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“He Couldn’t Tell the Difference between *The Merry Widow* and *Tristan and Isolde*”: Kafka’s Anti-Wagnerian Philosophy of Music

Abstract

This essay exposes an anti-Wagnerian philosophy of music in Franz Kafka’s “Researches of a Dog” and “The Silence of the Sirens.” Themes of music, sound, and silence are overwhelmingly powerful in these stories and cannot be divorced from corporeal and visual aspects. These aspects are articulated in the selected texts in a manner that stands in stark opposition to Richard Wagner’s philosophy of music as presented in the composer’s seminal 1870 “Beethoven” essay.

Keywords

Richard Wagner, Franz Kafka, Philosophy of Music, Transcendence, Acousmatic Sound, Silence

Max Brod, Franz Kafka’s close friend and literary executor, recalls in his biography of the author that Kafka once said that “he couldn’t tell the difference between *The Merry Widow* and *Tristan and Isolde*” (1995, 115). Brod evokes this memory in order to exemplify Kafka’s supposed lack of musicality. Indeed, for a German-speaking intellectual such as Kafka, not being able to differentiate Franz Lehár’s light operetta from Richard Wagner’s solemn, monumental music-drama would not simply be an example of unmusicality, but a symptom of cultural autism. While Brod’s recollection is

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the only documented reference by Kafka to Wagner or his works,¹ it does not necessarily follow that Kafka was unaware of Wagner's views of music and its effects. Indeed, Nicola Gess remarks that "[i]n the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the effects of music on its listeners were widely discussed, a discussion of which Kafka was aware" (2007, 276), and that speculations on the transformative power of music, with key contributions by Nietzsche and Wagner, were "in the air" (2007, 277). Moreover, Kafka's friend Franz Werfel was heavily invested in the discussion over Wagner's music and its Productions in Prague's Neues Deutsches Theater (Kreuzer 2010, 148–150). One can assume then that Kafka's supposed inability to discern between *The Merry Widow* and *Tristan and Isolde* should not be taken at face value but rather, as Will Self suggests, a playful irony by which "Kafka manages in a single aside to undermine the entire airy and castelated edifice of late German romanticism" (2016). Self's reading of Brod's note speaks to the concern of the following essay, namely, to present Kafka's philosophy of music as a direct response to that of Wagner.

Music Deterritorialized

Kafka thought of himself as unmusical. In a letter to his lover Milena Jesenská from June 14, 1920 he discloses: "Do you realize that I am completely unmusical, with a completeness that in my experience does not exist anywhere else at all?" (Kafka 1990, 49). A diary entry from Jan 3, 1912 might shed light on the origins of Kafka's view of himself as unmusical:

When it became clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction for my being to take, everything rushed in that direction and left empty all those abilities which were directed toward the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection and above all music. I atrophied in all these directions (Kafka 1976, 163).

Even if these statements are taken literally, Kafka's supposed unmusicality did not forestall him from engaging with music as well as with "philosophical reflection" on music in his literary output. Yet Kafka's treatment of music is certainly unusual; it is extremely rare to encounter common musical objects in his oeuvre; in most cases where music appears in his writings it is associ-

¹ The only other possible reference to Wagner in Kafka's work is the character Brunelda in *Amerika*, whose name implies the mythic figure of Brünnhilde, who became a central character in Wagner's cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The fact that in Kafka's novel Brunelda is a former singer further implies Wagner's famous work.

ated with the incomprehensible and almost always resides outside the boundaries of the layman understanding of what music is. According to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Kafka was not interested in an organized form of music, but rather in "a pure and intense sonorous material [...] a deterritorialized musical sound, a cry that escapes signification, composition, song, words—sonority that ruptures in order to break away from a chain that is still all too signifying" (1986, 6).

An example of such deterritorialized form of music is found in the story "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse People," where the narrator presents Josephine the mouse-diva as such a phenomenal singer that "[a]nyone who has not heard her does not know the power of song. There is no one who is not carried away by her singing;" but soon after the narrator adds that "Josephine's song as such does not represent anything extraordinary," and even wonders whether it is song at all: "[i]sn't it perhaps just squeaking? [...]" All of us squeak, but of course no one dreams of passing it off as art" (Kafka 2007, 94–95). By blurring the boundaries between song and squeak in the powerful performance of a diva with "nothing of a voice" (Kafka 2007, 100), the story challenges the common conception of music. "Josephine" is not the only deconstructive treatment of music in Kafka; another example is the "concert" in "Description of a Struggle":

'Please turn out the light, I can only play in the dark.' I straightened myself. At that moment two gentlemen seized the bench and, whistling a song and rocking me to and fro, carried me far away from the piano to the dining table. Everyone watched with approval and the girl said: 'You see, madame, he played quite well. I knew he would. And you were so worried.' I understood and thanked her with a bow, which I carried out well (Kafka 1983, 39).

If we expand our scope of Kafka's treatment of music to include noise as such (as "Josephine" prompts us to do) as well as silence, or at least the failed execution of sound (as the above scene from "Description of a Struggle" prompts us), we encounter further sonorous phenomena that are difficult, if not impossible, to decode. The sound emanating from the telephone in *The Castle* is a fitting example:

A humming, such as K. had never before heard on the telephone, emerged from the receiver. It was as if the murmur of countless childish voices—not that it was really a murmur, it was more like the singing of voices, very very far away—as if that sound were forming, unlikely as that might be, into a single high, strong voice, striking the ear as if trying to penetrate further than into the mere human sense of hearing (Kafka 2009, 21).

Another undefinable sound-object is the one which torments the mole-like creature of “The Burrow,” whose pride is in an elaborate system of tunnels that he himself constructed, and that serves as his home and shelter. One day he hears a sound whose definition and source he cannot locate. The ontology of the sound is unclear: its description, as Kata Gellen (2016, 111) observes, varies between hissing, scratching, scuttling and scraping; moreover, it is “exactly the same noise everywhere” (Kafka 2007, 177) so its source seems to be both nowhere and everywhere. The narrator embarks on a paranoid attempt to explain the noise and unveil its source—but to no avail.

The tormenting effect of the sound in “The Burrow” stems from it being, as Gellen points out, “a sign whose signifier consists of a series of related but non-identical acoustic effects” (2016, 111). Like Josephine’s song and the telephone in *The Castle*, the sound in “The Burrow” is an acoustic sign that does not communicate a decodable message.

Music Transcendence

Richard Wagner wrote extensively on music. It is far beyond the scope of this essay to present an exhaustive account of Wagner’s philosophy of music, which itself underwent various phases and alterations throughout the development of Wagner’s intellectual and creative output. The conception presented here, which I wish to contrast with Kafka’s, represents Wagner’s later philosophy of music as presented in his seminal 1870 essay “Beethoven,” written in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the latter composer’s birth.

In “Beethoven,” Wagner provides an elaborate discussion which advocates a unique status that music holds within the arts. In the essay, Wagner rehearses the aesthetic theory of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer as presented in Schopenhauer’s 1818/1819 book *The World as Will and Representation*. Deviating from Western philosophy’s tendency to define humans as rational animals, Schopenhauer proposes that humans do not essentially rationalize; the essentially desire. Hence a central concept in Schopenhauer’s philosophy is the will, which designates every human’s innermost essence—the will to live and to satisfy desires. The immense influence of Kant’s transcendental idealism on the philosophy of Schopenhauer accounts for the latter’s conviction that the will is at one and the same time the essence of every human being and the essence of the universe. According to Schopenhauer, the will is manifested in the world through concepts, or Ideas

(in the Platonic sense). These Ideas are the "objectification of the will" (Schopenhauer 1969, 257), its embodiment in phenomena. The aim of the fine arts is to stimulate the knowledge of these Ideas. The arts therefore "objectify the will only indirectly" (*ibidem*), they must use some sort of translation to deliver an indirect notion of the will to a perceiver. Music is different from all other art forms since it does not deal with objects. While other arts depend to a degree on concrete material phenomena, music is independent of the phenomenal world, and since for Schopenhauer the phenomenal world is the "appearance of the Ideas in plurality," music "passes over the Ideas" (*ibidem*) that mediate the will and the arts, and access the will directly:

[M]usic expresses in an exceedingly universal language, in a homogeneous material, that is, in mere tones, and with the greatest distinctness and truth, the inner being, the in-itself, of the world, which we think of under the concept of will, according to its most distinct manifestation (Schopenhauer 1969, 264).

This worldless and conceptless notion of music motivates Wagner's insistent dichotomy between the visual and the nonvisual. For Wagner (again, after Schopenhauer), human consciousness has two sides, the consciousness of one's own self, which is the will; and that of other things, which is chiefly "a *visual* knowledge of the outer world, the apprehension of objects" (Wagner 1966a, 67, italics in source). Hence, since the will is anti-thetic to the visual it can only be purely expressed by a nonvisual art form. The visual spectacle itself never transmits to our consciousness the Idea in a whole and pure manner. To the sight of the spectacle Wagner quotes Faust's cry "A spectacle superb! But still, alas! a spectacle. Where seize I thee, o Nature infinite?" and continues:

This cry is answered in the most positive manner by *Music*. Here the world outside us speaks to us in terms intelligible beyond compare, since its sounding message to our ear is of the selfsame nature as the cry sent forth to it from the depth of our own inner heart (Wagner 1966a, 70-71, italics in source).

Wagner ties music's ability to communicate deep universal essences with its power over listeners, incomparable to the effects of other art forms. In its purest form, music has a hypnotic power, it leaves the listener somnambulantly spellbound, so that even with eyes wide open they no longer see. Music's wordlessness is so powerful that when it delivers "its sounding message to our ear" it actually annuls the effect of anything visual and worldly:

Our eyesight is paralyzed to such a degree by the effect of music upon us, that with eyes wide open we no longer intensively see. [...] while listening to any tone-piece that really touches us, [...] the most hideous and distracting things are passing before our eye, [...] the mechanical movement of the band, the whole peculiar working apparatus of an orchestral production (Wagner 1966a, 74–75).

The link that Wagner cultivates between music's transcendence, its ability to communicate deep universal essences, and its total divorce from and undermining of worldly and visual materiality is central to the present discussion. As the following section illustrates, it is precisely these aspects which are subverted in Kafka's representations of music.

Kafka's Anti-Wagnerian Philosophy of Music

I am not the first to suggest an opposition between Kafka and Wagner. Nicola Gess' (2007) analysis of "Josephine" confronts Kafka's story with Wagner on the basis of music's relation to nation and *Volk*. In her illuminating analysis, Gess demonstrates how the story subverts a political ideology that constructs "a folkish identity by way of artistic performances and by way of a leader who fancies himself a great artist and his state one gigantic 'total work of art'" (2007, 288). In a similar trajectory, Colin Benert (2009) reads Kafka's "Josephine" as an intertextual parody of Wagner's aesthetic ideology and the German dream of a musical community. Both Gess and Benert thus focus on the political aspects of Wagner and Kafka and limit their discussion to "Josephine." My focus is somewhat different, not only because I relate to other texts, but mostly because my concern is not the political, but rather the metaphysical aspects of Wagner's and Kafka's conceptions of music. The following analysis of two texts by Kafka—the longer short story "Researches of a Dog" and the miniature short story "The Silence of the Sirens"—exposes an inversion of Wagner's philosophy of music in two interlaced trajectories: music's relation to, and communicability of, a universal truth on the one hand, and the hierarchical relations between the sonic and the visual on the other. While my discussion revolves only around these two works by Kafka, the ultimate aim of this essay is to propose the anti-Wagnerian perspective as a key to a new understanding of music in Kafka's work in general.

We have seen that, for Wagner, music's objectless and contentless nature provides unmediated access to the Schopenhauerian will, and is thus key to its ability to communicate essences of self and universe. Music's effect on the listener is such that it renders visual faculties ineffective, to the extent that

individuals become indifferent to "the most hideous and distracting things [that] are passing before our eye" (Wagner 1966a, 74–75). For the Wagner of "Beethoven," the visual is inferior to the audible to such an extent that it becomes ineffective.

Kafka's view on the relations between the visual and the audible with regard to music is far different: Max Brod recalls giving up dragging his friend to concerts upon realizing that Kafka's "reactions to them were of a purely visual character" (1995, 116). In a diary entry dated December 13, 1911, Kafka writes of accompanying Brod to a concert, complementing his impressions of the concert—which featured Brahms' *Tragic Overture*—with a pen-portrait of three clerics in the audience, whom he also describes in writing. Kafka's diary entry reinforces Brod's observation regarding the former's visual relationship to music. Prior to the description of the clerics, Kafka notes that music "only now and then has an effect on me, and how seldom it is a musical one. The natural effect of music on me is to circumscribe me with a wall, and its only constant influence on me is that, confined in this way, I am different from what I am when I am free" (1976, 137). Kafka's diary entry ties together several notions regarding "music's effect" that are relevant to the discussion at hand: the sound of music does not have a "purely musical" effect but rather a visual one; the attention of this visual effect is directed not at the source of music production but at the listening audience; when music does have a "natural effect" it is one of psychological and existential distress, characterized by confinement, limited freedom, and isolation. These issues stand in sharp contradiction both to Wagner's prioritizations of the audible over the visual and his conception of music's ability to deliver universal transcendence to the individual. As we shall see, the gathering of these anti-Wagnerian features is far from being confined to Kafka's diary entry; it in fact governs Kafka's conception of music in the stories "Researches of a Dog" and "The Silence of the Sirens."

Written in 1922 and published posthumously, "Researches of a Dog" features a dog-narrator reflecting on his life. The first part of the story, which will be in focus here, concentrates on the experience and aftermath of a particular formative incident from the dog's youth—an encounter with "seven great musical virtuosi" (Kafka 2007, 134). One day in his early life the dog recalls "something admittedly extraordinary" that "made a strong, original, indelible, formative impression on me" (*ibidem*): as he was running through darkness he suddenly saw a brilliant light and "out of some darkness, producing a terrible clamor the likes of which I had never heard before, seven dogs stepped into the light" (*ibidem*). What happened next was the following performance:

They did not speak, they did not sing, in general they held their tongue with almost a certain doggedness, but they conjured forth music out of that empty space. Everything was music. The way they raised and set down their feet, certain turns of their heads, their running and their resting, the attitudes they assumed towards one another, the combinations they formed with one another [...] (ibidem).

In her study of the story, June Leavitt proposes that the dogs' creation of music without instruments indicates that Kafka's story seeks to represent a "transcendental mode" (2011, 149). Leavitt notes that the narrator's choice of the verb "conjure" (*zaubern*), rather than "play" or "make," which would suggest physical sound, denotes "an invocation of supernatural powers" and "presents the music of the dogs as a supersensible phenomenon" (ibidem). Leavitt reads the unusual musical event within the context of mysticism and esoteric knowledge, but the seeming sourcelessness of the music in the passage may just as well relate to another kind of transcendence, namely Wagner's—that of music as an art that "arise[s] this immediate consciousness of the oneness of our inner essence with that of the outer world" and "transports us to the highest ecstasy of consciousness of our infinitude" (Wagner 1966a, 71, 77). Indeed, as Theodor Adorno detects, it is the elimination of the cause of music (the "occultation of production" or *Phantasmagoria* in Adorno's terms) which functions as "the formal law governing the works of Richard Wagner" (2009, 74) and which fulfills the Wagnerian ideal of music.

As Brian Kane remarks, within the Schopenhauerian paradigm only pure relations between tones can express "the endless longing and striving of the will," and therefore "music's instrumental causes have no place in this order. Causality is sloughed off in the transformation effected by aesthetic contemplation" (2014, 100). This notion leads to Wagner's famous concealment of the orchestra in his Bayreuth Festspielhaus, namely, to control what the eye sees by means of architectural techne: "[I]deal works of music may make this evil [i.e. the mechanical production of music] imperceptible at last, through our eyesight being neutralized, as it were, by the rap subversion of the whole sensorium" (Wagner 1966b, 333). Kane recalls that musicologist Carl Dahlhaus addressed "the 19th-century fascination with the 'invisible orchestra,'" and that, according to Dahlhaus, "Wagner's practice in Bayreuth [...] reproduces the 'prevailing doctrine of nineteenth-century music—the idea of 'absolute music', divorced from purpose and causes,'" a doctrine that led to the need to conceal "the mundane origins of transcendental music" (Kane 2014, 105). As we shall soon see, it is exactly this separation of the mundane from the transcendental that Kafka problematizes.

It is, however, not only the "occultation of production" that links Kafka's "Researches of a Dog" to Wagner; it is additionally the effect that music with no visible source has on the listener. We recall that, for Wagner, music creates a hypnotic subversion of vision as it "dews our brain as if by magic, and robs it of the power of seeing" (Wagner 1966a, 75). In a similar fashion, Kafka presents the effect of the conjured music upon the dog-narrator as extremely powerful and undermining the worldly and visible:

[T]he music gradually took over, practically seized hold of you, swept you away from these real little dogs, and quite against your will, resisting with all your might, howling as if pain were being inflicted, you could attend to nothing but this music that came from all sides, from the heights, from the depths, from everywhere, pulling the listener into its midst, pouring over him (Kafka 2007, 135).

Taken together, the seemingly source-less music and its incredible effect on the listener constitute Wagner's musical ideal with regard to the mechanics of production and phenomenological effects. But while these aspects seem to be taken straight from the Wagner cookbook, there is a crucial difference. For Wagner, music's "stupendous powers" are related to its ability to make known "the inner essence of all things." Through music, he writes, "the world outside us speaks to us in terms intelligible beyond compare" (Wagner 1966a, 78, 80). In other words, for Wagner music is a medium that links transcendence and self, it delivers a universal message of truth directly to the consciousness of the individual; in this regard, Kafka's story could not be more remote.

What exactly does the music conjured by the dogs communicate? What does their entire performance mean? These questions occupy and disturb the narrator, who admits that it is "incomprehensible to me" (Kafka 2007, 135). The narrator tries to approach the group and ask the questions that bother him, but just as he does that he is met by "a clear, vigorous, continuous note, arriving unchanged literally from a great distance" (Kafka 2007, 137). This note is "perhaps the true melody in the midst of the clamor" (*ibidem*)—it may be carrying the answer to his questions, but even if the dogs heard his inquiries and replied with this "true melody" he "could not distinguish the answer from the music" (*ibidem*), and the entire phenomena remained completely inexplicable, or as John Hargraves puts it: "The narrator cannot decide finally whether this is music or noise; music in the sense that it contains some truth he wants to know but cannot, and noise in the sense that it is the summation of many truths, each interfering with and canceling out the other" (2007, 323).

Contrasting Wagner's conception of a music in which "the world outside us speaks to us in terms intelligible beyond compare," Kafka's story contends that even if music contains some truth, this truth remains inaccessible, and its message incommunicable. Moreover, the further we read the story the more it becomes clear that the nature of the music experienced by the protagonist is far from the common model for an ideal work of art. Looking back at the experience, the narrator admits that "[i]n itself it was nothing extraordinary" and that "in the course of a long life you will encounter many things that would be even more astonishing if taken out of the context and seen through the eyes of a child." At a certain point he cannot actually tell whether what he heard was "terrible or sublime music" (Kafka 2007, 133, 137). This inability to distinguish between the terrible and the sublime, echoing Kafka's remark on *The Marry Widow* and *Tristan and Isolde*, radically conflicts with Wagner's claim that music—and certainly music with such a strong effect—"can once and for all be judged by nothing but the category of the *sublime*" (Wagner 1966a, 77, italics in source).

An additional charge against Wagnerian music-philosophy is revealed in the story when we consider that the "astonishing" musical dogs are nothing other than performing circus dogs, which the narrator happen to witness. As noted by some readers of the story such as Gellen (2016), the narration of "Researches of a Dog" is limited to the perception of the dog protagonist, a perception that filters out humans and their agency and thus leaves the protagonist unaware of any human related context such as the circus, the dog's human trainer and the source of musical accompaniment. This interpretation of the story demystifies the peculiar behavior of the performing dogs; for example, it is noted that while the dog-musicians stand upright "whenever they obeyed their better instincts for a moment and lowered their front legs, they were literally horrified, as if it were a mistake [...] and once again they raised their legs, and their eyes seemed to be asking forgiveness" (Kafka 2007, 136). When this picture is complemented with a punishing circus trainer the scene immediately makes sense.

Understood as generic circus music along with its associated crude materiality, the sweeping music "conjured" by the virtuosi becomes anything but "worldless" transcendence, and its "beguiling" effect turns parodic. The powerful overwhelming effect of music in Kafka's story is produced by a kind of music that cannot be further removed from Wagner's ideal. This is not only because circus music is taken as mundane entertainment and Wagner's ideal strives to the highest imaginable form of art, but also due to the nature of the relationship between spectacle and audible in Kafka's story.

Degrading works such as the operas of Giacomo Meyerbeer as venturing mere effects and thus as inauthentic, fake, and manipulative (Gess 2007, 281), Wagner saw operas whose emotional effect had no authentic cause as a "stamp of an absolutely empty piece of music" that "never got beyond a mere prismatic toying with the effect of its first entry, and consequently kept us bound to the relations presented by music's outermost side to the world of vision" (Wagner 1966a, 78). In Kafka's story, conversely, it is precisely such toying with effects of sound and vision which has no authentic cause behind it, that moves the narrator so deeply.²

Hence "Researches of a Dog" presents music whose mechanics of production and phenomenological effects are taken straight from the tradition of Wagner's philosophy of music, but whose abilities to communicate universal ideals as well as its "quality" and "authenticity" stand in complete opposition to this tradition. Seen against the backdrop of Wagnerian music ideals, the story is understood as a sharp counterblow to this tradition and its metaphysical and epistemological implications.

On December 7, 1916 Kafka wrote in *The Blue Octavo Notebooks* the following fragment: "Heaven is dumb, echoing only to the dumb"³ (Kafka 1991, 29). While the fragment provokes theological and existential readings, I wish to focus on its uncommon take on silence, according to which the absence of sound (being dumb) does not necessarily entail absence of action (echo). This is of course no novelty; actions can produce silence, by either preventing the emission of sound or preventing it from being heard. What distinguishes these kinds of actions from silence in Kafka's sky-fragment is that in the latter the action which creates silence remains essentially unseen.

Two months before writing the sky-fragment, Kafka had engaged with silence in a short story posthumously published under the title "The Silence of the Sirens." The story revisits Odysseus' encounter with the sirens from the Homeric epos. In Kafka's version, when approaching the sirens Odysseus stuffs wax into his ears to block the deadly song from being heard, but expecting this the sirens utilize "an even more terrible weapon than their song – namely, their silence." (Kafka 2007, 128) While one might escape their singing, no one can endure the hubris which follows the thought of

² A similar point is made by Gess in discussing "Josephine": "[Kafka's story] shows that 'poor' music in fact does what 'good' music was supposed to do [...] it turns out that the theatricality and make-believe stand at the heart of the power at work in the performance situation" (2007, 283).

³ The fragment has no title. In what follows it shall be referred to as "the sky-fragment."

overcoming them by one's own powers. And so when Odysseus passes by the sirens he does not "hear their silence;" he sees "the turning of their necks, their deep breathing, their tearful eyes, their half-opened mouths" and believes that "their arias resound, unheard, around him" (ibidem).

Both the sky-fragment and "The Silence of the Sirens" deal with the perplexing issue of *c a u s e d s i l e n c e*. While in the sky-fragment the absence of sound does not entail the absence of cause, "The Silence of the Sirens" displays a situation in which the cause of silence is misplaced—the "listener" believes the cause is the addressee (Odysseus) while in fact it stems from the source (the sirens). The possibility that silence might have undetected cause has a disturbing potential: how can one tell whether the silence one "hears" is caused by one action, by another, or rather by nothing at all?

In order to dive deeper into these questions, a discussion of the relations between sound and source is required. Acoustic phenomena always imply two objects, namely a sound that is heard, and a source which usually is visible, or at least can become visible. Sound itself is "insufficient for establishing reference back to the source" (Kane 2014, 135). To establish a sound's source, one must synchronize sonorous input with visual input of the source emanating it, but of course there are cases where one does not see the source of the sound one hears, cases known as *a c o u s m a t i c*.⁴ As long as the source is not manifested, any acoustic expression entails a dimension of uncertainty with regard to its source. Consequently, as Kane points out (2014, 148), since sound objects are never autonomous, acousmatic sounds carry an inherent disturbing feature. Kane also introduces the term *a c o u s m a t i c i t y*, by which he designates "the degree to which the sound's source can be ascertained" (ibidem). The term allows differentiation between simple revealing of sound-source such as the unveiling of a curtain, and more complicated, perhaps empirically impossible cases, such as the one faced by Kafka's researching dog and perplexed burrower. However, since every sound essentially has a source, acousmaticity by definition cannot reach degree zero.

Matters are different however when it comes to silence. If acousmatic sound is sound whose source is not perceived, then let us use the term *a c o u s m a t i c s i l e n c e* to designate situations where one normally expect sound but encounters silence whose source is not perceived. Just as with acousmatic sound, once encountered with acousmatic silence the tendency is to try and locate the cause of silence, but since unlike sound, silence

⁴ Sound theorist Pierre Schaeffer defines acousmatic sound as "sound that one hears without seeing what causes it" (Kane 2014, 3).

can be uncaused, the degree of silence-acousmaticity can be zero. We can derive the following rule: as long as the source of silence is undetected it is impossible to ascertain whether it is caused or uncaused.

While Kafka's sky-fragment presents the epistemological problem in which acousmatic silence is entangled (i.e. it is impossible to ascertain whether it is caused or uncaused), "The Silence of the Sirens" complicates this problem by problematizing the relations between sound and vision. These relations, as discussed above, occupied Wagner as well. In fact, Wagner's discourse of the power of music as depriving vision from the hypnotic, spellbound listener evokes the mythical source of Kafka's short story: Homer's sirens constitute the archetype of Wagner's attribution of music—their song is heard before they are seen, it clearly has hypnotic powers, and these powers render powerless their victims' vision (at least in the derivative sense of vision as "direction" and "rational").⁵ Since Wagner's musical transcendence cannot be easily implemented in a visual medium like opera, where "the physical presence of singing bodies onstage would make blindsight unacceptable," he confronts the necessary visibility of opera by controlling what the eye sees through the use of architectural *techne*, i.e. concealing the mechanism of the orchestra (Kane 2014, 115). In other words, for music to fulfill its Wagnerian potential it must be acousmatic.

For Wagner, "the mechanical movement of the band" and the "apparatus of an orchestral production" are completely subordinate to the hypnotic power of music. Conversely, in Kafka's story, the hypnotic power resides not in music but precisely in the mechanics of its production (the bodily gestures of the sirens), to the extent that it is at its peak when music is eliminated, when the sirens are silent. Moreover, while Wagner's music culminates with the use of *techne* that conceals the "mechanism for tone production" (Wagner 1966b, 333), in Kafka's story, in direct opposition, the power of silence reaches peak with the use of *techne* (wax) to conceal the mechanism of silence production. Thus, in "The Silence of the Sirens," not only is music deprived of its independent unworldly status and rendered subordinate to sight, it is also its absolute negation—silence—which takes precedence as the most powerful sonic phenomenon. In its employment of silence, "The Silence of the Sirens" challenges music's ability to communicate tran-

⁵ *Odyssey* Book XII: "To the Sirens first shalt thou come, who bewitch all men, whosoever shall come to them. Whoso draws nigh them unwittingly and hears the sound of the Sirens' voice, never doth he see wife or babes stand by him on his return, nor have they joy at his coming; but the Sirens enchant him with their clear song" (Homer 1909, 170).

scendence. In order to communicate transcendence, music must signify, it must convey the “essences obscured by the power of sight” (Wagner 1966a, 74). In Kafka’s story what the “power of sight” obscures is nothing other than the absence of song; Kafka responds to Wagner’s music’s universal communication with the obliteration of signification, carried out by his doubly muted sirens.

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