy, in measured prose” (Ex. 3).

[Ex. 2]

[Ex. 3]

Verdi’s final opera here seems an especially apt comparison, as Falstaff, eagerly awaiting his assignation in Windsor forest, counts down to midnight on F3 over a succession of nonfunctional harmonies. Augmented chords and German sixths in succession add an eerie glow to the anticipation of what lies at the bottom of the descending bass, as shown in Ex. 4. Yet once again Ligeti inverts the structural import of the reference. Nekrotzar enters in the full flush of power, warning “there will be blood, and fire will follow!” Falstaff’s evening assignation with Mistress Ford—as did that of Don Giovanni’s with the
“For there will be blood,” Reh. 62, Ex. 3
count—marks his comeuppance and the opera’s denouement. Likewise, Nekrotzar will pursue wine and women later, as though living the Don’s and the fat knight’s plots in reverse. His ultimate fate, however, lies somewhere between the two; drunk and beaten, he neither descends to hell nor joins the final triumphant chorus but simply disappears without fanfare.

[Ex. 4]

POPPEA GETS HER JUST DESSERTS

The parodic ethos at the heart of the opera is summed up the entrance of the astrologer Astradamors and his dominatrix wife Mescalina, dramatic and symbolic foils to the pure Amanda and Amando. The innamorati couples mirror one another as they reflect the Commedia dell’Arte influence that informed Macabre’s Flemish source. The bland, undifferentiated Amando and Amanda may not be central to the action, but their sweet obliviousness is central to the “anti-moral” of the plot. Conversely, Astradamors and Mescalina invert a stereotypical domestic power structure, as they subvert loving fidelity by trying to kill one another in vain. The astrologer and his wife, like all of Ghelderode’s main characters, took on new titles in the opera’s libretto. Astradamors’s name contracts Nostradamus, mors and amor, a portmanteau word that foretells his prognosticating abilities, but only hints at his feminized role.15 Mescalina’s name, on the other hand, serves as a three-dimensional reference: to the hallucinogenic alkaloid found in peyote, to Roman myth and history, and to opera. Historically, the Roman empress Messalina (d. 48) was the third wife of Claudius; apocryphally, she was the most notorious female libertine and adultress of ancient Rome. Upon its premiere in Venice in 1679, the

15 Ligeti in Conversation, p. 116. Astradamors was first conceived as a female voice, then later a countertenor paired with a tenor Mescalina with overtones of Carmen; von Seherr-Thoss, p. 263.
Falstaff counts down to midnight, Ex. 4
eponymous Messalina, by Carlo Pallavicino and Francesco Mario Piccioli, enshrined her licentiousness in the history of opera.\(^{16}\)

In the Baroque opera, Messalina’s crimes and passions were but cleverly alluded to, yet in *Le Grand Macabre* her namesake’s sadistic desire is on full display. Scene two of the opera opens with a second car-horn Prelude that catches Mescalina in flagrante, thrashing the cross-dressing Astradamors with a whip in their kitchen-observatory. The straight eighth-note accompaniment that cascades through winds, brass and percussion signals what appears to intrude from another cultural world entirely: the Looney Tune of the 1940s or ‘50s, complete with “mickey-mouse” musical illustrations of slapstick. Yet the animated cartoon is simply a surreal contemporary heir to the Commedia dell’Arte, one in which sadomasochistic antics are no more surprising than the rebirth of the pathetic murder victim in the following scene. Mescalina attempts to emasculate her husband but is thwarted by a strategically-place frying pan. Furious at his prudence, she delivers a karate chop that appears to kill Astradamors, delivered with a quadruple forte dissonant hexachord (pc set (012567)) and a cluster in xylophone.

“Dead? He has the nerve to die!” she exclaims. After a “hushed silence” the opera’s first official lament begins, potent combination of revered tradition and degraded kitsch modeled on Monteverdi’s *Lamento d’Arianna*. As it was when first performed, Arianna’s lament remains an obsessive topic of scholars, for igniting the Baroque lament craze and bringing a newfound expressiveness to opera recitative and, later, aria. Despite its strophic form, Arianna’s lament was not quite an aria, yet neither was it recitative. Following Rinuccini’s text, the lament breaks down into clear narrative units that offer a paradigmatic setting of the five stages of grief, while register, mode and pitch center map Arianna’s shifting emotional state.\(^{17}\) Suzanne Cusick’s close analysis reads Arianna’s

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lament as an allegory of early modern female virtue that affirms the values of patriarchy over those of women’s independence. Le Grand Macabre’s Scene 2 lament inverts that earlier power balance, as Mescalina castigates her lover, all the while acting as the architect of her own suffering.

The formal and affective ties between Mescalina’s and Arianna’s laments form one level of parodic inference in this extremely self-reflexive passage. Strings enter alone at piano with harmonics on open strings at rehearsal 152, a general signifier of lament that dates back at least to Monteverdi. The first stage of grief begin with the iconic cry “Oh pain!” a bar later, repeated in a parlando rhythm that gradually descends two chromatic steps and leaps up by a sixth, as in Arianna’s lament, to repeat the previous descent at T7 (shown in a reduction of the score in Ex. 5). “Oh pain!” is set to a six-note segment of Messiaen’s fourth mode of limited transposition; the introduction of the same melody in inversion destroys the harmonic progression as it directs our attention towards a dissonant culmination on C-sharp.

[Ex. 5]

On one level the lament’s harmonic accompaniment functions as a self-parody of compositional techniques that consolidated Ligeti’s reputation in the 1960s. Violins and violas play a rhythmically-augmented version of the lament, which appears in canon in four divisi cellos, a momentary allusion to the micropolyphony characteristic of the Kyrie of the Requiem, Lux Aeterna, or Lontano. Cellos 5 and 6 accompany the second phrase


20 Steinitz notes that Mescalina’s cry has a Mahlerian flavor in German: “O weh!”; Music of the Imagination, p. 230
with the lament in inversion, to form a chromatic wedge that approaches rhythmic and harmonic closure on a five-note chromatic cluster on the upbeat to rehearsal 154.

As Ligeti memorably stated in “Metamorphoses of Serial Form,” serial organization effaced the identity of a row through its juxtaposition at different pitch and inversional levels, with the waters further muddied when competing parameters were subsumed by the same unary structural logic. Jonathan Bernard and others have cited micropolyphony as one response to the challenge of serialism. Yet Ligeti does not so much answer the serialist challenge as mock it with great aplomb. His response to the Darmstadt purists employs serialism run amok: a quasi-chromatic pitch series whose identity is thrust in the listener’s face, thickened through heterophonic repetition at the pitch and octave until the entire composition is nothing but this series, smudged and untidy, as if the composer were gleefully painting outside a prescribed formal outline. In this context the chromatic voice-leading that accompanies Mescalina’s recitative will likely summon the ghost of Berg rather than Boulez, as the chromatic series is overlaid to produce a series of functional seventh-chords, chromatic embellishment through a passing diminished chord (Cm$7$ (flat-5)) leading to an implied trichord substitution (D-flat$^M7$) with a trite ii-V cadence in cocktail jazz voicings.

Rather than a recitative followed by lament (a standard pattern from Cavalli on), rehearsal 154 appears to signal the reverse, as the string chords on C-sharp pass to organ continuo to signal Mescalina’s second stage of grief. A typical recitative would enter on a first inversion dominant, a new tonal center to signal a corresponding shift in style and content. Yet here the continuo maintains an inscrutable chromatic cluster underneath the recitative, although that cluster—as befits its modernist heritage—is nothing more than the lament taken out of time and immobilized as a vertical sonority (Ex. 6). This phrase reveals Ligeti’s skills as a miniaturist, a skill often disguised by the huge scale of Le Grand Macabre. Whereas the parlando, weeping lament was sung as an aria, the “recitative” forgoes rhythmic freedom for the steady eighth-note pulse of doppio

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22 Rosand, p. 366.
movemento ($\text{\textit{d} = 80}$) “Who’ll rinse dishes? Do the washing?” Mescalina cries in a three-note descending chromatic motive that keeps repeating, in a faint echo of Ligeti’s meccanico style. As did the micropolyphony in phrase one, the meccanico references movements of earlier works, dating back to 1959’s Apparitions, in which mechanical ostinati repeat as if stuck until they either “run down” or are halted by an outside force. Here they pause for Mescalina’s snide remark, before the canonic accompaniment re-enters with a transition, clouding an authentic cadence that resolves on a BM$^{76/9}$ chord.

[Ex. 6]

Animated cartoons again provide a reference for the figurative light bulb that goes on in Mescalina’s head as she reaches for her familiar, a huge black spider, to raise Astradamors from his coma in the third stage of grief: furious anger. Mescalina woos the spider over a nattering harpsichord straight out of an old Universal horror film, complete with organ support and an ominous brass tattoo when Astradamors is awoken. His nimble aria of terror is a study in contrasts: quasi-Baroque passagework in straight eighth-notes, marked “with great élan and virtuosity” shares the stage with animalistic cries of terror and distress that reach a peak at G4 (reh. 163). The astrologer’s aria should mark the end of Mescalina’s lament, yet she reprises it in the form of a taunt, in a rounded period that functions as an epilogue.

At each stage in the lament the appropriation of dramatic, scenic (a filthy apartment littered with cobwebs) and musical signifiers reaches a higher degree of irony. The inversions offered in first scene come to their logical, parodic extreme as Mescalina finds her own death coextensive with erotic liberty. As the historical Messalina was put to death for her atrocities, so Mescalina’s call to the goddess is answered, yet her romantic assignation with the demon Nekrotzar ends in death. Mescalina’s entire scene is ironic in retrospect, as she bewails her own, imminent death in the guise of the other. Hence the brief three-bar reprise of the lament at rehearsal 237 in the buffò trio of contrabassoon, trombone and tuba as Piet and Astradamors carry her lifeless body off the stage (Ex. 7).
Le Grand Macabre’s gruesome lament may invert the Baroque model, but its reversed conventions reach back to the mythical roots of lament in the wail of the Gorgon’s cry. The Classical legacy of the lament began with the Greek legend, in which Euryale’s cry of mourning was transmuted to Athena’s aulos, an instrument of refined expression. Mescalina’s aria strips away the ensuing fantasy framework of Baroque elegance to reveal the monstrous content at its center.

Nekrotzar and Mescalina’s arias pair explicit musical allusions with hackneyed and inappropriate connotations much like Eight Songs for a Mad King. Yet none of their actions could be considered rational, hence the duality at the opera’s core, what the composer calls its “double bottom.” Each character’s motives, sanity and even mortality are perpetually in question, while the plot merges the comic with the terrible. Ligeti compares of the opera to a Western, in which a hare is disguised as a ghost. Marauding bandits rip off succeeding sheets, until they are convinced that they are indeed facing the undead, having failed to find the rabbit beneath. But whereas Ghelderode stripped his original antagonist Nekorzotar down to a harmless “hare,” Ligeti leaves the true identity of Nekrotzar ambiguous. The entire second half of the opera is a distorted musical and thematic mirror of the first, leading to the moral is that there is no moral: Breughelland will never know whether it was ever in danger, escaped destruction by the skin of its teeth, or has already died, and gone to a heaven indistinguishable from everyday life.23

Ligeti’s use of parody, allusion and ambiguity make sense if we return to his essay on form, where describes the forward march of music history as an “immense net that drags itself through the ages.” From a great distance, “one sees almost transparent tangles of thread which imperceptibly cover the tears: even what is seemingly without tradition has a secret connection to what has been.”24 This poignant image evokes Lacan’s concept of the gaze, the object of the act of looking. The gaze represents the split


subject expressed in visual terms, its internal alienation expressed as “a gaze imagined in
the field of the other.” The subject, gazing at the snarls and kinks of “the system of
musical form and its history,” sees that Other looking back at him, from a point that
excludes the viewer. This “transparent tangle” conceals a hole, or gap, in the structure,
one that forms secret ties to the past, hidden from view. The Real of music remains
inaccessible; we can glimpse its deformations only in the knots and torn threads that
appear to conceal the truth. Thus Macabre can only honor opera’s past through paradox
and contradiction, by refusing closure. The transparent tangle of history is thus the
object-cause of desire: it is not simply the inert substance of musical form, but that which
causes the subject to desire at all, and thus that which causes new music like Le Grande
Macabre to enter the world.