

Lied and the de-fetishization of music as a commodity



This paper, as its title indicates, involves four topics: Lied as a specific genre within western art music, the commodity and its fetishization in a Marxian sense, and the general dissemination of music within western and ultimately global culture. **Part I** discusses the historical media and technologies that have been used to share music. **Part II** concerns the similarities between the formation of the western canon and Marxian commodity fetishization. **Part III** is a material and hermeneutic analysis of Lied as a genre. **Part IV** synthesizes the previous sections into proposed practices for future Liedgestalter*innen. The paper addresses itself to anyone interested in music in an aesthetic sense as well as those interested in the characteristics of so-called “cultural commodities.” If there is one audience whose attention I would most prize, it would be those currently involved in the curation of art song whether they are performers, concert organizers, composers, or promoters. It is my belief, as it is also one of the main arguments of this paper, that Lied is extremely well suited to respond to the social and economic challenges that face our industry today. The basest intention of this essay is to provide these people with an analysis of the genre that encourages them to foster a meaningful dialogue

between aesthetic, social, and economic realms since the question of what it is we do, how it is valued, and how we should be compensated for it is a constant battle.¹

Part I : Music and its dissemination

“I’m listening to music” is a simple enough sentence. What we don’t immediately realize however, is that the possible implications of that sentence change drastically if we change the historical period in which it is said. Depending on the century, we get entirely different information about the location of the person or who might be present. If we know what music or which piece they are listening to then we potentially get an even greater wealth of information that might include the person’s social class, the country or city they are in, and even perhaps the time of year. This seemingly banal sentence is in fact a cornucopia of information depending on the period of history in which it is said.

One thing is for sure though: if someone says “I am listening to J.S. Bach’s *Weihnachtsoratorium*” in 2023, there is almost nothing that we can reliably infer about who this person is, where they are, or the present company. Today, we have nearly unlimited access to a body of music that would be impossible to consume in a single lifetime and our access is not limited by time or place. Some call this egalitarian and some see it as the evisceration of music as one of culture’s music meaning laden signifiers.

¹ In the very week in which I wrote this paper, a legal battle flared up in New York City as a musician’s union is protesting a Broadway theater which will produce a run of David Byrne’s “Here Lies Love” to a backing track instead of the 19 musicians the theatre is contractually obliged to employ. Michael Paulson. “Broadway Musicians Object to David Byrne’s ‘Here Lies Love.’” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/30/theater/here-lies-love-david-byrne-musicians.html>.

We can consider the act of sharing music to have three essential components: a producer, a medium, and a listener. Long ago, these components were all dependent on personnel, a specific time, and a specific place. Simply put, 2000 years ago, a performance involved a minimum of two people (performer/listener) in the same place at the same time. Throughout the course of Western music history, musical media has become more and more abstracted from the original human-bound attributes of voice/instrument, shared location, and a pair of ears so that the media of music today, as digital files for example, can now exist in a timeless, nameless, placeless manner. Indeed, whereas in its earliest stages, the media of music (instruments and the voice) required human input to function as vehicles of music, today, media have been introduced and developed so that this original requirement is turned on its head. For example, the music playing through the sound system of a shopping mall after it closes has neither producer or listener in the moment that it is being broadcast.

Because of the ubiquity and blisteringly quick worldwide adaptation of recent technologies, we take the over-saturation of music for granted. After all, we are over-saturated with just about everything else. As producers of music today, one of our chief concerns as marketers, disseminators, and sellers of a musical product is finding a way to create a scarcity of product within a flooded market. Strategies to address this have ranged from governments writing laws protecting intellectual property to coders developing new technology such as NFTs which create the possibility for scarcity within a digital space. Just as aviation fundamentally alters the logistics and parameters of travel by taking it out of the two-dimensional space of the ground and into the three-dimensional space of the air, the internet has completely reorganized the tools, structures, and concerns that organize the movement of music between its producer and consumer.

Today, we have the opposite problem than the one that faced the majority of western music history. If our 2020's problem is one of overabundance, during the 16th century when music notation existed only in manuscript form, the labor involved in the production of the product was extremely inefficient and supply was therefore limited. Andrea Antico and Ottaviano Petrucci, two of the earliest competitors in the market of printed polyphonic music, therefore enjoyed huge success when the technology of moveable type rewrote the rulebook on how scores could be produced and marketed.

Live performance is the oldest method of sharing music and it is a format whose balance of personnel/time/place remained unchanged for the longest period of time. The dynamics of live performance saw their first paradigm shift with the advent of radio when location was no longer a contingent factor of participation. Live streaming performances, popularized especially during the COVID pandemic, saw a change in the individual technologies used and offered a global reach to individual performers but this only magnified the effects a paradigm shift that had already occurred with the birth of radio. For these reasons, live performance as a method of sharing music will be put to the side for now in favor of an examination of media that had more gradual and subtle changes.

If we consider the creation and transmission (performing or teaching) of music in its most original historical form, it would have been an individual who created and organized the sound into music which would be consumed by a present listener. Just as literature was born out of an oral tradition, music too relied primarily on memory and the oral and aural senses as proto-media. As technologies developed, music as the art of organizing sound through time, came to be represented through other materials and senses. The initial push for a system of musical notation in the west came from the political ambition of the Roman church to unify its liturgy across a

wider geographical area.² Nevertheless, tools were developed specifically to increase the efficiency of memory as a music transmitting proto-technology since the cost of paper and other materials remained prohibitive. By far the most famous of these techniques was the Guidonian Hand which arranged pitches in a step-wise manner across the left hand.³ Incidentally, the same Guido of Arezzo is also credited with the creation of the 5-line staff system. The standardization initiated by the Roman Church and furthered by Guido of Arezzo's innovations equipped individual musical works with the necessary attributes to retain their identities as they travelled not only geographically but generationally, being passed from one musician to another.

The next major development in how music was transmitted from its producer to its consumer occurred at the end of the 16th century when notated music was first published using woodblocks (Ulrich Han's *Missale Romanum*, 1476) and then movable type (Ottaviano Petrucci's *Odhecaton*, 1501).⁴ For centuries, the basic apparatuses involved in bringing music from its producer to its consumer were limited to direct aural transmission (either learning by rote in person or attending a live performance) and printed or hand written scores. Just as Seay shows the political/religious origins of musical notation in the Roman church, Reese attribute the dominance of the Franco-Flemish style in the 16th century in large part to the fact that composers such as Josquin des Prez, Jean d'Okeghem, and Loyset Compère were heavily featured in the earliest mass-produced collections. The trend is that socio-political motives often drive various technologies' relation to music; new technology or media rarely emerge from purely aesthetic motives.

² Albert Seay. *Music in the Medieval World*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall. 1965), 41.

³ Carol Berger. "The Hand and the Art of Memory." *Musica Disciplina* 35 (1981): 87–120. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20532236>. 98.

⁴ Gustave Reese. *Music in the Renaissance*. Rev. ed. New York: Norton, 1959. 154.

If Guido's 11th century push towards the standardization of musical script was one of the first steps towards Western music's capability to exist through an autonomous and disembodied medium, the advent of the mass production of scores in the early 16th century took this disembodiment one step further by erasing the 1:1 ratio between scribe:manuscript. It would be several centuries later before the 1:1 ratio between performer:performance would be broken by the invention of sound capture and reproduction technology. Even though the 20th century witnessed the advent of the recording industry and the resultant market, the disembodiment of the transmission of music at least still retained its physicality and thinginess in the shape of CDs, tapes, and vinyl. Even when Prince claimed in 1998 to sell the first music entirely through the internet, he was still only selling CDs and mailing them.⁵ With these media, the bridges between the producer and listener are erased but the consumer is still bound by a concrete supply as dictated by the quantity and variety of their physical collection of recordings.

Radio is an interesting case. During a live broadcast, the medium keeps the bond between the musical laborer and consumer intact though they are of course not bound by the requirement of being in the same place. In the example of a prerecorded performance however, the medium exhibits its ability to nullify the temporal requirement which previously had bound performer and listener. Even though there is an unlimited supply of that performance (anyone with a radio can access it), it is only the *performer* who is not bound by time. The radio listener, who can listen to the music in any place is still required to tune-in to the radio station at the right moment in order to access the music.

Perhaps the above paragraphs are a bit overwrought in their examination of the qualities of various musical media. If they are indeed overwrought, it is because I have tried to show that

⁵ Jeremy Wade Morris. *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 7.

from the 11th century to the 21st, the developments in musical media/technology and their ontological effects on what it means to produce and consume music have happened over an extremely long period of time. The general pattern shows the gradual disembodiment of a practice which was originally prescribed by the requirements of personnel, place, and time. Moving in fits and spurts across the centuries, this trend of disembodiment reached its apotheosis only within the past decade. With the internet and the digitization of music, the basic requirements involved in performing the act of “listening to music” are completely independent of place, time, or personnel involved. As a listener, I have access at any given moment to virtually any recording that I wish to hear.

The performer or original creator of a music is now entirely out of the picture in this model of access. No, really. The disembodiment of music from musicians is by no means an abstract concept. It is now common knowledge that Spotify and other companies create fake artists and computer generated music that they push to the top of their playlists and distribution platforms.⁶ While each introduction of new media or technology tends to be sold as a tool to help musicians, this trajectory of media development over the centuries has resulted in the supplanting of musicians by the very media they use to reach their audiences.

A long narrative of role reversal is then apparent. There was a time when those who produced music held an exclusive monopoly on the access to music through their tight grip on the reins of where, when, and by whom a piece was played. Starting with the standardization of musical script in the middle ages and ultimately ending with music existing in today’s “cloud,” various apparatuses and technologies were developed which slowly erased the producer of

⁶ Tim Ingham. ““Fake Artists’ Have Billions of Streams on Spotify. Is Sony Now Playing the Service at Its Own Game?” Rolling Stone, July 2, 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/pro/features/fake-artists-have-billions-of-streams-on-spotify-is-sony-now-playing-the-service-at-its-own-game-834746/>.

music's control over where, when, and who/what is accessing the music. The result is that each new dawn has contributed to the reality that outside of live performance, music now exists, is accessed, and even is created entirely independently of musicians themselves. By developing and participating in newer and newer ways to reach more consumers, musicians have erased themselves from the equation.

Through these examples mentioned earlier by Seay, Reese, and others, it is clear that changes in the technology and media of music are often fueled by motives that are not strictly aesthetic, even though they have direct impacts on aesthetic movements and practices.⁷ Although this fact might be counter-intuitive since the west often views artists as especially free-willed and somehow driven by motives that are unsullied by economics or politics, it is a very well known and appreciated trend in other domains. During the 19th century's Industrial Revolution for instance, when technological advances caused violent and seismic shifts in the socio-economic order of Europe, writers such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels criticized Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, and other classical economists that came before them precisely because they ignored the social dimensions of how markets and products behave.

Just as Adam Smith and co. under appreciated the social components of commodities in the 18th century I think it is fair to say that musicians *still* generally under appreciate music's behavior as a commodity in today's markets. Of course there are writers such as Jeremy Wade Morris and Astra Taylor who have brilliantly undertaken the work of beginning to unpack

⁷ Stephen Rose shows interplay between stylistic/aesthetic choices and how they are dominated by the role technology plays in the scope of their dissemination: "The florid roulades and short note-values of solo lines or keyboard toccatas were hard to represent in the movable type that had been used throughout the sixteenth century. Engraving was better able to accommodate such complexities – as seen in Frescobaldi's two books of toccatas (1615, 1627) – but it remained expensive and limited to the upper end of the market." - "Publication and the Anxiety of Judgement in German Musical Life of the Seventeenth Century." *Music and Letters* 85, no. 1 (2004): 22-40. 68.

music's nature in a digital environment but their work tends to focus on pop music.⁸ It will be shown that there are particularities in the western art music world that require it to have its own separate analysis. **Part II** ventures into the space between political economics and the hermeneutics (the tradition and theory of interpretation within a branch of knowledge or beliefs, most commonly associated with religious texts) within western art music in an effort to show that it could be more than a coincidence that Marxian commodity fetishism and formation of the western musical canon originate from the same historical moment.

Part II : Commodity fetishism and the canon

Musicians don't like talking about money. We tend to believe that what we are doing is incompatible with it or that is somehow exists on a higher plane. While I won't necessarily go as far as to say that music and money behave similarly as expressions of human exchange, I certainly believe there is a danger in elevating music too far above the mundane. As **Part I** has shown, music is capable of carrying cultural information that goes well beyond the aesthetic. Music can tell us about religious practices, technology and media, the culture of intellectual property, and social class.⁹ Music's latent meanings however often get ignored in favor of purely aesthetic considerations thanks to the heritage of the mid-twentieth century schools of Northrop

⁸ Astra Taylor. *People's platform: Taking back power and culture in the Digital age*. London, UK: Picador Usa, 2015.

⁹ It should be said that starting in middle of the twentieth century, entire new disciplines of musicology have been spear-headed by more sociopolitically oriented thinkers such as Lydia Goehr, Susan McClary, James Deaville in music and Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Michel Foucault in philosophy. The fact that each of these thinkers has a distinct and independent body of work from the other is a testament to the breadth of subject matter that is available for study.

Frye in literature and Carl Dalhaus in music. As a result, money in the arts is often thought of in a cynical way. This attitude does a disservice to the creative and interesting quasi-metaphysical games that money plays as a form of human exchange and collective consciousness.

If the great mystery of music as the temporal art is that it enriches our experience of the moment thereby creating a truly irreproducible product, the great mystery of money is the complete opposite. Money treats everything as if it can be given a price, as if its value is reproducible. Through the magic of giving something a price, we can legitimately compare the worth of a carrot with the worth of a chair even though it is clear they have fundamentally unrelated values. We want to believe that the intangibility of music has no concrete literal value and yet the reality is that a global market exists where, yes, the same dollar that buys us a carrot can also buy a ticket to hear Yuja Wang.

By which processes are we able to put the nutritional use of a carrot, the comfort use of a chair, and the aesthetic use of a piano recital on the same plane of value? Karl Marx's theories and schemas related to questions such as this one continue to be some of the most important and influential ideas of the past two centuries. There are certain themes within his ideas on commodities and labor that have strong resonance not only with the ideas brought up in **Part I** but also with the process of canon formation within western art music which began in the 19th century.

In the Marxian view, commodities have three main attributes: value, use value, and exchange value.¹⁰ "Use value" refers to a thing's intrinsic often purely physical qualities insofar as they satisfy a human desire, need, or ideal. "Exchange value" refers to the fact that the

¹⁰ Liv Agar. "Explaining Marx's Capital Volume 1: Chapter 2, Commodity." Liv Agar (podcast). May 4, 2021. Accessed May 19, 2023. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/liv-agar/id1535599001i=1000518870205>

commodity is able to abstract and mobilize its use-value so that it can be traded for other commodities. "Value" is a direct expression of the amount of human labor that went into the production of the commodity. This is not the place for a thorough elaboration of these core Marxian ideas but the claim on which I would like to elaborate is that the culture of western art music has trained musicians to focus exclusively on the use value of their craft so that they relinquish their agency in determining its exchange value. The subsequent result is that, in combination with **Part I's** claim that musicians have been obscured to the point of erasure in their role as producers of music, music itself has become completely de-valued since it is no longer associated with human labor.

This phenomena of abstraction to the point of erasure is part of what Marx calls commodity fetishism.¹¹ According to Marx, the only way that use values of objects are able to be converted into exchange value (or: the only way we are able to reasonably consider how many carrots should be traded for a chair) is if we abstract the labor that went into the production of each. By abstracting the socially accepted amount of labor it takes to produce a chair and a carrot, we are able to compare the two commodities in terms of their value. "Abstracting the labor" means that even though the labor of a farmer is fundamentally different from that of a carpenter, we *abstract the labor* by measuring both in terms of hours spent, thereby quantifying their worth in the same units. Through different layers of abstraction, commodities obscure the social relations inherent in their production so that we believe the value is an attribute of the commodity itself. Labor imbues the commodity with value but the end result is that the labor is hidden so much so that we believe that the value exists as an inherent property of the

¹¹ Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1. Trans. Ben Fowkes. New York: Penguin, 1990. 165.

commodity.¹² This is the process of fetishization in the sense that inanimate objects are reified and acquire the social capacities otherwise held by humans.

In the same way that objects are reified through the process of commodification, so have works within the western musical tradition acquired their own type of autonomy through the process of canon formation and the performance practice of *Werktreue* ideology.¹³ As Liestra-Jones writes, “the idealized *Werktreue* performer must achieve a kind of absence from himself or herself in order to take on the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of the composer or composition in question.”¹⁴ It is important to realize that although *Werktreue* ideology is one of the dominant interpretive approaches today, this was not always the case. The history of classical music is filled with performers that have centered their own experience and expression over that of the composer or the work.¹⁵ From Lang Lang to Liszt however, these approaches often get labeled as cheap or egotistical. There are aesthetic arguments as to why this performer-centered approach is less desirable but there are also wider reaching, more nefarious motives for the favoring of an approach which de-centers the performer.

¹² “People in a capitalist society thus begin to treat commodities as if value inhered in the objects themselves, rather than in the amount of real labor expended to produce the object.” Dino Felluga. "Modules on Marx: On Fetishism." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. January 31, 2011. Purdue U. May 23, 2023. <<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/marxism/modules/marxfetishism.html>>.

¹³ Lydia Goehr’s 1992 *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works an Essay in the Philosophy of Music* is a benchmark work in the bizarre way in which the canon transforms the ontological aspects of a piece of music. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

¹⁴ Karen Leistra-Jones. “Virtue and Virtuosity: Brahms, the Concerto, and the Politics of Performance in the Late-Nineteenth-Century Austro-German Culture,” Ph.D. diss. (Yale University, 2011), 126.

¹⁵ The most famous example of this would be Liszt in the early part of his career. “There were explicit personally experiential components to Liszt’s pianism. In his performances, Liszt would appear be so involved in the music-making that he would appear to lose control of himself on stage and use his music to invite the audience to participate through transitory proximity to his own experience.” Pierre-Nicolas Benjamin Colombat. *Music and Modern Power: A Performer’s Tracing of Virtuosity and Systems of Musical Value*, Doctoral Dissertation (Boston University, 2021).

Borrowing from the work of Michel Foucault, I have argued that from the 1830's to today, western art music has undergone a transformation from being a tradition centered on performers and individual musicians to a tradition that based on the practice of music making itself. This is the first step in the abstraction of musical performance practice and the sublimation of the laborer's agency. The central agent of western art music used to be the artists themselves as purveyors of the art whereas now, through the transition from physical to compositional virtuosity in the second half of the 19th century, the works have achieved their own autonomy and hold the value of the tradition in themselves. Institutions such as competitions, conservatories, recording companies and others uphold a system where value exists *as an inherent part of the works themselves* through self-referential and decentralized systems of value creation.¹⁶

The two following excerpts reveal the similarity between how Marx sees the way in which markets mobilize the abstraction of labor as a weapon against laborers and how competitions (and other musical institutions) reverse the flow of value-generating systems through supposedly decentralized models of value in order to manipulate and control musicians.

Felluga's explanation of Marx: "Although value ultimately accrues because of human labor, people in a capitalist system are led to believe that they are not in control of the market forces that appear to exist independently of any individual person."¹⁷

¹⁶ "... rather than create a neutral relationship between the performer and the work, our concert practices establish the work as dominant and performer as subordinate." Colombat. 93 and more generally: 79-115.

¹⁷ Felluga.

The deceitful way musical competitions generate their value: “The participant enters the competition wondering if they will make the grade of the institution’s prestige and curated history; they might not realize that the competition’s prestige is nothing more than what its participants already are.”¹⁸

This pattern of workers becoming detached from the product of their labor goes well beyond music of course; it is the basic way in which our modern world operates. Documentarist Astra Taylor cites the responses she encountered when she confronted the people who pirated and uploaded her premiere documentary *Examined Life* to the internet. She writes, “One remarked that since my film was about philosophy and since philosophy, in a moral and historical sense, belongs to everyone in the world, my film does, too.”¹⁹ This is precisely the ideological move made by the canon when it detaches the value of a Beethoven sonata performed in a recital from the labor of the pianist that is performing it. Beethoven’s “work” (not his labor of course) in this conception belongs to history and to the entire world; in *Werktreue* ideology, the performer has no agency beyond their capacity to live up to the pre-existing value of Beethoven’s work. Taylor’s production costs and time spent in the production of the documentary were irrelevant given that philosophy “belongs to everyone in the world.”

In the both the case of the piano recital and Taylor’s film, we see that the market treats the value and price of the commodity in a *de facto* way that in no way accounts for the labor that went into its production. When it comes to commodities like t-shirts, capitalism achieves this with strategies including the distribution of labor and hiding the actual production from the

¹⁸ Colombat. 99.

¹⁹ Taylor. 141.

market itself. When it comes to music as a cultural commodity, this abstraction first began through the processes of disembodiment described in **Part I** and it achieved its end game in the formation of the canon whereby the value of music is grounded in the ideological narrative of tradition and not the practical quotidian experience of its creators.

All of this being said, I will not go so far as to call the canon a capitalist strategy. Doing so is reductive and stops us from understanding both sides. To treat them as the same is to ignore what the differences between the canon and commodity fetishization can tell us. The connection I wish to make is not between the canon and commodity fetishization directly but rather that both ideologies rely on certain media and technology in their deployment. The decentralized and circular value generating structure of the canon would not be possible without the various technological and media developments discussed in **Part I**. Similarly, capitalism as it exists would not be possible without the global technological and industrial resources that allow for the creation of such an abstracted distribution of labor.

Since I am approaching the part of the essay where it is expected I provide a solution to these issues, I can already say that I am not about to propose a return to some imagined utopia when our memory was the closest thing we had to an Urtext and live performance was all there was. We cannot be so naive as to ignore the benefits that these technologies and media have brought. That being said, if meaningful and conscientious steps forward are to take place, musicians must accept how utterly depleted the relationship between the production and consumption of music has become. In order to address this, **Part III** will provide a socio-aesthetic analysis of Lied as a genre which will lead into **Part IV**, which suggests how musical curators might structure their practice to better balance the ecosystem of producer/media/consumer so that music itself might live up to its latent value.

Part III : Lied as a genre

Art song, Lied, and *mélodie* are the three most commonly used words to describe a niche genre within the wider umbrella of so-called “classical music.” Terminology in the arts is a notoriously complicated and sometimes pointless subject since we generally accept a certain fluidity in aesthetic practices and ideas. Nevertheless I don’t think Ray Charles or Franz Schubert are done any favors if we call “Georgia on My Mind” an example of a Lied even though the basic elements of piano and voice are there. In some sense, terminology and genre *do* matter and *do* point towards something definitive within the characteristics of a piece of music. As I consider some of the essential characteristics of this tradition, special attention will be given to attributes which can be employed to undermine the forces implicit in both the canon and commodity fetishization.

After opera, Lied is the most important text based secular music in western art music. Traditionally, there are three main artistic inputs involved in its creation: a poet, a composer, and performers. This triad already offers an aesthetic richness and complexity that the purely instrumental repertoire does not have. It even differentiates itself from religious works in the sense that the text in Christian music is not thought of as an aesthetic work generated by an artist in the same way as Müller’s poetry. In this genre, the text can exist alone as its own autonomous work of art. The composer then interprets this work through the medium of composition and a singer and pianist then interpret this synthesis through the medium of performance.

In this way, even if a performer wishes to follow the ideals of *Werktreue* ideology, it would be impossible to do equal justice to the original intentions of the poet *and* the composer at the same time. This of course assumes that it is possible to concretely determine what a artist’s

“true intentions” are in the first place. As Lied performers who play from a score, we are naturally beholden to the composer’s text and world but this objective necessarily brings us only the *composer’s* interpretation of the poem and not the poem as it was originally conceived by the poet. In fact there are several instances of poet disapproving of a composer’s settings. Goethe for example rejected a collection of settings a young Schubert had sent him even though today we think of these two as one of the genre’s defining pairs.²⁰ In those situations, how exactly is respecting Goethe *and* Schubert supposed to happen when we perform these settings?

Werktreue ideology still has strong roots in the performance practice of today. Gavin Steingo attests to this in his essay, citing Goehr (as one does): “although Goehr emphasizes that works are not equivalent or reducible to scores, it is the score and not a performance that most authentically mediates the work after 1800.”²¹ Performers like Alfred Brendel, Paul Badura-Skoda, and Graham Johnson and other representatives of the mid-20th century school give voice to the principles of self-effacement in dealing with masterpieces. In a sense, these musicians are the last descendants of the post-enlightenment school of Franz Brendel (1811-1868) whose widely disseminated “*Grundzüge der Geschichte der Musik*” (1848) “aspired to say everything that was important, and to say it in a way that put all facts into an overriding system that gave them meaning.”²² This “overriding system that gave them meaning” describes the purpose and function of the canon itself. Taruskin’s critique of Brendel shows how in canonic thought (which metaphysically rhymes with commodity fetishism), it is the abstracted system which turns the

²⁰ Wigmore Hall / Johnson, Graham. “SCHUBERT IN LIFE & SONGS - I. Surviving the Erlking 1797-1815.” YouTube video, 1:50:42. January 31, 2023.

²¹ Gavin Steingo. "The Musical Work Reconsidered, in Hindsight." *Current Musicology*, no. 97 (2014): 81-112.

²² Richard Taruskin. "The Poietic Fallacy." *Musical Times* 145, no. 1886 (2004): 7-34.

tables to administer value back onto particulars instead of particulars having value on their own terms, based on the individual labor that went into producing them.²³

The generations of both musicologists and performers that came after this school have a much more fluid attachment to this ideology. Performers such as Patricia Kopatchinskaja and Tzimon Barto and musicologists such as Lydia Goehr and Alexander Stefaniak have all contributed in their own way to a movement which de-centers the fetishized self-subsistence of the musical text as some sort of Platonic Form.²⁴ The ice encasing the interpretation of western art music is thawing although there are still conservative critics of Kopatchinskaja's approach who accuse her of disrespecting the music or having an egocentric approach. Most of these comments however are kept to the hallways of conservatories since perhaps there is a feeling that being more vocal with this opinion goes against the contemporary current.

The problem for Kopatchinskaja and solo pianists is that by definition, their repertoire involves less complexity of aesthetic streams.²⁵ Instead of the dialogue of Lied, a solo pianist faces cool azure of a Henle Verlag Urtext which is sold as the most windowed window onto Beethoven's very soul. This supposed direct access provides positivist thinkers with fodder to continue patronizing those who they feel go too far. If properly understood, Lied on the other

²³ There is popular anecdote shared between Lied colleagues citing the comments from a jury member from a prestigious competition. Allegedly the phrase "there are *seven* different '*Ziemlich Langsam*'s in Schubert's songs" was spoken with the same certainty as a chemist describing the periodic table of elements.

²⁴ For Kopatchinskaja, see her recordings of Ravel. For Barto, see his recordings of Rameau. Lydia Goehr's *Imaginary Works* has already been mentioned. For Stefaniak, see: "Clara Schumann's Interiorities and the Cutting Edge of Popular Pianism." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 70, no. 3 (2017): 697– 765.

²⁵ In no way do I mean that their repertoire is less rich or complex. Simply by virtue of playing instrumental, non texted-based music there are less intersecting aesthetic planes when compared to opera or Lied. The chief difference between Lied and opera outside of the obvious difference that one is a theatrical work, is that the text of an opera was created already with a musical setting in mind. A Lied's text in most cases was already a published work before it was set to music.

hand fully embraces the impossibility of *Werktreue* ideology and will fundamentally remain a genre of interpretation and never recitation. Fashions in approach and interpretation methods will come and go but the complex dialect that is the very make-up of Lied as a genre defies the structure of *Werktreue* ideology. At its very birth, a Lied sullies the sanctity of “the poet’s intentions” by clothing it in the composer’s cross-genre transliteration. A Lied enters the world as an interpretation from the composer and invites further ones from performers. The difference between performing a recitation and an interpretation is that in the former, the value comes pre-packaged in what is being said. In an interpretation, the value lies in the individual input (or labor) that the interpreter brings.

Until now, Lied has only been discussed in its structural dialectic composition between poet, composer, and performer. The following section will discuss the actual content. What problems does a performer face? What sorts of decisions do they have to make? The answer to “what is the role of the interpreter?” is a vast subject with a seemingly endless trove of traditions, publications, and schools of thought.²⁶ Since I have discussed this subject in a general sense in the final chapter of my dissertation, I will limit myself specifically to the particularities within art song.²⁷

As previously stated, the definitive aspect of Lied that makes it a unique genre within western art music is the aesthetic autonomy of the text. The performers’ positioning and relation towards the text and the *lyrische ich* is central to the hermeneutic tradition of Lied. Is the

²⁶ Proposed introductory references include:

— Robbie Kubala. “Aesthetic Practices and Normativity.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. 2020;00:1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12727>

— Joshua Rifkin. “Rethinking Editions: Mass, *Missa*, and Monument Culture,” in *Rethinking Bach*, ed. Bettina Varwig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

— Richard Taruskin. *Text and Act : Essays on Music and Performance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

²⁷ Colombat. 115-134.

performer taking on the *ich* as themselves? Is the *ich* some abstract timeless identity that hangs between us all? The answer to this question relies on the performer's individual taste but also hopefully on their keen understanding of the style of the composer and poet. In this regard, it is a favorite past-time of interpreters and musicologists to try to find and propose biographical links between a composer and the content of their works. This is especially compelling when there is text involved.²⁸

In the case of Schumann's *Frauenliebe und -leben* Op. 48 for instance, Ian Bostridge describes the parallels between the tone of Robert's letters to Clara at the time and Chamisso's now scorned and allegedly misogynist rhetoric.²⁹ In this case, what is the performer to make of the *lyrische ich*? Are they supposed to center Chamisso's female character (which was of course penned by a man), Robert's proposed personal identification with the text through his own love for Clara, or the performer's own relation to the text (since it is in first person after all)?³⁰ Different performers will answer differently to this question and it is a pity that some of them will think there is an answer that is definitively correct.

Interpreters, musicologists, and philosophers have been obsessed with themes like "essence" or "truth" since the early 19th century at least. The very unity that has been fetishized by theorists from Goethe, through Franz Brendel, and Guido Adler to Carl Dalhaus is made

²⁸ There is a nice example where both the text and the composed music have direct biographical contexts: Brahms's Op. 91. The second song, a lullaby, was played at the christening of Josef Joachim's son. It is now also known that the instrumentation of this pair of Lieder for viola and alto was intended by Brahms as a consolation or encouragement gift for his two friends' troubled marriage. Josef played viola and his wife Amalie was a contralto.

²⁹ Ian Bostridge. "A Contented, Beloved Wife." *The New Criterion* 41, no. 8 (2023): 12-II.

³⁰ As interpreters, this is the fundamental difference between opera and Lied. Since they are playing a role, an opera singer will never be able to deliver the role as if they were themselves. In Lied however, it remains an option for the interpreter to assume the emotional content of the work as their own expression. It's simply a matter of taste whether or not this is an appropriate approach.

possible by a conception of the score as “the material technology that most authentically mediates the metaphysical musical work.”³¹ By prioritizing the score as the aesthetic message carrier, this school abstracts the multitude of individual performers that interpret the score in a similar way that capitalism abstracts the work of individual laborers. The fundamental richness of Lied as a genre however is the complexity of its aesthetic/narrative composition. It is deeply multifaceted. Lied fits awkwardly into the thought-silos of essence and truth since it is simultaneously many things at once.

As the genre within western art music whose score is the most fluid in terms of its constituent components, Lied would be the easiest genre to mobilize against the type abstraction and systematization that flourished between 1850-1950.³² The repertoire has a vast diversity of musical styles from the *Sturm und Drang* of Carl Friedrich Zelter to the “post-Sondheim” of Jake Heggie. Singers transpose songs regularly whereas transposing a Mozart piano sonata is nonsense. There is a virtually unlimited catalogue of languages that singers are expected to pronounce comfortably and clearly. It is perfectly reasonable for instruments of both José van Dam and Kathleen Battle to sing Schubert’s *An die Musik*. All of these aspects show that from its surface level to its very depths, Lied is a multi-faceted art of fluidity, flexibility, and extensibility. These characteristics are what makes it unique within the western art music tradition.

For these reasons, it should be the first place that performers, organizers, and critics look if they are interested in effecting change through western art music. Lied can be used (in a positive sense of the verb) to de-mystify the games played by capitalism and canonic ideology. Despite the fact that the genre is predisposed to it, it still remains up to performers and curators

³¹ Steingo citing Goehr. Steingo, 88.

³² The irony is that this 100 year period overlaps almost precisely with the golden years of the Lied repertoire.

whether it is appreciated in this light. The final chapter of this essay will hope to provide some kindling for future *Liedgestalter*innen* in their efforts to restore a healthy relationship between those creating and consuming this art form.

Part IV : Balancing the ecosystem

As a performer myself, one of the most confusing aspects of my work to negotiate has been the volatile and sometimes inexplicable variability in how much I get paid. As an example, I received 900CHF payment for accompanying an amateur choir which performed *Grease* covers and pop arrangements. There was one rehearsal and one concert. In comparison, my duo partner and I received 200CHF each for a 45-minute recital of Schubert and Wolf songs which took highly specialized skills/knowledge and large amount of time and in both individual and group preparation. During the times I was fortunate enough to play in some of the world's more prestigious venues, I was often not compensated since even though I was appearing as a featured and professional artist, it was under the guise of an educational program or a competition. To be fair, Olympian athletes do not get paid simply for attending the Olympics. Regardless, the variability of how much musicians get paid for their work as seen in these anecdotes illustrates the trend that we often get paid *less* for more prestigious work.³³ This is the direct result of the decentralized value structure that canonic *Werktreue* ideology creates within a capitalist system. When the value of our work is seated not in the hands of the laborer but in the curated prestige of the hall and abstracted cultural heritage of the repertoire, the conditions are set for workers to

³³ Wigmore Hall is famous within the business for having comparatively low artist compensation due to the fact that everyone would love to perform there.

perform extremely specialized labor while having absolutely zero control over its economic or aesthetic valuation.

In the history of warfare, there are countless examples of one side being utterly defenseless against the technological advances of the other. The commodification of music is the story of a similar imbalance between musicians and their aesthetic-economic environment. It has been the main goal of the first three parts of this essay to outline how various economic and political pressures have taken advantage of developments in media and technology to abstract and exploit the labor production of musicians throughout the centuries (**Part I**). Alongside these technological and media developments, aesthetic ideologies within the musical community such as *Werktreue* performance practice and the formation of the canon have rendered musical laborers utterly submissive and compliant to the disembodiment and abstraction of their labor (**Part II**). These factors all contributed to the transformation of music into a Marxian commodity which was subsequently fetishized within a capitalist global economic framework.

One of the many effects of this situation is that we are often unsure of what to propose on the few occasions when an organizer asks what our fee is. This confusion is made all the worse by inconsistencies between different countries. The result of this is that musicians often undersell themselves since they would prefer take a slightly lower fee rather than scare off a potential employer. Historically there have been efforts to create systems of solidarity between musicians in the form of unions, strikes, and online social media campaigns but these projects tend to address the capitalist economic aspects of the problem. With the exception of some organizations like Castle of Our Skins in Boston and Lied Basel in Switzerland, few organizations make the effort to draw explicit connections between the hermeneutic aesthetic tradition of western art

music and the socio-political economic structures in which that tradition is disseminated.³⁴

Similarly, those who draw socio-political connections between the interpretive tradition of music such as Phillip Ewell and the previously mentioned scholars do not go as far as to illustrate the economic implications of these hermeneutic frameworks.³⁵

Since there is already significant theoretical work being done on humanities side by musicologists and philosophers and the economic side by labor unions etc., there is a considerable gap between these active poles that needs to be filled by musicians and concert organizers themselves. Those who are actually responsible for the creation of the product should be more conscious of their complicity with preexisting hermeneutic-economic models. We have been trained to think that what we create does not belong to us. There has been nearly a millennium of movement in which our tradition has taken the work of musicians out of their own hands. If commodification is to be resisted, we need to make one simple fact clear: music is made by musicians, not owned by “culture” (culture in this case being the stand-in for capitalist markets). We have been trained to think that affirming ourselves as producers somehow tarnishes the beauty we find in someone else’s work. This is not necessarily the case and in fact the opposite argument, that the practice self-effacement can is sometimes a hidden power-grab, has been made by many.³⁶ Antoine Hennion has talked about the “practice of loving music” and this

³⁴ For what it’s worth, this was the driving ideology between my cultural project Wagner’s Nightmare with violist and critic Daniel Orsen: wagnersnightmare.com @wagnernightmare on instagram

³⁵ Phillip Ewell. “Music Theory’s White Racial Frame.” Music Theory’s White Racial Frame. February 22, 2021. <https://musictheorywhiteracialframe.wordpress.com/>

³⁶ See:

- Mary Hunter. “To Play as if from the Soul of the Composer”: The Idea of the Performer in Early Romantic Aesthetics.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 58, no. 2 (2005): 357–98.
- Karen Leistra-Jones. “Staging Authenticity.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 2 (2013): 397–436.
- Stefaniak, Alexander. “Robert Schumann, Serious Virtuosity, and the Rhetoric of the Sublime.” *The Journal of Musicology* 33, no. 4 (2016): 433–482.

idea, combined with the work of Robbie Kubala, is what I propose as a new interpretive tool-kit: “The performer, compelled by an aesthetic obligation to the work...manifests the composition as a further grounding of their own practical identity as a performer.”³⁷

When it comes to individual interpreters, the question of how to answer the call of this new model will remain very subjective. Individual interpretive decisions need to remain fluid in how they are conceived and received. What is more concrete however, is the story we tell about what we are doing and the structures through which we disseminate our work. Artists need to take the risk of opening their metaphoric workshops. Steps need to be taken to abolish the myth of talent and inspiration, which represent little to no labor hours, and replace them with craft, skill, and intention, which can be appreciated and actual labor hours musicians spend in order to develop them. Artistic labor needs to resist the narrative that it is an innate ability if it wants to be seen as labor at all.

The question of media and technology should also not be underestimated. If the internet and recording technology have blown the lid off of the potential ways we can disseminate our art, we should not be tricked into thinking that the most prevalent use of these technologies by global companies is the only expression of their potential. NFTs are a contemporary example of how the same technology can be employed by a spectrum as wide as isolated anarchic tech-revolutionaries to naive global speculative investing companies.

The most recent development in media and technology however is not always the “cutting edge.” During my time in Boston, I saw how the underground music scene of the North

³⁷ See:

- Hennion, Antoine. “Music Lovers: Taste as Performance.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 5 (2001): 1–22.
- Kubala, Robbie. “Grounding Aesthetic Obligations.” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 58, no. 3 (2018): 271–285.
- Colombat. 130.

East was starting to return to releasing its music on cassette tape. In this way, they circumvented the distribution channels that they were socially or politically opposed to and also created a simple and concrete way to be a member of their community. By being sensitive and committed to the idea that media is the bridge between economic, political, and aesthetic realms, this community was able to forge a healthier relationship between its consumers and producers.

Media and technology however are not the only way forward. In these digitally global times, there is something deeply radical about performing live events on acoustic instruments. There are countless ways for the inherent yet dormant socio-political constitution of Lied to be reimagined outside of a performance practice founded on the sublimation of musical creators. By showing our labor and effort, the goal should not be the alienation of our audiences. In fact, the strict boundary between the stage and the audience needs to be softened so that audiences are actually able to relate to musicians. By keeping the stage as an enclosed and impenetrable space where the myths of “natural born talent” and “genius” thrive, we continue the tradition of mystification and abstraction that allows for the commodification of music. Talent, genius, and inspiration are low hanging fruit in the process of abstracting labor.

If we make the craft of music relatable, we hopefully should be able to achieve the double goal of attracting new audiences *and* make them understand that this is something for which they should be paying. In fact, modern restaurants have already adopted this tactic as seen in the practice of the “open kitchen” where patrons are invited to be wowed by the bustling chaos in the kitchen that produced the meal they are about to enjoy. There should be opportunities for audience members to participate in the production of music so that first, they develop a personal relation to the practice, and second so that we make the labor hours that go into the production of music more visible. In practical terms, Lied also benefits from being one of the most cost-

effective genres in classical music to produce. With a minimum of two musicians and one keyboard instrument, it presents a comparatively low budget opportunity for presenters to get creative in how they put on events.

First and foremost, those who use their labor to produce music should understand that the predominant economic and hermeneutic framework in which they work is built to actively devalue their labor. It is a system that is built on the disembodiment of labor so as to support an economic structure of unlimited global dissemination. Its financial value is based on the fabricated cultural narratives of tradition, the canon, and heritage. This is not to say that tradition and heritage are fabricated ideas. The way in which the capitalist economic framework has co-opted tradition and heritage however has been curated so as to strip workers from the product of their labor. I am a Lied pianist so naturally I have only analyzed my own practice in an effort to address these issues that naturally go well beyond the practice of a single art form. If the reader finds this analysis compelling, it is my hope that they are also compelled by their latent agency as practitioners and laborers in their own field to explore their own contributions to this effort to demystify the labor of cultural commodities.

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