

# Listening to the Self: *The Shawshank Redemption* and the Technology of Music

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What do we sound like? Listening to the self was a deeply ontological practice in the nineteenth century. This form of sonic cultivation has a long history, and certainly one that stretches the “longness” of the long nineteenth century beyond the normal boundaries. How long history is, of course, is not something that centuries can cut up and measure. This issue is particularly acute for the nineteenth century since its own historical consciousness had a propensity for time travel. Ironically, this temporal condition was caused by its very attempt to snip itself off as a new epoch, dividing its modern noise from the ancient world in order to accelerate its course toward a utopian future. The nineteenth century did not so much contain its “present” as project historical time

as “futures past,” to borrow the words of Reinhart Koselleck.<sup>1</sup> Its sense of modernity was driven by a nostalgia for an unattainable past that it hoped to regain in the future through the infinite march of technology.

In this highly accelerated and uncontainable time-sense, the modern self developed a sonic signature that echoed the freedom and progress that the nineteenth century promised. This sound was also “futures past,” simultaneously nostalgic and proleptic. Appropriately, this article will attest to this sense of historical elasticity by bending our ears back to hear the ancient hum of the cosmos, and straining forward to listen to the twentieth century’s transformation of Mozart’s opera *Le nozze di Figaro* through the technology of sound reproduction

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<sup>1</sup>See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

in *The Shawshank Redemption*. But despite such time travel, the focus is on a nineteenth-century mode of self-listening that even the iPod of the twenty-first century has yet to supersede. In fact, the iPod may have finally delivered the sonic identity that the modern subject has been hankering after for some two hundred years. The Romantic subject and the iPodic self share the same ontological playlist. As this article shuffles through various centuries, it will become clear that we have yet to outlive the sound of the long nineteenth century.

#### IPODS

So, what do we sound like? The desire to hear our ontological sound goes back to an epistemological structure that might be termed “harmonic glocalization,” a global-local identity in the ancient world in which music tuned the cosmos according to the Pythagorean ratios and scaled the human soul to the same proportions. This world came to be pictured as a monochord that united the chain of being in the harmonics of its vibrations (see plate 1). The human being simply resonated like a harmonic along this string as a local particular in tune with the global order. The harmony of the spheres—to borrow the slogan of HSBC—was the “world’s local bank,” underwriting a sonic economy that simultaneously universalized and particularized the human being.<sup>2</sup>

By the turn of the nineteenth century, this ancient harmony was a nostalgic sound for the early Romantic philosophers. It symbolized the unity of man and nature, a micro-macro harmony that the divided existence of the modern subject could no longer attain. On first hearing, it may seem that such ideal and inaudible music would be opposed to the vision of material progress that fueled the development of modern technology. Indeed, many eighteenth-century music theorists had dismissed such ancient ideas as superstitious dogma in favor of empirical information, espousing “the science

of sound,” as Jean-Philippe Rameau put it, rather than the mystique of inaudible numbers.<sup>3</sup> But for all their empirical data and appeals to natural history,<sup>4</sup> these theorists ultimately located music in the *idealized* interior of the human subject that was no less speculative and no more audible than the harmonies of the spheres. Rameau, for example, conducted a self-experiment in the 1750s by imagining himself in an original state of nature in order to experience the first sound that would strike the blank canvas of his ears only to discover that it was not a single sound but a composite series of tones that resonated from the fundamental bass/bass of his being. His body was an inner resonator of sensation, emitting the partials of the harmonic series, as if it were literally the *corps sonore* of his harmonic theory. The “science of sound” had reduced Rameau to a monochord in the body of a Homo Sapiens.<sup>5</sup>

The Enlightenment demythologized the monochord only to remythologize it within the human subject. Eighteenth-century man was musically bionic, a man-machine that was more technologically advanced than his ancient predecessors in that he had more strings. Inside him was a nervous system that was either hardwired as a harpsichord or, for the more sensitive types, a clavichord. Denis Diderot, for example, imagined our sensory interior as a biological harpsichord jangling to the stimulus of the outside world: “We are all instruments endowed with feeling and memory,” he writes. “Our senses are so many strings that we are struck by surrounding objects and that also frequently strike themselves.”<sup>6</sup> For Johann

<sup>2</sup>On the epistemological ramifications of a musical cosmology and the monochord, see Daniel K. L. Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 12–72.

<sup>3</sup>Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Traité de l’harmonie réduite à ses principes naturels* (Paris: De l’imprimerie de J.B.C. Ballard, 1722), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>On the empirical, physiological, and biological understanding of sound in the eighteenth century, see Chua, *Absolute Music*, pp. 82–144.

<sup>5</sup>See Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Démonstration du principe de l’harmonie* (Paris: Durand, 1750), pp. 11–12; and Thomas Christensen, *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 217–18.

<sup>6</sup>Denis Diderot, *D’Alembert’s Dream* (1769) in *Diderot’s Selected Writings*, ed. Lester G. Crocker, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 187–88. The discussion is couched in the form of a play in which the main characters are Diderot himself, D’Alembert and, aptly, the French physician Théophile de Bordeu, who believed



rather, the self became a singing cosmos.<sup>11</sup> As David E. Wellbery puts it: the Romantic ego states “I am that I sing I am”;<sup>12</sup> it is a being (and “I-am”) that issues from an originary song prior to language and is therefore a being that eludes the grasp of conceptual thought. “I sing therefore I am” replaces the Cartesian “I think therefore I am” in deference to a self that Kant had made famously inaccessible to knowledge. In this sense, the entire Romantic project is based on an inner audition of the self in order to hear the identity of what it can neither see nor grasp.<sup>13</sup> This inner hearing is virtual because it is not reducible to an external source in the real world. Ears are not mandatory. Instead of some stimulus causing the nerve fibers to vibrate like soundwaves, as it apparently did in the eighteenth-century body, the Romantic subject was independent of such somatic reaction, no matter how often they occurred; otherwise external stimuli would reduce the self to an effect as opposed to the cause it believed itself to be. Rather, its song must guarantee the ego’s self-sufficiency. In this sense, the Romantic song is “absolute music,” not simply because it is a music prior to language but because it promises an audition of an unconditioned, self-grounding principle. To hear this song is to perceive an autonomous subject with no empirical data, no material matter, no body, no physical cause. Instead, this song is pure spirit, pure being, pure origin. It is a sound no longer limited by any physical or temporal constraints; as such it is akin to the music of the spheres, for it is an impossible song that cannot exist in reality. Music, in its audible but “absolute” form, is a reflection of this inner space—a virtual reality *avant la lettre*.<sup>14</sup> As Roger Scruton

argues, musical space is a metaphor, an “acoustic space, where a new kind of individual is born and lives out its life” separate from the physical circumstances of the real world.<sup>15</sup>

Because it is simultaneously a self-grounding principle and an originary point, this song refuses to operate within any normal space-time dimension. In fact, its impossibility is founded on a space-time contradiction. In terms of time, it is both eternal and momentary—an absolute identity that can break through at any point. In terms of space, it is simultaneously enclosed and limitless. After all, if the music of the spheres has collapsed into the Romantic ego, then the self has become an internal cosmos that is infinitely vast yet self-contained. The acoustical space of this song is the sonic equivalent of Dr. Who’s TARDIS, a time machine in the BBC science-fiction series that is shaped like a London police box in which the interior is infinitely larger than its exterior (see plate 2).<sup>16</sup> So the Romantic song, for all its momentary intimacy and inwardness, is absolutely vast and can transport us out of time. It inhabits an inner foyer that extends into what E. T. A. Hoffmann would call the “spirit realm of the infinite,” full of imaginary, virtual, ineffable spaces.<sup>17</sup>

But why would the Romantics invest so

<sup>11</sup>See John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry, 1500–1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

<sup>12</sup>David E. Wellbery, *The Specular Moment: Goethe’s Early Lyric and the Beginnings of Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 22.

<sup>13</sup>See Chua, *Absolute Music*, pp. 145–98. Also see Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 52, and *Why Classical Music Still Matters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 19–21.

<sup>14</sup>Eric Clarke compares the subject-object experience of music to the virtual reality of videogames where the player has no problem envisaging herself as both the subject con-

trolling the game and the object on the screen; Clarke, *Ways of Listening*, p. 87.

<sup>15</sup>Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), p. 72. Scruton argues that the metaphorical sense of space, time, and causality in music is an internalized experience of Kantian freedom (pp. 73–77); in other words, he is rehearsing the idea of Romantic song of which absolute music is the mirror.

<sup>16</sup>The TARDIS is short for a “Time and Relative Dimensions in Space machine.” This TARDIS-like self is not merely the stuff of science fiction; the experience of “myself” is not constrained by a limited exterior, because all the senses are outward facing. The interior being exceeds its physical dimensions; my “I AM” feels much bigger than I really am. To sound out this self is not merely an acoustic trick, but has various uses in nature; for example, koalas, despite their small compact dimensions, ward off predators and rivals by emitting a deep reverberant sound to project a vast aural image of themselves. Listen with eyes closed, then see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFBQmDAlbUs>.

<sup>17</sup>E. T. A. Hoffmann, “Review of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony,” *E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism*, ed. David Charlton, trans. Martyn Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 239.



Plate 2: Dr. Who's TARDIS (not actual size).

much in a virtual song? Why locate the meaning of the subject in the contortions of a nonconceptual music that is eternal and momentary, infinite and enclosed? Because such contortions echo the contradictions inherent within the subject. What the Romantic song represents is the modern condition itself, and it does so by inverting the ancient harmonic order. Whereas in antiquity the music of the spheres established a global harmony that guaranteed our unity with the world, in modernity the song is a global dissonance that requires future resolution. Or as Arthur Schopenhauer put it, music is the image of the "delays, postponements, hindrances, and afflictions" that torment us since "we ourselves are now the vibrating string that is stretched and plucked."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, ed. and trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), II, 451.

Instead of resonating at one with the cosmic monochord, the modern self is divided from its environment and is no longer in tune with itself—*rerum Concordia discors*.<sup>19</sup> Under the pressure of increasing industrialization and urbanization, the self's internal cosmos has hardened into a time capsule, a TARDIS that insulates and preserves our identity from the pollution around us. The history of this song, then, is one of increasing retreat into our true self, a hibernation of our being in the hope that when we awake the world will be a better place. Modernity, even in its postmodern form, has never quite outlived the spaces of the Romantic song and continues to shape who we are.

As if to prove this point, we need only look at the current fad of the iPod. The iPod is a nano-sized TARDIS with vast internal storage; it not only replicates the spaces within the self, but is designed to create a huge invisible force-field that insulates the self from the outside world through sounds that are inaudible to everyone else. The meaning of its social function is all in its name: *I*-pod. The modern self is an "I" in a "pod," a self closed off from the outside like a sonic monad, deaf to everything other than the sound of its own playlist; with its noise-cancelling earphones, the "I" need no longer listen to anybody but itself. Indeed, the MP3 format the iPod supports is based on a psychoacoustic theory of "private, interior auditory experience"; it reproduces what we hear inside our heads.<sup>20</sup> Thus the iPod is a machine that makes the inner audition the Romantics yearned for a consumer reality.

The history of the Romantic self up to the *I*-podic self is therefore one of technological innovation that renders the authenticity of the self entirely artificial. What the technology of sound reproduction strives for is not merely an attempt to capture the realism of sounds "out there," but to realize the imaginary space-time

<sup>19</sup>"The discordant concord of the world"—Schopenhauer's description of Beethoven's instrumental music captures the Romantic inversion of the cosmic order (*The World as Will and Representation*, II, 451).

<sup>20</sup>Jonathan Sterne, "MP3 and Mapping the Mind's Interior," paper given at "Music, Sound and the Reconfiguration of Public and Private Space," The Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Science and Humanities, Cambridge University, April 2008.

dimension of a song “in here.” High fidelity is really a fidelity to the self—an I-fidelity. And because this self is artificial, what counts as high-fidelity is in fact a virtual fidelity that faithfully reproduces an impossible song. What we hear is not so much hi-fi as vi-fi—virtual fidelity.<sup>21</sup> What does this virtual self sound like? Is it actually possible to hear this ideal song that resides in an infinite interior and lasts for an eternal moment?

#### HIGH FIDELITY

Let’s begin at the start of the nineteenth century, since the song of the self emerged at this time within the Romantic subject. Prior to the age of recording, the technology of sound reproduction involved wiring up complex notational data to the machinery of musicians. And ca. 1800 the philosophers who championed the song of the self also ensured its reproduction through the concept of *Werktrue*—a fidelity to the work—turning the score into a kind of “true recording” to which musicians had to be faithful: the performers’ allegiance to notation guaranteed the high fidelity of the work.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the score could record the self; to be true to its notation was to amplify the song that sings within—a song captured by the genius of the composer. And just as today’s technology can add spatial cues to recordings through the tweaking of reverberation and delay times, so scores could manipulate acoustical space to conjure up the sonic signature of the self and place the listener in the “subject-position” of the Romantic ego.

One of the earliest instances of this type of sound occurs in the score of Beethoven’s opera, *Fidelio* (1814). As the title underlines, fidelity is the theme of the opera: Leonore’s faithfulness to her husband results in his freedom. But the message of being true is achieved not merely in the plot but through the sound, that is, through the acoustical technology of its nota-

tion. The moment of truth here is a moment of high fidelity. When Florestan is finally set free by Leonore, we hear the virtual spaces of the Romantic song conjured up by the score as a sign of our true being. We are caught in the strange space-time dimensions of the eternal moment. “O Gott! O welch’ ein Augenblick” [O God! O what a moment!] sings Leonora as she removes the chains from her husband’s hands (see ex. 1).<sup>23</sup>

This moment of action seems to move in slow motion. What should take no time at all lasts an eternity. As Ernst Bloch puts it: the still point of the opera is a moment of such “veritable tarrying” that it “deserves to go on arriving for ever.”<sup>24</sup> Some commentators have compared the stasis in *Fidelio* to the eighteenth-century tableaux, which was a kind of theatrical still-life that suspended the moment for sentimental contemplation.<sup>25</sup> But the critical difference in *Fidelio* that marks it out as a nineteenth- rather than eighteenth-century “frame” is that the stasis is not merely visual but aural. Freedom is suspended in the song not the scene. And in order to suspend time through the temporality of music, Beethoven has miraculously turned sound into a virtual space that can be accessed only by our ears.

So how has Beethoven notated this space? A *pizzicato* marks a sudden twist from A major to F major, taking us into an alterior harmonic dimension. We are no longer in the world of phenomena, observing the soldiers and prisoners in the courtyard of the dungeon; we are positioned in the noumenal world of the subject. We are seeing the event through Leonore’s

<sup>21</sup>In the history of high-fidelity, the notion of a recording as a faithful copy of an original is a consumerist ideology. See Sterne, *The Audible Past*, pp. 215–86.

<sup>22</sup>See Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 1 and 231–42.

<sup>23</sup>This moment should be compared to Pizarro’s murderous *Augenblick* in act I: “Ha! Welch ein Augenblick!” Its nonreverberant speed functions as antimatter to Leonore’s moment of freedom; see Daniel K. L. Chua, “Untimely Reflection on the Operatic Echo: How Time Travels in Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo* and Beethoven’s *Fidelio* with a Short Instrumental Interlude,” *Opera Quarterly* 21 (2005), 587. On various types of *Augenblicken* in Beethoven, see Daniel K. L. Chua, “The Promise of Nothing: The Dialectic of Freedom in Adorno’s Beethoven,” *Beethoven Forum* 12 (2005), 13–35.

<sup>24</sup>Ernst Bloch, *Essays on the Philosophy of Music*, trans. Peter Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 243.

<sup>25</sup>Carl Dahlhaus, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to His Music*, trans. Mary Whittall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 184–85.

Sostenuto assai

(Leonore nimmt die Schlüssel, löst, in grössler Bewegung, Floresatan die Ketten ab, er sinkt in Leonorens Arme.)

Leonore  
frei'n. O Gott! o Gott! welch' ein Aug-en-blick!  
[O God! o God! What a mo - ment!]

Example 1: Beethoven, *Fidelio*, act II, sc. 8, "O Gott! O welch' ein Augenblick," mm. 1–10.

eyes as her timbral signature—the oboe—emerges from the harmonic texture and becomes her song. And yet this noumenal interior through which we are viewing the act of freedom is infinitely vast. The notation encases us in a TARDIS that only the ear can "see." Beethoven conjures this up through the sustained repetitions of an F-major triad composed of chords that fall on the second beat of each measure. These chords are out of time, not only metrically but metaphysically displaced in their attempt to transcend time. Their dynamic articulation—*sforzando piano*—indicates that these sounds have traveled from far-away, like distant explosions. Their metrical dislocation and articulation signify the sound of long-distance delay. What should take a moment—a mere tonic chord—lingers as an impossibly long echo that reverberates in an enclosure seemingly without walls. Leonore's voice can take its time to sing because there is no time. Her voice is simply suspended in this

vast, timeless, inner sanctum. Beethoven has placed us, through Leonore's eyes, in the virtual space of high fidelity, a high fidelity to the noumenal reality of the self. We hear in this infinite interior our originary identity—our song of freedom.<sup>26</sup>

Thus Beethoven's music transmutes the space we see on stage to create the global moment of the opera. Just as HSBC is the world's local bank, so Leonore becomes the world's local hero, for it is at this moment, in the very *Augenblick* she sings of, that the universal and the particular coalesce: the intimate sphere of marriage becomes the public sphere of justice; personal freedom becomes human freedom; domestic bliss becomes universal happiness. And if we find this moment as spine-tingling as

<sup>26</sup>This passage and other reverberant moments in *Fidelio* are discussed in more detail in Chua, "Untimely Reflection on the Operatic Echo," pp. 585–93.

Leonore seems to, then it is because the acoustical cues have given us a glimpse of the global identity that still resides within. Beethoven is singing our song.

#### PIPED MUSIC

Now fast-forward from 1814 to 1994 to Frank Darabont's film *The Shawshank Redemption*, which is based on a short story by Stephen King entitled *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*.<sup>27</sup> "Fidelio goes to Hollywood" might be an apt subtitle for the film. Like *Fidelio*, this is a prison drama with a soundtrack of hope and freedom; the Florestan figure is a banker named Andy Dufresne, who is wrongly convicted of murder and sentenced to life in Shawshank prison where he is sometimes confined to a dungeon—called "the hole"—by an evil warden. The figure of Leonore comes in the form of various pinup girls—Rita Hayworth, Marilyn Monroe, and Raquel Welch; they rescue Andy in that their images faithfully conceal for twenty years the tunnel through which Andy will eventually escape. But what particularly makes this film a Hollywood *Fidelio* is that its moment of freedom is literally an operatic moment that re-creates the space of Beethoven's *Augenblick*, albeit with a Mozart aria.

After pestering the state with six years of weekly letters asking for improved library resources at Shawshank, Andy finally receives a check for \$200 along with several boxes of secondhand books and LPs. He notices a boxed set containing Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, and, in an act of overt defiance, he locks himself in the warden's office, commandeers the warden's record player, and transmits Mozart's Letter Duet through the PA system so that the beautiful strains of the aria envelop the entire Shawshank complex (see plate 3). In effect, Andy has turned the prison sound system into a giant iPod, and the music, through its sheer beauty, forms an invisible bubble that momentarily suspends the ugly reality of the world in which

the prisoners are captive. As the narration makes clear, this music is the sound of freedom:

I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singin' about. Truth is, I don't want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. I like to think they were singin' about something so beautiful it can't be expressed in words and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you, those voices soared, higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away. And for the briefest of moments, every last man at Shawshank felt free.

The prisoners in Shawshank are doing time for life; what Andy's giant iPod achieves is the transportation of those who are forever "doing time" out of time. The music is free because somehow it escapes being bound by the temporality it inhabits. It does this in two ways.

First, the music is out of time in that an aria of the 1780s has infiltrated a prison in the 1950s. This discrepancy defamiliarizes the present condition in which the prisoners are trapped. It is not that the late eighteenth century was a utopian moment of freedom that needs to be relived in the present; the aria's historical specificity is immaterial. What counts is the way an ancient music puts time out of joint. The intrusion of an-Other time testifies that human history contains timeless moments that can shock us out of our present time and into our true being. Mozart's song therefore functions as a time capsule in which freedom hibernates in the eternal guise of beauty: it is hope in a pod, the promise of freedom, the very song of the self. As such, this music ought to be stored in the internal hard drive as the playlist of who we really are. So what history proffers as hope-in-a-pod is transformed into an *I-in-a-pod* at the moment this hope lives in us. Or as Andy puts it while pointing to his head and his heart: "Mr. Mozart . . . [is] in here." "That's the beauty of Music," he explains. "They can't get that from you." Once inside, the music is indestructible, because its beauty articulates the timeless dimension of the self, which is our ineradicable identity.

Second, the music is out of time because, as an eternal moment, it transcends time. The

<sup>27</sup>Stephen King, *Different Seasons* (New York: Signet, 1983). "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption" alludes to the spring season, with the title "Hope Springs Eternal."





Plate 3: *The Shawshank Redemption*: Andy locked in the warden's office, transmitting Mozart.

"briefest of moments" in which "every last man at Shawshank felt free" is one in which the inmates are held captive by the music of their true being. They stand in the prison yard entirely static, as a tableau of what the music is doing within them (see plate 4). They hear their song, and the suspension of motion that coincides with their hearing forms a visual representation of an internal suspension of time in which they experience the originary point of freedom. Like the prisoners briefly let out of their cells "in freier Luft" (into the fresh, literally the free, air) in *Fidelio* (act 1, sc. 9), the prisoners in the yard at Shawshank are stunned into a hushed moment of musical stillness by the thought of freedom. For that moment, the prisoners find themselves in the strange space-time dimension of the Romantic song.

This dimension is alluded to in Andy's subsequent punishment for his operatic misdemeanor. He is locked up in "the hole" for two weeks of solitary confinement; in other words, he is trapped in a space-time dimension where time is long and space is short. When asked by his fellow prisoners how he survived the ordeal, Andy replies: "I had Mr. Mozart to ac-

company me." The punishment was "easy time," he says. Doing time was nothing because temporally, in the time of his inner song, fourteen days takes no time at all. And spatially, "the hole" to which he is confined is also nothing because the acoustic space of his song is infinitely larger than the physical space in which he is confined. It is as if Andy were wired up to some invisible iPod that turned "the hole" into a TARDIS. The music in his head inverts the space-time torture to which he is subject. With Mr. Mozart to accompany him, time is short and the space is vast.

We don't get to see Andy's time in "the hole." But it doesn't matter because we have already heard it. Commentators are divided on how Mozart's aria functions in the film. At one extreme, Slavoj Žižek suggests that the music is absolute, both musicologically and philosophically. Musicologically, the prisoners hear the aria as pure music, since, as the narrator puts it, they had "no idea . . . what those two Italian ladies were singin' about." Consequently, this pure hearing negates the "trifling content" of the aria, creating "a momentary suspension of meaning that elevates the sub-



Plate 4: *The Shawshank Redemption*: Prisoners standing motionless before the sound of Mozart.

ject into another dimension." This other dimension is the space of the Romantic song, for what the prisoners perceive as "absolute music" is also philosophically absolute. The music, states Žižek, is the "brief apparition of a future utopian Otherness," an absolute he equates with none other than the "Holy Ghost."<sup>28</sup> Mozart's aria signals a Pentecostal promise of an ancient sound—a "Futures past."<sup>29</sup>

At the other extreme is Mary Hunter's sober reading of the scene. For her, Mozart's aria is

<sup>28</sup>Slajov Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 158–60.

<sup>29</sup>Friedrich Schlegel, in *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), p. 99, calls music a "sacred breath [*heilige Hauch*]." Wilhelm Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck, in a similar vein, call instrumental music "der letzte Geisterhauch" in *Phantasien über die Kunst für Freunde der Kunst* (Hamburg: F. Perthes, 1799), in *Werke und Briefe von Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder* (Berlin: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1938), p. 190. Absolute music and the Holy Ghost are kindred spirits, and Žižek is clearly tapping into this ideology in his own theological attempts to articulate Utopian hope and revolution.

not the animation of the Holy Spirit; there is nothing absolute about it. Rather the aria gives rise to a "touchy-feely" moment that titillates our sentimental bodies. In effect, Hunter transfers the eighteenth-century cult of feeling she associates with the Letter Duet to a feel-good movie of the twentieth century. *The Shawshank Redemption*, she suggests, is a "sentimental prison buddy story" that promotes the "values of democratic inclusivity and universal brotherhood."<sup>30</sup> The *Marriage of Figaro* might echo some of these sentiments, but for Hunter it is far from giving us even a fragile glimpse of utopian happiness. The film uses the music to manipulate our feelings by imposing a condition of listening that ironically undercuts the film's own political vision. Ultimately, Andy is in the control room; he is the white, privileged, educated banker who knows what this elitist music is all about. And the one who knows manipulates those who can only feel. But what

<sup>30</sup>Mary Hunter, "Sentiment and Wit, Feeling and Knowing: *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Prizzi's Honor*," in *Between Opera and Cinema*, ed. Jeongwon Joe and Rose Theresa (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 93.

does Andy know? Well, according to Hunter, precisely what Mary Hunter knows. Andy, it appears, is a surrogate musicologist. Unlike Žižek Hunter finds that the content of the Letter Duet is no trifling matter. Its historical and narrative context is deliberately used to create the *Augenblick* of the film: the servant-master inversions and the pastoral backdrop of *Figaro*, the unexpected friendship between the Countess and Susannah in this duet, and the hope of a “freely loving order” that they imagine their letter will achieve are all cleverly woven into the film as sublimated commentary.

Žižek and Hunter are split between the ideal and the real, between faith in the divine song of the free subject and a hermeneutic suspicion of the self as master-manipulator. But the split actually represents two sides of the same coin (or LP), where the sovereign self, as the all-controlling soundmeister, usurps the position of God.<sup>31</sup> A one-sided view will always appear too gullible or too cynical to believe in. Whereas Žižek sounds naive because he believes in “the Music,” Hunter sounds like a killjoy because she believes in musicology. Andy, after all, is a banker and not Carl Dahlhaus, and even were he in the possession of the right academic knowledge, it would not matter; the knowledge is not what makes the moment work. By focusing too hard on the music—whether as absolute or contextualized—Žižek and Hunter overlook the technology through which the music “appears.”

In this film, the message is in the medium and not in the music. Both Žižek and Hunter assume that the technology merely transmits rather than transforms the music. But the film suggests that the source of the Romantic song of freedom is not Mozart, but the aria’s reproduction as recorded sound. The camera work makes this explicit by following the chain of connections and conversions that amplify the sound from the needle of the record player to the microphone of the PA system, then through the wires and cables until the duet emerges from the loudspeakers. By lingering on the tech-

nology of sound transmission, we see in slow motion, as it were, what takes a split second, as if the camera were mimicking the space-time structure of the *Augenblick*. The eye of the camera takes time in following what takes no time, and by tracing the amplification of sound from the pin-point of a needle to the vast sound stage created by the speakers, the camera work parallels the spatial existence of Andy, who has locked himself within the confines of the prison office and yet is sonically extended throughout the entire Shawshank complex. Žižek’s Holy Spirit turns out to be a ghost in the machine, the invisible phantom of electricity that can convert the physical into the metaphysical.

Thus what we hear and see in *The Shawshank Redemption* is not music per se but “piped” music. In this sense the film defamiliarizes the everyday, since this is precisely the technology of sound we hear in shopping malls and airports—a technology that habitually converts Mozart into Muzak.<sup>32</sup> So this is clearly piped music of a different order. Instead of a mass diffusion of music to induce a mood of global anonymity, we hear an *I*-podic experience of glocal proportions that transforms Mozart into metaphysics. Through “Mr. Mozart,” Andy, the local hero, speaks globally; he shares his iPodic interior by converting the entire prison into a universal iPod: “we are all born free,” the music proclaims, “and even if everywhere we are in chains, hope keeps us alive.” In Andy’s iPodic being we hear the indomitable spirit of humanity.

Perhaps this is why the film maps the musical moment of freedom onto the actual moment of freedom. Andy’s escape involves negotiating 500 yards of pipe-work awash with “shit smelling foulness,” as the narrator puts it (see plate 5). The parallel with the opera scene is obvious. The Mozart we hear moving through the cables and wires in the act of sound reproduction assumes visual form when we see Andy crawl through the tunnel and sewage pipes to squeeze his way—or more precisely to be excreted—out of bondage. This is piped music for a piped escape. Similarly, the two “Italian la-

<sup>31</sup>See Daniel K. L. Chua “Beethoven’s Other Humanism,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 62 (2009), 571–87.

<sup>32</sup>See Jonathan Sterne, “Sounds Like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space,” *Ethnomusicology* 41 (1997), 22–50, in particular the correlation between Mozart and Victoria’s Secret (37).



Plate 5: *The Shawshank Redemption*: Andy's escape through a sewage pipe.

dies" whose voices we hear wafting out of the loudspeakers are, like Leonore, analogous to the cover girls we see in Andy's cell who literally cover the tunnel through which he gains his freedom. They are all forms of Lady Liberty, beckoning the individual into the land of the free. So in the film, the metaphysics of hope and the actuality of freedom are presented as one and the same, except that hope is beautiful but devoid of real content, whereas freedom is pure content but covered in shit. Freedom is real and ideal—shit and Mozart.<sup>33</sup>

This double structure articulates the division of the modern subject that can only maintain its grip on reality by keeping its identity virtual. In other words, there is an aesthetic dimension within the iPodic self through which that self insulates its being. Or, to borrow

<sup>33</sup>It is probably for this reason that the composer, Thomas Newman, tries to keep the music for the actual escape scene as unobtrusive as possible; he makes no attempt to steal the scene from Mozart, as it were. Music when "ideal" aestheticizes freedom (Mozart), whereas in the "real" escape scene the music is underplayed in order minimize the aestheticizing process.

Žižek's phrase, the aesthetic functions as "the brief apparition of a future utopian Otherness to which every authentic revolutionary stance should cling."<sup>34</sup> The ugly struggle, despite the shit, is inwardly beautiful because the aesthetic illusion is precisely the truth of the self. "Truth lives on in the illusion of art," writes Schiller, "preparing the shape of things to come."<sup>35</sup> So the mucky action in the film in which Andy is excreted into freedom is shaped by the inaction of a pure music. The inward song is an indestructible illusion marking the very division that makes the experience of the subject possible.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, p. 160.

<sup>35</sup>Friedrich von Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967; rpt. 1985), p. 57.

<sup>36</sup>The double structure is absent from the novella on which the film is based. There is no opera scene in Stephen King's text (how could there be?). In King's text, Andy "wears his freedom like an invisible coat" (King, *Different Seasons*, p. 64); in Darabont's film, this invisible freedom is internalized as music. So the scene that steals the show is unique to the movie and is arguably the pivotal moment that transforms a prison story into a "feel good" movie. By



Plate 6: *The Shawshank Redemption*: The moment of freedom—Andy looks up with eyes shut.

There is one other parallel between the opera scene and the escape scene that illuminates the cinematic mechanism at work here to articulate our inner song. Both scenes employ aerial shots. In the opera scene, the camera peers down over the prison yard as the music envelopes the inmates; in the escape scene, at the moment of freedom, the camera looks down directly from above Andy as he looks up into the night sky with his eyes tightly shut as if in prayer (plate 6). In the first scene what we see “from above” is aural; we hear with eyes positioned from the perspective of the loudspeakers that tower over the prison yard. In the second scene, what we see is divine in that the camera seems to hover above Andy like Žižek’s Holy Ghost. Presumably we are viewing Andy from the absolute perspective of freedom since the camera is positioned outside any available reality. Here is the ideal gaze of a freedom that can grasp the sum total of Andy’s humanity in

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accentuating the division in the iPodic subject through this inward-outward structure, Durabont’s film makes us “feel good” about who we are by mirroring what we are.

his moment of liberty. When Andy raises his head to the sky we look down from a godlike perspective as if we were meeting his inner gaze. This bird’s-eye view puts us in the position of the two Italian ladies floating invisibly out of the loudspeakers, whose “voices soared . . . like some beautiful bird, higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream.”<sup>37</sup> But in the opera scene, what we see and what we hear are in contradiction. As the Mozart aria floats out of those speakers, we do not hear the infinite expanse of the sky, but a different space that is much more resonant than anything we can imagine from our elevated viewpoint. It is a space that does not exist; a space that cannot be seen. This may seem odd, since the music is obviously diegetic; it is a sound that Andy and everyone else in *Shawshank* should hear. But this diegetic sound drifts toward the nondiegetic, falling into some kind of “in-between” metadiegetic region that signi-

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<sup>37</sup>Given this divine-avian perspective, it is no wonder that Žižek heard the Holy Spirit. The dove of freedom is on the anointed Andy, who has been baptized in sewage and water on behalf of humanity for sins he did not commit.

fies an intersubjective hearing that is simultaneously real and ideal.<sup>38</sup>

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, the hi-fi sound from the record player does not exhibit high fidelity to the real world of the film but to the virtual world of the self. In fact, the technology of sound reproduction we see in the prison equipment of the 1950s is primitive compared to the technology of sound reproduction we actually hear. At first we can probably suspend disbelief in the probability of hearing such high-end sound from a rather low-end record player. We can probably take the increased resonance in the soundtrack as a cue for an increase in spatial volume as the music diffuses outward. But there is an imperceptible point when we become aware that the expected deterioration of sound is contradicted by an inner hearing in which the music becomes increasingly reverberant and articulate. If this were diegetic sound, we, like everyone else in Shawshank, would hear a thinly processed Muzak failing to fill the increasingly large spaces of the prison complex until it reaches the open air, where it would evaporate without further reverberation. It should have that miniature quality that Adorno accused the radio of inflicting on Beethoven symphonies in the 1950s, robbing the music of its communal power.<sup>39</sup> In *The Shawshank Redemption*, what should sound inadequate is given a new technology, far beyond Adorno's conception, that can grant even a seemingly trivial aria the communal power of a Beethoven symphony. By the time the music

is squeezed out of the crude speakers that look no better and should sound no better than megaphones, we hear a massively reverberant aria, seemingly at high volume with long delay times and close-up details, as if the sound had miraculously traveled a vast distance without any deterioration.

This acoustic dimension does not tally with an open space, but suggests an infinitely large interior in which a sound that should take a moment can take forever to echo. This is the eternal *Augenblick* of endless reverb; it is hi-fi as vi-fi—a fidelity to the self that is entirely virtual. From the aural perspective of the towering prison speakers, we hear the virtual space of the subject as a contained infinity. And this space we hear ultimately interprets the space we see. The sky in the aerial shot through which we capture the moment is not a sky out there but, like Andy's gesture to his head and heart, a sky inside us—the music of the spheres as a cosmos within the subject. This virtual space is paralleled in the escape scene; Andy looks up at the sky, but his eyes are closed because the expanse he sees is within. Thus *The Shawshank Redemption's* affective power resides in its ability to tap into the resources of the Romantic song through its manipulation of sound technology.

#### CANNING THE UNCANNY

The technological transformation of the Mozart aria in *The Shawshank Redemption* should sound unnatural if not unbelievable. And yet we believe. We are drawn to the impossible music of this universal iPod because it seems strangely familiar, as if this were a sound with which we feel at home. This is because the uncanny sound of modern technology is already at home, both literally in the domestic spaces of our lives and metaphorically in the interior chamber of the self.<sup>40</sup> Whether with

<sup>38</sup>As this example from *The Shawshank Redemption* underlines, the method of classifying film music as diegetic, nondiegetic, metadiegetic, etc. is inherently problematic and does not always do justice to the significance of music. See *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), in particular Robynn J. Stilwell, "The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic," pp. 184–202, and Lawrence Kramer, "Melodic Trains: Music in Polanski's *The Pianist*," pp. 66–85.

<sup>39</sup>Instead of absorbing the individual listener into the community as its voluminous sounds envelope the audience in the concert hall, the symphony on the radio, claims Adorno, is like a cheap reproduction that reduces Beethoven to a decorative element in a living room no different from a houseplant. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 118–22.

<sup>40</sup>The technological urge to create an increasingly portable sound-world is driven by a desire for personal "space" travel in which the self can experience its autonomy wherever it goes. The technology of sound reproduction enables us to experience a Fichtean "Ich," which, as Wellbery puts it, "is always at home, enfolded in self-sufficiency"; Wellbery, *The Specular Moment*, p. 59. Also see n. 42.

speakers in the living room or earphones in the Metro, the places we inhabit today are different from the space we hear through music. It is not simply that recorded music sounds artificially intimate in detail and reverberant in space (which, in fact, it often is), but that technology itself mimics this TARDIS-like acoustics in which physical miniaturization is inversely proportional to a hi-fi sound that wants to go in-ear and reverberate at high volumes.

When the artificial becomes second nature, when the uncanny feels at home, the things that should jolt us out of our mundane lives lose their power of dis-location. The technology of sound reproduction has commodified the *Augenblick* to such an extent that what is exceptional—the moment—has become the norm. The impossible sound is now technologically concrete. We are now everyday TARDISES, portable sovereigns, bionic monads. If such technology has hardwired our ears to consume the impossible sound that we've always wanted to hear, then we should be in a permanent state of glocal happiness. Our hope for reconciliation between the particular and the universal should hum like a sonic halo around our iPodic selves and the world, to quote the old Coke ad, would "sing in perfect harmony." But the fact that there is nothing more irritating on the Metro while I read my copy of *19th-Century Music* than to hear the soundtrack of another person's playlist buzzing out of a pair of "cans" may indicate that the glocal promise of sound reproduction, far from being "the real thing" has already been broken.<sup>41</sup> The subject's

<sup>41</sup>In 1969 the Coca-Cola Company and its advertising agency, McCann-Erickson, ended their "Things Go Better with Coke" campaign, replacing it with a campaign that focused on the slogan "It's the Real Thing."

isolation in an iPodic bubble may not be the revolutionary spirit of humanity hibernating in hard times but an isolated privatized self, absorbed in what it thinks it already has.<sup>42</sup> "Futures past" is over. Žižek "Holy Ghost" reveals himself in the present as Hunter's soundmeister, imprisoned in his pod and imagining that he can project his spirit by remote control. It is not that modern technology, by giving us what was impossible, has failed humanity with a premature realization of a promise, but that it confronts the self with its own sovereign delusions.<sup>43</sup> Once realized, the universal iPod may turn out to be Apple's forbidden fruit, kicking us out of our virtual paradise because it knows too much for our own good.



<sup>42</sup>According to Sterne, the technologies of sound reproduction have developed an "audile technique" of listening since the nineteenth century that has increasingly individuated the listener, as if sound could demarcate a private property of the self. See Sterne, *The Audible Past*, pp. 158–77.

<sup>43</sup>See Chua, "Listening to the Other: A Counter-Cultural Ear in iPodic Times," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 135 (special issue, 2010), 103–08.

### **Abstract.**

Music has often been used to symbolize and express ontological experiences. This article explores a mode of nineteenth-century self-audition where music captures a glimpse of the freedom that lies at the core of the subject. This mode of listening has intensified with the development of modern technology and is still prevalent in constructing the identity of the self. The opera scene from the *Shawshank Redemption* not only is an example of this special effect, but provides a narrative of how music achieves this affect, creating an ideal and virtual self through sound technology. Keywords: *Shawshank Redemption*, Romanticism, subjectivity, freedom, sound technology