Back to the Garden? Performing the Disaffected Acoustic Imaginary in the Digital Age

John Richardson

Professor of Ethnomusicology (acting), University of Helsinki; Adjunct Professor in music and media, University of Turku

Delivered at the IIPC, University of Turku, 2 March 2010

When Professor Salmi invited me to participate in the IIPC debates series, he requested that I try to come up with something provocative. There are two ways in which my presentation today might be understood as meeting this requirement: the first is methodological; the second concerns a central hypothesis of the presentation.

The first of these points relates to perceptions of disciplinary identity, methods and their underlying assumptions. My methodology is almost an anti-methodology, insofar as it is amenable to a large number of theoretical impulses and disciplinary influences. In short, I define what I do, after the musicologist Joseph Kerman (1985), as "academic music criticism", which is the best way I can think of situating my work within the disciplinary rubric of musicology while nevertheless attempting to make it accessible across disciplinary lines. Cultural criticism is a significant part of my identity as a researcher. The *de facto* attitude of resistance or "outsiderness" that both Adorno and Benjamin identify with the activities of the cultural critic is not something I accept unreservedly, however. Criticism in my work has more to do with academic criticism *as a method* than cultural critique as a theoretical alignment. For this reason, I tend to prefer the terms "music criticism" and "cultural musicology" over the more (explicitly) politicized "critical musicology" (shouldn't all musicology be critical?); although I'd add hasten to add the caveat that my work closely resembles work defined in this way (see, e.g., Hawkins [2001] and Scott [2003]). Criticism involves writing from experience, applying knowledge of (cultural) codes and extrapolating from theory. Foremost among its methodological tools are

activities such as thick description (or elucidation), analysis, interpretation and evaluation. Interpretation was the number one buzzword of critical musicology in the 1990s, but in the 2000s there is a sense of the ground shifting towards matters of performance and phenomenology, both of which require attention to the first of the above categories, a mode of description that goes beyond dry empirical observation. Terms such as vivid description, lucid description, and constructive description are familiar from phenomenology and are found with increasing frequency in musicological writing**.** Lawrence Kramer, for example, writes of "vivid descriptions" in which "a construction from meaning is extended to the object addressed" (2003, 128). "The effect" of such descriptions, he continues, "is not simply to repeat or reaffirm something about the object described, but to reconstitute the object in the act of describing it" (ibid.). The best phenomenological writing, I would argue, requires a form of lucid description that allows us to imagine experiencing with the writer, but to extrapolate from this onto a Gadamerian historical horizon by means of inductive reasoning (cf. Torvinen 2008, 11). Vivid or constructive descriptions are experiential more than they are technical or analytical, which allows greater mobility across disciplinary boundaries, offering the potential for true interdisciplinary insight. This is especially true when dealing with audiovisual forms, which on some level is what all musical performances are. For this reason the interdisciplinary field of performance studies offers a particularly useful model for how to approach the experienced actuality of performances (specific cultural instances, or articulations, to borrow from Stuart Hall), by which I mean that musical performances are always more than musical.

When considering the experience of music, the question of affect seems hard to avoid, a concept that has been much debated in cultural studies and philosophy by people like Deleuze, Massumi, and Sedgwick. In music research, Naomi Cumming has described music as conveying emotional potentialities through a synthesis "of different elements … [which] add up to an emergent affect that is complex and subtle yet in some sense singular" (Cumming 2000, 217). The literary critic Sianne Ngai's discusses literature in much the same way, employing the notion of mood" or "tone", which shouldn't be confused with the more restrictive musical sense of the latter word. For Ngai, tone is a cultural artifact's "global or organising affect, its general disposition or orientation towards its audience and the world" (2005, 28). This sense of the word

2

encompasses "the formal aspect of a literary work that makes it possible for critics to describe a text as 'euphoric' or 'melancholic'", and, importantly, how these and other more subtle designations can be related to a holistic matrix of social relations" (ibid.). Of course, affect is not entirely separate from discursive and semiotic meaning; it is modified and channeled by these aspects. As Richard Dyer writes:

> When we attend to the extra-semiotic, amodal dimension of an artwork, we are never entirely within extra-semiotic or amodal reality precisely because we are in art and discourse, we are in what is already only analogous to affect, what is always already worked, historical, contingent. Art can never quite get affect, partly because it can never actually *be* affect, only its formalized and conventionalized objectification. I believe everyone knows this intuitively; everyone knows that art falls short of the real. Yet still we respond, still we are moved. (Dyer 2007, 256.)

This statement asserts a core assumption of this presentation, the idea of a unified affective stratum that is inseminated or inflected by culturally contingent expectations and responses. These can be triggered or modified by the specific textual details in performances.

The affective character, mood or tone that is most central in this presentation is what I will call the disaffected acoustic imaginary. It is imaginary because it is a discursive construct, an idea, whose boundaries overspill what would ordinarily be considered a strict ontological definition of the acoustic. My discussion largely bypasses, therefore, the debates over authenticity that have dominated discussions of folk music, which prioritize one ontological view over another (the ontology of the acoustic over that of the electrical). I prefer the term *disaffected* to any implication that the phenomena I am discussing are entirely without affect. Undoubtedly this concept brings to mind what Jameson refers to as the waning of affect under postmodernism. However, I do not believe affect can simply be dismissed because it has been negated. Rather it becomes strengthened in a certain way, seeping up from between the cracks of the discourse rather than constituting it. Affect in this sense is different to conventional narrative impulses,

comprising cumulative and modificatory mechanisms of intensification and dis-intensification that provide a rubric for different structures of feeling. Silvan Tomkins' concept of "affect amplification" seems particularly apt when it comes to one of the central question of this work (cf. Sedgwick and Frank, 1995). The fact that electrical amplification could be said to modify and to mediate the intensities of pop and rock music is widely accepted, but this relationship reflects back also onto practices of acoustic music, which is not as innocent as some commentators have thought in the digital age. This is true of each the examples discussed here. More than electrification, which might have been the crunch issue to those making acoustic music in the 1960s (Bob Dylan's and Joni Mitchell's generation, from which the title of this paper is drawn), the modes of production and aesthetic understanding we have learnt from digital culture impinge directly on the musical examples to be discussed here. Surpassing to some extent old distinctions between the urban and the agrarian (read alienated vs. authentic communities), digital aesthetics can be seen as infiltrating musical production and consumption in ways that are more fluid are bound to redefine the relationship between individuals and communities. Folk revivals in such contexts are undoubtedly not what they used to be.

Instance 1: 'Because of Toledo', performed by Paul Buchanan and the The Blue Nile

Recorded in 2004, the song 'Because of Toledo*'* (*High, 2004),* composed by Paul Buchanan, is my first example. Despite Buchanan's defining vocal presence in the song, an impersonal element is articulated in the acoustic guitar accompaniment. Played in strict metronomic time, Buchanan's mode of performance resembles the pre-programmed sequencer parts found in the Blue Nile's early electronic work (from the late 1980s) more than it does the expressive performance styles usually associated with the instrument. Not only is the guitar played with a distinct lack of embellishment and expressive contouring, the musical syntax is put together in such a way as to highlight the blandly repetitive nature of the musical terrain**.** Throughout the entire duration of the verses, changes result from incremental bass movement alone. Built on a thirdless, and consequently hollowed out (or disaffected), voicing of G, each variant of the chord outlines the same angular trajectory. A hint of polymeter in the 3 + 3 + 2 patterning of the arpeggios strains against the surrounding 4/4 time signature, suggesting a push toward

ternary time, which does eventually happen in the chorus. In addition, a constant abrasive yet resonant minor-second dissonance is folded into the texture of the guitar patterning through the simultaneous presence of g^1 and $f\#^2$, suggesting an inner wound or scar – a grating sense of melancholy in the subjectivity of the performer. Above all Buchanan's treatment is suggestive of the barren yet luminous backdrop of twenty-first century urban life, in which technological containment is an unavoidable fact. Interior and exterior space and affective terrain reflect back on each other in the song: in this way the guitar accompaniment becomes the implacable (mechanized) environment to the song's "self": the main melodic line.

Given the implacability of the guitar part, attention is easily diverted towards the vocals. After an initial statement of the song's main hook ("Because of Toledo"), the melody rises up to a labored high, d^2, concomitant with the loaded line "I got sober and stayed clean". At the same time, the bass line and bass guitar drop to an affectively charged low E. Thereafter the singer soars to an even higher and strained $e^{2,}$ before descending in a series of carefully weighted meandering phases. The last of these culminates on the emotionally fraught line ("I live here but I don't really live anywhere"), which is colored musically by ending on the dissonant major seventh of G. Technically speaking, the song might be major; it nevertheless comes across as elegaic due to the enfolded dissonances of the guitar part, the descending arpeggiation (vaguely analogous with falling rain, referred to in the lyrics), the mournful melody, and the pitches Buchanan highlights in his setting of the lyrics. The line "another faded waitress dressed in pink", for example, sounds bleak because it comes to a halt a dissonant second above the tonic. As if to confirm the impression of desolation, the bass falls again to a dark open E following this phrase (root note of the related minor chord).

Nevertheless, there is an element of stylistic distancing in the vocals, which to some extent counteracts the overriding sense of melancholy. In short, Buchanan's singing is characterized as much by (performative) affectation as it is by affection. I'm referring to the influence of 1950s-style jazz crooning on his vocal style (from Sinatra to Nat King Cole), including the use of stylized portamentos, Tin Pan Alley mannerisms, and a speech-driven approach to phrasing (cf. Potter 1998, 55). Such stylization can be understood as a form of parodic distancing, producing a sense of disaffection, an interpretation that finds support in

the sonic environment of the music, where the voice is left to reverberate across empty spaces, a solitary subject in inhospitable surroundings.

Buchanan's approach to music-text relations is characterized by close attention to mood, often conveyed through descriptions of the material world more than references to the narrator's feelings. There is an cold luminosity to his vivid verbal descriptions that brings to mind the approaches of imagist poets like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, the new novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet, or the painting style of Edward Hopper. In all of these forms, the "thingness" of objects becomes concentrated. Meaning is implicit in lyrics like "another faded waitress dressed in pink", who becomes a sign of romantic disaffection projected onto disaffected consumerism more than a real person. The theme of facelessness, spelled out in the chorus, permeates the rest of the lyrics: everything from the mediatized real virtuality of the "early morning news" to "shadows dancing" on the prairies, an ingenious *double-entendre* that links up with the preceding reference to "picks ups", inferring both a popular form of transport in rural America and to inconsequential relationships: one-night stands.

Like much of music with its roots in digital culture, the structure of 'Because of Toledo' is shaped by a constant flow of beats divided into fields of varying intensity. In this respect, the most significant transformation happens in the chorus, when a simple subtractive music procedure, the removal of an eight note from each bar, results in a transformation of the time signature from 4/4 to 6/8. This brings about an overall heightening, or amplification, of affectivity, which in addition to meter is indicated by Buchanan straining to reach to highest note of his song, and by a corresponding thickening of musical texture. Notably, amplified instruments are introduced at this point, the electrifying presence of other musicians serving to dispel some of the lonely disaffection of the verses. The sense of plenitude brought about by this reinforcement is transitory, however, just as images relating to the lost object referred to in the lyrics are fragmentary – like forensic evidence at a crime scene, these material traces (of lipstick and cocaine) stand in for but cannot replace the person to whom they belonged. Echoes of Romantic orchestral music (Wagner or Mahler) can be heard in the 6-5 suspension that spans the first and second bars of this section, while voice leading in the second chord (C) moves restlessly along a dissonant trajectory without resolving. These are

6

mere echoes, however, heard in the context of a repetitive musical patterning, which liberates musical procedures from the formal obligations of the past. Though the dominant affect may be one of bleakness, the final verse does bring a modicum of relief. Here a trumpet obbligato joins the singer in unison, a traditional way of signifying the presence of a transcendental other – a projection perhaps, but a comforting presence nevertheless. In these final moments, the singer announces how he would like to return to Toledo, a gesture that is underwritten in the music as he joins himself in a harmonization that scoops up to the (positively affected) major third – the missing link in the broken harmony of the verses.

Instance 2: KT Tunstall Performing "Black Horse and the Cherry Tree" on *Later … with Jools Holland*,

KT Tunstall approaches the disaffected acoustic imaginary from a different angle: through the use of digital technology rather than its evocation. Here I will only summarize work I have presented in greater detail elsewhere (Richardson 2009). I was initially motivated to write about Tunstall by a single television performance: her breakthrough performance of the song "Black Horse and the Cherry Tree" on the television show *Later … with Jools Holland*, televised by the BBC in October 2004. In this performance, Tunstall used a digital looping pedal, the Akai E2 Headrush, to simulate multi-tracking recording techniques in "real time". Referred to by the singer affectionately as "wee bastard" (like Paul Buchanan, she is Scottish), the pedal effectively allowed her to pillage or to bastardize the conventions of acoustic music performance in a musical context that underwrites a different cultural logic. Her work with the looping pedal in particular brings her into line with a group of artists to whom the label "folktronica" has been applied, a catchall for all manner of artists who have combined mechanical dance beats with elements of acoustic rock or folk, such as Múm, David Gray, Tunng, The Books, Björk and the Blue Nile.

Most noticeable about the early moments of the *Later* performance is the concentrated effort that goes into putting together a complex multitrack groove with the pedal. Multitrack recording is generally conducted in private rather than in the presence of a studio audience.

Thus, a sense of intrusion upon what would ordinarily be considered a private act is apparent when a hand-held camera encircles Tunstall in the "turnaround" sequence of the song's chorus. Contrary to the received wisdom on looping and other repetitive practices, which portrays them as "passive" and, where sampling is involved, "parasitical", the evidence of this television footage points towards a heightening of agency through the performer's immersion in the act of com-position (literally, putting together), which is compounded by the fact that her role overlaps with that of the studio engineer. The loop, in this instance, must be looped; the musical sample does not simply repeat, Tunstall must repeat it. Furthermore, the process of looping must be visually authenticated if agency is to be correctly assigned.

Even without undertaking a detailed analysis of the music, it is evident that Tunstall builds up the groove bit by bit in successive real time overdubs with an unusual amount of care (the digital implications of the word "bit" are intentional). She turns the pedal off at around the midpoint of the song, a common strategy in the forms of layering found in EDM, gaming music and minimalism, and then continues to build the song culminating in as many as 11 overlaid tracks, including a difficult canon on the tonic (two identical parts starting at different times). Eventually she achieves an orchestral tapestry of textures – an electroacoustic "wall of sound" – that belies the modest instrumental means available.

Arguably, what rises to the surface here is not the technological apparatus of the performance *as such* but Tunstall's mastery over it. By this I mean that she takes existing musical elements that might be considered outmoded or clichéd in difference sonic contexts (a classic "turnaround" chord sequence, a Bo Diddley rhythm, a half-remembered melody from Peter Green etc.), and incorporates them as building blocks in musical processes that underwrite a different temporal logic than that which has prevailed in the dominant forms of Western music since the Renaissance. As Mark Katz suggests, sampling practices in the digital era are only coarsely described in terms of "quotation"; sampling – and by implication, looping – is in his view "most fundamentally an art of transformation" (2004, 156). More than her CD recordings, Tunstall's live performances resonate with a contemporary sensibility because of their mimetic relation to the dominant cultural structures of our time. In this way they offer a model of sorts for coming to terms with new technologies: the struggle

to assert agency (not least, for a woman) in an increasingly pre-figured world, and to make oneself heard amidst a daunting cacophony of media-generated noise. Tunstall meets the challenge head on, with an almost exaggerated sense of agency that we have come to associate with animated heroines such as Lara Croft. In so doing she provides a model for female identification while becoming a kind of fantasy figure for the nerdy male gaze (I am referring obliquely here to some of Tunstall's comments regarding viewer responses to the *Later* performance. The performance appears to have been of particular interest to young adult males with an interest both in technology and the singer-songwriter herself.)

I'd like in my conclusion to return to the title of the paper, the idea of returning to the garden, a line from the Joni Mitchell's 'Woodstock' that conjures up both the hippy ideal of flower power and folk's rejection of the alienated discourses of electrified modernity. It is an impulse that underlies traditional ideas about "the acoustic", suggesting pre-ideological directness and auratic immediacy in an age when these qualities are often thought to have been lost. The two examples I have provided suggest a different dynamic, in which the reach of the digital is extended to permeate even the virginal sanctuary of the acoustic, bringing about a tangible state of disaffection. Some of the most useful models for discussing the acoustic are paradoxically to be found in research on the audiovisual. While ostensibly resisting the mediatized nature of contemporary life, acoustic music is a discourse that relies upon visual authentication in order to do its cultural work. As Philip Auslander puts it, "seeing is believing" when it comes to live performance and the processes of accreditation by which we assign agency to artists (2008, 85). This is especially the case in discussions of folk. We see ample evidence of this in KT Tunstall's *Later* performance, which nevertheless allows us to read her actions as a parody of traditional practices of musical production in multitrack recording. In performance, then, acoustic music is – surprisingly, perhaps – inextricably audiovisual. Folk authenticity is proven in performances, even while the performativity of acoustic performance threatens to destabilize those very constructions of authenticity. In Tunstall's case, gender becomes an issue to the extent to which Tunstall's example of the recording performer reiterates while transforming the approaches of male

9

predecessors (Prince, Mike Oldfield, Stevie Wonder, Moby etc.), whose recording labour remains unseen and is thereby to some extent mystified.

Drawing on the ideas of Roland Barthes and Raymond Bellour, Laura Mulvey offers a further concept from audiovisual research that might prove useful to studies of the new digital acoustic. Her book *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006) addresses moments of stoppage in cinematic flow, where the gaps that lie between the representations of the filmic medium are brought into sight either through directorial intervention or by strategies of viewer activation. If the auditory equivalent of the visual gap in film is silence, we approach an understanding that could engender a new theorization of acoustic music, which understands it as saturated with media consciousness rather than as an idealistic escape from such consciousness. For Mulvey, moments of stillness (for our purposes, silence) in cinema create "a 'pensive' spectator who can reflect 'on the cinema'." She continues: "Not only can the 'pensive' spectator experience the kind of reverie that Barthes associated with the photograph alone, but this reverie reaches out to the nature of cinema itself". (2006, 186.) For Mulvey, this allows two kinds of time, narrative time and its cessation, to cross-contaminate one another. The new acoustic music articulates a similar sensibility.

Instance 3: 'Heysatan', performed live by Sigur Rós.

The aspect I am discussing surfaces most recognizably when there are distinct breaks in the unfolding discourse. There are at least two abrupt silences in KT Tunstall's performance: at its middle and end points. A third example encapsulates this idea more clearly still. Performed outdoors in the Icelandic wilderness, the song 'Heysatan' by Sigur Rós (featured on the DVD *Heima*, dir. Dean DeBlois, 2007) incorporates several silences, which convey not only an absence of sound, but easily become infected with "content" relating to both to the ecological environment and connotations of absence and loss. This inflects the music (and the images alike, since this is an audiovisual discourse) with a sense of melancholic reverie. The direction of the film dwells on this point by its attention to images of gravestones and abandoned buildings. Outside and apparently mingling with the performing musicians are a

group of uncanny (because inanimate) life-sized statues. An ecological impulse is at work in these images and sounds. Environmental sounds blend with the performed music, while moving clouds seem to correlate in mood with static harmonies and resonant sonorities, thereby providing a subtle continuity between the musicians and their physical setting. Might this be considered a straightforward audiovisual representation of the Woodstock spirit, in which performers returned to a lost utopian garden? The music doesn't support such an interpretation. For one thing, several instruments are amplified, thus complicating the dialectic between the acoustic and its electrified Other. Moreover, the music is structured in a way that is recognizably a product of digital recording practices. Even the silences seem mechanical. Most significant here is the fact that audiences are offered *the impression* of continuity between the depicted silences of the film's diegetic world and media audiences' own environmental silences. Michel Chion offers a useful theorization of the issue in his essay "slience of the soundspeakers". Because of the technological advances brought about in Dolby and THX surround sound, silences in recent cinema make audiences increasingly aware of the corresponding and contiguous silences of their own listening environments. The two can never merge, we cannot fully immerse ourselves in Sigur Rós's pre-recorded reality as we are always more closely connected with our own reality, but the images and sounds present audiences with the illusion of continuity between these two domains, resulting in a silence that seems to be listening to them (or simply surrounding them). This is not an comfortable sensation, but it does encourage a degree of reflection was not so easily achieved in the pre-digital age. Mediatized "acoustic music" of this type encourages the adoption of such a subject position: a quietness that potentially leaves sufficient space for reflection.

In *The Neutral*, Roland Barthes's distinguishes between two kinds of silence: *tacere* and *silere* (2005, 21-23). Tacere is the silence of gaps in the discourse, a kind of rhetorical silence. *Silere* on the other hand, implies a stillness that results from the absence of movement and noise, resulting in a contemplative and restorative silence. Environmental sounds are prominent in perceptions of this kind. Both types of silence are present in the Sigur Rós performance: it is both a cessation of the mechanized flow of media, the ubiquitous discourses of the digital age, and a second silence that flows into and out of an ecological

discursive space. In the digital age, we are never truly at one with nature, but rather with an idea of what nature has become in an age of media flow and digital surround sound. I suspect that this is the reason that the new acoustic music resonates so deeply with contemporary experience – the fact that it touches on both of these modes of understanding.

References

Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Second Edition (Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2008).

Barthes, Roland, The Neutral (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

Cumming, Naomi, The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

Dyer, Richard, "Side by Side: Nina Rota, Music, and Film," in Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer & Richard Leppert, eds., *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 246-259.

Hawkins, Stan, *Settling the Pop Score: pop texts and identity politics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).
Katz, Mark, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2004).
Kerman, Joseph, *Musicology* (London: Fontana Press, 1985).
Kramer, Lawrence, "Subjectivity Rampant! Music, Hermeneutics and History", in Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert & Richard Middleton eds.,*The Cultural Study of Music* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 124-135.
Mulvey, Laura, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London; Reaktion Books, 2006).
Potter, John, *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky & Adam Frank, eds., *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham: Duke, 1995).
Ngai, Sianne, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Richardson, John, "Televised Live Performance, Looping Technology and the 'Nu Folk': KT Tunstall on *Later … with Jools Holland.*" In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology.* Derek B. Scott (ed.). Farnham & Burlington: Ashgate, 2009. 85-101.

Scott, Derek, *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
Torvinen, Juha, "Fenomenologinen tutkimus: lähtökohtia kriittiseen keskusteluun", *Musiikki* 1/2008, 11.