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**Dissecting the Musical Body:
Analyzing the Influence of Body Norms on Musical Discourse**

Lauren del Rosario

Honor Scholar Thesis

DePauw University

April 10, 2023

Sponsor: Dr. Eliza Brown

Committee: Dr. Amity Reading, Dr. Derek Ford

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Introduction

Disability has emerged as a key area of inquiry in the arts and humanities within the last three decades alongside other intersectional aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. All the arts and humanities employ implicit embodiment metaphors – or comparisons which use familiar bodily experiences to explain abstract concepts – in their language and academic theory. To be effective, these implicit embodiment metaphors rely on a universalized human experience, creating a normative body – often a healthy, wealthy, white, male body – that excludes marginalized bodies such as those of people who identify as disabled. Interdisciplinary and poststructuralist discourses have allowed many arts and humanities disciplines to better identify and rectify the harm of excluding those with non-normative bodies.

Music as an art form can be perceived as a common human experience that connects people across cultures and differences and can communicate abstract thoughts and emotions without words. However, music studies itself fails to include disability, falling behind other disciplines in the arts and humanities. One reason for this lateness lies in the difficulty of translating music theory and musicology terminology for audiences outside of music academia, which makes music theory impenetrable to other disciplines. In my thesis, I intend to 1) explore disability studies as a subfield in music theory, education studies, and other humanities disciplines, and 2) bring these discourses together with plain language. Then, I will distill this discourse into a music theory approach – or a method of music analysis that focuses on addressing scholarly perspectives, reframing “difference,” and recognizing the work of diverse creators through scholarship.

Music theory has not widely discussed specific tools for disablist music theory due to the newness of disability as a subfield and limitations in scholarly perspective. Most research into

music and disability emerged in the last twenty years. Although canonical classical music repertoire includes many works by composers with physical and mental disabilities, theoretical literature about these composers and their works scarcely investigates the connections between music, musical discourse, and disability. Furthermore, most of this literature comes from music theorists, and this literature contains music theory jargon that is not accessible to individuals outside the discipline. Many music theorists may not consider an interdisciplinary audience or the potential other disciplines have to contribute to music theory and disability. In my own writing, I hope to increase scholarship about underrepresented composers and music about disabled figures through a musical analysis of Amy Beth Kirsten's chamber opera *Ophelia Forever*.

Music theory often conducts a norm-centric discourse: listeners must distinguish between the normal, or expected forms, and the abnormal, or the deformed ones. Music analysts seek to justify formal and harmonic abnormalities within normative structures. For instance, sixteenth-century Western classical music followed strict compositional rules for consonance and dissonance. Like their general definitions, consonance and dissonance refer to the subjective compatibility of simultaneous notes – or a set of two or more pitches played at the same time. To the Western ear, consonant chords sound stable because they have simple frequency ratios: for instance, in an octave, the top frequency is exactly twice that of the lower pitch (1:2). Conversely, dissonant harmonies have more complex frequencies. For example, minor seconds have a frequency ratio of 15:16. Other cultures, geographies, and musical genres have different perceptions of consonance and dissonance. The particular tuning of these intervals to ratios reflects Western music's roots in Ancient Greece. Therefore, this association alone between

dissonance as “bad” and consonance as “good” underscores the arbitrary prioritization of pitch in music theory, as well as the use of binary value judgements to evaluate music.

In historical Western sacred music, consonant chords were preferable to dissonant ones because they were thought to sound more harmonious and heavenly; if a piece contained dissonant chords, the dissonance had to resolve to consonance. However, in the sixteenth century, Monteverdi (1567-1643) began to exploit dissonance for the sake of representing unpleasant emotions within the music, such as grief. This divergence from genre rules caused great controversy. Traditionalists perceived Monteverdi’s use of dissonance in sacred music as incorrect. However, this connotation of consonance as “good” and dissonance as “bad” is limited to sacred music as a genre and to this historical period; music composers and listeners use dissonance more liberally than Monteverdi in classical music today. However, in the sixteenth-century, Palestrina and other proponents of traditional harmonic progressions evaluated Monteverdi’s harmonies as abnormal or deformed.

However, the word “deformed” did not come into use generally until the nineteenth century alongside the nineteenth-century definition of disability.¹ The medical model of disability defines disability as a lack or a deformity in the human body. This model attempts to correct disability through medicine and therapy; however, modern medicine can only treat impairments, a term in the medical model that denotes a “problem” in a person’s body that limits functionality. Disability, the social repercussions of limited functionality, results after the failure of modern medicine to treat a medical abnormality.² Similarly, music theory diagnoses and tries

¹ James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 615.

² Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling A Transformative Body Politic*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 19.

to resolve impairments within music by justifying their utility in the larger structure of the piece. For instance, in Schenkerian analysis, Heinrich Schenker resolves tonal impairments – pitches that exist outside the work’s primary pitch trajectory – by explaining their purpose as transitory material that brings the work to its final shape. This process of justifying difference in music makes music theory prescriptive, and often affects the ways in which contemporary audiences listen or the methods by which composers write music.

A more recent definition of disability considers the ways in which prescriptive and oppressive societal behaviors hinder disabled people more than their own impairments. The social model of disability “views disability as socially created such that disability oppression is linked to the material and ideological transformations of capitalism.”³ This definition confronts the exact ideologies responsible for creating structural inequity. To do so, it identifies disability stigma’s harms for the purpose of remedying them through means beyond language.

Contemporary music theorists, such as Joseph Straus, strive to portray disabled bodies through the social model,⁴ although latent themes of embodiment within theoretical language inhibit their success. While this theory addresses inadequacies found in the medical model, the social model itself received critique for treating impairment as a value-laden term.⁵ To address this concern, recent scholarship yields new models such as the biosocial model and the collective model. The advantages and disadvantages to using these models, or any one particular model, will be

³ Ibid.

⁴ Joseph Straus, *Broken Beauty: Musical Modernism and the Representation of Disability*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 173. In the section “Theorizing Modernist Music: Some (Mostly) Disablist Theories,” Straus lists three theoretical narratives that, to him, “embrace. . . neurodiversity and biodiversity:” Schoenberg [Nonharmonic tones], Princeton School, and Transformation Theory.

⁵ Erevelles, 36.

explored further in my discussion of extradisciplinary methodology, or principles not yet bridged between disciplines.

Using an interdisciplinary lens, I hope to circumvent these obstacles to achieving *disablist* music theory,⁶ or musical analysis which celebrates all bodies and their forms of difference. This informed disablist music theory – which borrows theorist Joseph Straus’ term, but not his approach – will consider questions such as 1) to what extent is applying normative mindsets about the body to musical works harmful; 2) what does current disablist music theory look like in practice; and 3) how should it look, when considering sensitivity to language and the complex history between art and politics? Education studies can help remedy the schism between music theory – analysis of organized sonic events – and musicology – the study of music, with special attention to performance, history, anthropology, and aesthetics. Studying education encourages familiarity with historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts to best prioritize human dignity, access, and wellness within social justice.⁷ Furthermore, education studies specializes in honing critical thinking and pedagogy to engage communities in cognitive and conceptual change. These aspects of education studies will help me to establish a disablist music theory that both effectively engages in conceptual change and emphasizes human dignity and access.

Although I aim to increase accessibility for specialists in other disciplines to understand music theory, my intention is not to recommend accommodations for disabled composers, performers, or concert attendees. This paper’s primary focus will be to recognize the extent to

⁶ Straus, *Broken Beauty*, 156.

⁷ DePauw University, “Education Studies Mission,” accessed November 7, 2022, <https://www.depauw.edu/academics/departments-programs/education-studies/info-for-current-students/education-studies-mission/>.

which antiquated cultural values limit musical discourse and to conjecture how re-historization and critical interdisciplinary work can address this limitation. To accomplish this task, I seek to explain music theory history to non-music-academics in accessible language. I will demonstrate one potential application of my findings through a disablist musical analysis reflective of my newfound historical and interdisciplinary knowledge. This analysis unveils meanings less-commonly explored within the work, and presents these findings in an unconventional, interdisciplinary fashion.

Considering the newness of music and disability discourse, I recognize the potential this research has to influence other music specialties. Understanding and critiquing disablist music theory helps current musicians to better understand the function that music serves within a community and how to increase accessibility for a more diverse audience. DePauw's twenty-first century music program (21CM) deals in these discussions, and my thesis could have an impact on the university's community collaborations. Some of the critical questions that I consider in my research apply to interactions between contemporary musicians and their communities. For instance, to what extent is it important for a scholar to approach a work from a similar ideological approach as the composer or author, and then apply a similarly-informed lens? or is it important to tailor a critical lens to each piece of music, or should it have universality? Engaging in these conversations can lend insight to entrepreneurial endeavors that intend to expand diversity and inclusion. This research can guide music entrepreneurs to consider to what extent of community awareness should current and emerging professional musicians have before offering services or imposing their own external perspectives? and to what extent should DEI efforts be tailored to each situation and community, or universally applied?

My thesis does not intend to provide a definitive answer to the question of how all disablist music theory should look, nor does it intend to “cure” music theory of its ableism. In fact, I believe that no model will ever be sufficient for everyone or over a long period of time. My thesis aims to encourage further movement in music theory to dismantle its ableist structures through ongoing self-awareness and reflection. In this process, I will also translate musical and disability jargon into popular terminology so that these disciplines can more easily inform one another. I hope my interrogation of current disablist music theory through an interdisciplinary lens will help musicians and audience members alike understand their “habitus of listening” – the kinds of subjectivities we presume, and the ideologies and presuppositions we bring to musical listening.⁸ By critically engaging with a composer or scholar's ideological approach to portraying disability, we can more consciously evaluate and revise our own cultural and personal lens.

⁸ Judith Becker, “Exploring the Habitus of Listening: Anthropological Perspectives,” eds. P.N. Juslin & J.A. Sloboda, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 130.

Chapter 1: Defining the Space

The American music theory space today reflects changes made within the last fifty years, including the music theory/musicology schism and the introduction of postmodern, post-structural, and feminist discourse. Western music theory analyzes sonic phenomena, describing sound-organizing practices such as form, rhythm, and tuning. This scholarship included music, musicians and their performances as part of one undivided study until the Society for Music Theory (SMT) broke ranks with the American Musicological Society (AMS) in 1977, following which music theory attempted to “focus on ‘musical structure’ apart from any historical, cultural, or performative features surrounding music or musical works.”⁹ This theoretical focus in turn repurposed the term “musicology” from meaning “the study of music” to describing music analysis that emphasizes culture and history.

Separating music analysis from cultural and historical context gives music theory a false sense of objectivity.¹⁰ The illusion of false objectivity bases itself in the failure to recognize the subjectivity of all human experience. It masks implicit biases against marginalized groups inherent in norm-centric music theory and creates a barrier to critique. Take, for instance, Schenkerian Theory, a method of analyzing pitch in tonal music with the goal to demonstrate organic coherence in an abstracted deep structure. In “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame,” Philip Ewell discusses the importance of understanding the interconnection between Schenker’s music theory and his positionality as a German nationalist.¹¹ While other music

⁹ Judy Lochhead, “Music’s Vibratory Enchantments and Epistemic Injustices: Reflecting on Thirty Years of Feminist Thought in Music Theory,” (ZGMTH 17/1, 2020), 17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 16.

¹¹ Philip Ewell, “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame,” *Music Theory Online* 25, no 2, (June 2019).

theorists choose to separate Schenker's racism from his music theory, Ewell argues that Schenker's understanding of music is informed by his racist values:

“Schenker decried the mixing of politics with music. . . Yet the notion of hierarchy, of a strict ordering of the tones of a composition, is so thoroughly consistent with his deeply conservative outlook on life and culture that *it is difficult to uncouple his theory entirely from two of his most consistently expressed ideological stances*: (1) the centrality of the German people in European culture, underscored by their preeminence in music, and (2) the steady decline of culture and political order in Europe since the late eighteenth century, ultimately resulting in the complete demise of musical art by the beginning of the twentieth century.”¹²

The methodology itself may not contain Schenker's racist language, but the idea of organizing pitches in a hierarchy directly parallels his perspective on the hierarchy of races. Whitewashing Schenkerian analysis superficially removes its historical context, giving a sense of “transcendent ‘immutability’” that protects racialized structures that benefit whites over people of color.¹³ Furthermore, using Schenkerian analysis without understanding its racialized structure actively marginalizes all non-German participants in music by leaving intact the latent assumption that German music is the ideal. By extension, any uncritical use of music theory allows latent oppressive structures to limit the potential of music theory to apply to all peoples.

Long-term false objectivity in music theory leads to a white, able-bodied, cis-gender male homogeneity. In “Music's Vibratory Enchantments and Epistemic Injustices,” Judy Lochhead discusses the legacy of this musicological schism on the demographic composition of those engaged in music theory discourse: for instance, “in 2017, AMS was 51.2% female and 48.5% male, while SMT was 31.6% female and 66.4% male.” Lochhead further calls attention to how “for SMT, the number of women who are members has hovered persistently around 30% over

¹² William Drabkin, “Heinrich Schenker,” quoted in Philip Ewell, “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame,” *Music Theory Online*, 25, no 2, (June 2019), 11. (Italics by Ewell.)

¹³ Ewell, “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame,” 7.

the last thirty years despite efforts to encourage female participation.”¹⁴ The SMT’s most recent demographic report supports this statement, reflecting no significant difference in gender representation: in 2021, the SMT reported that, of its 1,028 members, 61.09% male, 31.91% female, and 0.39% gender neutral.¹⁵ The statistically significant difference in the ratio of men to women between the AMS and SMT suggests that fundamental aspects of the music theory field exclude participation by women.

Feminist theorists have devised theories to challenge false objectivity within the sciences, some of which experience severe gender imbalances. Lohead identifies Sandra Harding’s tripart feminist standpoint theory as an important work in investigating the “relation between the production of knowledge and practices of power.”¹⁶ The theory consists of three theses: “the situated knowledge thesis, the thesis of epistemic privilege, and the achievement thesis.” The first thesis states that all knowledge is partial, and emphasizes the importance of context for interpreting music theory.¹⁷ The second thesis holds that a theorist’s partiality must be “examined with respect to the episteme privileged in any particular group,” acknowledging the ability of any particular mode to exclude individuals within a social group.¹⁸ The third thesis states that dominant frameworks are achieved through group consensus, and that understanding these frameworks informs our understanding about the creation of norms and structural inequity. All these theses inform how theorists such as Lohead examine disability in music theory.

¹⁴ Lohead, “Music’s Vibratory Enchantments and Epistemic Injustices,” 18.

¹⁵ Society of Music Theory, “Annual Report on Membership Demographics,” (SMT, December 2021), 6.

¹⁶ Lohead, “Music’s Vibratory Enchantments and Epistemic Injustices,” 19.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The second thesis of epistemic privilege is the most pertinent in dismantling false objectivity within music theory. Recognizing the partiality within embodiment and organicist metaphors is critical to understanding and redressing the harm caused by these oppressive ideologies. Objectivist theory thus far has not accounted for the ways in which embodiment metaphors and organicist metaphors disguise covert values through musical enchantment. Lohead underscores the importance of studying “enchantments,” or the body and its effects, as an area of study ignored by the objectivist and structuralist frame: “Enchanted places of music, associated as they are with the body and its affects, have eluded explicit thought in modern music theory, especially in its facile objectivist and structuralist epistemic frame. The enchantments of music have posed both an enticing presence and an epistemological hurdle for twentieth-century music studies which were built around the dualisms of mind versus body, objective versus subjective, and rationality versus emotionality.”¹⁹ Each of these dualisms correlate in some way to the most basic binary opposition, “good” versus “bad.” Music theory has tended to prefer objectivity over subjectivity, and rationality over emotionality. However, when theorists embed these dualisms into music theory, these subjective associations between “mind” as good and “body” as bad are discreetly made to appear objective.

Feminist theory and post-structural criticism began to reshape these epistemic frames in the 1990s, introducing “approaches addressing human experience, gesture, listening, timbre, and other aspects of music which defy objectivist thought.”²⁰ Lohead mentions the SMT’s promising November 2019 meeting, in which “there was rather a euphoric embrace of the new directions suggested in the pathways towards ‘reframing.’” However, these new perspectives have not yet diversified the demographics of musicology, leaving North American musicology and the

¹⁹ Ibid., 20.

²⁰ Ibid.

demographics of music theory “dominated by white, male practitioners.”²¹ Further disciplinary transformation must occur to properly include individuals of all forms of difference, such as through the creation of disablist music theory.

I. Disablist Music Theory Precedents

Disablist music theory discourse to date is confined to a limited bibliography by a small handful of music theorists. “Music and Disability at the SMT and AMS,” a blog for the Society of Music Theory (SMT) and American Musicological Society (AMS) contains a primer that introduces musicians to the subfield,²² a database of musical works that feature a disabled person or disability,²³ and catalogs a variety of scholarly research on music and disability.²⁴ Blake Howe’s introduction to the basic principles of Disability Studies most relevant for musicologists and music theorists includes a summary of disability as culture, models of disability, and disability narrative. The database, also created by Blake Howe, organizes works based on impairment, year, composer, and genre. Although the works contain diversity in genre and temporal range, including musical representations of disability from as early as the fifteenth century, the entries act as a starting point for music and disability studies listening. The

²¹ Ibid., 15.

²² Blake Howe, “Disability Studies for Musicians: An Introduction,” *Music and Disability at the SMT and AMS*, <https://musicdisabilitystudies.wordpress.com/2013/11/20/disability-studies-for-musicians-an-introduction/>.

²³ Blake Howe, “Musical Representations of Disability,” *Music and Disability at the SMT and AMS*, ed. Charlotte Armstrong, <https://www.lsu.edu/faculty/bhowe/disability-representation.html>.

²⁴ “Bibliography,” *Music and Disability at the SMT and AMS*, last modified September 18, 2019, accessed December 12, 2022, <https://musicdisabilitystudies.wordpress.com/bibliography/>. See also “Works in Progress,” “Recent Publications,” and “Pedagogy” for more resources.

SMT/AMS’s bibliography, also vast and detailed, reflects the field’s limited participation and novelty, with publication dates almost exclusively contained within the twenty-first century: many of the sources reflect the small few with the largest voices within music disability studies. When adding the “Bibliography” into Voyant Tools²⁵ – an AI tool to analyze web-based text –, the two most popular voices emerge in the top twenty words: Howe (54) and Straus (33). In the context of a “Bibliography” containing 278 sources, these are considerable percentages (20% and 12%, respectively).

Terms				Count	Trend
			Term		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1	disability	186	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	music	168	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	new	121	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	university	114	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5	york	107	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	6	studies	102	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	7	press	100	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	8	oxford	99	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	9	edited	93	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	10	howe	54	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	11	et	48	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	12	al	48	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	13	handbook	47	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	14	journal	37	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	15	straus	33	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	16	routledge	33	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	17	musical	32	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	18	american	30	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	19	popular	29	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	20	https	27	

Figure 1. Voyant Analysis of “Bibliography”

Joseph Straus, the second most prominent voice within contemporary music theory according to the “Bibliography,” has authored and edited numerous books that engage disability and become a standard reference within the interdisciplinary discourse between music theory and disability studies. Straus’s first works on music and disability concentrate on the role of music in creating disability as an abstraction, another otherness category in line with race/ethnicity and gender/sexuality. Straus’s first article on music and disability “Normalizing the Abnormal:

²⁵ Sinclair, Stéfan and Geoffrey Rockwell. Voyant Tools, (2016).

Disability in Music and Music Theory” contextualizes the discourse between disability and music as one of the many interdisciplinary discourses emerging between disability studies and the humanities.²⁶ Straus’s first substantial publication, *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, co-edited by Neil Lerner, contains essays on narrating, performing, and composing disability musically, with specialized topics such as Andrew Oster’s “Melisma as Malady: Cavalli’s *Il Giasone* (1649) and Opera’s Earliest Stuttering Role” and Stephanie Jensen-Moulton’s “Reconsidering ‘Blind Tom Wiggins.’”²⁷ For the most part, the authors of these essays merely suggest disability as a framework for analysis within pre-existing works in canonical Western music and music-theater.

Straus did not evaluate the connections between musical discourse and disability studies until his first book on disability in music theory, *Extraordinary Measures: Music and Disability* (2011).²⁸ *Extraordinary Measures* reflects on the consideration of the social model of disability in some music theory analysis, concentrating on the ways in which composers, performers, listeners, music theory traditions, and works embody and construct disability. His sixth chapter “Disability within Music-Theoretical Traditions” highlights the importance of embodiment metaphors in shaping traditional music theory discourse. The central metaphor of music theory, according to Straus, states that any work of music, or a corpus, is a living human body: “Just as the concept of the normal depends on an often-unarticulated concept of the abnormal, the concept of the praiseworthy organic (i.e., the harmonious, symmetrical body) depends on the

²⁶ Joseph Straus, “Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 59, no. 1 (2006), 113–84.

²⁷ Neil William Lerner and Joseph Nathan Straus, *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*. (New York: Routledge, 2006.)

²⁸ Joseph Straus, *Extraordinary Measures: Music and Disability*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.)

concept of the disabled organic (i.e., the deformed, disabled body).”²⁹ This nineteenth-century organicist metaphor underlies many beloved musical compositions from this time period. In upholding these works as the nonpareil standards for classical music, participants in the musical canon reinforce these antiquated organic values through their appreciation of purportedly organic qualities, such as harmony or symmetry.

Janet Levy highlights the role of organicist metaphor in music analysis, especially in texts that seek to establish a musical work’s legitimacy. In her article “Covert and Casual Values in Recent Writings about Music,” Levy exposes the tradition of using organicist values and vocabulary as seemingly objective, positive descriptors.³⁰ For instance, the seed metaphor – a musical idea growing or flowering from a seed – implicitly projects ideas about beauty and goodness onto a musical subject.³¹ This example lies among the more explicit organicist metaphors: the understanding that flowering in an artistic context almost exclusively connotes goodness is clear. Most organicist metaphors more covertly convey values, and require more historical and institutional context to fully understand. For example, in the European Romantic aesthetic, musical valuations of economy – or works void of non-essential elements and details – allude to organicism because “nature is economical.”³² Confronting artistic economy in writing about music reveals the meaninglessness in attributing organicist values to musical works. For instance, Levy critiques David Hughes’ praise of Haydn’s thematic economy as an inhibitor to

²⁹ Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, 103.

³⁰ Janet Levy, “Covert and Casual Values in Recent Writings about Music,” *Journal of Musicology* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 4-5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 7.

discussion of “other, and possibly more important or telling attributes of value.”³³ Levy also problematizes belief in thematic economy’s value when analyzing a thematically abundant piece, in which a “hidden economy ‘must’ be found” to qualify the work as good. Nonsensical and ridden with covert nineteenth-century values, these positive musical valuations of economy in classical repertoire both signify nothing and diminish the potential for productive analyses of other significant musical phenomena within a piece or genre.

This covert link between nature and economy has implications beyond embodiment metaphors, leading toward a larger investigation of hidden ideologies in music aesthetics. Without fully exploring the extent to which artistic economy exists as an aesthetic value in musical composition, Levy explicates the potential link between the modern existence of artistic economy and covert nineteenth-century values:

“The provenance of economy qua artistic value seems both varied and suggestive. A few likely sources may be 1) the ingrained, though perhaps mistaken, belief that nature itself is economical and that to mirror nature is a priori ‘good’; 2) the Protestant dictate of ‘waste not, want not’ and the sequel to that, ‘a penny saved is a penny earned’; 3) the economic notion of getting the maximum return on a minimum investment.”³⁴

This passage outlines the nineteenth-century American philosophies that echo within embodiment metaphors – Romanticism, Protestantism, and capitalism. Although Levy limits her discussion of economy, disability scholars such as Nirmala Erevelles spend more time discussing this foregrounding of the “‘natural’ as intensely political, and as a result, often intensely oppressive.”³⁵ More specifically, in *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic*, Erevelles connects disability and capitalist oppression by evaluating their complex, interrelated economic/social relations within the historical context of

³³ Ibid., 8

³⁴ Ibid., 11.

³⁵ Erevelles, 53.

transnational capitalism.³⁶ I will return to Erevelles later in the paper to examine these relationships more closely and to make the connection between her argument and mine more explicit. Nonetheless, Levy hints towards the more global role and long-term role that organicist metaphors play in ideological oppressions through their epistemic privilege. In confronting this epistemic privilege, Levy calls for music analyses with explicit reasons and judgements. This theoretical opacity underlies developments made in current disablist music theories to dismantle oppressive ideological frameworks.

Another common music-theoretical framework influenced by the intersection of oppressive and antiquated ideologies is sonata theory. A sonata form is a three-part musical sandwich (ABA), consisting of an introduction to a musical idea (A), a section which toys with the musical idea (B), and a section in which the musical idea returns (A), in that order. This form became popular due to its ability to create compositional unity between its two A sections, while also having an exciting and varied B section. Music theory professors often teach sonata form through Hepokoski and Darcy's *Elements of Sonata Theory* (2006), either explicitly in their book lists or implicitly by distilling information from the book into their own lesson plans.³⁷ Students and professors rarely deconstruct sonata theory's use of the word "deformation" to describe formal abnormality. In the book's often-neglected appendix, Hepokoski and Darcy discuss the significance of using deformation in lieu of synonyms such as abnormality: "deformation," they claim, "is a technical term referring to a striking way of stretching or overriding a norm. As a technical term, they intend it to carry no judgmentally negative connotation, as in some popular usages of the word."³⁸ This definition appears promising, attempting to "adhere" to a social

³⁶ Ibid., 6.

³⁷ James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*.

³⁸ Ibid., 615.

model of disability by destigmatizing deformations. It also shows promise as a predecessor to Straus's disablist music theory, a more extensive approach to reframing deviations as "good" in music theory, which I will discuss later. However, I find three critical issues with their justification for using "deformation:" 1) they attempt to disconnect "deformation" from its etymology, 2) they pretend that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biases do not exist today, and 3) they extend their metaphor of deformation within sonata form to how other musical genres disengage with convention.

Just as musical enchantments hide covert values in music, Hepokoski and Darcy delineate the methods they employ to distinguish "deformation" from its colloquial meaning. One method for distinguishing the colloquial and technical definitions is by disconnecting "deformation" from "deformed:"

"We steer clear of the verb 'to deform' along with (especially) the related word 'deformed' (let alone 'deformity'!) to describe the effect of deformation. Instead of a 'deformed recapitulation' we prefer to write of a 'recapitulation subjected to a deformation.' The abstract noun 'deformation' is cooler, more detached – hopefully, more connotationally, 'technical,' It makes only our noticing (and often relishing) of a remarkably unusual compositional choice; it is not judgmental."³⁹

In the footnotes, they highlight the negative connotations associated with "deformed" and "to deform" in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), but the three definitions for "deformation" also connote negatively: 1) "The action (or result) of deforming or marring the form or beauty of; disfigurement, defacement 2a) Alteration of form for the worse; esp., in controversial use, the opposite of reformation 2b) An altered form of a word in which its proper form is for some purpose perverted."⁴⁰ Even if the OED characterized deformation as neutral, the etymology of

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Deformation, n." OED Online. December 2022. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/48975?redirectedFrom=deformation> (accessed February 24, 2023).

deformation links the noun to its parent verb and relative adjective.⁴¹ Considering that their audience may not understand the nuance they intend to create between the adjective and adverb, this distinction is not effective.

Hepokoski and Darcy further separate their own use of “deformation” from its historical context by discrediting the existence of ableist nineteenth-century ideologies in music theory. They acknowledge that most ““progressive connoisseur[s]”” of the time in which sonata form was in its prime interpreted thematic and structural deformations as “signs of creative vigor,” with “the exception of a few grumbling caveats from waning sectors of ‘old-world’ traditionalists circa 1780-1820:” “they have not been regarded as off-putting disfigurements or ‘disabilities’ to be contrasted with some tacitly posited concept of the supposedly ‘normal’ or ‘well formed’ of how exemplars of the genre ‘ought’ to proceed.”⁴² This depiction both minimizes the harm caused by ableist metaphors in music theory and reduces “disability” to “off-putting disfigurements.” In their long circumlocution to avoid critique, Hepokoski and Darcy further implicate themselves in protecting oppressive frameworks in sonata analysis.

However, according to Hepokoski and Darcy, no genre of music can escape this framework. Each individual work within a genre shares a voice in a continuous interchange between the normative background of genre traditions and their unique compositional statement.

Hepokoski and Darcy describe the framework for this dialogue between composer and genre:

“All genres (indeed, all familiar actions) involve systems of norms and guidelines, typical and expected procedures. In the case of music these are grounded in increments of elapsing time. We are inescapably with the results of laying down compositional decision after decision module

⁴¹ “Deformation” derives from the Latin word *deformationem*, or “the act of changing the form from.” However, entry of “deformation” into the OED in 1835, during the peak of the medical model of disability, suggests that its intended use is for describing abnormality in a norm-centric discourse.

⁴² Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Form*, 618.

after module, in time, presumably with a larger purpose of a grander coherence in view all the while. The result is a temporal process of ongoing dialogue – successive modular decisions that invite us to understand them, one by one (and then conceptually joined together in groups or clusters), according to the guidelines of a backdrop of a set of implied norms for the genre, which the reception community is assumed to share.”⁴³

As specialist educators in music theory, Hepokoski and Darcy benefit from having this framework because it makes teaching rudimentary-level music concepts to beginning musicians easier. Furthermore, for students who elect to study and specialize in classical music, this basic understanding of musical genres suffices. However, this dialogue has less significance to musicians with interest in studying genres less centered in the academy, such as jazz. This dialogic framework also excludes composers who actively resist or reject genre. Therefore, in trying to relate norm-centric practices to other musical genres, Hepokoski and Darcy overgeneralize about the ways in which other music genres and non-genre specific music conceptualize themselves.

In *Extraordinary Measures*, Straus begins to discuss more effective methods by which music theorists diverge from norm-centric discourse; however, he does not draw a definitive line between norm-centric discourse and disablist music theory until *Broken Beauty: Musical Modernism and the Representation of Disability* (2018).⁴⁴ In *Broken Beauty*, his most recent publication on music and disability, Straus problematizes the role of organicism in creating a “therapeutic” music theory.⁴⁵ Following a medical model of disability, Western music theory conducts norm-centric discourses: listeners must distinguish between the normal, or natural forms, and the abnormal, or the deformed ones; meanwhile, music analysts seek to justify formal

⁴³ Ibid., 616.

⁴⁴ Straus, *Broken Beauty*.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 155.

and harmonic abnormalities. Therapeutic music theory, or musical analysis in which abnormalities are normalized within narratives of overcoming, rationalizes musical events in relation to normative models: schemas, form types, conventional harmonic progressions, and voice leading rules.⁴⁶ This therapeutic approach to music theory reinforces a negative characterization of disability as an ailment waiting for a magical cure, contradicting contemporary efforts to celebrate difference.

Furthermore, this approach centers normative models and marginalizes music that deviates from those models. For instance, Schenker's therapeutic model seeks to establish German music as the epitome of classical music and thus supports the pre-existing "White racial frame" in music theory.⁴⁷ Schenker's framework depreciates non-German music by evaluating its worth based on its similarity to paragons of German music. Ewell highlights the ways in which Schenker's discussion of Black music centered around its relationship to European music: "Schenker disparages the music of blacks, namely, 'negro music' and jazz, as well as negro spirituals, claiming that they were 'completely falsified, dishonest expropriation of European music.'"⁴⁸ Schenker's evaluation of non-German music by Germanic music standards fails to portray music by non-German musicians fairly since they share different artistic values than German musicians. In this particular case, it discredits the artistic potential for Black music to have its own artistic integrity and beauty. This theoretical approach thus strips both the music and the musical participants involved in its creation of their humanity, as it reduces their ability to create valuable music separate from German music traditions.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 164.

⁴⁷ Ewell, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 8.

Discussion about the ethical harm inherent in the therapeutic approach manifests itself to some extent in discourse about musical modernism and other contemporary genres in classical music. Straus likens musical modernism to disability as two categories with ambiguous and permeable boundaries:

“We can define modernism in music as we defined disability a moment ago, not as a quality that inheres in a body or work, but rather its relationship to a regulating, normative standard. Modernist music is marked as abnormal with respect to the normatively sounding and functioning music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like disabled bodies, modernist music causes a commotion and seems to require an explanatory story.”⁴⁹

Straus’s definition of musical modernism depicts a similar power relationship between tonal eighteenth and nineteenth century classical music and modern music as the one Ewell portrayed between German music and Black music. Attempting to classify musical modernism using conventional modes of theory, or disability within normative identity, pathologizes difference. Furthermore, according to Straus, our valuation of musical conventions from the eighteenth-and-nineteenth centuries limits our ability to understand and appreciate modern music. In an alternative approach to disablist music theory, I intend to approach a musical work on its own terms rather than to position it against a normative model. For this approach to work, I must consider the question implicit in Straus’s definition of musical modernism: how could a music analyst theorize about music that intentionally seeks to betray the norm, or does not seek to situate itself in relation to norms at all? Later in my thesis, I will provide more explanation as to how I define the pertinent context necessary for musical analysis as well as its role in the aesthetic considerations for a musical work.

Raising awareness of the ethical harm in norm-centric music theory opens discussion for music theorists to interrogate the use of container theories. Containers are specific types of

⁴⁹ Straus, *Broken Beauty*, 6.

image-schemas that imagine bodies as sealed objects: when the container is “punctured in some way (by the extrusion of something from inside the container or a wound from without),” it becomes “distorted (i.e., either expanded or compressed).”⁵⁰ This understanding of the body as a container underlies the distinction between abilities and disabilities. Lakoff and Johnson argue for the necessity of using containers and other image-schema, or “recurring, flexible patterns of our embodied interactions with our environments” in knowledge acquisition:

“Metaphor pervades our normal conceptual system. Because so many of the concepts that are important to use are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (the emotions, ideas, time, etc.), we need to get a grasp on them by other concepts that we understand in clearer terms (spatial orientations, objects, etc.). This need leads to metaphorical definition in our conceptual system.”⁵¹

While these embodied metaphors have some utility in introducing abstract concepts, they can hinder understanding of abstract concepts in situations where the metaphor fails. For instance, the word “out” – which describes the physical movement of an actor to a defined spatial landmark – has literal and figurative contexts. Consider the difference between the meaning of “out” in the two following sentences: “The dogs run out of the house” and “Time has run out.” The first example describes a specific spatiotemporal relationship in which the physical actors, “the dogs,” move towards a specific destination, outside the house. In contrast, the second example has an abstract actor, “Time,” and a nonspecific location – time has no defined end to its run. Therefore, this example projects the “out” schema onto time. Understanding time as a linear progression supported by spatial awareness mitigates the abstractness of time. However, this image-schema may be harmful in understanding the subjectivity of time as linear, as well as its roots in Western cultural hegemony. Not all cultures see time as linear, and this misconception

⁵⁰ Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, 108.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

can impede the acceptance of new scientific discoveries which re-examine time as non-linear, such as in theories about time travel or time around black holes. This misconception can occur with any image-schema. Image-schema in music theory that project onto bodies can distort our ability to understand exceptions to the norm.

Instead of deconstructing image-schemas, Straus explains their existence as essential to comparison in statistics and justifies their utility in linking cultural conceptualizations of the human body to a particular time and place.⁵² While Straus contextualizes music and disability history for the sake of “restoring our sense of their intertwined histories enriches our understanding of both,” he and other disablist music theorists do not yet see the potential for a future beyond mere awareness.⁵³ I want to further dissect the ableist development of music theory discourse and find ways in which other disciplines can guide music theorists to expand or create new and more inclusive theoretical frameworks. Although classical European music’s historical context includes the problematic medical model of disability, our continued prescription of these body-based image-schemas in general-practice music theory is ableist. In a disablist music theory informed by alternative frameworks in other disciplines, I want to be active in my response against latent oppression hidden in underlying institutional ideologies.

Straus proposes a disablist discourse for music theory, one that “celebrates extraordinary musical bodies on their own terms, without reference to normative standards.”⁵⁴ Straus’s two charts “Normalizing (therapeutic) and Disablist Music Theory (preliminary chart)” and “Two ways of Doing Music Theory (Comprehensive Chart)” delineate the differences between

⁵² Ibid., 116.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Straus, *Broken Beauty*, 162.

norm-centric and disablist music theory, organized by affiliations with disability models, attitudes toward disability, and different purposes for performing theoretical analysis. These attributes effectively distinguish the two modes of music theory for individuals unfamiliar with music terminology, enabling easy identification of both norm-centric and disablist music theory. Straus evaluates several contemporary modes of analysis, such as those by music Schenker, Salzer, Schoenberg, Boss, Forte, and Lewin, using this chart. He claims that contemporary music theories can attempt to approach disablist music theory through a shift in attitude toward musical structure, resisting (yet never completely eluding) the therapeutic imperative from the medical model of disability.

Indeed, most disablist music theory today does not completely escape the inherent medical model framework. Straus's own disablist music theory echoes the medical model of disability by creating a chart with two oppositional categories in which he presents "normalizing" theory as the dominant framework and "disablist" music theory as the marginalized alternative. Even if Straus intends to frame the former as "bad" and the latter as "good," his conceptualization of the two theories replicates the harmful binaries inherent in the medical model of disability: just as doctors and scientists endeavor to cure the human body of all its ailments, Straus's disablist music theory cures the normative model of its inadequate and exclusive language. Following Straus's paradigm can obscure the other reasons besides social hegemony for the centrality of norm-centric music theory. Furthermore, any use of binaries does not adequately disconnect music theory from its history of harmful dualisms. While an alternative approach to disablist music theory may not completely escape binaries, it can address this contextual history of harm. In the next section, I will introduce ways in which existing

organizational systems outside of music theory might succeed at recognizing binaries and other normative theoretical structures.

II. Extradisciplinary Methodology

Music theory has yet to consider the most recent discussion of disability models, relying on a basic understanding of the tri-part conventional models of disability – the religious model, the medical model, and the social model. These models reflect the prevailing ideologies during their respective time periods, and creating an effective disablist music theory necessitates exposing how these covert values endure today. The religious model, prevalent during the pre-Enlightenment period, describes disability as a divine punishment.⁵⁵ As Straus notes, this “moralistic view” endures in biases towards specific disabilities: “at the present moment, AIDS, addiction, and obesity – and other widely occurring variations in human morphology, behavior, and ability – are often thought of as emblems of character flaws and immorality.”⁵⁶ The second predominant model of disability – the medical model – portrays disability as “deviance and lack located within the individual, and therefore all medical (and educational) interventions are geared toward bringing the individual as close to normalcy as possible.”⁵⁷ The medical model persists today in music theory’s analytical discourse: diagnosis and treatment. If an abnormality occurs in the music – for instance, a persistent chromatic note, or a note which strays from the original key’s tonality –, then a theoretical framework often arises to rationalize it, such as “the chromatic note creates a tension later resolved in the work.” Not only does this mode of music

⁵⁵ Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, 5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁷ Erevelles, 19.

theory reinforce a standard for classical composition, but it both encourages and treats an inherent anxiety aroused by modern compositions which distance themselves from the Western classical music canon.

Straus's disablist music theory bases itself in the social model of disability. The social model destigmatizes and depathologizes disability, implicating individual and institutional bias in creating social barriers for people with disabilities.⁵⁸ As the newest of the models, the social model informs disablist music theory the most of the three, as evidenced by Straus' language: "the resulting disablist music theories are more likely to enact chaos or acceptance narratives and to celebrate musical events, especially those traditionally perceived as deviant, that individuate and particularize musical works."⁵⁹ Straus's disablist music theory in *Broken Beauty* invites in musicians unfamiliar with disability discourse through its accessible language; however, it does not reflect the ongoing discourse about the inherent dilemmas in the social model nor does it suggest further collaboration between musicians and disability scholars. This section on "Extradisciplinary Methodology" will attempt to fill in these gaps to inspire more interdisciplinary conversations between musicians and other academics.

Critical disability theorists have continued to critique the social model, encouraging further development in defining disability. Recent poststructuralist disability discourse has critiqued the social model for 1) reinforcing economic determinism, or the social value of economic relationships, and 2) blurring the line between impairment and disability: the conceptual distinction between the biological and the social, or impairment and disability, "break[s] the causal link between 'our bodies' (impairment) and 'our social situation'

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Straus, *Broken Beauty*, 156-57.

(disability).”⁶⁰ This break ignores the extent to which having an impairment contributes to disabled identity: “the distinction between the biological and the social is problematic because the very utterance of the biological almost instantaneously brings into play the politics of the social.”⁶¹ Erevelles argues that, while impairment references a biological or natural standard, both impairment and disability have roots in historical, social, and economic contexts:

“impairment enables the disabled body to experience an explicit self-awareness where the body becomes the focus of attention because of its dys-functional mode of operating within the norm, thereby enacting its own dys-appearance.”⁶² Impairment acts as both a catalyst and a measurement by which disabled persons configure their identity through a process of continuous reinforcement: “the ‘impaired’ body is interpellated through a chain of incessant (re)iterations that stabilizes our notion of the natural and this forms the boundary conditions between nondisabled bodies (bodies that matter) and disabled bodies (bodies that do not matter in the same way.)”⁶³ Disability scholars must take all these complexities into account while re-envisioning the most suitable definition for disability today. To what extent can a new model answer existing ideological dilemmas while also expanding its inclusivity to a global context?

Erevelles favors the biosocial model as an alternative that examines the interrelationship between the history of medicine and social forces, such as racism, pollution, and poverty. This model operates with the intention to act less as a concise definition and more as a theory imbued with possibility.⁶⁴ She argues that ignoring the conceptual barrier between the medical and social

⁶⁰ Erevelles, 19.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 36.

⁶³ Ibid., 162-63.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 17.

limits growth in the development of medical treatment.⁶⁵ This phenomenon, described by Erevelles as structural violence, directly links conceptual barriers to social inequities in medicine:

“Structural violence, a term coined by Johan Galtung and by liberation theologians during the 1960s, describes social structures – economic, political, legal, religious, and cultural – that stop individuals, groups, and societies from reaching their potential. . . . Because they seem so ordinary in our ways of understanding the world, they appear almost invisible. . . .”⁶⁶

Understanding how a biosocial framework operates can support medical developments such as cancer treatment. For instance, Erevelles discusses the causal relationship between gene mutations, or the development of cancer, and the impact of social and historical conditions that can potentially beget gene mutations: “was it merely random chance or was it the deliberate march of history as written on the body?”⁶⁷ Applying this framework to music theory expands the potential for inquiry for music theorists to interpret musical works. For instance, to what extent is a persistent chromatic note both a part of musical narrative leading towards resolution (biological) *and* a narrative celebrating musical divergence (social)? This question helps to frame music theory analysis less objectively, dependent upon the analyst’s engagement with contrasting value-laden theories. These positionalities allow for increased intellectual diversity in music theory, and perhaps allows for the inclusion and acceptance of diverse voices. However, even given the liberties underlying this biosocial model, the answer to the following question remains unclear: how is disability celebrated if its very existence is inextricably linked to the violence of social/economic conditions of capitalism?

⁶⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁶ P.E. Farmer, B. Nizeye, S. Stulac, and S. Keshavjee, “Structural Violence and Clinical Medicine,” quoted in Naomi Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts*, 16.

⁶⁷ Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts*, 17.

Developed within the last twenty years, the most recent theory– the cultural model – attempts to broaden the definition, restating disability as an inherent aspect of human life and allowing disabled people to actively impact how they are perceived and treated within society. This model founds itself on four assumptions, integrating extra-disciplinary theories and discourses:

“1) people perceive reality through the prism of their culture and experience acquired with it, 2) disability can have different meanings depending on what kind of discourse constitutes its meaning, 3) disability does not mean a feature of an individual, but a category of human differentiation, which can be embodied and thus materialized, and 4) instead of just ‘looking’ at people with disabilities and asking what problems they are struggling with, and what support from the society they need, the current perspective should be broadened and include the entire society and its culture.”⁶⁸

These tenets do not intend to replace pre-existing models. Rather, the cultural model expands upon the medical and social models in that it “offers an additional and at the same time a broader perspective, and encourages both historicising, generalising and theorising of the studied issues.”⁶⁹ Especially as this model continues to develop and solidify, its purpose to enrich rather than rectify allows disability scholars to prioritize analyzing the outcomes made possible by each model. In essence, neither the biosocial nor the cultural model will ever be fully effective in capturing disability absolutely and in perpetuity. The search for the best and newest model of disability falls into the trap of being “reductive and thus in effect normative” by nature of being a model.⁷⁰ This cultural model’s emphasis on cultural relativism, or the view that ethical and social standards reflect the cultural context from which they are derived, is important for

⁶⁸ Andrzej Twardowski, “Cultural Model of Disability – Origins, Assumptions, Advantages,” *Kultura i Edukacja* 136, no. 2, (year), 48.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷⁰ Anne McGuire, *War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence*, (University of Michigan Press, 2016), 17.

contextualizing each distinct mode of music theory. We must have new contextual information to advance music theory, although this “informed” disablist music theory will need constant renewal because of cultural relativism.

Therefore, scholars must address the conditions in which they apply different definitions, models, and theories, and the fact that their individual applications of these principles hinge upon well-established cultural and historical ideals. Erevelles exemplifies this principle well within her book when discussing the scope of her argument. For instance, within the realm of the biosocial model, Erevelles focuses her argument specifically on the relationship between various forms of difference and the political economy produced within the global historical context of transnational capitalism. Why do some bodies matter more than others, how do these other bodies become invisible, and how have social conditions created this inequity?⁷¹ To answer these questions, Erevelles applies Spiller’s theory of the flesh as a means to look at the commodification of disability for profits in transnational markets. This analytical method includes the most actors while also specifying which ideologies underlie difference: “the critical role political economy plays in the social construction of difference and explore[s] its implications for the actual living conditions, and concomitantly, the actual embodied existence of disabled people living within the social/political context of transnational capitalism.” Ensuring that her “analysis will necessarily have to have a global focus,” Erevelles effectively points towards the global and historical habits that predicate disability – “war, environmental hazards, social conservatism, economic exploitation, segregated/ghetto schooling, and simply just hate” – and calls in the collective necessary to consider the ways in which we can reduce impairment.⁷²

⁷¹ Erevelles, 6.

⁷² Ibid., 197.

This contextual framing helps the audience situate Erevelles's argument in the larger discussion of disability. Erevelles defines her current scope, influenced by a social, political, economic, and cultural context, and her argument's intended impact. Furthermore, this context invites new audiences to disability discourse with the hope to reform and perhaps change our understanding of disability.

In a musical context, this process can begin by re-examining aesthetics and how they impact the development of musical knowledge. Aesthetics, or the "underlying principles of a work of art or a genre, the works of an artist, the arts of a culture, etc," provide a historical foundation for understanding the present existence of musical values and traditions.⁷³ In music specifically, cultural and individual aesthetics influence our understanding of listening, performance, composition, etc. Most discourses exist around the central question of "what purpose does music serve?" In what ways do we listen to music either to appreciate its composition or to reach an ulterior artistic goal? Any answer to these questions guides consequent theories about the musical aspects which best uphold the music's purpose. For instance, if one were to believe that music exists to convey stories, then we may ask "how does a music composition structure sound to create narrative?" As I work backwards to analyze the role and significance of embodiment metaphors, I uncover the underlying aesthetic principles that imbue musical features with meaning. Therefore, in dissecting embodiment metaphors, I attempt to undermine the crypticism associated with Western musical aesthetics.

Musical participants must first come to terms with their role in contributing towards specific aesthetic traditions, as well as the challenges that exist when reconceptualizing musical aesthetics as a whole. The concept of aesthetics itself has inseparable ties to normative visual and

⁷³ "Aesthetic, n. and adj.." OED Online. December 2022. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/3237?rskey=jkJAxn> (accessed February 23, 2023).

auditory senses. The term “aesthetics” derives from the Greek word *aisthánomai*, which means “to perceive, feel, or sense.”⁷⁴ Although this etymology roots traditional aesthetics in embodied experience, aesthetics serves as a set of principles that unite the mental and physical senses. De León conceptualizes aesthetics as a reality-altering ideology which can “shape our entire world of experience, including through the modeling of perceptions, feelings, habits, actions, memories, and desire, as well as through ideas and language.”⁷⁵ While every individual has involvement in aesthetic development, artists hold the most capacity for revolutionizing reality through their craft. De León recognizes the capacity all artists possess to act as “counterhegemonic intellectuals” and to become “bearers of other worlds:” her book *Another Aesthetic Is Possible* catalogs artists that have “amplified the legitimacy crises . . . by using their art to publicly critique ideologies of political representation and national identification through which these states exercise hegemony.”⁷⁶ In this sense, aesthetics connect to arts and politics inseparably.

However, according to French-American philosopher Gabriel Rockhill, scholars once perceived these concepts separately before the need to reconceive artistic and political practices arose.⁷⁷ The more conventional ontological methodology for defining art and politics – the belief that “there is a being or fixed nature behind phenomena such as art and politics” – prescribes “fixed formulas: this art has this political consequence or implication.”⁷⁸ In *Radical History &*

⁷⁴ Jennifer Ponce De León, “Introduction,” *Another Aesthetics Is Possible*, Arts of Rebellion in the Fourth World War, (Duke University Press, 2021), 4.

⁷⁵ De León, 5.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 18; Ibid., 16.

⁷⁷ Gabriel Rockhill, *Radical History & the Politics of Art*, (Columbia University Press, 2014), 5.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 3.

the Politics of Art, Rockhill problematizes these frameworks because they “are often structured by an undergirding binary normativity, according to which the artistic world is divided between authentic and inauthentic art, truly political and apolitical artwork, and so forth.”⁷⁹ This assumption limits discourse of art and politics to their existence within binaries and spectrums of their effectiveness and success. Rather than qualifying these terms in their relation to one another, Rockhill proposes an analysis of art and politics through a social lens: “the intertwined relationship between these three heuristically distinct social dimensions of aesthetic practices – creation, circulation, interpretation – . . . chart out their social politicity, meaning the political dimensions that play themselves out in the historical struggles between various forms of social agency.” This foundation allows for a more open and inclusive discourse which asks “how do diverse dimensions of the practices socially labeled as ‘aesthetic’ and ‘political’ cross, intertwine, interlace, and become ‘extensive’?”⁸⁰ Reconceptualizing aesthetics, art, and politics through this lens allows more and previously-excluded agents to not only be a part of, but necessary for the historical narrative. In an informed reconceptualization of disability music theory, having a new historicist framework justifies the revision of previous contextual histories to include marginalized identities.

One step necessary to successfully involve more diverse actors in the aesthetical-political discourse includes addressing historical hegemony within the arts. Rockhill accomplishes this by opting to evaluate the historical timeline of art and politics through radical historicism, as opposed to selective historicism. While selective historicism “selects – hence its name – what transcends historical transformation: the deep kernels of reality that allow us to measure change,”

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 4.

radical historicism, “recognizes that everything is historical, including our most privileged practices, cherished concepts, and venerated values.”⁸¹ While selective historical narratives emphasize the importance of certain historical events and values and perhaps offer a more concise and persuasive argument, this historical framework invites bias that often excludes marginalized identities, their histories, and values. Radical ones recognize the capacity for all events and values to have historical significance: “the adjective *radical* refers both to the dissolution of the supposedly natural objects of history and to the dynamic role of different forms of agency in history.”⁸² By doing so, “radical history thereby opens a fundamentally different field of inquiry and introduces a unique gamut of questions by acknowledging that there is not, in fact, a firm starting point with clearly delimited entities whose unique relation can be definitely described.”⁸³ Understanding this nuance removes the obstacle of trying to resituate excluded events and values into a stringent, preconceived narrative. Furthermore, it historicizes present-day values such that they operate within a sphere of historical beliefs and occurrences. Conceptualizing music aesthetics using radical historicism creates a malleable continuum that does not require constant reframing or justification for the inclusion of different methodological or musical participants.

One musical example of radical historicism applied to aesthetics, but not commonly applied to music theory, is Barthes’s “Grain of the Voice,” from *Image, Music, Text* (1977).⁸⁴ A French literary theorist, Barthes redefines the voice and its significance within a vocal

⁸¹ Ibid., 2.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

performance to better suit a modern context, all while detaching this denotation and connotation from the stringent ideals of Western music aesthetics. To effectively do so, he develops terminology that distinguishes vocal performances which showcase “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue; perhaps the letter, certainly significance[.]”⁸⁵ In other words, the performance must possess an undefined artistic ethos that guides the musical listener to focus on the voice’s resonance abstractly and materially. Barthes names this quality the “grain of the voice,” conveyed in the *geno-song*.⁸⁶ He calls performances lacking the ‘grain’ *pheno-song*, which guides listeners' attention to the meaning and emotional content of the sung words.⁸⁷ Barthes criticizes pheno-song for its placement of value in the technical aspects of singing, such as breath and the lungs:

“The lung, a stupid organ (lights for cats!), swells but gets no erection; it is in the throat, place where the phonic metal hardens and is segmented, in the mask that significance explodes, bringing not the soul but *jouissance*.”⁸⁸

In this passage, Barthes redefines voice as a qualitative outcome detached from the human subject. Barthes posits that this new aesthetic based on the “grain of the voice” could “attach less importance to the formidable break in tonality accomplished by modernity.”⁸⁹ Barthes’s discussion of changing tonality and modernity addresses the ongoing cultural change in Western popular culture. This cultural shift signals to Barthes the need for a new aesthetic

⁸⁵ Ibid., 182.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 181.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 182.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 183.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 189.

paradigm, aided by the reconsideration of general musical values and the introduction of new terminology to describe a new musical aesthetics.

Barthes's redefinition of the aesthetics of voice resonates with the more contemporary redefinition of voice in education studies. Mazzei and Jackson's article "Voice in the Agentic Assemblage" exposes the limitations of defining the voice through sounds, which discriminates against "speaking and hearing human subjects."⁹⁰ Answering the question as to "what happens when voice exceeds language and is more than (un)vocalized words, and how do we account for it among the intra-action among human and non-human objects?," Mazzei and Jackson expand upon voice as more than "spoken words emanating from a conscious subject and instead place voice within the material and discursive knots and intensities of the assemblage. . . inseparable from all elements (human and non-human)."⁹¹ Previous models envision the voice as a "mirror of the soul, the essence of the self," and re-framing the voice as a mere portion of an assemblage that allows posthuman research practices to circumvent a bias towards "speaking and hearing human subjects."⁹² In a posthumanist agentic assemblage, the voice consists of elements beyond its mere materiality and possesses greater agency among other elements within the assemblage – "bodies, mores, objects, unspoken thoughts, communities, space, and so on."⁹³ This approach deconstructs common contemporary definitions and valuations of voice and reframes

⁹⁰ Ibid., 1091.

⁹¹ Lisa A. Mazzei and Alecia Y. Jackson, "Voice in the Agentic Assemblage," *Educational Philosophy* 49, no. 11, (Oct. 2017), 1090.

⁹² Ibid., 1091.

⁹³ Ibid., 1094.

pre-existing scenarios to allow for increased vocal agency among other unmediated elements in the assemblage.⁹⁴

To my knowledge, this concept of agentic assemblage most closely satisfies my wishes of resisting perfectionistic models, refining definitions in music theory, and increasing diversity and inclusivity in musical aesthetics. While models attempt to capture many ideas from a singular moment in time, assemblage describes the ongoing process of arranging and rearranging:

“An assemblage emerges when a function emerges; ideally it is innovative and productive. The result of a productive assemblage is a new means of expression, a new territorial/spatial organisation, a new institution, a new behaviour, or a new realisation. The assemblage is destined to produce a new reality, by making numerous, often unexpected, connections.”⁹⁵

Considering assemblage as a framework for musical inquiry allows me to move beyond simple analyses of voice, considering an approach that more directly engages with what voice is and what it does. To analyze voice within an agentic assemblage, I will analyze its intra-activity, or “the ways in which ‘discourse and matter are understood to be mutually constituted in the production of knowing.”⁹⁶ For example, in what ways do Ophelia and her voice intra-act with other material agents in the assemblage to produce new becomings? Or more specifically, the ways in which “be-coming disabled” reconciles itself with the “incomplete process of becoming-in-the-world.”⁹⁷ Erevelles defines this “becoming-in-the-world” as a framework to depict a more posthumanist view of disability:

“[B]ecoming signifies a process that shifts and flows just as the body itself undergoes changes and modifications . . . as the irregular and contingent transformations and reversals that

⁹⁴ Ibid, 1093.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 1093.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 1094.

⁹⁷ Erevelles, 28.

unsettle subjectivity – and identity – itself . . . How we come to know ourselves and others in the world is the matter of material engagement, often through the direct contact of flesh and blood encounters that do not simply *affect* us at the surface level but *effect* the very constitution of embodied being.”⁹⁸

Typical humanist avenues consider a line of questioning that focuses on the materiality of voice, in which they “let voices speak for themselves,” “give voice,” or “make voices heard.” This inquiry restricts voice to being the stable essence of self to be retrieved and liberated.⁹⁹ If material voice becomes the quintessence of identity for a near-voiceless character such as Ophelia, then we forget to consider other limited agents which compose Ophelia’s developing identity. In the following chapter, I will consider the extent to which Kirsten’s compositional approach encourages assemblage as an analytical framework.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Mazzei and Jackson., 1090-91.

Chapter 2. Ophelia Forever Analysis

I. Kirsten's Compositional Framework

Amy Beth Kirsten's musical background and approach to composition complements the work I'm performing in my thesis – resisting models, refining definitions, and increasing inclusivity and diversity in musical aesthetics. A composer-director, Kirsten specializes in “exploring theatrical elements of creation, performance, and presentation,” a process which seeks to expand classical music's aesthetics.¹⁰⁰ Her intentionality in recognizing the musicality of each actor and instrumentalist on stage resembles the idea of a musical assemblage: “her body of work fuses music, language, voice, and theatre and often considers musicians' instruments, bodies, and voices as equal vehicles of expression.”¹⁰¹ With this compositional intention in mind, I can use Kirsten's attention to gesture and theater as a significant element in understanding her perspective on Ophelia and her changing portrayals in music and literature over the centuries.

Kirsten adds to musical, literary, and feminist discourse as one of few composers with experience of being perceived as a woman to discuss women and madness. Male composers dominate the canon of musical works that associate women with madness, so maleness often acts as the norm against which other women or non-binary composers are measured. This intersectionality between non-normative bodies and non-cis-male gender identities informs Kirsten's ideological approach to portraying Ophelia's murky and contradictory characterizations. Her positionality as a non-male artist and her challenge of conceptions of non-cis-male gender norms makes her and her work relevant in broader discussions of women, their bodies, and of normative and non-normative bodies in music.

¹⁰⁰ Amy Beth Kirsten, “About,” Amy Beth Kirsten, Accessed March 16, 2023, <https://www.amybethkirsten.com/about/>.

¹⁰¹ Amy Beth Kirsten, “About.”

In using *Ophelia Forever* as the subject for my analysis, I intend to increase the scholarship of diverse creators, as Lohead advises in her own scholarship¹⁰²; however, my analysis does not crutch itself on Kirsten's gender. In selecting *Ophelia Forever* as the subject of analysis I recognize its excellence as a music composition that synthesizes interdisciplinary ideas and long, ongoing discussions about *Hamlet* in academia. I also acknowledge the pre-existing associations between Kirsten's music and women and gender studies discourse in my limited research of the pre-existing scholarship about *Ophelia Forever*.¹⁰³ Although her compositional process and the production of *Ophelia Forever* draw on her knowledge of the historic socio-cultural conditions which forbade women from self-expression,¹⁰⁴ I intend to frame Kirsten and her work in a broader social context. In my analysis of *Ophelia Forever*, I will focus on the ways in which Kirsten critiques misogynistic societal constraints through her subversion of traditional musical roles. This commentary brings together feminist and disability discourse through the theme of *agency*.

Ophelia Forever began as a compositional project during Kirsten's time as a doctoral student at the Peabody Institute. Studying under the director of Peabody's opera program, Roger Brunyate, Kirsten approached him about participating in their Opera Etudes program, an

¹⁰² Lohead, "Music's Vibratory Enchantments and Epistemic Injustices," 26.

¹⁰³ The two following papers I found on *Ophelia Forever* situate Kirsten's work within women and gender studies in an academic context: Hillary LaBonte's "Analyzing Gender Inequality in Contemporary Opera," and Alexis Scangas's "Forget the Familiar: The Feminist Voice in Contemporary Dramatic Song."

¹⁰⁴ In fact, Kirsten objects to the programming and analyses of works by women composers on the basis of gender over excellence. In "The 'Woman Composer' is Dead," she articulates her stance on "woman composer" as a reductive and antiquated term in the twenty-first century. You can read more here: <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/the-woman-composer-is-dead/>.

opportunity “for composers to write opera scenes that would be staged at the school.”¹⁰⁵ Kirsten’s focus on Ophelia also originates in her studies, having discussed “Shakespeare as a jumping-off point” for opera scenes. Drawing on the melodramatic nature of Shakespeare’s plays, many composers find strong, distinct narratives to depict musically. Shakespeare’s plays use heightened expression to discuss things that he cannot otherwise discuss more plainly such as madness, gender, and politics. He does not, however, give every character the same agency to speak. For instance, Ophelia has only 58 out of 4,042 lines in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s longest work. In *Ophelia Forever*, Kirsten seeks to give Ophelia agency via the opportunity for expression by dedicating an entire chamber opera to her.

To construct a fuller and more nuanced Ophelia than conveyed in *Hamlet*, Kirsten supplements Shakespeare’s text with content from other writers.¹⁰⁶ In an interview with Baynard Woods from Baltimore City Paper, Kirsten details her thought process in constructing the libretto:

“I took fragments of the play, I set not only Ophelia’s lines but I also used other characters’ lines as if they were being spoken by Ophelia. It’s a jumble of excerpts from Shakespeare, from Rimbaud, from Baudelaire, from Christina Rossetti, and those pieces and fragments are woven together and what I ended up doing was I made a catalog of all these text fragments and decided I was going to focus on three different Ophelias, three archetypes, and I spread all these text fragments across my living room floor and eventually made three piles, associating certain lines of text with each of the archetypes. That whole project came before any not of music was written.”¹⁰⁷

This construction of the libretto from literary fragments reflects both the fragmentary nature of Ophelia’s laments in *Hamlet* as well as Ophelia’s fragmentary identity as perceived

¹⁰⁵ Baynard Woods, “A new opera by a Peabody alum explores the story of Ophelia,” (Baltimore City Paper, Feb. 4, 2014), 1.

¹⁰⁶ Hillary LaBonte, “Analyzing Gender Inequality in Contemporary Opera,” (Phd. diss., Bowling Green State University, 2019). 77.

¹⁰⁷ Woods, 1-2.

over the centuries. Additionally, this process also demonstrates how Kirsten composes the music in her opera to support Ophelia's speech. My musical analysis will therefore reflect this power dynamic between text and sound within a broader discussion of Kirsten's selective adoption and rejection of traditional operatic portrayals of Ophelia.

Kirsten's subversion of traditional musical roles in *Ophelia Forever* demonstrates her considerate engagement with the antiquated conventions surrounding Ophelia's portrayal in operas from centuries-past. Kirsten paints a picture of the historical context from which she engages in the following program note:

“With each generation comes a fresh analysis of her significance to Hamlet, the mystery surrounding her death, especially her madness. Many interpretations have formed over the years and seem to coincide with an established cultural ethos regarding women of the time. Because Ophelia has served as a social mirror she has reflected the journey of the female spirit that has sought to defy polite social labels, to resist gender-based restraints, and to forge a path that embraces both love and independence. The aim for this piece is to present the multiplicity of the character, the struggle between aspects, and the eventual resolution of the struggle.”¹⁰⁸

Kirsten's contextual information reflects the interest within music composition and musicology to idolize Ophelia as a figure that represents how madness in women acts as a revolutionary tool for escaping patriarchal constraints. These historical depictions often reinforce the ongoing patriarchal forces which seek to dehumanize and disempower women such as Ophelia through madness. Kirsten educates the actors and the audience about these socio-cultural restraints and her direct efforts to escape them as a necessary step in restoring Ophelia's gendered agency. Her agency relies upon our legitimization of her mental illness and humanity: while engaging with Ophelia's historical portrayals, musical participants in the twenty-first century possess agency to identify symptoms and form diagnoses that impact Ophelia's identity and agency. Naomi Merer reinforces the pitfalls of ignoring this history: “in performing these

¹⁰⁸ Amy Beth Kirsten, “*Ophelia Forever – Libretto*,” (Issuu, March 15, 2014,) 2.

roles without studying the history, we are portraying Ophélie as a stereotypical madwoman instead of as the victim of circumstances” imposed upon her by men in power.¹⁰⁹ By placing this information within the program notes, rather than implicitly through musical instructions, Kirsten informs the singers’ acting and the audience’s reception of Ophelia so they recognize their role within Ophelia’s assemblage.

In identifying how Kirsten draws attention to the many actors in this assemblage, her program notes also bring the following question to mind: in what ways does Kirsten either appear to merely *present* Ophelia and her historical resistance to gender restraints or to *comment* upon Ophelia’s portrayal as a feminist critic? In other words, to what extent does Kirsten and her own voice play in Ophelia’s assemblage? Elaine Showalter’s essay “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism,” underscores the inadequacies of Ophelia’s historical interpretations and constructs a feminist narrative distinct from female symbolism or madness as a mere plot device.¹¹⁰ Showalter argues that Ophelia’s story – when unveiled by feminist criticism – best reflects the ongoing historical narrative of Ophelia’s representations:

“to liberate Ophelia from the text, or to make her its tragic center, is to re-appropriate her for our own needs; to dissolve her into female symbolism of absence is to endorse our own marginality; to make her Hamlet’s anima is to reduce her to a metaphor experience. I would like to propose instead that Ophelia does have a story of her own that feminist criticism can tell; it is neither her life story, nor her love story, nor Lacan’s story, but rather the history of her representation.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Naomi Hanna Merer, “Get Thee to an Asylum: Reflecting on the Evolution of Mental Illness and its Portrayal in Thomas’s Operatic Mad Scene,” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2021,) vi-vii.

¹¹⁰ Elaine Showalter, “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism,” (*Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman. Methuen, 1985), 77-94.

¹¹¹ Showalter, 79.

According to Showalter, Kirsten appropriates Ophelia to an extent for her own needs by making Ophelia the tragic center of *Ophelia Forever*; however, Kirsten's consideration of Ophelia's portrayal in culture and history also demonstrates her attempt to portray Ophelia with feminist critique in mind.

Looking more closely at Kirsten's artistic inspiration reveals direct influence and application of feminist and literary criticism. Inspired by Carol Solomon Kiefer's "The Myth and Madness of Ophelia," an art exhibit that represents various aspects of Ophelia's psyche, Kirsten portrays the multiplicity of Ophelia interpretations alongside historical perceptions of women and developing models of madness. The most notable paintings for Kirsten within this collection include John Everett Millais's painting *Ophelia* (1851-52), Gregory Crewdson's photograph *Untitled (Ophelia)* (2000-1), and Linda Stark's oil on canvas *Ophelia Forever* (1999).¹¹² To me, these three pieces – each depicting Ophelia's body immersed in water – emphasize the interconnected legacy between Ophelia, water, and her gendered madness. Millais's *Ophelia* de-emphasizes Ophelia's death in favor of a celebration of her everlasting beauty. Here, her death concludes her madness – she no longer threatens, and even invites onlookers with her beauty. In contrast, Crewdson's photography parodies Millais'. Crewdson's eerie and gloomy tableau disrupts the peace and tranquility of Millais' dream-like landscape by depicting a surreal nightmare, like a scene from a modern horror movie. Disorienting to a different end, Stark's work de-emphasizes Ophelia as a person, representing her as two breasts in the shape of the infinity symbol. In doing so, Stark's *Ophelia Forever* speaks to Ophelia's perpetuity through infinite interpretation after her fictional death. Kirsten's reflection on these different art pieces demonstrates her careful attention to how older depictions of Ophelia prioritize beauty over

¹¹² Kirsten, "*Ophelia Forever* – Libretto," 2.

discussions of madness or gender. In my analysis, I hope to use this context to inform my understanding of how the themes of beauty, madness, and gender manifest in the music and the libretto.

Kirsten's compositional framework – informed by considerable musical and interdisciplinary research – reflects her considerable efforts to create a greater and more nuanced voice for Ophelia in *Ophelia Forever*. This compositional process expands the potential tool kit for investigating how Kirsten either repeats, develops, or contrasts historical musical ideas in addition to ideas of her own. In the following section, I will discuss the extent to which Kirsten's *Ophelia Forever* depicts Ophelia as a musical assemblage. Furthermore, my investigation of assemblage will influence my understanding of the following questions: How does Kirsten depict the Mad Mermaid's madness? What does this portrayal say about Ophelia's gendered agency?

II. Musical Analysis of the “Mad Mermaid” in the Tri-part Ophelia

In doing a disablist musical analysis of the “Mad Mermaid” in *Ophelia Forever*, I admit to reading against the grain, a literary term that describes an analysis which recognizes the author's intended reading of the text and engages in an alternative one. This process often involves extrapolating ideas implicit and explicit in the text: what does the author say and not say? Disability scholars often must read against the grain of a work to derive new significance from it. In *Black Madness: Mad Blackness*, Therí Alyce Pickens explores disability and race as one discourse in Black speculative fiction, theorizing about the “places where and reasons why the relationship between the two refuses to so easily fall apart.”¹¹³ This process follows the steps of similar disability studies scholarship, which argues for the need to re-examine texts so that

¹¹³ Therí Alyce Pickens, “Introduction: What's Good?,” in *Black Madness: Mad Blackness* (Duke University Press, 2019), 11.

these texts can possess new meanings: “to trouble notions of how a text speaks is to allow for the possibility that cognition, communication, and ability upend or cocreate said text.”¹¹⁴ Pickens contextualizes disability studies as a field “borrowing” from critical race studies and women’s studies – discourses connected by their concern with social constructions and relationships to “normativity.”¹¹⁵ Thus, my musical analysis does not aim to simply shift lenses by locating new nuances in difference. Rather, as other disability scholars such as Pickens argue, my analysis hopes to demonstrate how an examination of disability goes hand in hand with examination of race, class, and gender oppression. In analyzing *Ophelia Forever* against the grain, I bring together disability and feminist readings as one discourse about agency.

In doing this analysis, I must also address the subjectivity of my approach to reading disability and feminist themes together. My understanding of these themes rely on my personal recognition and engagement with them as they either affirm or challenge my current understanding of disability and feminist studies. Pickens makes a similar acknowledgement of the privilege inherent in her own methodological approach: “reading madness and race respectively requires participation in the form of decision-making on the part of the reader,” thus “the reader bears the responsibility of interpretation: understand that multiple interpretations are available and that their choices indicate a stance on Blackness and madness itself.”¹¹⁶ Inspired by Shoshana Felman and Toni Morrison’s incitement of their audiences to respond to the social, political, and cultural contexts surrounding their work, Pickens makes explicit the connection between critical discourse and our – the author and the audience’s – engagement with disability

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 17

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 14.

and race, madness and Blackness. In the same likeness, I also wish to make explicit that my approach to disablist music theory in the context of *Ophelia Forever* reflects my understanding of assemblage's applications to other contexts. I could do my analysis in a number of different ways, or use another method entirely. Pickens herself does not use assemblage to discuss madness, a topic which I will revisit in my conclusion.

In my musical analysis, I will hone in on the following questions: 1) In what ways and to what extent is applying assemblage helpful in conceptualizing the interaction between multimedia elements and Kirsten's narrative, 2) In what ways does Kirsten construct Ophelia as an assemblage? 3) How does Kirsten portray madness through the Mad Mermaid? 4) What does Kirsten's representation of Ophelia say about her gendered agency? This analytical process will be broken into three parts: a discussion of Ophelia as a character played by 3 singers, the interconnections I perceive between these three portrayals, and a detailed analysis of the Mad Mermaid's role in the work.

The most obvious link between *Ophelia Forever* and assemblage is Kirsten's division of Ophelia into three actors. Ophelia's tri-part portrayal resists simple characterization, emphasizing the fluidity of her identity and being. The dialogue between the three Ophelias does not merely represent an altercation between three contrasting human actors, but the process of discovering how these three beings realize their own function within their relationship to one another. Kirsten's representation of Ophelia as three separate characters demonstrates her awareness of how fragmented elements of Ophelia's psyche concurrently conflict and intertwine, resisting their fragmentation.

Kirsten uses motivic hoquet – or the passing of a melody back and forth among parts without interrupting one another – to depict the binary between unity and fragmentation in

Ophelia Forever. The following example of motivic hocket marks the point in which the three Ophelias transition from discussing their shared anxiety about their legacy towards individual reflections.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for three vocal parts: SNT (Violated Saint), MM (Mad Mermaid), and SDX (Faithful Seductress). The score is in 3/4 time, marked '♩ = 63 with freedom'. The SNT part has lyrics 're-cog-nize the star[k]'. The MM part has lyrics 'I know that voice'. The SDX part has lyrics '[s]ark shape of a friend who'. The score includes various performance instructions such as 'mp', 'p', 'n', 'frill up to any pitch', 'fade out', 'waterdrops', and 'wko - beck-ons'.

Ophelia Forever, “I know that voice . . .” mm. 1-4

Motivic hocket as a compositional technique itself is a fragmented unison. Kirsten’s manuscript also illustrates how the three vocal lines weave together. The dynamic shaping, or the changes in the relative volume of the three parts, helps disguise the passing of the melody from the Mad Mermaid to the Violated Saint to the Faithful Seductress. As one voice ends, they decrease in volume from mezzo piano to nothing. Meanwhile, the sound of the incoming voice emerges from nothing, increasing in volume to match the previous voice’s mezzo piano. Kirsten also does not distinguish the voices stylistically within this gesture, speaking more to their unity than their fragmentation. In context, the three Ophelias are heard as one continuous voice.

Kirsten further conveys this contrast between unity and fragmentation in her characterization of each Ophelia in the program notes. Each has a poetic name that reflects on a representation or role imposed on Ophelia. The first and third Ophelia’s oxymoronic names attest to the ways Ophelia resists social archetypes. The first Ophelia – the Violated Saint – conveys Ophelia’s conflicting yet co-existing quality as innocent and impure. Kirsten describes the Violated Saint as “righteous, moral, pious, dedicated to Hamlet, but concerned for his soul, and

for her purity.”¹¹⁷ The Violated Saint embodies loyalty through her strong faith and dedication to Hamlet; however, her slight impurity imbues her with enough darkness and unconventionality to have more agency than a traditional pious saint. Musically, Kirsten distinguishes the Saint through medieval chants – also indicated notationally via the lack of stems. In addition, the Violated Saint’s part reaches into the lower register, representing her ability to expand beyond the traditional vocal range for her voice type as well as social conventions.

The third Ophelia – the Faithful Seductress – also demonstrates self-fashioned agency through her social unconventionality. She – “a voluptuous beauty, strong willed, extremely sexual, and sensual. Loyal to only one thing . . . Hamlet” – gains agency by embracing her beauty and sexuality.¹¹⁸ Musically, the Faithful Seductress expresses this beauty and sexuality through her sultry tangos. Kirsten’s use of breathy vocalises – “singing on a syllable instead of on words” – to depict sensuality correlates with operatic trends Merer observes in Thomas’s *Ophélie*: “the use of vocalises in lieu of words furthers the sensuality of the scene, as silence and mystery were tied to desirous feminine sexuality during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”¹¹⁹ As the other singers join in with the Faithful seductress in this vocalization, allowing each to benefit from increased agency as a result of this heightened abstraction from social convention.

The second Ophelia – the Mad Mermaid – contrasts the other two the most in terms of her identity and agency. Unlike the two other characters with oxymoronic names, the adjective “mad” in the second Ophelia’s name reinforces the mermaid archetype. The descriptor “mad”

¹¹⁷ Kirsten, “*Ophelia Forever* – Libretto,” 2.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Merer 104; Merer, 168.

extolls the dangerousness of a mermaid or a siren – women who use their sensuality, either via their music or their appearance, to control men and thus threaten patriarchal society.¹²⁰ The Mad Mermaid thus achieves agency through both madness and sensuality, which enables her to not only confront Hamlet but other social restraints. The addition of madness gives her space to separate herself from her more restrained aspects: although they possess sensuality, the Violated Saint and the Faithful Seductress still closely resemble Ophelia’s archetypes as the dutiful daughter or the ideal Renaissance woman.

Furthermore, in alluding to mermaid and siren archetypes, Kirsten also engages with the phenomenological association between women and water. Showalter describes how Ophelia’s suicide via drowning constitutes a ritual death in which she engages with her innate “feminine fluidity”: according to phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, drowning “becomes the truly feminine death in the dramas of literature and life, one which is a beautiful immersion and submersion in the feminine element.”¹²¹ Through this archetype, musical aesthetics and other ideas about music and tragedy from the ancient Greeks persist into contemporary music. Ophelia’s death marks the point in *Hamlet* at which Ophelia fails to resolve her grievances with Hamlet and she cannot overcome her sorrow – manifested as tears (water expelled from the eyes). As Shakespeare and his contemporaries saw it, a death via drowning – whether purposeful or accidental – best depicts Ophelia’s internal melancholy. The phenomenological association between women and water alongside the mermaid/siren archetype opera tradition together compose the bridge between the audience’s pre-informed understanding of Ophelia and Ophelia’s newest narrative in *Ophelia Forever*.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 120.

¹²¹ Showalter, 81.

Of the three Ophelias, Kirsten intends for the Mad Mermaid to possess the most strength through her sensuality and madness. In the program notes, she describes the Mad Mermaid as “insane, mumbling, fidgety, intense, yet she is the strongest of the three aspects.”¹²² This description distinguishes Kirsten’s use of the word “mad” from more conventional definitions that may connote illness or weakness: in addition to exhibiting characteristics of mental illness, the Mad Mermaid also “is in control of the other two” Ophelias.¹²³ The Mad Mermaid has the clearest role and predestined legacy: to express a repressed truth and assert their own power through madness and sensuality. The Mad Mermaid acts as the most direct contact between the three Ophelias and Hamlet, perhaps because she has the most agency to do so. However, in this characterization of the Mad Mermaid, I do not believe Kirsten shows the power dynamic between the three Ophelias, as opposed to merely designating the Mad Mermaid as the leader. In the context of this paper, analyzing the Mad Mermaid as the leader of the three Ophelias contradicts my analysis of the work as an assemblage. As I analyze the Mad Mermaid’s musical role in *Ophelia Forever* more deeply, I will examine the assemblage, focusing on the Mad Mermaid’s agency as she intra-acts with other agents.

The Mad Mermaid’s designation as a coloratura soprano provides Kirsten the ability to connect to the operatic tradition to cast mad women as coloraturas. This tradition originates from Renaissance thinkers who believed that singing represents excess speech, and associated “heightened emotionality (another form of excess) with femininity.”¹²⁴ Referencing English Renaissance music and poetry scholar Leslie C. Dunn, Merer describes the gendered difference between male speech and female singing:

¹²² Kirsten, “*Ophelia Forever* – Libretto,” 2.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Merer, 160.

“Because singing is an excess of speech – meaning that singing has higher and lower ranges, has longer durations of syllables, can contain florid movement, requires the mouth to be more open, requires more breath control, a better control of the diaphragm, etc. – it is more like femininity and madness than speech, which was associated with masculinity as well as societal expectations and normalcy.”¹²⁵

Ophelia’s singing in the original Hamlet play as well as in numerous operas reinforces this association between women and singing. Furthermore, it results in intensified connection between madness and femininity from which vocal traditions grew. Merer explores this history as she details how previous opera composers and singers have used coloratura:

“coloratura was used by composers and singers throughout history for two main reasons – it required ‘the highest vocal prowess,’ including ‘athletic vocalizing, range extensions, pristine intonation, articulatory precision, and superb breath control. . . it was also associated with ‘pure, intense emotion. Wordless vocalises can imbue one syllable with a variety of affects: joyful abandon, intense rage, and perhaps most famously, madness.’”¹²⁶

The Mad Mermaid fulfills both of these functions in *Ophelia Forever*: her part engages in a greater divergence from tonality and uses more extended vocal techniques than the other Ophelias. These musical characteristics accentuate Ophelia’s melancholy related to her relationship with Hamlet, as well as to the larger socio-historical connection between her beauty and madness. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss how Kirsten specifically implements vocal techniques in the music to either engage or disengage from operatic tradition.

The Mad Mermaid’s first solo – “What the Mermaid Saw” – establishes her musical character. Although the Mermaid’s solo elides with the ending of the Seductress’s solo, Kirsten shifts quickly between the two musical spheres with the shaken shells. This movement establishes the following characteristics about the Mad Mermaids sound: liberty with time, frequent registral leaps, and the frequent intermix between sung and spoken text. Many musical

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Merer, 36.

solos often feature some element of rubato, or a temporary expressive quickening or slackening of tempo; however, Kirsten's careful attention to displaying time indicates a more thoughtful consideration of how the Mad Mermaid can manipulate the formal framework of the piece. This movement contains numerous time signatures and tempos, as well as pushes (accelerandos) and pulls (ritardandos) throughout. The piece begins around 80 beats per minute, slows down to 60, accelerates 132, and then breaks away from time completely by the end. Towards the end of the piece, Kirsten expresses time loosely by the second.

c.20

Take time, freely

obo

Tr 1

Tr 2

Fl

Cl

MM

Sax

mumbled/whispered ad lib. pitches & rhythms

pp

mf

pp

mf

pp

mf

pp

mf

pp

mf

pp

mf

Ophelia Forever, “What the Mermaid Saw. . . (solo #1)” m. 39

The Mad Mermaid's ending demonstrates an interesting disconnection between the singers and the instrumentalists' traditional musical roles to create a new musical system less defined by the individual elements. The instrumentalists abandon their instruments and join the singers in the creation of a soft mumbled or whispered atmosphere with pitches and rhythms ad

libitum, or freely and expressively. Meanwhile, the oboe has a solo unrestricted by time. As the oboe finishes its final fermata, this soft atmosphere increases in volume to a mezzo forte dynamic. One interpretation of the music could preclude that the oboe controls the duration of mumbling and whispering through their solo, taking back temporal control from the Mad Mermaid. However, if interpreting this measure as a musical assemblage, all the lines have distinct directions which aid towards the shape of this spooky and transitional musical atmosphere. Viewing this passage as the outcome of a musical assemblage allows me to reframe the change in instrumentation as an increase in potential for the entire ensemble. All members of the ensemble can engage in expression, rather than merely transferring expressionistic power from the Mad Mermaid back to the other Ophelias.

In the Mad Mermaid's second solo "Never Doubt I Love," she has limited accompaniment and structure, much like a cadenza – a virtuosic passage towards the conclusion of a piece where the soloist stands alone in the spotlight. This movement acts as one of the final climactic moments in the opera: the Mad Mermaid increases the intensity of her musical gestures as she nears a moment in which she can reconcile her feelings about Hamlet and overcome her intense emotions. Expanding upon the freeness of time in the Mad Mermaid's first solo, the temporal structure of the piece increases the level of musical fragmentation and contrast. Each measure appears as its own separate gesture, demonstrating greater ranges in changing temporal values (66-160, vs 60-132) and increased jumps between measures timed by meter or seconds. This movement also demonstrates an increased use of extended vocal techniques, with much of the Mad Mermaid's vocal line being atonal or unpitched. The piece begins with more contemporary vocal techniques such as tongue clicks, which similarly bring the nautical mermaid timbre into play, just as the sea shells had at the end of the Mad Mermaid's first solo.

Ophelia Forever, “Never Doubt I Love. . . (Mad Mermaid Solo #2)” systems 10-11

This penultimate system in “Never Doubt I Love” demonstrates the culmination of many different music gestures into the climax of the Mad Mermaid’s solo. The libretto draws from Hamlet’s love letter to Ophelia, read aloud to Gertrude by Polonius. Polonius wishes to convince Claudius and Gertrude that Hamlet’s love for Ophelia caused his madness: “Doubt thou the stars are fire / Doubt that the sun doth move / Doubt truth to be a liar / but never doubt I love.”¹²⁷ In this song, Ophelia toils over Hamlet’s love for her as well as her own love for him. Of the three Ophelias, the Mad Mermaid has the most agency to speak freely and to express a wider range of emotions.

Kirsten demonstrates more attention to shape with increased dynamic markings and dynamic ranges, emphasizing the shape of each individual gesture as well as the relation of shapes to one another. Tonally, Kirsten expands the range of the voice to match the increased emotional intensity of this song. The Mad Mermaid’s solo ends with a dramatic, fortissimo glissando from a high D above the staff to a Db at the bottom of the staff. This jump spans just over two octaves, which is extremely difficult and unnatural for the voice. After the Mad Mermaid completes this vocal leap, she “lingers in madness” for six silent seconds. This quiet end to the Mad Mermaid’s solo contrasts the dramatic and vocally-intense music within the solo

¹²⁷ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.115-18.

itself. After this emotional catharsis, Ophelia still does not have a clear resolution to her issues, prompting all the Ophelias to remark together “Poor Ophelia, divided from herself and her fair judgement.”¹²⁸

Conclusion

My approach to applied disablist music theory only represents one manifestation that the synthesis of these interdisciplinary ideas can take. Some contemporary disability scholars use assemblage to discuss disability as “the irregular and contingent effect of shifting signifiers producing disorganized collections of hybrid associations/assemblages that morph into an unstable and transgressive Body-without-Organs (BwO).”¹²⁹ According to Erevelles, these theories succeed in embracing “a form of contra-aestheticism that mocks the normal, rejecting disability’s limited role as prosthetic in identity politics,” engaging in a more “transgressive” process of becoming.¹³⁰ However, for the sake of her own argument, Erevelles engages more with disability as an assemblage interconnected with historical and economic themes:

“It is this violent moment of intercorporeal assemblages that produces disability, and its becoming-in-the-world foregrounds a dialectical tension between the historical and the contemporary, between production and consumption, between desire and need, between continuities and discontinuities, and between the conditions of possibility and the violence of its limits.”

Erevelles’s modification of assemblage for her own argument demonstrates its flexibility as theory, as opposed to the rigid structure of a model.

In contrast, other disability scholars such as Pickens decide not to use assemblage at all.

¹²⁸ Amy Beth Kirsten, “*Ophelia Forever* – Manuscript,” 34. This interaction is documented in the manuscript, but not the libretto or the published version of the work.

¹²⁹ Erevelles, 27.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

Pickens uses fold – a nonlinear process of development: “it constantly folds, unfolds, and refolds.”¹³¹ This method allows Pickens to investigate places where normativity breaks and provide a new lens, for “the mad Black/Black mad subject is not simply standing at an intersection but also actively changing it. In what follows, I seek to figure out” (22). Pickens distinguishes the fold from other processes of becoming like assemblage, especially in its use to accompany intersectionality: “to foist assemblage onto intersectionality also reduces Black women’s embodied theorizing and becomes merely another vehicle for the enactment of privilege since it shifts the conversation away from them and their ideas about world-making.”¹³² Here, Pickens distinguishes her own reading of black madness/mad blackness to a social context in which intersectionality fails to serve its purpose of extending humanity and respect to excluded parties. More disability scholars may follow suit in later years, especially considering that mental illness to date is a less-explored topic in disability studies.

My own analysis selected the areas to which assemblage seemed most relevant, rather than merely applying a theory universally or didactically. In future applications of my research, I would imagine that the theory would continue evolving. I would continue modifying my language to match 1) what I read, 2) socio-historical context, and 3) language connotations and academic developments relevant to the time in which I’m writing. At bare minimum, this experimentation in applying a theoretical methodology allowed me to dissect the musical body – consisting of numerous human and non-human agents – to better understand its composition and the potential for its future.

¹³¹ Pickens, 15.

¹³² Pickens, 16.

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