

JUDITH HAMANN *Music for Cello and Humming*



Judith sent me a dream about someone named Josephine. In this transcribed dream, Josephine wrote out the poems of someone that Judith didn't know, or whose name she couldn't remember. The poems took the shape of sine waves, with bracketed-off consonants and vowels placed above and below the crests and troughs of the marks. As she traced the work of this unnamed figure, Josephine said to Judith, "and look, here, here he's really humming." Josephine started humming, or reading, the poems as they were written. When the writing was finished, the dream filled with a conversation about the terrain of humming. Gender and safety. Bravery and undoing. Diminution and unveiling. I hadn't met Judith before reading her dream. Once I had read it, I felt like I had a clearer sense of who Josephine was than of the dreamer herself. Moreover, I felt like I had an even sharper sense of this unnamed poet-figure whose work they were enunciating and evading. Now, why would I feel things like that?

Eleven days earlier, I had also woken up shaken from a dream. I had dreamt that I was in my mother's house, where she was making tea out of cuttings from some kind of tough-barked plant. I was trying to tell her not to use so many cuttings, that she didn't need to, but she said she had plenty. In that moment I started to sense that my mother's death was imminent, immediate. I tracked down my sister and confronted her on a beach that is always full of oval stones that make it difficult to walk on (an actual beach I remember well from childhood, and a beach that she now, unlike then, lives near in real life). I was angry at her because I felt that she knew that our mother was dying before I did, and had withheld it from me. I was angry at my sister because, shortly before this dream, she had told me that she was

pregnant with her first child, something I will never be able to say. We screamed at each other, how we used to, to the point of blackout rage, but I couldn't hear anything because the wind off the ocean was too strong.

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In his discussion of expressive activity, the philosopher Nishida Kitarō described the world as "the shadow of being cast in the direction of nothing." The first phrase of this aphorism is a familiar one: Kitarō cites similar images in Plato and Plotinus. In Kitarō's example, matter is "that which suffers actuality." Some kind of illuminating light (thought, awareness, etc.) is cast on being (what is real, what is true, etc.), which only accidentally gives off a shadowy imitation (matter, substance, etc.). But it is the second phrase, "the direction of nothing," the orientation of the shadow in its pointing towards nothing, wherein Kitarō places the activity of activity.

He asks, "What sort of thing is activity?" In other words, what does activity express in itself aside from its character as an activity-of or an activity-by or an activity-for? "What merely changes is not yet what is acting. When we see something changing before our eyes, we cannot immediately assume it is acting. What acts must be what can change itself. [...] At the ground of acting, the one gives birth to the many, and the many constitute the one. Were there not the unity of the one and the many, of course, our very thinking itself could not come into being. That the universal itself determines itself is the fact of our thinking." Today, amid roundly victorious post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theories of the "actant," Kitarō's preservation of a teleological potential

for the act might seem passé, if not incompatible with the co-constitution and co-determination of cause and effect (or the desire and its ends) that he still upholds. But this is not to defend the subject and its will or to disavow it in its immersion. Rather, he says, "we could consider our bodies to be a kind of expression that harbors wise character. In the body that should be called the point of an antithetical intersection between the entirety of the ideal and the whole of the actual, the content of expression, activity, and the expression itself are one." Activity here is always an auto-determination of what acts as what acts, a claim made for the possibility of activity (and subjectivity) rather than mere change—but never more, it seems, than that possibility. Whether it is cast by consciousness or the body, the "shadow of being" is a cloak of activity, and it points toward nothing for Kitarō because, in a philosophical perspective so enamoured with totality and wholeness, there can be nothing lacking. Anywhere you try to point, there it is. And it is the pointing which begins the transformation of change into activity.

Kitarō calls the world our bodies find themselves in "the world of the dialectical universal." For him, "the 'actual' is enveloped within the nonactual, within something like sense," just as thought is enveloped within what is not conscious, and just as the thing is enveloped within what is unmediated. Enveloped, or set in a dialectical movement akin to vibration.

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It seems to me that Judith Hamann's *Music for Cello and Humming* is concerned with activity—not the activity of the instrument in itself or the

activity of the hummed voice in itself, not these together (because it is a question, whether they are together)—but the activity of the void between the serration on the strings and the mouth’s suppression of its own sound. When these works set cello and hum to harmonics, to scalar drifts, to sustained loops, to electronic decays, one senses the rigor of Hamann’s investigations; one senses that the music is an investigation into a kind of nothing that acts or forces action that a music is able to track. Her work is resolutely collaborative: her performance of Anthony Pateras’s “Down to Dust” allows the subaural glow of the hummed voice to swell and diminish while the long-drawn notes extinguish themselves, as waves on a shore. We can hear some kind of near-verbal exclamation only once; its affect is unplaceable and distant. The album’s longest piece, “Loss: For Humming Cellist and Electronics,” is a composition by Sarah Hennies that similarly attempts to complicate its own collapse. Beginning with an almost mimetic relationship between hum and strings, each trying to match each other’s pitch and inclination, the music works through an increasingly embodied practice of complication: repeated scales transform into repeated plucking which transforms into repeated fading. Yet, more than mere change, the course of the piece seems to be concerned with avoiding what it is avoiding. Moments of strained near-moans punctuate its acts, along with coughs and resigned “tsks,” as the borders of the hum disintegrate and blur.

Though something like humming may often be normatively described as “less determined” and “more emotive” than the verbal terrain of language, there is clearly a regulatory power in the hum which is under scrutiny here. The moments in which the hum benevolently shepherds Hamann’s

beautiful, dissonant playing in “Étude for Multiphonics and Humming: One Cello, One Voice and One Shadow Voice” must be set alongside the moments in which it unfolds into that same type of dissonance in the two “Fragments,” and appears, if you’ll forgive my psychologism here, a bit hypocritical. We picture a musician humming to find the right note—the body containing a “wise character”—but there is something lost if one cannot be seen as enveloped by the other, with one prodding the other on. It is as it is with the two women in Claude Chabrol’s 1995 film *La Cérémonie*, where it is too easy to assume that questions like “who is the mother and who is the daughter?” or “who is corrupted and who is corruptible?” or “who has been just and who has been unjust?” stand in a relation with the action. These are simply questions of change, of a changing perspective on what is happening in the artwork that avoids the possibility that nothing is happening. Literally “in the artwork”: the film’s climactic murder takes place during, is recorded into, live opera.

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No, I won’t talk about him.

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It is hard to listen to *Music for Cello and Humming* in May and June of 2020 without thinking of this time as its context. Over the past several months we have encountered what some have argued is the twenty-first century’s first truly global shared experience, a shared experience of the exponentially varied responses to and conjugations with what is at root a rupture in capitalism. Or at least, this is something we

can argue about until the next “first truly global shared experience” arrives. These months have been full of commentary on the nature of rupture in general: some have augured the potential for radical change in the pandemic and its shockwaves, even going so far as to promise the inevitability of this change. Some have pointed to the continuity of this moment with its constitutive historical elements, whether from positions of reactionary cynicism or positions of a more cautious and strategic left radicalism. Some have sought to highlight the ways that millenarian panic and hope both equally occlude the far more durable forms of racism and imperialism that structure our world. We are in the middle of something, certainly—but just how much more or less in the middle of it we are than usual is unclear. Imagine saying: on a whole and on average, the vast majority of human beings currently on this planet have become more familiar with isolation and loneliness than they have ever been in their lifetimes. Imagine saying that! One thing I do know is that I’ve found it harder and harder to speak. When you see fewer people you repeat yourself less, or notice when you repeat yourself more. When you don’t see anyone, everything feels like a repetition. There is not much to talk about anyway, and talking is more exhausting than waiting, which is the other obvious option. (Waiting for what?) Like almost everyone I know, I feel more uncertain about the future materially, politically, and interpersonally. Not uncertain—at a loss. Indifferent to the void that has opened up. Numb, in a way I wish was not so welcoming.

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Two years ago, in May and June 2018, I began

vocal feminization training with a voice therapist. I forget what my voice used to sound like, actually, and probably couldn’t return to it if I tried. But I remember how unimaginable that first step was, where we are told to hum. By humming a scale of notes above one’s ingrained speaking range, and humming them to the point of exhaustion and breathlessness over and over, something that can seem in a visceral way to be physically impossible for trans women—the possibility of a voice that is heard by others as female—does eventually open up. At the same time, this months-long exercise (which I would do in the closed back room of my non-air-conditioned apartment, sweating and blushing from the unusual summer heat and humidity, afraid that my landlord might hear me try to change my voice, and change myself) was something jarring and wounding. The voice therapist would record my humming and my nonverbal vowel shifts and play it all back to me, pointing out things I could change or modulate to sound “less masculine.” There wasn’t time to critique these kinds of things. This wasn’t free. Instead, we talked about this thing with humming as its ground. How should the air move? Where should it come from? How do you picture your mouth moving when you close your eyes? She was kind and inoffensive about all of it. Not many people even know that the voices of trans women can be and are trained in this way. Many people ask if it changes on its own, as if anything does.

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Shaking Studies concretizes the kinds of musical and conceptual activity that Hamann’s work is interested in around the vibration, the interval, and the pulse. Unvoiced, the pieces that make up this LP focus more on the draw of the cello and

on its particular colour when cycled and layered. Whereas the corporeal obstinacy of the hum forced its peculiar dialog with the cello in *Music* wherever the two found one another, here there is more technical experimentation with the instrument alone. The tremulous playing that characterizes the first track of *Shaking Studies*, titled “A Reading,” is more compact, more accelerated, more electrical than the work of its sister album. With both at hand, one will feel where in *Shaking Studies* the absence of the hum and its embodied source has structural effects. But, just like in the probing of the hum in *Music for Cello and Humming*, these modalities of change beyond the body allow the music to waver and fade—and it is in the wavering, the fading, the inconstancy, and the tremulousness of the sound and the body producing it, and the truth enveloping that body, that we find a dialectical activity.

In the language of the German Idealism to which Kitarō was a principal respondent, we can say that shaking is not quite movement and not quite stillness. It is from a certain view an intermediary or hybrid state between two concepts in a dyad. But shaking and stillness are bound by a shared negation that shaking and movement are not: neither shaking in place nor remaining perfectly still is movement, and thus both *are* not-movement. The same is not true, however, of steady movement and shaking, since that pair, only movement is not-stillness. What first appeared to be a synthetic phenomenon (shaking) now seems to share an identity with the negation within the dyad (stillness, not-moving), even while both depend on the possibility of the dyad’s affirmation (movement) that may never be fully distinguishable from the enfolded synthesis. It is as if the *a posteriori* product of this opposition

between motion and motionlessness was there in the latter state all along, and moreover was what produced the former. Movement in this view is a thing dreamed out of and determined by the activity, the vibrato, the quiver, and the rattle, taking place within not-movement, within nothing. It is this unified and determinable “not-” that Kitarō had in mind, I think, in his aphorism about the shadow of being’s direction.

Kitarō was a close reader of Immanuel Kant, whose treatment of “nothing” in the *Critique of Pure Reason* strikes me as one of the most unresolved and jarring moments of that otherwise immaculately architectural work. Given Kant’s attempts to ground the conditions of knowledge in the “two stems” of intuition and the understanding alone, four possible concepts of nothing seemed possible to him through their combination. They were, in order, “empty concept without object,” “empty object of a concept,” “empty intuition without an object,” and “empty object without a concept.” Kant makes it clear that this addendum to the Transcendental Analytic, which enumerates the ways that empirical and transcendental concepts can be confused, covers all of the possible concepts of negation available to us, and shows that “nothing,” is really just a side effect of the formal constitution of our knowledge, rather than a thing (or lack of things) possessing autonomy or reality. But there are two other variations missing in Kant’s formulation. We are not given the “empty concept of an object,” the reverse of the second division, and we are not given the “empty object of an intuition,” the reverse of the third. A friend of mine said that she thought these are things Kant didn’t want to stain with the name of “nothing.” “Nothing” is properly impossible and illusory in his world of

appearances: the empty concept of an object is just the transcendental object itself, and the empty object of an intuition is just the transcendental apperception from which the I emerges. World and self, totality and limit, tremor within nothing.

Kitarō attempted to embrace what Kant could not bear to within his own work: “In this world all actuality subsumes activity within itself; each must be free personhood, and activity becomes its means, becomes incomplete or imperfect expression. Each self, in being self-aware, because it includes time within itself, can be conceived as the actuality of eternity that transcends time. A world in which value sustains value itself is not a world without time but rather a world that subsumes time within itself.” And: “Objective expression is thought as an infinite ‘should.’ What is thought to be intuition is negated therein. But then there is absolutely no movement from the created to the creator. We are entirely what, being created, creates; we are what, being made, makes. Fundamentally, at the limit of expressive historic-corporeal action, we contradict the infinite ‘should.’”

Imagine saying that.

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Theodor Adorno said that “each [artwork] must follow the whippoorwill of objectivity immanent to it.” Whippoorwills, which only begin to sing as night falls, were called “goatsuckers” in Ancient Greece—their diving below herds of goats and sheep was thought to be their suckling for milk, when they were actually just diving to eat the insects which hovered around the exposed bellies of those ruminants. This misrecognition in the

dark, the opacity of the nighttime, is fundamental to questions about the subject: a fount of nourishment to which the song is drawn, or a pest circling the fount of nourishment to which the song is drawn? That doesn’t matter. The point is that there is something going on out there that we can’t see but can follow.

I listened to *Music for Cello and Humming* again today, the morning after a week-long heatwave. In certain pieces, the *études* especially, Hamann’s cello and voice rose, repeatedly, variably, and I listened in risings for the way that one source (of the music and of the study) would tarry behind or ahead of the other. In the rising, the flexing or clawing out of a space, there was also a falling, a dwelling in the preparatory and the provisional. The space where the heat had been was still here, if not the heat itself, in this place where I sometimes remember that I live. Things are “opening up” and “starting again,” or so we are told; here, the death toll is highest in Canada. Sharp changes in the weather are common in Quebec, but the temperature dropped overnight from suffocatingly hot and humid to unnaturally cool and dry. When I went to buy some food for dinner, everything was closed—I’d forgotten that today is Quebec’s beloved counter-national holiday, the feast day of Saint John the Baptist. There was no one around. I found it pretty funny, honestly; people being forced back to work only to immediately be given a day off. A break within a break. Whenever the weather changes like this, the wind starts to pick up. And the wind is picking up.

Nora Fulton
Montréal, June 24, 2020

Study for Cello and Humming
Judith Hamann

Down to Dust (2018)
for cello and electronics
Anthony Pateras

Humming Suite: Études for Cello and Humming
Judith Hamann

- I – Étude for one cello and one voice
- II – Fragment i
- III – Harmonies étude for one cello and one voice
- IV – Fragment ii
- V – Étude for multiphonics and humming, one cello,
one voice and one shadow voice

Loss (2018)
for humming cellist and electronics
Sarah Hennies

Mastered by Kassian
Troyer at Dubplates &
Mastering, Berlin.

Part of this recording was
made on the stolen land of
the Jaara people of the
Dja Dja Wurrung nation.
I wish to pay my respects to
the traditional custodians
of these lands, and their
elders, past, present and
emerging. Sovereignty was
never ceded. Pay the rent.

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Anthony Pateras for your
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Kumpf and all at Blank
Forms for your trust.

Recorded by Alexandria Smith at Studio A UC San Diego
2017, edited and processed at EMS Stockholm by Judith
Hamann 2019. Mixed by Alan F. Jones, Laminar Audio,
Tracyton WA.

Recorded and mixed by Anthony Pateras at Akademie
Schloss Solitude June 2018. This piece first appeared
on: *Anthony Pateras Collected Works Vol II (2005–2018)*
Immediata, IMM015.

Recorded by Judith Hamann at Ossastr, Berlin 2019, and
HIAP, Suomenlinna 2020. Mixed by Alan F. Jones, Laminar
Audio, Tracyton WA. Additional click magic by Robbie Lee.

Recorded by Casey Rice at Lyttleton St, Castlemaine on
the hottest Boxing Day I can remember, 2018. Mixed by
Sarah Hennies, Ithaca NY.

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