Abstract

Ineffability marks an intellectually productive, technologically mediated, and socially meaningful encounter with the experiential impact of musical sound. Repositioning ineffability in this way contests, in strong terms, previous scholarship associating ineffability with conservative conceptions of absolute music or prohibitions on speaking. In support of our argument, we foreground key elements of Vladimir Jankélévitch’s writings on improvisation and musical technique and stage a critique of Theodor Adorno’s treatment of the ineffable as needlessly attached to metaphors of language. We conclude by contending that this broadened conception of music’s ineffability may open a path towards a more inclusive musical aesthetics, one that is unmoored from normative conceptions of musical language, that is modest about music’s ability to enact scholarly ideals for political resistance, and that embraces the many ways music elicits vernacular forms of wisdom and speculation.

Keywords

ineffability, improvisation, technicity, Jankélévitch, Adorno, vernacular philosophy
The Ineffable (and Beyond)
Carolyn Abbate and Michael Gallope

In mathematics there are “ineffables,” which are un-formulable propositions, and in set theory there is even an “ineffable cardinal,” a phrase that can easily unmoor the imagination (off we sail, to ornithology, or church hierarchies, or reddish hues). But as understood within the humanities, “ineffable” has primarily to do with words. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it means “too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words”—alternatively, it means barred from being said out loud, “not to be uttered.” Linger for a moment over the first meaning, since this is the one that has been significant in music philosophy. (The second is often associated with Abrahamic strictures against naming God). Though the ineffable has been associated with music in a multitude of cultures, surprisingly few philosophers have devoted sustained attention to this association. Small wonder, then, that among writers who deal with music and philosophy, the ineffable has become so powerfully entwined and associated with a single philosopher who positioned music’s ineffability as one of his central preoccupations: Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903–1985).

For Jankélévitch, music’s ineffability may be axiomatic, but it offers no prohibitions. Though he resolutely holds to the proposition that music is not language-like, Jankélévitch’s conception of music’s ineffability is in fact playful, complex, and full of openings. He contends that music has “broad shoulders” and, in the process, casts the ineffable into a productive concept that enables multiple interpretative forays (2003, 11). As he puts it, when speaking about the human experience of music, “one delves without end into such transparent depths and into this heartening plenitude of meanings” (72). Jankélévitch’s interpretations may deal with the naturalistic, mechanical, or non-emotional quality of musical topoi. They
may ask why this or that musical passage attracts hyper-symbolic readings. Or they may address broader questions: music’s unique way of modelling the inconsistent flow of time, or how it might bring to life the creativity inherent in repetition, or show the range of vicissitudes within rhapsodic movements, or exemplify the way a given instant can appear paradoxically timeless, or even how becoming distracted can set our feet on unexpected paths. All this polyphonic interpretive traffic is supported, eliciting a speculative mode of attention we would call an “unwoven dialectic” (see Gallope 2017, 165–203; McBrayer 2017).

Across this multiplicity, there emerges a single, unifying motif to Jankélévitch’s approach to music’s ineffability: he asks his readers to address the sensuous inconsistency of musical experience point blank. The sonic medium is his locus of fidelity. And by inconsistency we mean this: even as music incessantly imitates, attracts, and weaves itself into meanings, its sonic materiality remains irreducible to a matrix of phonemes and signs or to metaphors of “speaking.” Instead, it appears fluid and non-discrete to our lived experience. To be sure, Jankélévitch writes evocatively on various repertories in ways that reflect his Gallic stylistic commitments to impressionism, to the inexpressive, and to the neoclassical. But what is unique in his writings on music is the tenacity with which he draws attention to the “drastic,” which is more than giving heed to performance and lived experience (see Abbate 2004). The drastic refers to music’s many existential charges: the inconsistent contours of a courageous performance, the dramatic workings of a resourceful improvisation, and the polyphony of ways musical labour is mediated by various kinds of material and technological objects. All this is drawn into his overarching affirmation of the loose and non-linguistic character of music’s unique significance.

The precepts summarized above were given voice above all in La musique et l’ineffable (1961), and among Anglophone music scholars, the 2003 English translation set in
motion a wave of responses and debates on the topic that has, since then, continued to unfold and evolve. Some reactions were predictable: puzzlement about rhapsodies to silence and reticence in a philosopher who wrote hundreds of thousands of words about music, and attendant calls to refuse the temptation embodied by this paradox (Scruton 2010). (Far better not to dive in at all than to do so in a way that risks leaving oneself at all vulnerable to irony.) There was a suspicion of anything suggesting metaphysics, and uneasiness about the way virtues like grace, charm, and forgiveness make repeated appearances within his work. For James Hepokoski, attempts to make that discomfort go away by gathering adjectives—such as “once-faded” or “well-worn” or “anti-intellectual” insofar as they might be associated with a “potential for intimidation” and “suppression”—were ready to hand, in something of an echo of Karl Popper’s midcentury suspicion of all things mystical (Hepokoski 2012, 224, 226; see also Popper 2013). The ineffable is even “dangerous,” as Judith Lochhead (2008) has written.

The vocabulary used here can seem perplexing in its anxious disparagements, since the threats referenced are absent from Jankélévitch’s actual work. What he proposed was not some retrograde or conservative pact with the irrational. Rather, he contends that it is not illicit to contemplate the proposition that silence, modesty, restraint, or respect for what remains stubbornly unknowable could be a legitimate choice. Or that mystery is a fruitful aporia. That not-forbidden-ness is one of the many instances in which Jankélévitch enacts—here in the form of an invitation or an allowance, an openness—his philosophical fidelity to music’s unique properties as a medium, namely, as noted above, its material inconsistency.

Another recurring theme in responses to Jankélévitch’s work has been the charge that music’s ineffability amounts to a conservative call to bypass sociology, politics, or cultural history. Following the rise of absolute music in European and Anglo-American aesthetics since the early part of the nineteenth century, scholars have occasionally associated music’s
ineffability with some brand of formalism (Pythagorean, Hanslick-influenced, or otherwise) in order to claim that both are ideologically blind to the particularities of social meaning. This gambit—which has been employed by Lawrence Kramer (2012, 2016) and Susan McClary (2015) among others—has been used to recommend hermeneutics, a method that promises to unearth semiotic registers in music, and that strives to pedigree certain listening experiences in the name of forgotten and implicit cultural nuances. Yet, as with the critics of all things mystical, the rote association of ineffability with a silencing formalism has derived from a misreading of Jankélévitch’s thought that caricatures the underlying philosophical questions at issue.

Music’s ineffability undeniably carries metaphysical valences, but for Jankélévitch it is also materially grounded and saturated with cultural specificity. He considers music’s orphic powers—in their very irrationality—to be a social fact that invites a concrete, loquacious, and wide-ranging engagement with music’s nocturnal capacity to perplex, stun, and mystify. And though he does wax eloquent about the ways in which hermeneutics can become a police action that sets franchised limits upon the experience of music, Jankélévitch’s conception of the ineffable is diametrically opposed to any kind of formalism devoid of meaning. At no point is pious silence the aim of his philosophy. Rather, as mentioned earlier, Jankélévitch devotes sustained attention to numinous and evasive ways musical experiences release and support a “plenitude of meanings” (2003, 72).

All that said, Jankélévitch is not a saviour or a prophet. His thinking has undeniable limitations, and the present authors find plenty of room for disagreement with aspects of his work. His chosen repertoire is decidedly narrow, demonstrating little to no engagement with popular music, with musicians of colour, with traditions from non-European locales, or with music transmitted orally or through non-Western or vernacular forms of musical literacy. Indeed, for a man who rapturously embraces multiple musical worlds and waxes poetic over
music’s multiple possibilities—and who had at least some exposure to jazz—Jankélévitch discerns ethical virtues most often in French, Spanish, or Slavic modernism, or in the works of Franz Liszt, and elsewhere only as exceptions (see Currie 2012).

There could be other difficulties with Jankélévitch’s quaint chivalry towards women (since chivalry can become condescension), or with his rhetorical deployments of the feminine (for a critique of Jankélévitch’s metaphors of the feminine, see James 2018.) There could be difficulties with his idea that ancient Greece was an Eden of continence and virtue, when its violence and frequent political chaos are no secret—violence and chaos that have not escaped being made into legend over time as well, as the yang to continence’s yin. One need only contemplate The Iliad, or, for a more recent instance, the film 300 (Zack Snyder, 2006). Perhaps most significantly, his writings are more ethical than political; they do not engage deeply with the pressing concerns of injustice and inequality, or with European politics and society during his lifetime—problems and issues that tend to be more structural than experiential or phenomenological.

In the years since Music and the Ineffable was translated, Jankélévitch’s work on music has seen its share of inspired applications by Anglophone musicologists and music theorists. Writings on favoured composers (Fauré, Debussy, Ravel) have been taken up as a heuristic device, to see whether one’s analysis might gain in vividness in being inflected by his poetic way of putting things, or his suggestions concerning exactly which qualities in musical works deserve interpretive attention (Rings 2008, Rumph 2015, Janz 2015, Puri 2007, 2017). In another vein, at least one analysis inflected by Jankélévitch’s writings has focused on acoustic phenomena rather than musical works. In an article for Organised Sound, Kristina Wolfe (2014) writes of sonification—the ostensibly objective and often scientific translation of non-acoustic data into audible forms—and reasons from Jankélévitch’s
speculations about ineffability to zero in on sonification’s pacts with incommensurability and its potential as apophatic experience.

While we recognize the virtues of these applications, our goal here is slightly different: we seek to open up some philosophical themes in Jankélévitch’s musical writings beyond the usual repertoires, case studies, and their analyses. Our first aim will be to explore the productive nature of music’s ineffability as Jankélévitch understands it, with particular emphasis on his writings on improvisation. In these writings, Jankélévitch offers a meditation on the way a musician’s performing body is woven into its many technological mediations and affordances. We then reposition Jankélévitch’s work in relation to the writings of a philosopher, who, for some, will appear an unusual figure in this context, namely Theodor Adorno. We hope to show that Jankélévitch’s efforts to re-think the long tradition of music’s ineffability have the power to engender their own twenty-first century variations, in particular variations that might help establish more inclusive futures for musical aesthetics.

Ineffability and Improvisation

If ironies within Jankélévitch’s writings have been noted and catalogued, there has arisen, simultaneously, an acknowledgement that his philosophical singularity is opening up new lines of inquiry in the worlds of moral and ethical philosophy, in philosophies of life, and in musicology and music theory. But what constitutes that singularity? In a review of Music and the Ineffable, Julian Johnson (2004, 643) began with a droll remark: “You may feel that you don’t have time for the ineffable. Perpetually rushed between preparing tomorrow’s lecture, this afternoon’s faculty meeting, the writing of references and reports, and reading a hundred committee papers, what time have you for music, let alone the ineffable?” Johnson went on to propose why time should be made, what (in other words) the
paradoxical qualities of the ineffable could have to do with your practical life as a musician, scholar, or teacher. That’s hardly a familiar gesture, since philosophical questions about music’s ineffability would seem to exist on a plane so exalted—cosmology, ontology, metaphysics—and so intricately woven with history, so focused on long-vanished or elite musical cultures, as to preclude the production of any evident or ordinary collateral benefit once all the effort has been made.

But Jankélévitch’s approach to the ineffable is grounded in the ordinary and accessible materiality of the here and now. In fact, one of Jankélévitch’s most under-served ideas about music aims to make philosophical insights about music germane to the domain of everyday life. And, among musical phenomena, he suggests that improvisation, in its very nature, could give insight into the act of making moral and ethical choices. Nowhere is this resemblance stated outright; rather, his belief has to be gleaned from his writings on musical improvisation, on Liszt in particular (see Jankélévitch 1998). It has to be gleaned by asking how virtues in the domain of musical improvisation—how Jankélévitch describes or characterizes them—come to resemble the virtues and ethical practices set out in his moral philosophy.

Improvisation is something Jankélévitch intuitively aligns with making one’s way as an ethical being who is perpetually confronted with dilemmas and changed circumstances, and ought to be able to act virtuously in a drastic situation, in a win-or-lose moment that appears in time. It is this virtue that he associates with the qualitative inconsistency of time denoted by the Ancient Greek term, *kairos* (see Périgord 1974, Norton 2016). Amidst the drama of a charged social predicament, no commandment, no *a priori* moral dictum, score, or rulebook will suffice, precisely because they are all prescriptive. Calculated and fixed responses provide false comfort in the face of what needs to be done, or what cannot be
undone. Thus, in everyday life, occasions will arise when following the score will result in an immoral choice.

Jankélévitch’s thinking about improvisation and moral choice was in part formed by a specific historical moment: the German occupation of France during World War II, when despicable laws were enacted by the government, then obeyed by citizens who chose the desolate ethics of compliance. What is difficult, of course, is knowing when a law is unjust, and determining, in a critical moment, how one should choose a path undictated by it. To be sure, a malevolent or ill-tempered extemporiser—particularly one in a position of power—can commit great wrongs, so the improvisation of a moral choice per se is no guarantee for a just outcome. But this is the point. The risk of doing the wrong thing inheres in the existential charge of one’s moral reasoning. As a result, it is not virtuous merely to improvise. It is virtuous to do the just thing in the face of uncertainty, and to do it well.

In music, a virtuoso improvisation taps into the actions and rhythms of such a decision. It threads its way between the a prioris of the self, the inconsistent fabric of time, the physical medium at hand, and memories of past configurations and sounds, with heroic verve. Doing so in turn reflects a wide array of other models for ethical or genuinely responsive behaviours—liveliness, playfulness, being oblique with one’s own intentions, recalling deep historical traditions, and practicing complex fidelities towards the always-vanishing experience of the now (see Gallope 2016). In the realm of jazz improvisation, many have discerned similar parallels with ethical virtues insofar as improvisation unfolds with the contrapuntal dynamics of collaboration (as a metaphor for political or social virtue) and collective attention. For Arnold Davidson (2016), himself a reader of Jankélévitch, jazz performance (in solo flights by Sonny Rollins) can even represent individual moral perfectionism in action. And outside jazz studies, Dana Gooley’s Fantasies of Improvisation
(2018) has spun together Jankélévitch’s earliest writings about improvisation with the economies and networks of nineteenth-century Romantic virtuosity.

We may feel we don’t have time to work out the philosophical questions underpinning music’s alliances with these vicissitudes of human action. But the lesson, in our view, is significant for music scholars and philosophers alike. For Jankélévitch maintained that such an ethics can be discovered not just in works or styles, or in the materia musica of high-art composition, all of which can remain un-embodied, contemplated, and even reified as they are turned around in the mind. In his view, ethics comes to life most vividly somewhere else. For instance, in an action, in the real-time making of something that works, even in the slight, but irreducible panic of improvisation. For even when scaled down to the register of everyday life, a miniscule panic invites a valiant response; under such conditions, performer and listener alike can be taken away by an astonishing solo, unsupported by guardrails of compliance. Such a phenomenon is not totally inexpressible, nor does it ever entail some form of silent metaphysical fusion or apolitical emptiness of cultural meaning. On the contrary, improvisations are filled with cultural life and social desire. They are saturated with both, even though as a phenomenon they resist linguistic expression, and resist being sculpted into easy analogies tout court.2

It is not, in other words, that drastic performances evade understanding altogether, or that scholars in a wide array of disciplines from sociolinguistics to performance studies have not effectively written about them in the past. It is that the existential charge of real-time phenomena constitutes something that, as a scholar or writer, one is perpetually inclined to forget, to subsume beneath a prefabricated model for understanding, such that one loses track of that irreducible inconsistency that produces astonishment each time something works, barely works, or even fails. We should not evade the force of that astonishment, lose track. Jankélévitch asks us to be puzzled at the inconsistencies allied to musical production, and to
be taken aback by the blank verve of action. His meditations draw on one’s ability to attune oneself to the ephemerality of everyday life, whose exemplar is the real time of a musical performance, whether that performance is what we do when we play Ravel’s *Menuet Antique* (1895) with a sense of absent-mindedness, or what we do when we are flooded with adrenaline in the face of a large audience, and our soloing hands get involuntarily rigid. No naïve vitalism ensues. The drastic is not an instance of emancipation and boundless freedom, nor is it an affirmation of the powers of a performing body against all else. For Jankélévitch, the ineffable comes to life as a charged drama—a concrete, material, and secular drama—that gives rise to dialectical paradoxes. If we are philosophically attuned to the drama, it can open our mind to a complex weave of interaction with the surrounding world.

The Part Played by Technicity

This is because technicity structures the passing of time. In his book on Liszt, Jankélévitch essentially argues that that improvisation is an obstacle course: technical mediation complicates the verve of action at every turn, a stance that puts him at a critical remove from simple Bergsonian affirmations of “freedom” and “immediacy.” Jankélévitch in other words took the material turn decades before it became respectable and routine in academia. He had an enduring affection for musical things and objects, for the feel of instruments when you play them, for physically manifest sound—he found virtues there. And not just because they were sensuous artefacts, or because, as objects, they embody a distinct epistemology from the historical past. Rather, he contended that material objects were perpetually infused with, and structured by, potential forms. Inert devices, sculptures of matter, set out parameters for action. And in turn, such objects sculpt our actions. In contemporary terms, as fields such as music cognition or music-and-neuroscience would
define them, these material objects and experienced phenomena are “musical affordances” (Menin and Schiavo 2012). For others, they are infused with the life of “distributed cognition” (Clark and Chalmers 1998, De Souza 2017). In Jankélévitch’s words:

In the first place, improvisation is negatively guided, which is to say limited, channeled, defined by the technical possibilities and impossibilities of the instrument at the surface of which it takes shape: all is not realizable, and the possible has neither the same sense nor the same limits for the saxophone, the flute, the keyboard of the piano, or for the human voice; there is the tessitura and the range, the intervals, the fingers, and more generally the instrumental writing, the imperatives and prohibitions of craft [métier] being, on the one hand, a function of the vibrating material, and on the other, the capacities of the hand, the larynx or the breath. (1998, 123–24)

Given the power of the formatted object, the musician’s body is likewise foundationally technical, inhabited, distorted, and even damaged by complex and historically significant patterns. This vital body, always-already structured by materials and patterns, was a key theme of Jankélévitch’s first philosophical book, his 1930 monograph on Bergson. The technicity of the vital-body was never really developed by Bergson himself, though, in Jankélévitch’s hands, it became a rich dialectical insight that proved to be something of an innovative motif. In Jankélévitch’s discussion of a much broader Bergsonian ontology of life, he called it the “dialectical complication” of the “organ-obstacle”:

Such is the ironical contradiction of the organ-obstacle […] The body in general is thus an impediment as much as it is an instrument […] Its very
resistance and inertia are paradoxically a stimulant for vitality… the animal sees *despite* its eyes rather than by means of them. There is no idea more profound and more fertile in Bergson’s philosophy. Bodies, we may add, far from being the cause or even the simple translation of the spiritual, on the contrary represent everything the soul has had to vanquish to live alongside a matter that seems to do violence to it and in which it believes itself to be boxed in. […] All the same, the Pythagorean’s *soma sema* [body prison] lacked the dialectical complication and the paradox of the organ-obstacle: for the prisoner needs his prison. He is the little that he is only in this prison and thanks to it! The heaviness of the flesh is the very condition of his personal existence. (2015, 138–39)

As it is with life’s structuration by physical organs, or musical production’s inflection by instruments, so is it with the spectres of idioms and traditions that are inherited, unwittingly or not, in the time of an improvisation. In a gesture that even resonates with the writings of Martin Heidegger, or a Derridian conception of “constitutive technicity,” Jankélévitch calls attention to shadows of the musical past that stand ready-to-hand, built upon a multitude of historical inheritances (Gallope 2011). The threshold of creativity is populated by techniques—“habits and reminiscences”:

But it is at the level of the vibrating material itself that the seeker of impromptus finds these harmonic and melodic constellations. The fingers, caressing the ivory keys, already hold the nascent rhapsody at the tips of their nerve endings: the errant hand brushes the keyboard, and here the melismas lift themselves in their multitude, dictated at the same time by the muscular
innervation and the aural preference, by kinesthetic habits and reminiscences, by sensory-motor tendencies and associative tropisms, by the physiology of fingers and the suggestions of memories; the inspired hand, docile to the gravitation of cadences and the modulations as much as the appeal of sensory terminals, reinvents all of music without itself noticing it. (Jankélévitch 1998, 124–25)

All of this underlines the fundamental necessity of mediation. For Jankélévitch, music’s ineffability resides and comes to life within these physical mediations, within the flight of the here-and-now. Ineffability flows from an existentially charged materiality; the music is never purely in flux, since it comes to life through the dialectical weave of actions structured by technics.

This charged and intertwined life in turn gives rise to puzzlement, and such perplexities attract language that resists the reliable circuitry of linguistic reference. For this reason, writing—the language used—does matter. Music’s inconsistency, as summoned by language, comes to life in conceptual registers that supported Jankélévitch’s sustained meditations, in a multitude of unusual metaphors, sentences, punctuation, and imagery. In Chapter 3 of Music and the Ineffable, the disquisition on paradoxical expressive directions in piano pieces by Fauré, Ravel, and Debussy (muted fortés, sonorous pianissimos) leads to the lyricism of a double entendre: “the means to realize these paradoxes physically do not exist. Imponderable touch, a left hand that sings, a weightless one, iron fingers gloved in velvet . . . archangel hands would be needed to convey this ambivalence” (Jankélévitch 2003, 116). The concreteness and physicality of such an image field, intentionally, is the counterweight to a proposition that a physical manifestation of these expressive directions is impossible. Because, as Jankélévitch points out a few pages later, you have to call repeatedly on the
metaphors (all the while questioning them, testing them) to be “subtly deflected,” asymptotically, towards truths about music that will not be reached.

Music’s inconsistency colludes with labels while preserving them. All these contradictions slow one’s thinking, and slowed thinking is good, since it acknowledges—and allows consciousness of—the heaviness of the body, the weight of the instrument, the inherited idiom (whether musical or intellectual), which helps us escape conclusions, slogans, keywords, shorthand, complacency, vainglory, inertia, and conformity. We are moved by the aporias of the drastic, since they are not easy affirmations inducing silence. The drastic invites deliberation.

The Long History of the Ineffable

It has been right to wonder about “music and the ineffable,” for the specific reason that deriving immense energy from the question of “the ineffable,” allowing music’s un-graspable-ness to make for high-flown speculation, is hardly unique to Jankélévitch. As an insight about music, “the ineffable”—in the sense of music’s Mysterium, its resistance to explication, its paradoxical capacity to seem to have import, or voice chthonic truth-saying without allowing understanding—has been a central post and pillar in German intellectual history. From an even longer historical view, European discourses on the ineffable are multiform. They reach back most notably to Plotinus and Augustine. In modern Europe, the notion was diffused enough to accommodate the well-known appeals of the Romantics, the Hanslick-inspired formalists, the aestheticism of Walter Pater, and many within the orbit of twentieth-century aesthetics, from T. S. Eliot to Clement Greenberg, Susanne Langer, and Roland Barthes.

Philosophers have tended to associate music’s ineffability not only with questions
within the philosophy of art, but also with deeper metaphysical questions linked to that which lies beyond language or social actuality. In the history of European philosophy, Schopenhauer proposed the outline for a musical unconscious with his proposal of music narrating “the story of the will as it is illuminated by thoughtfulness” (Schopenhauer 2010, 287). His best-known follower, Friedrich Nietzsche, defended an aesthetics in which physiological intoxication becomes the carrier of numinous Dionysian forces. During the twentieth century, a modern Marxist tradition in Europe exemplified by Bloch and Adorno rescued remnants of theology and metaphysics in order to build out unconscious threads of music’s unspeakable capacities into a grand, often baroque, politics of utopian fracture. The hope—and it was grand—was that just as music resisted the positive referentiality of language, it might too resist, with a brilliant and sublime obliqueness, the larger social ills of alienation and injustice.

How might we position Jankélévitch in this history? Jankélévitch, who wrote a master’s thesis on Schelling, who knew Schopenhauer’s texts well, and whose father translated Hegel and Freud into French, should by no means be taken as the inexorable Other of the Germanic tradition (Gallope and Kane 2012, 240). He was also hardly unusual among twentieth-century music philosophers in hypostasizing certain musics, or composers, or styles precisely because they are deemed ethical where others are not. These philosophers commonly asked: what ethical essence is at issue, and exactly how might it attain significance in musical form, in this or that piece, in some technical or formal aspect of music, in a given instance? Jankélévitch went to great lengths to pin down and defend the noble compositional paths of Liszt, Debussy, and Ravel, among many others. Indeed, many twentieth-century intellectuals, faced with a flooded marketplace of newly recorded musical styles, focused philosophical energies on developing discerning criteria for an ethical practice of modernism. Is such an ethical specification of philosophical principles not the essence of
Adorno’s love for Schoenberg?

Consider a further parallel that crosses national boundaries: though it is not often mentioned, Adorno, like Jankélévitch, recognized music’s ineffability. Yet Adorno’s conception of music’s ineffability is one that is saturated with semantic latency and ultimately circumvented by the ways and means of interpretation. In “On the Contemporary Relationship Between Philosophy and Music” (1953), Adorno wrote famously that “music provides the prototype of untranslatability” (Adorno 2002, 142). Evoking Benjaminian negative theologies, Adorno claimed music was exceptional among the arts due to its numinosous modes of appearing. Adorno writes: “The name appears in music only as pure sound [reiner Laut], divorced from its bearer, and hence the opposite of every act of meaning [Bedeutung], every intention toward sense [Sinn]” (140). For Adorno, the key paradox is the way music promises meaning while ultimately withholding it, as a hieroglyph—and the hieroglyph metaphor suggests that what is withheld will, eventually, be disclosed. The promise of meaning comes in the form of historical materials, which have become language-like over time, particularly through the emergence of tonal conventions. As a result, “the succession of sounds is related to logic: there is a right and a wrong” (113). In its highest forms, Adorno extends music’s “logic” into a defence of music’s Erkenntnischarakter, a language-like structure that must be properly recognized by listeners. Famously, in most of Adorno’s writing on music, this led him to narrow criteria for what an ethically resistant or fractured modernist practice might be.

All the same, for Adorno, no score—and this was his problem with total serialism—could be contemplated only in terms of abstractions on the pages (Adorno 1998, 269–322). It still needed responsive, human performers and listeners. It was in dealing with music in the flesh that Adorno had to acknowledge music’s ineffable opacity, since, when materially realized, music’s significance appeared surreally “at once distinct and concealed” (Adorno
2002, 114), In “Music, Language, and Composition,” (1956) he writes that music “reaches the absolute immediately, but in the same instant it darkens, as when a strong light blinds the eye, which can no longer see things that are quite visible” (116). And in Aesthetic Theory (1970), “if one seeks to get a closer look at a rainbow, it disappears. Of all the arts, music is the prototypical example of this: It is at once completely enigmatic and totally evident.” (Adorno 1997, 122). It was Adorno’s quirk that, while continually making reference to an immediacy that forecloses stable interpretation, to fascinating enigmas and fertile aporias, his commitment to a relatively provincial formalism led him to shy away from music’s ineffability as a sustained locus of mediation. There is a certain tragic anxiety in the very next sentence of Aesthetic Theory, “it [the paradox] cannot be solved, only its form can be deciphered, and precisely this is requisite for the philosophy of art” (122). And with this thought, Adorno turned to the exacting forms of his immanent critiques, and refrained from any sustained, Jankélévitch-like fidelity to music’s inconsistency.

Such differences invite a comparison of metaphorical fields between the two philosophers. While Jankélévitch is set apart from the German tradition by his Bergsonian a prioris, making him uninterested in questions about musical works (or techniques or phenomena) as giving fractured, mediated expression to history, he is also set apart, from Adorno in particular, by the values or virtues he assigned to ineffability per se. Jankélévitch did not proceed from a blanket axiom about historical and material alienation, nor did he consider historically developed forms to be essential to comprehending music’s specificity. For him, music’s inconsistency was an object that could positively sustain our philosophical attention. Adorno, for his part, would have considered Jankélévitch’s existentialist themes of positive fidelity and authentic moral action to be hopelessly bourgeois and deluded—false appeals to the intimacy of one’s own particular experience.6

At moments when Adorno contemplates the language-like character of music in
general, he acknowledges that music has a unique kind of gestural inconsistency, and thus might be an analogue to a language beyond all known names. Again, to allude to a language—albeit a magical, unknowable one—is to cling to rhetoric that implies the existence of a dictionary, somehow, somewhere. And Adorno’s stringent formalism comes at a cost. In his more conservative writings, when Adorno relies on music’s “broad shoulders” to bear the weight of a special truth-saying, he sets up a strong dialectic that involves legerdemain.

It goes like this. Adorno’s edifice—feeling quietly certain that music speaks a cryptic, elusive truth—is of course founded on music’s ineffability and ambiguity. But an a priori measure of certainty is desired, air-tightness, steadiness in the formal domain: this is the belief that musical works, mediations they may be, do give access to historical and cultural truths, albeit in forms that are cryptic and puzzling and refracted and fiendishly difficult to access. Once feeling quietly certain about that is locked down, ineffability can be tolerated because it’s actually required for the legerdemain. At his most narrow and dogmatic, Adorno seems to other music’s ineffability as a fearful thing: in his prose, the words that characterise music’s non-signifying quality start slewing towards voids, empty eyes, the alien. Thus, Adorno’s variant on music’s ineffability produces an incommensurability. It functions within language as a sort of transcendental signified, a seductive but disavowed “real” inconsistency—something akin to a cobra’s paralyzing stare—that becomes foundational to the exacting form of music’s fractured resistance.

Every sharpened point of contrast invites qualifications. There were always more open-ended Adornos lurking in different Adorno texts, different periods, different moods: Benjaminian Adornos, Blochian Adornos, and yes, even Jankélévitch-like Adornos. There are versions of Adorno where the historicity of forms has a looser and more ambiguous grip on experience. Even as his conclusion remained ultimately pessimistic, one of these Adornos
acknowledged the imaginative potentiality of an ontological rupture in “The Form of the Phonograph Record” (1934). The grooves that result when a needle inscribes sound in a physical medium are inconsistent, shaky, and erratic. Via a rhetorical slide, these quavering peaks and valleys and sideswipes are said to reveal something about music per se, which is “decisively its true character as writing [Schriftcharakter]” (Adorno 2002, 280). The language Adorno uses—music-as-writing is said to “transform the most recent sound of old feelings into an archaic text of knowledge to come”—reverts to a now-familiar trick, giving music the metaphorical garb of a decipherable phenomenon (writing, text), while nonetheless alluding to the inaccessibility of the knowledge it embodies (“to come”) (280). Yet there remains that underlying doubt, triggered by the physical inconsistency and irregularity, the puzzling character of the grooves made by the needle. And doubt—which is good—here devolves specifically upon the ontological rupture.

Elsewhere Adorno seems genuinely unsure what music’s forms are. The Adorno of *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* (1960) affirms something that the Adorno who wrote *A Philosophy of New Music* (1948) would never acknowledge: that vernacular musical materials, with somewhat ordinary harmonies, could nonetheless indicate obscure powers of resistance. Adorno’s metaphors and rhetoric in the Mahler book reflect this perplexity over music’s inconsistent forms. The prose jumps sensory registers from notated details, to literary images and characters, to quasi-cinematic and even olfactory hallucinations, as if entering a state of altered parataxis. As if all supposedly exact languages were suddenly up for grabs.

While not above his own forms of conservative guardianship, Jankélévitch foregrounds this critical perplexity in the face of the ineffable as the locus of his philosophy. In his view, negative hieroglyphs are disquieting where inconsistent and non-communicative arabesques are not, since for him ineffability is not vehicular, it’s not needed to verify the exacting negativity of a given fracture. Along these lines, Jankélévitch undid grandiose
notions that musical works or institutions legibly enact an abstract form of political resistance. He undid any “casual assumptions about the symptomatic relationship between [music and] human and social life” (Currie 2012, 247), and he rebutted the historical analogy in which music becomes language-like. In his writings, individual works become set pieces for speculative rhapsodies.

For Jankélévitch, it is not that music has no politics. Not at all. Nothing prevents music from shouldering the power of a slogan, triggering an association, or loosening our sense of what is socially possible. Jankélévitch merely emphasizes caution against idealized investments in music’s political powers. The key is that the medium—an inconsistent flux—cannot deliver precise social results, just in the same way that it cannot deliver precise semiotic meanings. That music’s messages are transient and contingent was a truth known to Italian opera composers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, since they would (not infrequently) reuse music originally written for one number in another number, in a different opera, which was not just sung by a different character in a different plot, but had different words, whose emotional valences could be at an opposite pole. Affective day and night, yet the same music accommodated both. It is something hardcore punk bands have known for decades. If a loud band in the basement wants to get political, they use the acoustic down time in between songs to stage didactics with their audiences, thus establishing solidarity. Otherwise, in the flux of impact, the music risks erasure of their social cause. Or consider hip-hop, a late modern genre that opens vast acoustic spaces for verbal language, which pours out in cascades. Groundbreaking work in the genre—from Nicki Minaj to Kendrick Lamar—relies nonetheless on rappers not as transparent communicators of messages, but as icons for complex, unspoken fantasies. A drum machine’s hypnosis, the delicate weave of atmospheric samples: these pulses are the gravity that gathers and concentrates music’s inconsistency. Beats—devoid of exact referents—carry hip-hop’s numinous cathexes.
Jankélévitch’s thinking in effect asks us to press play on the stereo, then to be honest. There’s a lot there—a lot of life in the sensuous inconsistency of the medium—that is probably not behaving. In Jankélévitch’s view, any exacting hermeneutic claim has a way of forgetting the befuddling power of that flux. Forgetting that is not good. Thus, to be silent is not to be muzzled, worshipful, or conservative. It is not to offload social and historical agency to a numinous transcendent force. Quite the opposite. It is to be modest, open, and attentive to the efficacy and inconsistency of the medium. Jankélévitch’s variations on ethics simply ask for courage and reflection in the face of inconsistent unknowing.

The Ineffable—Beyond Western Art Music

Might we read Jankélévitch as asking us to loosen our fixation upon canonical forms of modernist resistance? This is not to say that fantasies of modernist historicism (to borrow Seth Brodsky’s recent term) are simply false, ideological, or without efficacy (Brodsky 2017). It is that Jankélévitch’s moderation and scepticism is also a caution against the heated and often privileged desire for scholars to prescribe one virtuous fracture against another. For Jankélévitch reminds us that we might not know, and what’s more, we might not connect—or could even somewhat ironically be embarrassed that we do connect. Or we could remain unsure ourselves, habitually misrecognizing aspects of our own desire. This would not be a refusal of form, or language, or discipline, nor is it an un-reflexive dive into de-territorializing affects. It would be an honest response to the specificity of the musical medium. Being responsive to the medium, in our view, enables one to be ethically open towards a fracture that one does not know, or may never know.

It was Jankélévitch’s relish, his affirmation of resounding music whatever its physical source that nourished an ideal: more inclusive, hospitable, and flexible approaches that could
evolve from pondering music’s ineffability. One starting point is Jankélévitch’s stance towards the physical media that music inhabits. In *Music and the Ineffable*, he asks: “But exactly *where* in the end, is music? Is it in the piano, or on the level of the vibrating string? Does it slumber within the score? Or maybe it sleeps in the grooves of the record? Is it to be found on the tip of the conductor’s baton?” (2003, 91). Here, the LP record and the physically vibrating string can comfortably cohabitate within the same sentence, with no abyss being opened out between them. In his musings about all of the resounding that forms music might take, Jankélévitch suggested an ontology of music without strong borders, and hence felt no need for an essay on the reifying dangers of “The Question Concerning Technology” (Heidegger 1997) or on “The Curves of the Needle” (Adorno 1990). Jankélévitch’s question—exactly where in the end is music?—suggests ontological porousness. It hints at ways music’s ephemeral specificity could take shape in a multitude of material and technological circumstances, according to protocols and idioms that might remain only partly intelligible and even perplexing to their listeners. Jankélévitch’s question indexes a virtuous modesty tied to a keen ear.

In this context, it would appear that recording technologies—the devices and systems of techniques of all sorts, from Edison to the LP, to drum machines, modern audio compression, streaming audio, and highly malleable software for the performance of electronic music like Ableton Live—in our view, these media multiply the stakes of Jankélévitch’s conception of music’s ineffability. Insofar as Jankélévitch affirms that music’s only real materiality (the inconsistency of sound) is foundational to its non-linguistic significance, then to write, edit, sculpt, manipulate, and reproduce this inconsistency is to let the object drift freely from normative coordinates once reified by the narrow literacy of the work-concept. Meanwhile, as many scholars of the new organology have contended, technological media through which music becomes material express odd and peculiar forms
of agency all their own, rarely paying much heed to the dogma of gatekeepers (formalists, purists, Luddites, audiophiles, or gear fetishists). In the present era of sophisticated technological reproduction, the sites through which music’s ontology takes flight just keep coming. New historical and technological conditions do not do away with music’s object-hood: performances, albums, songs, works, sessions, solos, remixes and the like continue to individuate an increasingly complex world of sound. As a result, life within that world of sound, and within the world of those who contemplate sound and music, is irrevocably pluralized.

More broadly, an inclusive material future for the ineffable could go hand-in-hand with an inclusive conceptual one, in a way that extends far beyond Jankélévitch’s writings. Far outside the annals of Western Art music, music’s ineffability has of course been an object of speculation and perplexity in ways that carry rich and polyphonic social weight. Complex and centuries-long traditions of Sufi mysticism have developed elaborately conceived approaches to the idea that music is incommensurable with language. (For an introductory text see Ernst 1997.) In Hinduism, the Sanskrit concept of Nada Brahman finds an ancient origin in the Upanishads where the vocalization of a single mystical syllable—“Om”—captures the transcendent character of spiritual ascent or a pure fulfilment of desire (Beck 1993). In the lineages of Taoism in Chinese thought, the music of a shamanistic “Great Man” was seen as a vehicle for inexpressible forms of intoxication (Kohn 1992). From a modern perspective, geographically distant from Asia, at the turn of the twentieth-century W. E. B. Du Bois wrote powerfully of the way “Sorrow Songs” sung by African-American slaves and their descendants carried “a message [that] is naturally veiled and half articulate,” that embodied “a strange world of an unknown tongue” (Du Bois 1989, 210). Frederick Douglass, decades earlier, had written about the “ineffable” sadness he felt in hearing such songs (Douglass 1849, 8–15). And within the transnational flows of immigration in the Americas,
Jairo Moreno (2004) has explored the ways Latin Jazz enacted a uniquely sonic counterpoint of cultural syncopation that was not articulated in any individual Latin American locale, but instead came about only in the fusions and fissures of musical collaboration.

Moreover, many practitioners themselves think and work in such philosophical terms. In the world of postwar modernism, George Lewis’s history of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians details the essential importance of mysticism among pioneering Afro-modernists like Roscoe Mitchell, Muhal Richard Abrams, and Sun Ra (Lewis 2008). In an adjacent milieu, Alice Coltrane, in her adoption of post-bop, Indian music, and Hinduism, used music’s ineffability as the backbone for formal experimentation amidst the misogynistic currents of the 1960s and ’70s jazz press (see Berkman 2010). More recently, Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth conceded that her stage persona was “mysterious”, “opaque”, “enigmatic”, and even “cold.” She then writes revealingly: “Maybe for a performer that’s what a stage becomes; a space you can fill up with what can’t be expressed or gotten anywhere else” (K. Gordon 2015, 12). And in a space outside language, since 2008, Kanye West has made a habit of mysteriously long and empty outros, blank refrains devoid of lyrics, and meandering auto-tuned vocals that have been manipulated to the point of being nearly anonymous.9 Such practices are neither irrational nor flighty; they exemplify, in sensory form, a vernacular philosophical thinking about ineffability.

They also echo facets of a contention once made by a forgotten giant in aesthetics, Susanne Langer. The artist, claims Langer, “is not saying anything, not even about the nature of feeling; [s]he is showing” (1953, 392). Note that this aphorism resonates strongly with Jankélévitch’s disquisition on the difference between doing and saying (2003, 77–88). Langer elaborates upon this proposal in the opening pages of Feeling and Form (1953), enjoining her readers to attend to the poetic, expressive, and intuitive components of art-making. As she put it: “the most vital issues in the philosophy of art stem from the studio” (1953, 14). Her notion
of showing rather than saying pushes against the culturally sanctioned reduction of philosophy to speaking, and to semiotic exactitude. It raises an ethical question, whether there are other ways to participate in intellectual interchange that have been overlooked or de-legitimized, a question relevant to everyday life, to our teaching and our interactions with students. The possibility that processes of showing have a discernable and instructive wisdom to them paves the way to what we think of as a vernacular philosophy: “what artisans, composers, engineers, or technicians are doing . . . represent[ing] an engagement with problems that are also causing perplexities upstairs in conventional philosophy” (Abbate 2016, 797).

By what method might one retrieve such vernacular engagements, where wisdom on music’s ineffability is being articulated beyond great works of the European past? Simply romanticising unfamiliar traditions is, of course, not the answer. Jankélévitch’s philosophy after all encourages one to take a critical distance from scholarly fantasies that a particular compositional métier, or musical tradition, can reliably perform specific political work. Or that music can manage, for example, when rendered into a symbol, fracture, or an exemplar, to wake us tout court to the continued scarring left by colonialism. Or slay the dragons of neoliberalism. Not because the systematic hierarchies and abuses of colonialism and capitalism are simply here to stay—they undeniably encapsulate the formidable endurance of social exploitation and inequality—but because the scholarly act of treasuring one’s own (or one’s favourite) fracture as the authorized resistance to injustice can easily collapse into idealised echo chambers—a defensive narcissism, or a fetishised romanticism.

Thinking about the ineffable along these lines does lend itself to an overarching virtue that is both ethical and political, one that is easier to affirm in theory than it is to set into motion as a practice: pluralism and the unconditional principle of inclusion it presupposes. Far afield from Western Art music traditions, it asks us to accord a wider multiplicity of
forms both legitimacy and social weight, and to do so while remaining alert to their specific medium (musical sound), its many mediations, and what that medium is doing. It also asks us to take on board a practical and detailed sense of the weight of what is known and unknown, heard and unheard in these forms. To be self-aware about our immersion in them, or distance from them. To take note of what remains opaque, problematic, awkward, and still hierarchical across cultural lines. To do this, to pay attention to what remains ineffable, is not to blind us to the elaborate web of social context. It is to caution us to acknowledge that in no specific form or genre, from this or that place or time, will music per se conform to a scholar’s ideals for social change. Music’s inconsistency—its medium-specific resistance to being made into a dragon-slayer of injustices—does not stop at national, international, genre-specific, or cultural borders.

We (the present authors) are ourselves advocates of speculative, interpretive reflections on the medium. But we want to express philosophical caution about the scholarly fantasy of salvation-by-analogy, so that we might instead ponder the ineffable as consonant with a sober attentiveness to all music, up to and including vernacular sources of sound at the outer limits of audibility. This sober attentiveness would make room for reticence, diffidence, and another order of thought within and against prefabricated critiques that seem to digest and present music’s social and political meaning too conveniently. While attending to sound, and noting that its medium is inconsistent, music’s ineffability still supports the outward step to politics, ethics, history, and society. At the same time, it may also serve to remind us how important it is to plainly grasp and attend to an injustice for what it is.

The politics of what counts as listening, what counts as music, what counts as legitimate forms of thinking and reflecting, does however, directly inhabit what we do. In this regard, we share a conviction that philosophical insights are paralleled, qualified, and enriched by practitioners and non-philosophers who work in a multitude of cultural milieus.
Threading one’s way through the critical perplexity embodied by Jankélévitch’s thinking on the ineffable could, as we have argued, open on to a historically responsive and openly practical conception of philosophy, in which forms of wisdom also come from musicians, engineers, problem-solvers: non-philosophers. Taking technicity seriously invites this. Many think and work far from the centres of power among intellectual authorities, but with equal speculative rigor about the affordances of the medium, even if they don’t express it in terms that register professionally as philosophy. There is much to be learned by amplifying and clarifying the stakes of this vernacular philosophical thinking. By attending to the speculative thought of non-philosophers, philosophy might move beyond its own provincial spheres of the usual masterworks. It might build bridges with all those who now wrestle with the complex and global currents of music’s life.

1 A multi-disciplinary assessment is given in Jonas 2016. Jonas undertakes a systematic examination of how one might think of the ineffable as a way of knowing exemplified by a foundational experience of what she calls “self-acquaintance.” Many thanks to João Pedro Cachopo, Martha Feldman, Laurie Lee, Tomas McAuley, Amy Skjerseth, an anonymous reviewer, and the participants of Martha Feldman’s graduate seminar “Techne, Body, Memory” at the University of Chicago for their generous feedback on earlier drafts of this chapter.

2 Jankélévitch’s metaphorical fields, as well as his assignments of import to improvisation, have been shadowed by Lydia Goehr, who writes about improvisation impromptu as a “concept of wit and fit, of doing exactly the right thing or wrong thing in the moment,” (2016, 459. The critical terms are right and wrong.

3 Jankélévitch’s original reads as follows: “En premier lieu l’improvisation est négativement guide, c’est-à-dire limitée, canalisée, définie par les possibilités et impossibilités techniques de l’instrument à la surface duquel elle prend corps: tout n’est pas réalisable, et le possible
n’a ni le même sens ni les mêmes limites au saxophone, à la flute, sur le clavier du piano ou pour la voix humaine; il y a la tessiture et la portée, les intervalles, les doigtés et plus généralement l’écriture instrumentale, les impératifs et interdits du métier étant fonction de la matière vibrante d’une part, des capacités de la main, du larynx ou du souffle d’autre part.”

4 Jankélévitch’s original reads as follows: “Mais c’est au niveau de la matière vibrante elle-même que le chercheur d’impromptus retrouve ces constellations harmoniques et mélodiques. Les doigts, caressant l’ivoire des touches, tiennent déjà la rhapsodie naissante au bout de leurs filets nerveux: la main errante effleure le clavier, et voici que les mélismes se lèvent en foule, dictés à la fois par l’innervation musculaire et la préférence auriculaire, part les habitudes kinesthésiques et les réminiscences, par les tendances sensorimotrices et le tropisme associative, par la physiologie des doigtés et la suggestion des souvenirs; la main inspire, docile à la gravitation des cadences et des modulations autant qu’à l’appel de ses terminaisons sensorielles, réinvente toute la musique sans même s’en apercevoir.”

5 Nietzsche, riffing on Schopenhauer writes of music’s ineffability in The Birth of Tragedy (2000, 42): “The world symbolism of music utterly exceeds the grasp of language, because it refers symbolically to the original contradiction and pain at the heart of the original Unity, and therefore symbolizes a sphere which exists over and above all phenomena. In comparison with this, all phenomena are merely allegories: so language, as organ and symbol of phenomena, can never reveal the innermost depths of music, and as soon as it engages in the imitation of music, can only ever skim the surface, while even the most eloquent lyric poetry is powerless to bring the deepest meaning of music as much as one step closer to us.”

6 Adorno’s critique of the immediacy of existentialism is a recurring question raised by P. Gordon 2016.

7 For a powerful animation of the more open-ended potentialities in Adorno’s meditation on the phonograph, see Moten 2004.
8 See Jacques Rancière’s famous slogan, the “distribution of the sensible,” which has sought to recover the ontological inventiveness of nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetic production. See especially Rancière 2013. Also, Denning 2015 narrates the phonograph’s role in vernacular musical traditions worldwide.

9 An early example of Kanye West’s vast empty outros occurs in the second half of “Say You Will,” *808s & Heartbreak* (Rock-a-Fella, 2008); another exemplar (with auto-tune) is “Blood on the Leaves” (Def Jam Recordings, 2013).


