

**“For me the greatest measure of a work of art is  
if it makes me feel uncomfortable or excites me sexually”:  
A Lacanian Reading of Michael Finnissy’s *Verdi Transcriptions***

**Abstract.** This project attempts a Lacanian reading of Michael Finnissy’s *Verdi Transcriptions*. In doing so, it explores how the work engages with questions regarding notation and audiative apprehension.

It begins by examining how a contemporary Lacanian musicology might proceed: by reading Lacan through a Jamesonian Marxism to understand Lacan’s concepts as historical effects rather than essentialist descriptors.

Having established this, the study then uses Lacan’s concept of the Imaginary to consider some of the ways in which Finnissy exploits audiative imagination and musical memory. Stylistic conceits are related to musical details to determine the work’s aesthetic effects: that our abilities and tendencies to organise unities through audiation are problematised and deconstructed whilst being employed toward a dramatic interplay between the source material and its development.

Lacan’s concept of the Symbolic is then applied to consider the historical meaning of Finnissy’s notation. The composer’s approach is contrasted with his predecessor Busoni and his contemporary Brian Ferneyhough; this shows the significance of his particular methodology and reveals its subtle understanding of the relationship between tradition, process and originality.

In this way, the study hopes to show the possibilities of a dynamic Lacanian musicology which, through a Marxist historicisation, is able to enhance a work (or our understanding of it) on its own terms rather than cataloguing its elements; similarly, the Lacanian concepts themselves are developed through an encounter which produces new insights into their interpretive potential. Finnissy’s art emerges as a profound reply to contemporary historical forces regarding tradition and the individual, subjectivity and its determination: one where individual insight and originality are produced through their paradoxical rejection.

**Keywords:** Michael Finnissy, *Verdi Transcriptions*, Giuseppe Verdi, Jacques Lacan, Frederic Jameson, Karl Marx, Imaginary, Symbolic, Real, Music, Piano, Transcription, Postmodernism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Lacanianism, Ian Pace, Sean Homer, Dylan Evans, Theodor Adorno, Roger Redgate, Brian Ferneyhough, Slavoj Žižek, Bert Olivier, Kenneth M. Smith, Reilly Smethurst, The Beatles, Alexander Zemlinsky, Jean Sibelius, Luciano Berio, Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger.

### 1. Introduction

Michael Finnissy’s *Verdi Transcriptions* is a work for solo piano composed between 1972 and 2005 published first as a premature 1995 torso and now as a completed cycle of four books. The piece is marked by a use of quotation in that, instead of generating material through audiative imagination, processual logic, aleatorical operation or otherwise, the composer begins by taking an excerpt from the works of Giuseppe Verdi as a found object which is then transformed through various compositional processes (Ian Pace 1997; 2005). Finnissy (2005) himself places such an approach in a tradition of procedures which stretches from Duchamp to Warhol and, in its exploration of the implications of a culture where the weight of canonical memory effects its own atemporal negation, incorporates a number of extra-musical concerns into its structural mechanics. In the consideration of these, this study hopes to show the possibilities of a redeployed Lacanian musicology: by historicising the concerns of Lacan and Finnissy through a Jamesonian Marxism (Frederic Jameson 1981; 1991) whereby Lacan’s concepts denote the emergence of superstructural symptoms rather than essentialist categories of human experience. An attempt to reflect on the possibilities of musical significance, this study is indebted to Ian Pace’s (1997; 2005) penetrative analyses of Finnissy’s music, as well as interpretations of Lacan’s diverse thought by Dylan Evans (1996) and Sean Homer (2005). Though for reasons of scope this study contents itself with an enquiry into the unfinished 1995 publication, the meditations and conclusions were derived from considerations regarding a performance by Pace (2016) of the 2005 work to which, being on features of the work’s core philosophical and stylistic concerns, it is held they are equally relevant.

### 2. On Lacanian Musicology

Lacan’s almost complete silence upon music has not deterred a body of work emerging which Kenneth M. Smith (2011: 353–354) has championed as an effective new branch of music criticism. In a survey of existing approaches and manifesto for his own, Smith serves inadvertently to summarise the two primary issues with this field: on one hand, the misapplication of concepts, which he minimises, and on the other, the contextual impropriety of their use, which he repurposes as a strength. The former, “that Lacan’s ideas are employed on an ad hoc basis in order to explicate compositional ideas” (Smith 354), refers to the indiscriminate reification of the Lacanian orders of the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic into mere empirical descriptors: Lacan’s vitally Heideggerian project of stressing the process over the object is undone, with these concepts becoming instead

formal categories of aesthetic organisation through which a composition's elements can be catalogued. Thus when David Schwarz (1997: 23–27), in his work on The Beatles' (1969) "I Want You (She's So Heavy)", or Smith (2010) himself on Zemlinsky's (1921) use of quartal harmony in *Der Zwerg* attempt to locate the Lacanian Real in an element which clearly functions within an artwork's system of signification, the concept of the Real, though useful within that particular critique, becomes otherwise meaningless. Reilly Smethurst (2017) makes this point rather more forcefully, going so far as to contend that a serious Lacanian musicology will only be founded by an entire rejection of Smith's approach (264), which he (248) portrays as being marked by the false conflation of Lacan with Žižek and a fundamental confusion regarding the concepts' meaning.

What unites these opposing arguments is their attempt at fixing an encyclopaedic stability. Indeed, both Smethurst's prescriptive return to the texts themselves and Smith's naive systematisation of their relevant components find contemporaneous parallels across the humanities. Such anxieties should be read more generally against what might banally be termed the end of Postmodernism, and the crises this implied for certain modes of thought. In Sokal and Bricmont's 1997 work *Intellectual Impostures*, a useful determiner of that shift in periodisation, Lacan is the first figure to be interrogated and exposed as the flagship Postmodern charlatan. The conclusion offers a critique of "the extreme privilege [Lacan and his disciples] accord to 'theory' (in actual fact, to formalism and wordplay)" (34), claiming that Lacan's use of a discourse neither logical nor entirely poetic in its function left it implicated as "nothing less than a new religion" (35). Leaving aside the obvious irony of one (pair of) writer(s) critiquing another's reasoning through argument by implication and false dichotomy, their nomination of a Lacanian "Secular Mysticism" (34), when decontextualized from its somewhat absurd origins, provides a practical new perspective for engaging with this philosopher: that is, Lacan as a secular "structural effect," and Lacan as the dynamic, creative origin of a body of theory that, in its recent, more Catholicised use through the lens of Žižek's (1992) simplified pedagogy (or, indeed, through the prospect of intra-disciplinary fixing), threatens meaninglessness by way of standardisation. Concepts which are themselves dependent upon a Marcusean multi-dimensionality become useless when reified into empirical categories itemising various structural instances, and impoverished when fixed to a certain application.

This brings us to the second of the two problems implicit in Smith's (2011: 354) advocacy: the de-historicised relationship drawn between Lacan's ideas and, via Wagner and Schoenberg, an essentialist "human relationship to music." Of course, this is a problem that with Lacanian theory itself rather than any misapplication: criticisms of Heidegger's failure to historicise *Dasein* fall equally upon Lacan's psychoanalytic development of that phenomenological tradition. It might seem obvious that Lacan's divided subject, his essentialist notion of alienation, let alone the uncanny felicity of his thought to the art-form of cinema, would figure him as a defining critic of the late capitalist condition. And yet applied Lacanianism commonly implements historically determined concepts in the analysis of pre-modern works. With reference to the previous point regarding the assimilation and de-radicalisation of these concepts, it is vital to maintain that modes of thought which insist upon the construction of perspectives should continue to emphasise temporal context as a vital constituent of that which constructs.

Therefore, reading Lacanian theory via Lacan's own insistence on a "materialism of the signifier" (Evans: 107; Lacan 1988: 40–52), in that his conception "involves a certain materialism of the elements in question, in the sense that the signifiers are well and truly embodied, materialized" (Lacan 1993: 289), and through Jameson's (1981: 66) dictum that "we can think abstractly about the world only to the extent that the world has become abstract," allows us to resolve both these issues: firstly by seeing psychoanalysis and Lacanian thought as contingent upon the development of the subject under capitalism, as Jameson (1981: 61–66) argues in *The Political Unconscious*, and secondly by figuring Lacan's body of work at the intersection of the ideological logic and utopian promise that Postmodern culture constitutes. Again following Jameson (1991: 25–27) we can define that culture through what he terms a "Lacanian Schizophrenia" to chart both the basis and impact of Lacan's work across society at large. If, then, Lacan's "Secular Mysticism" can be seen as the ideological-utopian expression of this historical moment, it can form both the backdrop against which to examine Finnissy's music, and the tools with which to do so: Lacanian analysis, as a central paradigm of the Jamesonian interpretation of the Postmodern condition, can be applied to Finnissy's approach to show how the latter, struggling with the same socio-historic antagonisms as Lacan, contains and transcends those within his artwork.

### 3. The Imaginary

Before turning to the mechanics of this, a brief summary of this study's understanding of Lacan's concepts shall be hesitantly offered in the interests of introductory clarity. Lacan's human condition is that of an essentially alienated individual which then creates a fictional, alienating unity through an Imaginary identification with its mirror image, which is then in turn divided by its inscription into the Symbolic order of language; what Lacan then terms "the Real" is that which corresponds to the leftover elements of this process, the pre-Oedipal immediacy of life, symptomatically experienced only through trauma at moments of Symbolic opening or disintegration (Evans; Homer; Lacan 1977; 1988; 1993; 2006: 6–50, 75–81; Steven Z. Levine 2008; Žižek 1989). Vital to this investigation is, specifically, the relationship between a fictive Imaginary unity on one hand, and, on the other, a Symbolic determination which both frees us from that alienation whilst simultaneously fixing our subjectivity through the restrictions of its discourse.

To begin with the implications of the Imaginary order which, to emphasise, Lacan (1993: 146) defined by its constitutive alienation: in that disparity of experience is replaced by externally given unity. Because of this, Evans (82) argues that as an extrinsic fiction overlying complex actuality, the realm of the Imaginary indicates and provokes the processes of false consciousness and reification. This leads Bert Olivier (2005: 142), in his excellent outline of the possibilities of a Lacanian musicology, to show that, because the Imaginary constitutes the human tendency to hypostatise processes into objects through our "alienating identification with various Imaginary constructs" such as, for example, political ideology, we can critique musical motifs which invite the listener's identification through this concept. Crucially, he (151–152) extends this idea to show how such motifs may themselves "function as auditory loci of identification for listeners" which "tempt one to adopt a position which is alienating in so far as it effectively precludes further, or subsequent, positions of identification with different (perhaps liberating) 'sound-images,'" arguing that "to be 'caught' in the web of an identification of this kind at the level of the Imaginary is tantamount to what Lacan describes as being enclosed in the rigid 'armour of an alienating identity.'" Though the example that Olivier gives here is of Sibelius' (1905) *Finlandia* with reference to its functions of nationalist ideology, we can invoke Adorno to show the same process at work in the culture industry's exploitation and subsequent transformation of art music under late capitalism. In a work fundamental to Jamesonian (1991) analysis, Adorno (2006: 134) explains how, through uncritical listening habits fostered by the technological developments which determine music as background noise, musical style has become reified and separated from its content. Thus, in his analysis of Stravinsky, he argues how certain works reveal the irreconcilable breach between the subject and that in music which stands opposed to it as an objective element: the idiom... The subject that in music is prohibited from speaking of itself ceases actually to 'produce' and contents itself with the empty echo of an objective musical language that is no longer its own... Through the rigorous manipulation of the hollowed-out musical language, reduced to wreckage ... a second, phantasmagorical and regressive musical language [is brought into existence].

By situating the effects of the Lacanian Imaginary within the context of Adorno's critique of late capitalist culture we can appreciate how certain distinguishing features of a composer's characteristic sound-world come to act as a unifying sound-image which alienates the rich complexity of their practice, with historically determined styles supplanting the very interventions within those styles which gave the composition meaning.

It is precisely the persistence of this socio-historic Imaginary unity which Finnissy exploits in his transcriptions through the extra-Symbolic effects of the choice of compositional source material: that is, their absent persistence as Imaginary wholes. This study argues that: through the audiation of canonical memory ensured by the subsumption of the source-music into the culture industry and the resultant alienating unities produced by this, the traces of the Verdi material work to engender a ghostly presence which haunts the music in an absent conceptual obligato. This mis-hearing and mis-remembrance works with the various emergences of untransformed quotation to create an uncanny instability through which one can never be entirely sure what is being heard. This in turn serves to problematise the very unity which maintains this illusion. In doing so, the listener's interpellated habits of alienating audiation are surpassed for an immediate experience of the music on its own terms. Take by way of an example the opening of the piece (Finnissy 1995: 1–2), where the material is at its most abstract and transformed (Pace 2005). Despite the brutality of the register, density of the clusters and complexity of rhythmic transformations, the tertial harmony and dotted rhythms, when heard through the work's programmatic conceit as a horizon of expectation, are enough to create the audiative illusion of hearing something beyond what is being played even – indeed, especially – where it does not exist. The Lacanian idea of the 'lack' as being constitutive of identity is here affirmed in that, as with the paradoxical

alienation of the mirror stage, it is the individual's lack of unity which determines that very unity. It is this which creates the primary drama of the piece, with the physical immediacy of the music existing in counterpoint with the Imaginary unity of the works it is derived from. The complexity of such an interplay works to deconstruct those listening habits from which it emerges, opening up a space for novel, personal encounters with the work and its source material.

This problematisation of audiation by both projecting and interrogating an extra-musical Imaginary unity through Symbolic means extends throughout the work. It is obviously at its most pronounced when the implications we have just looked at manifest themselves as more direct quotations. Section V (23–28), for instance, consists of an Ivesian counterpoint between the functionally harmonic source-music and its abstract commentary (Pace 2005); it is here the piece is most obviously working in the Postmodern tradition of quotation and satiric superimposition as Berio (1968) in *Sinfonia*. However, in contrast to the orchestral colour and dramatic vocality available to such a piece, the texture of the piano and registers employed here impel the relative insistency of the commentary to create a form of depth perception: between the quoted Verdi, its Godowskian re-writing (Pace 2005), its blurred outlines and its erased absence which then (as we have seen) works to project its own phantasmal continuation. This weaponisation of Imaginary unities into the agents of their own deconstruction is further supported by analysis at a technical level. For instance, Finnissy (1995: 8–11; 47; 52–53; 58; 75; 98–99) combines two lines in a single register so that they resist audiation into two mutually exclusive unities, instead interrupting and problematising one another in a manner that can be seen as relational to and exemplifying of the source material and its serial transformations. Similarly, the composer (30; 48; 50; 99–102) will often split a single line up across multiple octaves, taxing our ability to audiate it as a single unified whole. A similar effect is achieved through the use of a textural pointillism (18–22). Our learned, alienating tendencies to audiatively organise these lines into separate Imaginary unities are challenged by the deconstructive power of these processes, forcing us to a more direct and immediate confrontation with the music itself. It is striking that this is ultimately the product of the work's referentiality; such a dialectic can continue to be traced through another aspect of Lacanian theory, as we shall see.

#### 4. The Symbolic

Lacan's concept of the Symbolic order further illuminates concerns regarding influence and originality within the *Verdi Transcriptions*. For Finnissy, transcription and composition do not form neat categories of difference but, in his contemporary historical moment, become radically commingled. As he states in an interview with Christopher Fox and Ian Pace (1997: 2–3):

Transcription is not simply 'writing down', but creating webs of allusions, playing with sub-texts, cultural codes; it's a discourse on the 'already extant' if you care to try to differentiate it from 'free' composition ... I don't [see my work as merely a form of representation] but I'm never sure when the composition starts and when the transcription as such stops. Because I don't have a particular fetish any more for generating original material, I often, even in pieces I don't acknowledge as transcriptions, take the material from somewhere else because how can you have an original idea in something as socially determined as music? All the notes have been used before, so at best you can deceive yourself that you are starting from scratch, but you never are. I wouldn't say that if I started a transcription, deriving the material from Machaut, Beethoven, Wagner, that I view the composition with that material any differently. Composition remains the same business of discovering what the object is and revealing what your perceptions are, what your insights are about the object.

Alongside an exemplification of the Lacanian transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, we can here read Finnissy's comments as articulating the final position of the move from the Kantian transcendental subject and its unification of experience, to the Heideggerian subject that perceives a limited part of an external world, to the Lacanian turn whereby that world itself becomes a pre-given Symbolic expanse of what Lacan refers to as the big Other, the system of signification which speaks through us (Homer 44–45): as Lacan (1977: 207) argues, "a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier." What is interesting about Finnissy's compositional approach is how originality is seen to emerge through an intersection between the composing subject and the trans-subjectivity of the compositional process, in that it is the product of a historically determined tradition of Symbolic discourse. Though the big Other of the Symbolic may be a "radical [anteriority] which mediates our intersubjective relationships" (Evans 202), the possibility of their mediation and construction points the way through and out of that confining interiority. Thus Olivier (145–146) holds that the only way to avoid entrapment within the Imaginary's illusion is in fact through a renunciation

of the possibility of any homegrown originality: by adopting the subjective position of the Symbolic register rather than the alienating ego-position of the Imaginary. For Finnissy, this means that, while we cannot audiatively imagine a musical idea without it being in some way interpellated through the social determination of the big Other of the Symbolic order, we are able to go beyond the confines of our determined subjectivity by enlisting the Symbolic: that is, for composers, the processes which extend beyond the limits of our socially determined imaginative and Imaginary abilities.

In order to fully appreciate the significance of this turn we can compare Finnissy's approach with that of his forbear Busoni. In his trailblazing work *A sketch of a new aesthetic of music*, Busoni (1962: 85) presents the unity of the musical idea as the Real of the late Romantic aesthetic. The composer's audiative imagination is seen to be the Romantic locus of authentic, pre-Symbolic insight which is necessarily qualified through its inscription into the Symbolic order. Notation, on the other hand, is presented as the transformative filtration of that individual unity into a determined textuality. Busoni (84) argues that such a unity can only be restored through the insight of the performer into the extra-notational concerns which the work must still contain. This foregrounds a theory whereby creative, living processes become paradoxically dependent upon their objectification into a notational document, with the Romantic individual forming the cipher between truth (the inspiration) and knowledge (its inscription). These paths can be represented thus:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{Process} \rightarrow \text{Object} \rightarrow \text{Process} \\ \text{Real} \rightarrow \text{Imaginary} \rightarrow \text{Symbolic} \rightarrow \text{Imaginary} \rightarrow \text{Real} \end{array}$$

Finnissy intervenes in Busoni's procedure to replace audiative imagination with canonical memory as a means of acquiring this same insight into the extra-Symbolic. Busoni's anxieties regarding the restrictive conditionality of transcription here become the location of a post-Structural attempt at originality through an inversion of the original formula:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{Object} \rightarrow \text{Process} \rightarrow \text{Object} (\rightarrow \text{Process}) \\ \text{Symbolic} \rightarrow \text{Symbolic} \rightarrow \text{Imaginary} \rightarrow \text{Real} \end{array}$$

We can see this at work in Finnissy's use of a notation which contains the negation of its own constrictive tendencies. That is, Finnissy's notational language which, though inherited rather than devised, and determined by systemic means realised through a system of traditional, determined and trans-subjective language, still, in its demands upon the performer, effects a process which reaches beyond Symbolisation. As Roger Redgate (2018) argues, Finnissy (1995: 31; 67–73; 100–109) deliberately “blurs precision” through, for instance, long complex irrationals interwoven with grace notes, or lines of grace notes, and complex rhythms which reach across the full length of the keyboard: such a notation produces the chaotic effects with which its constrictive dictates are transcended. Crucially, this is accomplished through those constrictions rather than in their evasion in a vague experimentalism. Notice the historical transition here: the location of emancipatory power moves from the individual composer as Romantic artist to the canonical material as found object; and from the individual performer to the score-text itself. Arguably, if anything can be said to define New Complexity it would be this particular concern with leveraging notation against itself to open up individual insight within a world of nigh-total determination. Of course, in factors of definition differences become all the more crucial: Finnissy's approach to this issue distinguishes him from his contemporary Brian Ferneyhough in his use of notational complexity as formal signifier rather than general aesthetic of the work. Redgate explains how:

From a performer's point of view, they couldn't be more different. With Ferneyhough's music, working through the notation and grasping the complexity of it is a vital part of forming an interpretation. Finnissy's music doesn't have the layers of complexity that Ferneyhough's does. The notation isn't about the complexity: it's about changing the perspective of the musical image for the performer and the listener.

These shifts in the focus of the performer's approach to the material, and the resultant effect upon the listener, are used to shape the form of the piece: parallel to the work's revelation of its source material in an uneven but distinct programmatic trajectory runs Finnissy's problematisation and accentuation of this through a chaotic indeterminacy. This is effected by a complex notation which, as we have seen, works to reveal and emphasise that which exists beyond Symbolisation.

## 5. Conclusion

The possibilities for further investigation within this reading are extensive, particularly with regard to Finnissy's approach to musical temporality; however they remain out with this particular project. Though limited, this study hopes to have demonstrated the possibilities of a Lacanian musicology which, through a Marxist tradition, serves to illuminate and enrich aspects of Finnissy's music rather than enlisting the work in a demonstration of Lacan's ideas or reducing those ideas to an index of the work's elements. Such a method has shown how the *Verdi Transcriptions* achieves originality and immediacy through a subtle use of tradition and referentiality in a unique answer to the Malthusian repletion of the late 20th century and the early 21st, one distinctly at odds with contemporary approaches which uncritically employ quotation for novelty or mere plurality. Of course, it would be foolish to imply that such a reading could ever be exhaustive: Finnissy's music, both wise and ludic, reaches past the possibilities of academic discourse, psychoanalytical, Marxist or otherwise, to engage with the issues that language cannot. Though this study has aimed to show the implications of some of them, the music's insights are, ultimately, its own. Or, as Finnissy (Fox and Pace: 21) argues in the quote that forms the title of this paper, art is measured by something other than musicological judgements.

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**„Didžiausias meno kūrinio matas man yra tai, ar jis verčia jaustis nejaukiai, ar jaudina seksualiai“:  
lakaniška Michaelio Finnissy „Verdi transkripcijų“ analizė**

**Santrauka**

Straipsnyje atskleidžiamas lakaniškos muzikologijos potencialas. Čia nesiekama, remiantis analizuojamu muzikiniu kūrinio, išaiškinti, apibrėžti ar pakoreguoti prieštaringas Jaques'o Lacano mintis, taip pat supaprastinti lakaniškas idėjas, kad būtų galima panaudoti jas kaip analizės objekto inventorių. Analizė vykdoma atmetant ir priešpriešinant esamas metodologijas, prieš tai pažvelgus į Lacano idėjas per Frederico Jamesono (g. 1934) marksizmo prizmę. Tokia procedūra išplečia lakaniškų interpretacijų potencialą, nes idėjos išlieka atviros, dinamiškos, priklausomos nuo konteksto.

Čia atskleidžiami „Verdi transkripcijų“ aspektai, kurie taikant kitokius analizės metodus liktų nepastebėti. Tai suteikia pagrindą tolesnei šio kūrinio bei kitų to paties laikotarpio susijusių muzikinių tekstų analizei. Michaelis Finnissy manipuliuoja mūsų istoriškai susiformavusiais psichologiniais įpročiais audijuoti garsinę medžiagą ją suskirstant į aiškius atskirus vienetus. Pasinaudodamas tuo jis sukuria dramatiškus, satyriškus komentarus apie mūsų santykį su muzikos istorija. Jo sudėtinga notacija paliečia opius, su subjektyvumu, tradicija ir originalumu susijusius klausimus.

Reikia pažymėti, kad Finnissy sukuria originalią, individualią muzikinę estetiką per jos pačios antitezę. Norėtume tikėti, kad šios įžvalgos padidins marksistinės krypties požiūrio svarbą, praplės lakaniškos muzikologijos horizontus ir galiausiai išryškins drąsaus, materialistinio Finnissy meno reikšmingumą.