Presenting the Irreconcilable:

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This tension in modernism's relationship with the political can also be observed in relation to composers' artistic products, which tend to be arranged into two opposing

³ James Macmillan, 'Music and Modernity', *Standpoint Magazine*, Nov. 2009. www.standpointmag.co.uk/text-november-09-music-and-modernity-james-macmillan?page=0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C0%2C4 (acc. 16 Sept. 2017).

positions. The first encourages political contribution through radical innovation within the realm of material and will be discussed here as a crude Adornian standpoint. In his highly influential *Philosophy of New Music*, Theodor Adorno states that music's 'social substance' is its 'isolation', which can correspond 'to a momentous social change'.⁴ Babbitt or Schoenberg could well be ascribed political importance from this viewpoint. The second, contrasting, position allows the use of material that has specific political ends, or even bald social comment. This is connected with a Marx-inspired socialist consciousness that seeks to compose music either for, or with the intention of educating, 'the people'.

These two viewpoints have come to define the debate concerning the engagement of modernist music with politics, with both open to criticism from different angles. The belief in abstract, 'pure' musical expression is critiqued for obscuring a conservative agenda, and for ignoring the way in which all musics are subject to societal formations in their organization and dissemination. The other position, which seeks consciously to engage with society and to change it, has been seen as a hopeless cause, while the materials utilized to these ends are described as musically unconvincing.⁵ The two sides appear locked into an antagonistic binary that has defined the discussion of politics and music-making throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

That new light can be shed on this opposition is, therefore, important not only to modernism's connection with political expression but to conceptions of music's political potential in general. It is argued here that just such a contribution can be found in the work of the German composer Mathias Spahlinger (born 1944). Many of these important strands of political music-making in the twentieth century are interwoven in this composer's practice: he is a member of the 1968 generation, a Marx-inspired modernist, and a regular commentator on music's political potential in a vein significantly influenced by Adorno, Hegel, and the Frankfurt philosopher Bruno Liebrucks. Spahlinger's work *in dem ganzen ocean von empfindungen eine welle absondern, sie anhalten* for choir and playback (henceforth *ocean*, 1985), which will be the focus of this article, demonstrates particularly clearly his intense interest in music's political potential.

Spahlinger is now a venerable member of the German new-music scene: he has received commissions from the majority of the country's major orchestras and new-music festivals, and was a leading teacher of composition until his retirement from the Freiburg Musik Hochschule in 2009. Among his composer colleagues, he is most often associated with fellow Germans Helmut Lachenmann and Nicolaus A. Huber due to their shared nationality, certain surface similarities in their use of noise and extended techniques, and their initial common leftist political outlook. Spahlinger, like Huber and Lachenmann, is known primarily as a composer of instrumental acoustic works, making *ocean* to this extent atypical in both its scoring for choir⁶ and use of technology.⁷

⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. A. G. Mitchell and W. V. Bloomster (London, 1973), 131.

⁵ See Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment', in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London, 1980), 177–95.

⁶ There are in fact a number of Spahlinger's pieces that contain a chorus or small choir: *sotto voce* (1974); *drama* for twelve voices (1969); *el sonido silencioso* (1980) for seven female voices and tape; *signale* for choir (1983); *verfluchung* for three vocalists with percussion instruments (1983/85); and *Über den frühen Tod Fräuleins Anna Augusta Marggräfin zu Baden* for eight instruments and eight voices (1995). There are also yet more chamber works that incorporate solo voices such as *128 erfüllte augenblicke* (1976), *vier stücke* (1975), and *musica impura* (1983). Yet there is nevertheless a sense that Spahlinger is first and foremost an instrumental composer: partly as he himself has never singled out the vocal strain of his work as being particularly significant, while scholarship on him has primarily explored instrumental compositions.

⁷ Marion Saxer, working from information supplied by the composer, briefly describes all the instances of non-instrumental or vocal sound production in his works, a list that incidentally does not include the distorted scream

Yet these features are not incongruous within the composer's oeuvre: political works for choir are actually quite frequent in his output, even if they are not among his best known, while the role of technology serves to make explicit concerns that are implicit in other pieces, in particular those regarding the musico-political debates outlined above. *ocean* is an unusual work for the composer, but it is one that gives a particularly illuminating perspective on a crucial tenet of his compositional project.

While Spahlinger has received increasing exposure in German musicology,⁸ his work—which comprises 'occasional but significant theoretical writings',⁹ as well as musical compositions—has only recently been considered in detail for an Anglophone readership. In particular, translations of two key texts have appeared in recent years to make his thought more accessible to an international audience.¹⁰ Chances to hear his music outside Germany are also increasing in frequency, but are still rare. A 2015 festival dedicated to his work in Chicago, 'There is no repetition', was a particularly important step forward in the exposure of Spahlinger's work abroad.¹¹

This article will argue that *ocean* contains a highly unusual inner tension in that it contains both abstract musical argument and aspects of protest music: a dialectical experience that feels far from polystylistic, yet makes no attempt at 'false' synthesis. It suggests that this presentation of unresolved opposition is a compelling example of Adornian negative dialectics, demonstrating that there is a subtlety and variety to modernist responses to political issues. This relationship with the political may prove another way in which, as Björn Heile puts it, modernism is 'a more multifaceted phenomenon than it was given credit for',¹² and, indeed, as Gulbrandsen and Johnson argue, that it is an attitude that 'not only stretches back further than we might previously have imagined but is still ongoing'.¹³ The year in which this piece emerged—1985—is, after all, hardly a time in which modernism was unanimously seen as offering new perspectives. The discussion will begin by exploring the context to these debates within post-war modernist music through exchanges between Lachenmann and Luigi Nono. The formal and technical details of this piece will then be examined in order to understand more fully by what means this musical experience is achieved, while the potential critical vulnerabilities of such an approach will also be considered.

of *el sonido silencioso*. Most of these do not employ electronics on the same footing as the instrumental music, however, as the majority of electronic contributions are designed to disturb or disrupt the concert situation. See Marion Saxer, 'Die "anderen Räume" der Medien: Mathias Spahlingers in dem ganzen ocean von empfindungen eine welle absondern, sie anhalten für Chorgruppen und Playback (1985)', *Musik-Konzepte*, 115 (2012), 114–29 at 120.

⁸ Important contributions include Dorothea Ruthemeier, *Antagonismus oder Konkurrenz? Zu zentralen Werkgruppen der 1980er Jahre von Wolfgang Rihm und Mathias Spahlinger* (Schliengen, 2012); Tobias Schick, 'Musik, Gesellschaft, Wirklichkeit – Weltbezüge im Werk Mathias Spahlingers' (D.Phil. diss., Hochschule für Musik Carl Maria von Weber, Dresden, 2016), 146; and the *MusikTexte* issues focusing on Spahlinger from 2002 and 2012 (nos. 95 and 115).

⁹ Max Paddison, 'Composition as Political Praxis: A Response to Mathias Spahlinger', *Contemporary Music Review*, 34 (2015), 167–75 at 168.

¹⁰ Mathias Spahlinger, 'this is the time of conceptive ideologues no longer', trans. Philipp Blume, *Contemporary Music Review*, 27 (2008), 579–94; and idem, 'political implications of the material of new music', *Contemporary Music Review*, 34 (2015), 127–66.

¹¹ For further information see: <https://arts.uchicago.edu/article/there-no-repetition-mathias-spahlinger-70> (acc. 29 Jan. 2018).

¹² Björn Heile, 'Introduction: New Music and the Modernist Legacy', in Björn Heile (ed.), *The Modernist Legacy* (Farnham, 2009), 1–12 at 2.

¹³ Erling E. Gulbrandsen and Julian Johnson, 'Introduction', in Gulbrandsen and Johnson (eds.), *Transformations of Musical Modernism* (Cambridge, 2015), 1–19 at 2.

Finally, the consequences of *ocean's* inner contradictions will be further teased out with reference to Adorno's philosophy.

MUSICAL AUTONOMY AND THE POLITICAL

Questions of how to approach political content were particularly pressing for composers considered part of the '1968 generation'. This group, which includes the German trio mentioned above, was characterized by a socialist sensibility forged during the student protests, with those working in Germany being particularly concerned with guarding against any traces of, and potential return to, the totalitarianism of the National Socialists. Beate Kutschke describes a 'moral duty to take part in the sociopolitical reorganization of society' at the time.¹⁴ 'Engaged' music¹⁵ and 'critical composition',¹⁶ both terms regularly employed in these debates, seek in different ways to come to terms with the challenges of composing new music in these politicized times. Indeed, the debate was heightened in Germany by the stark contrast on either side of the Iron Curtain: between the Soviet-inspired socialist realism encouraged in East Germany, and modernist, West German music that received significant support from state institutions. This, along with the sounds of American GIs in the Frankfurt Jazz Cellar, was the artistic context that defined Spahlinger's formative years.

As well as these political times, there were also two formative examples of engaged music for the '68-ers'. Both the Italian Luigi Nono and the Austrian Hanns Eisler attempted in very different ways to bring Marxist ideas into their music: the former at first tying his political views to a strict serial aesthetic, while the latter composed music performable by the 'working classes' in between his own serial experiments. Nono, in particular, is a pertinent point of comparison in relation to Spahlinger, as the Italian had a huge influence on the course of German music, teaching both Lachenmann and Huber, as well as having a significant presence at the Darmstadt Summer Courses. The Italian's *Il canto sospeso* (1956), *Intolleranza 1960*, and *Al gran sole carico d'amore* (1975) are among various works that form a wider genre of large-scale choral works with explicitly political themes, one that also includes Henze's *Das Floss der Medusa* (1968) and Giacomo Manzoni's *Ombre – alla memoria de Che Guevara* (1968). All share a sense of earnest engagement and grand statement that is present to some in extent in *ocean*.

In aesthetics, too, issues of the role of art in political expression were at the centre of debate, and indeed there is a history of this long before 1968. The famous exchanges between Marxist aestheticians, including Adorno, Benjamin, Lukács, Bloch, and Brecht, are testament to the long-standing importance of these themes. A vital component of the Brecht–Lukács debate, for example, rests on the former's belief that artworks should directly function as tools in the class struggle.¹⁷ Lukács, meanwhile, sees art's political function as one of reflection rather than directly partaking in society's

¹⁴ Beate Kutschke, 'Introduction', in Beate Kutschke (ed.), *Musikulturen in der Revolte* (Stuttgart, 2008), 5–23 at 5. For a French perspective see also Mark Carroll, 'Commitment or Abrogation? Avant-Garde Music and Jean-Paul Sartre's Idea of Committed Art', *Music & Letters*, 83 (2002), 590–606; Eric Drott, *Music and the Elusive Revolution: Cultural Politics and Political Culture in France 1968–1981* (London, 2011).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Frank Cox, and Wolfram Schurig (eds.), *Critical Composition Today* (Hofheim, 2006).

¹⁷ See Bela Kiralyfalvi, 'Georg Lukács or Bertolt Brecht?', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 25 (1985), 340–48 at 342.

changes.¹⁸ Such questions of the efficacy of artistic engagement stretch forward and back in time from '68, remaining with us to this day.

The exchanges between Nono and his former pupil Lachenmann continue the discussion of many of these key issues and are extremely useful as a frame for the debate that Spahlinger inherited.¹⁹ They reveal a crucial difference of opinion on issues of music's relationship with society and its potential political effect. The disagreement is starkly demonstrated by Nono's 1969 statement that 'by composing music I contribute to the class struggle and help it advance',²⁰ whereas Lachenmann considers such attempts directly to change society to be a 'quixotic',²¹ or more charitably, a 'promethean'²² project. One statement implies that music can have significant societal impact; the other that such endeavours are compositely self-indulgence.

As Ben Earle identifies, Nono's belief in aiding the class struggle is not without its contradictions. He asks what many would wonder when confronted with the Italian's music: 'How do we get from class struggle to Darmstadt?'²³ There is an apparent gap between Nono's chosen form of musical expression and the people he claims to support, one that Eisler had consciously tried to overcome through his more populist works. In Nono's case, this question is answered by a Gramscian overthrow of cultural hegemony, in which the Italian Communist Party would take power and effect a transition to communism.²⁴ This idealized political view, then, becomes the basis for his conflation of radical music and socialist politics. Lachenmann, on the other hand, describes the work of contemporary music on listeners' consciousness and, potentially, political consciousness in less distinct terms. He prefers a conception of composition as, in Nonnenmann's words, a 'self-referential open process of reflection that at best should be able to dislodge listeners' old, societally mediated foundations from under their feet'.²⁵ This indirect route to political effect is, for Lachenmann, the only path that is open. This potential emancipation is more personal, perceptual, and, in theory, universal as it is not dependent on social stratum.

These differences of opinion on whether music should have active political messages are in fact based upon fundamentally different understandings of how it should act in relation to society, with Lachenmann believing in this process of reflection, while Nono—at least in 1969—wanted more direct political participation.²⁶ This opposition can be helpfully reframed in the manner of T. J. Clark by considering which class is implied by the invocation of 'society': the bourgeoisie might expect, or be presumed

¹⁸ Ibid. 343.

¹⁹ For another relevant instance of this debate, this time between Jean-Paul Sartre and René Leibowitz, see Carroll, 'Commitment or Abrogation?', 590–1.

²⁰ In Rainer Nonnenmann, *Der Gang durch die Klippen: Helmut Lachenmanns Begegnung mit Luigi Nono anhand ihres Briefwechsels und anderer Quellen 1957–1990* (Wiesbaden, 2013), 292.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Helmut Lachenmann, 'Touched by Nono', *Contemporary Music Review*, 18 (1999), 17–30.

²³ Ben Earle, 'Review-Article: The Politics of the New Music', *Music & Letters*, 94 (2013), 664–71 at 668.

²⁴ Ibid. 667.

²⁵ Nonnenmann, *Der Gang durch die Klippen*, 301.

²⁶ So important was the disagreement between Lachenmann and Nono on this issue that it was a contributing factor in their personal relationship becoming cold during the seventies. As Earle identifies, Lachenmann's more 'metaphysical' take on the relationship between music and its listeners was one that Nono regarded 'as constituting a flight from historical necessity'. It should be noted, however, that Lachenmann has since shown reluctance to engage in politically charged aesthetic debate, raising the question of whether these political formulations were in part a convenient formulation for his musical desires. His recent, and surprising, *Marche Fatale* (2017) is a good example of his continued ambivalence regarding a politico-aesthetic stance.

to expect, abstraction and iconoclasm based upon their supposed agential autonomy, whereas the expectations of the proletariat give rise to collective representation and clear symbolic relations.²⁷

Lachenmann's viewpoint is very easily ascribed to a particular reading of Adorno's philosophy, which was extremely influential during the period of these exchanges. Set against Benjamin's faith in the politically progressive power of technology²⁸ and a Brechtian intervention in society, Adorno states in 1962 that 'this is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead'.²⁹ The Adorno of these statements appears to advance the idea that political effect is better achieved through purely autonomous art, as the 'uncalculating autonomy of works which avoid popularization and adaption to the market, involuntarily becomes an attack on them',³⁰ while more intentional commitment is labelled as 'shadow-boxing'.³¹ The strong emphasis on autonomy that these statements betray is partly a result of Adorno's deep suspicion of musical propaganda, forged after observing the use of music under the National Socialists.³² His idea of musical material as 'sedimented history'³³ explains in part how this apparently apolitical engagement with musical ideas remains, for him, a significant social undertaking. Crucially, the fragmented nature of contemporary music reflects the brokenness of contemporary society, while also revealing the false promises of a monolithic culture industry.

Characteristically, though, the philosopher's position cannot be reduced to statements that simply advocate music without overt political content. Indeed, the philosopher at times talks positively of Schoenberg's explicit tribute to Holocaust victims, *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947), and the social comment of Berg's *Wozzeck*. Yet, his wariness of aestheticizing suffering in works of art led to a more critical reading of the Schoenberg piece, which bears the 'power to elicit joy' from the representation of the victims.³⁴ In *Wozzeck*, too, there is potential for the form to act as a 'medium of shock absorption' rather than presenting the true horror unblinkingly.³⁵ This is not, then, to assert that Adorno's position and Lachenmann's are one and the same; rather, that aspects of the philosopher's ideas can be easily implemented to support Lachenmann's views. This supposedly Adornian standpoint, therefore, becomes one end of a binary opposition between radical autonomy and direct political content or action.

THE POLITICAL IN *OCEAN*

Much of Spahlinger's oeuvre presents an abstract, *musique-concrète-instrumentale*-inspired surface that would probably encourage the view that he falls heavily on the Adornian and Lachenmannian side of developing material that offers an opportunity for

²⁷ T. J. Clark, 'Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art Author(s)', *Critical Inquiry*, 9 (1982), 139–56.

²⁸ See Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations* (London, 1999), 211–14.

²⁹ Adorno, 'Commitment', 194.

³⁰ Ibid. 190.

³¹ Ibid. 180.

³² See Theodor W. Adorno, 'What National Socialism Has Done to the Arts (1945)', in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (London, 2002), 373–90.

³³ See Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge, 1997), 98.

³⁴ Adorno, 'Commitment', 189.

³⁵ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 30.

critical reflection through perception. Yet the theme of *ocean*, expressed in no uncertain terms by the composer's programme note, concerns the concrete theme of world hunger. This text is a stark and denunciatory description of the situation of 'Third World' lands³⁶ in which people 'produce more than half of all raw materials' yet starve because of economic inequality: 'thirty times as many people could be fed if farmland was not used for the cultivation of animal feed for the industrial nations'.³⁷ Spahlinger states that, as individuals in industrial nations, 'we know what we do. we are informed: the rich become richer, the poor become poorer. we waste 7/8 of the utility values [*gebrauchswerte*], the other two thirds of people must live, or die, with the remaining 1/8'.³⁸ Despite the tendencies of his preferred musical language, the composer does take on an openly political theme here, following on from the examples of Manzoni and Nono.³⁹

This theme of world hunger is part of a wider cultural trend in which the political turbulence of 1968 had a decisive influence. The German author Hans Magnus Enzensberger (whom Spahlinger greatly admires) and Nono were engaged with South American themes during the 1970s, while Spahlinger's interest in the 1973 Chilean putsch was the impulse for his *el sonido silencioso*. *ocean* is situated within the increased international awareness of how economic inequalities contribute to world hunger, as well as high-profile attempts to tackle the problem. During the late 1970s and 1980s a great many books and articles in both English and German continued the discussion, creating the idea of the 'Third World' that remains, at least in part, with us today. Susan George, in her *How the Other Half Dies* (1976),⁴⁰ contests the thesis that there is not enough food to feed the population of the Earth, arguing instead that wealthy industrial nations' self-interested control of food prices and production is at the root of starvation—an argument Spahlinger re-employs here.

After describing the acute economic imbalances that lead to the problem of world hunger, Spahlinger's programme note moves on to how one might approach such a topic in an art-work—in other words, returning to the debate sketched above in relation to Lachenmann and Nono. Even to attempt to address this theme in art, he states, is 'hubris' and 'self presumption' of artists who consider themselves 'mature' and their expressive means 'adequate'.⁴¹ Endeavouring to tackle such a political issue is also in danger of becoming 'monstrous kitsch'.⁴² In seeking to avoid both such presumption and kitsch, Spahlinger returns to one of his favourite themes: the self-reflexivity of art and, in this case, how it might be used to problematize the reception of media

³⁶ 'Third World' was originally a Cold War term that denoted countries that were neither part of the Soviet nor Western, NATO-affiliated blocs. It then became the preferred term for poorer nations with developing economies, often in Africa and Central and South America. It has rather fallen out of fashion more recently because of its implied divisiveness, lack of clarity of meaning, and potential for condescension. Hans-Henrik Holm notes that its critics doubt its usefulness as either an economic or political term: Holm, 'The End of the Third World?', *Journal of Peace Research*, 27 (1990), 1–7.

³⁷ Mathias Spahlinger, programme note to *in dem ganzen ocean von empfindungen eine welle absondern, sie anhalten*, unpublished: composer's private archive, 1987.

³⁸ Ibid. Here, as elsewhere, the lower case is used in Spahlinger's original.

³⁹ Schick argues that this theme has a particularly abstract nature in that it refers to no specific political event, thereby betraying a vital difference between Nono and Spahlinger. See Schick, 'Musik, Gesellschaft, Wirklichkeit', 146.

⁴⁰ Spahlinger cites the German edition: Susan George, *Wie die Anderen Sterben: Die wahren Ursachen des Welthungers* (Berlin, 1978).

⁴¹ Spahlinger, programme note to *in dem ganzen ocean von empfindungen eine welle absondern, sie anhalten*.

⁴² Ibid.

messages. Through self-reflection, Spahlinger holds that art can ‘confront the artificial’ so that ‘out of the presentation of inadequacy, the inability of expression’,⁴³ this topic, apparently too terrible to be addressed directly, can be approached.

The composer states that ‘at the very most i could use the device of juxtaposing art with non-artistic things such as photographs or news broadcasts, in the hope of creating expression by showing its unattainability’.⁴⁴ The ability of art to engage critically with its own presentation, its own expressive means, however, allows it to function as a critique, not of the theme of world hunger itself, but of its media representation, according to the composer. For the media suggests that its images are completely objective: ‘presentation, that no longer wants to be presentation’.⁴⁵ This contradictory description of media message is an apt characterization of the work as a whole, as it is concert music—an aesthetic presentation—that attempts to inform the listener of a concrete, real-world situation.

Rainer Nonnenmann considers engaging with such issues problematic, however, at least from his perspective of ‘critical composition’. He sees such a theme as demonstrating an empty ‘politically correct’ attitude, as ‘Conventional aesthetics of pity or dismay, involving the denouncement of wars, hunger, exploitation and oppression’ will simply affirm the preconceived opinions of the public.⁴⁶ That he mentions ‘hunger’ is probably a reference to *ocean*’s exploration of this theme. Few of course would disagree with Nonnenmann that world hunger and pacifist messages are unlikely to become unworthy causes any time soon, yet he overstates the extent to which *ocean* at least is in ‘absolute agreement’ with its audience. Certainly it was intended to make for uncomfortable listening by bringing open political statement into the concert hall. Experiencing this work is an invitation to reflect critically on the political state of the world, one that will not necessarily result in positive affirmation for listeners. The choice of theme is also essential to the long-term political and aesthetic effect of the piece, and its singular constellation of seemingly abstract musical concerns and societal statement.⁴⁷

MATERIALS AND FORM

ocean is scored for a choir of thirty-six singers and what is essentially a tape part, i.e. a fixed and immutable series of recorded sonic events. The soundworld is regularly dense, dissonant, and at times bewildering. Whispers, shouts, and cries punctuate the musical surface, while spoken text with factual information is also used extensively. When performing the piece, tape and the work of the live singers in fact simply run alongside each other, though an at times complex interaction between the two is written into the score. Arguably this interaction makes both feel ‘live’ in performance, connecting with an ongoing debate in electronic music as to whether pre-recorded

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Spahlinger in Peter Niklas Wilson, ‘Music as a Play of Language and Society’, booklet notes to *Mathias Spahlinger* (CD, Wergo, 1993), 22–32 at 26.

⁴⁵ Spahlinger, programme note to *in dem ganzen ocean von empfindungen eine welle absondern, sie anhalten*.

⁴⁶ Rainer Nonnenmann, ‘A Dead End as a Way Out’, in Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Frank Cox, and Wolfram Schurig (eds.), *Critical Composition Today* (Hofheim, 2006), 88–109.

⁴⁷ A similar debate can be found in the discussion of *Il prigioniero* in Ian Pace, ‘Review: Luigi Dallapiccola and Musical Modernism in Fascist Italy’, *Music & Letters*, 98 (2017), 163–7.

FIG. 1. *ocean*, 1st layer of material

material necessarily inhibits a feeling of ‘liveness’.⁴⁸ This interaction is also encouraged by the fact that the electronics are made up entirely of vocal material sung by the choir, with some light manipulation of the sound (at least by today’s standards). The piece begins before the tape, however, with the doors open and the choir among the audience as the latter return to their seats, so the ‘experience’ of the piece begins long before and without definite starting point.⁴⁹ Performers begin a quiet pattering of spoken material that emerges from the noise of the audience, which develops into longer spoken phrases on world hunger and scattered sung pitches.⁵⁰

The texture builds before a loud and complex entry from both the live singers and the recorded playback. A similar moment returns, much extended, after the texture has settled into periodic breath sounds. (See Fig. 1 for a diagram of the piece’s form.) Example 1 displays a partial score of this second entry and is typical of the sung material of the piece in its dynamic ebb and flow between the different choirs, the dissonant harmonic material (often semitone clusters that are widely spaced), and the extremes of register so reminiscent of Nono. The text here is not defined, singers being given the choice to sing vowels *ad libitum*.

These are not simple tutti entries, rather they are dramatic moments filled with a great deal of dynamic detail: groups of singers and playback fade in and out as the sound moves round the space to create a sense of living sonic organisms. Schick states that their expressive effects are due to their relationship with ‘sound-realities [*klanglichen Realien*]’ with ‘breathing, sobbing and shouting’ having an expressive effect not because of their place within a symbolic system of representation but ‘because of their real-life meaning’.⁵¹ This material in fact presents an important issue of the work in microcosm. The fact that such cries are pitched, albeit with a contour that imitates that of a shout of human suffering, points to a more complex relationship between ‘real-world’ sounds and musical system than Schick admits. It will be argued here that these chords have a contradictory function in that they are simultaneously on both sides of the divide that Schick identifies.

⁴⁸ Marco Stroppa, ‘Live Electronics or... Live Music? Towards a Critique of Interaction’, *Contemporary Music Review*, 18 (1999), 41–77.

⁴⁹ The performance directions state that the work can only be performed after an interval for this reason, though conceivably the audience might drift to their seats if the space were left open at the beginning of a concert.

⁵⁰ The Wergo CD recording, which is a studio production, begins with the gentle burble of the audience for around thirty-five seconds before the playback begins, giving an aural impression of the performance situation.

⁵¹ Schick, ‘Musik, Gesellschaft, Wirklichkeit’, 136. The same expressive factors are certainly in play in a work like Berio’s *A-Ronne* from the previous decade (1975).

Ex. 1. Partial Reduction from 6'53'', *ocean*

The musical score is arranged in four systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clef). The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4.

- Choir I:** Features dynamic markings *ff* and *<ff>* with crescendo and decrescendo hairpins. The notation includes eighth and quarter notes, some beamed together.
- Choir III:** Includes dynamic markings *<ff>* and *ff*. It features a section labeled "staggered entries" with a triplet of eighth notes. There are also triplet markings over eighth notes.
- Choir II:** Features dynamic markings *<ff>* and *ff* with hairpins. The notation includes long horizontal lines indicating sustained sounds or breaths.
- Electronics (selected pitch content):** Features dynamic markings *ff* and *<ff>* with hairpins. The notation includes chords and single notes, some with ledger lines.

The formal context of these large chords and opening material are shown in Fig. 1, which describes the proportions and sections of the material once the playback begins. The openings of both Parts I and II are very varied in the material they employ, with singing, spoken text, and chanting mixed into a diverse surface—perhaps the closest the piece comes to the music of Nono. Other sections labelled here, such as the long breathing passage and the held D, are far more homogenous musical entities, which provide moments of aural recovery.

What is striking when the most important musical sections are laid out in this manner is that what defines the form is a simple, almost primal, musical profile. After all, the clearest units defined in Fig. 1 are characterized by periodic breath

FIG. 2. *ocean*, 1st and 2nd layers of material

noises, a single held pitch, and rhythmic chanting that emerges from breath sounds: some of the most basic singing materials available. The breathing section and held D also have a more concrete musical relation to each other in their meditative periodicity: the held note swells at five-second intervals while rocking back and forth between singers and playback, creating a slow cyclic feel not unlike the regular breathing, which is given for just short of two and a half minutes in a regular fashion. This regularity also provides a connection, unacknowledged by the composer, with the waves mentioned in the title (discussed below). The relatively simple nature of some of these materials might be thought unsurprising considering certain technical challenges the piece posed, yet a striking contrast between dense music and stasis is characteristic of Spahlinger's compositional approach. *passage/paysage*, to name but one piece, operates in a similar manner.⁵²

Alongside the materials displayed in the first formal diagram above, there are two further layers that make up the piece. The second, indicated by the second layer in Fig. 2 is defined by moments in which the word 'jetzt' ('now') occurs, or in which ascending numbers are spoken by the choir. Both refer to a statistic employed in the piece that 'every two seconds a person dies of hunger', with 'jetzt' drawing attention to single moments in time in which a person is said to die, while the numbers reflect how many have died during the piece's performance. The fixed time of the playback means the figures can be quoted with some accuracy—though Spahlinger avoids stating numbers at two-second intervals, which would be the most literal interpretation of the statistic. The closest he comes to such a periodic expression of numbers is at 2'15", which transitions into the regular sounds of the breathing section.⁵³ The counting provides an external, quasi-objective thread through the work, one that is not fully integrated into the musical experience: a reminder of the incontrovertible fact at the heart of its message.

⁵² See Neil Thomas Smith, 'Mathias Spahlinger's *passage/paysage* and the "Barbarity of Continuity"', *Contemporary Music Review*, 24 (2015), 176–86.

⁵³ An exact translation of the statistic would also date the piece to a particular time or statistical methodology.

The meaning of this layer is only revealed at the conclusion when ‘every two seconds a person dies from hunger’ is clearly stated for the first time. Listeners, therefore, retrospectively make sense of the numbers and statements of ‘jetzt’ heard at the opening. It is significant that this material is absent from the middle section, as spoken word gives way to a greater amount of sung material and a succession of more abstract musical ideas. In listening to the piece, however, the regular spoken material that contains other facts about world hunger, and the occasional use of the consonant ‘t’ in various textures, gives the counting and ‘jetzt’ material more presence throughout the piece than Fig. 2 would indicate. Only in the breathing and held D sections does it feel truly distant. The punctuation created by these recurring utterances provides concrete definitions of time in the work, while the sonic qualities of the word ‘jetzt’ are taken as musical material for the more abstract musical narrative. Sonic and political characteristics can no longer be divided absolutely.

The admittedly rather faint dramatic arc created by the revelation of the counting material is a surprising presence in Spahlinger’s work, which usually eschews such a sense of teleological dramaturgy. The comprehensibility of the text is carefully controlled here to encourage this retrospective, and terrible, final realization as to the meaning of the numbers and statements of ‘jetzt’ that have occurred throughout, betraying, as Wilson describes, ‘their macabre significance’.⁵⁴ Part of Spahlinger’s particular conception of form in new music is a belief that all endings are only apparent endings without the final feeling of conclusion that tonal pieces achieve with a perfect cadence.⁵⁵ Yet here in *ocean*, the piece ends with a revelation of meaning alongside its bare spoken instances of ‘jetzt’—a rare sense of an ending whose seeds are sown at the opening. Other works by the composer certainly end with dramatic flourishes (for example, *éphémère*, 1977), but the insistent ‘jetzt’ here speaks of a quiet horror quite unlike any of his other work.

A final layer can also be identified to accompany the materials indicated in the formal diagram in Fig. 2 and the references to the hunger statistic. This is a layer of what Marion Saxer describes as ‘medial ruptures’ [*mediale Brüche*] that occur throughout the piece and is shown in Fig. 3.⁵⁶ These are a series of very different events, the simplest being the opening and closing of the doors of the concert hall. This controls the clarity of the playback from speakers 7 and 8, which are placed in the foyer, and creates a sense of moving between an everyday space and the hermeticism of the concert hall—one that mirrors the movement between abstraction cut off from the outside world and a political statement that invites the world into the concert space. Indeed, Schick notes that, after the doors are closed, there are no more news-report-like statements, therefore dismissing those ‘fragments of reality’,⁵⁷ though the continuing ‘jetzt’ layer means there is still an important spoken element.

Perhaps more immediately arresting, however, is the moment at the end of Part I when, according to the score, the recording of a ‘harsh, shouting crowd (eruption, revolt, protest)’ intrudes, followed by the sound of a woman crying—‘TV-sound loud, from neighbouring room with a half-open door’. This first sound is played on the speakers positioned outside the hall, giving both a sense of distance and the feeling

⁵⁴ Wilson, ‘Music as a Play of Language and Society’, 28.

⁵⁵ See Dorothea Ruthemeier née Schüle, ‘...dann wird offenbar, daß alles auf Vereinbarung beruht’: Zur Idee der offenen Form in Mathias Spahlingers “verlorener weg” (1999/2000)’, *MusikTexte*, 95 (2002), 35–49.

⁵⁶ Saxer, ‘Die “anderen Räume” der Medien: Mathias Spahlingers in dem ganzen ocean von empfindungen eine welle absondern, sie anhalten für Chorgruppen und Playback (1985)’, 116.

⁵⁷ Schick, ‘Musik, Gesellschaft, Wirklichkeit’, 129.

FIG. 3. *ocean*, three layers of material

that it comes from the ‘outside world’—though the descriptions given by the composer, and the general theme of the piece, would suggest that he is under no illusion that this is any kind of direct representation. Finally, during Part II, the choir place their hands on the shoulder of a member of the audience ‘in passing’. The intention here, as described by Saxer,⁵⁸ is to break through another barrier, to literally touch the audience in a manner that media representations of such a problem might fail. She describes the ‘double line of attack of the piece’ as it ‘undermines both the hermeticism of the concert hall in which bodily contact never takes place’ as well as engaging with ‘the distal detachment of electronic media’.⁵⁹ To this should be added that these actions also serve to interrupt the more abstract musical narrative implied by the first two formal layers described above, bringing it into contact with the real-world sounds and actions that more overt protest pieces employ.

The three layers identified here show the fissures within the fabric of this work. ‘Purely’ musical sound is heard alongside material with clear semantic content, both of which are interrupted at times by elements that disrupt the concert situation. The nature of this interaction will be explored further below, but it is important to understand at this juncture that all three are fundamental to the effect of the piece: in searching for the essence of this work there must be an openness to it containing contradiction.

⁵⁸ Saxer, ‘Die “anderen Räume” der Medien’, 117.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

FIG. 4. *ocean*, speaker set-up and choir movements

PLAYBACK, ACTUALITY, AND REALITY

Christian Leuschner, the production chief [*Produktionsleiter*] of the South German Radio (SDR) who was responsible for working with the composer to create the playback, gives a pithy description of why the themes Spahlinger wishes to explore are suited to the use of electronic sound as well as live singers. He states that an 'essential element' of the piece is an opposition between pairs such as 'actuality and image' and 'original and reproduction', so that it is 'unsurprising that the work was composed for choir groups and playback'.⁶⁰ Though not known as a composer concerned with technological advances, Spahlinger immediately seeks to engage with the medium in an unusual manner, critiquing the means with which he is working at a time when the general trend was to pursue ever greater technical capabilities. Spahlinger's tape part differs from many others in that it must be recorded anew for each choir that performs the piece: his search for as exact a reproduction as possible in the recorded sound—a reproduction that nevertheless does not match the listeners' experience of the live singer—means that the tape part must be recorded by the same voices that perform the live material.

The playback is diffused through eight loudspeakers: two outside the hall in the foyer (speakers 7 and 8) and six in a circle surrounding the audience (speakers 1–6 in Fig. 4). These speakers also act as spatial reference points for the choir, which moves between the different stations during the course of the piece—the choir and playback move round in the space in sometimes disorientating fashion. In Fig. 4 the numbers enclosed in hexagons refer to the loudspeakers, while the roman numerals denote the choir groups. The movement of the singers, and the shifting electronic sound within the speaker set-up, mean that where a sound is coming from is one of its defined characteristics, and that space, therefore, is an important realm of compositional control

⁶⁰ In Saxer, 'Die "anderen Räume" der Medien', 120.

in this piece. Spatialization, described by Spahlinger in primarily compositional terms, also introduces tantalizing links with ideas of distance and migration—themes perhaps even more present in European consciousness now than at the time of composition.

In his writings, Spahlinger prefers to separate what he calls ‘actuality’ [*wirklichkeit*] from ‘reality’ [*realität*]⁶¹—a distinction the German language facilitates rather more than the English. This idea has particular relevance for this piece with its critical response to the media’s attempts at expressing objective reality. In ‘thesen zu “schwindel der wirklichkeit”’ (theses on the ‘sham of actuality’, 2014),⁶¹ much of the content of which he attributes to Bruno Liebrucks, Spahlinger explains his conception of reality as that which can never be known as itself—in essence the Kantian ‘thing in itself’—while actuality is what we understand, and perceive, as what exists. Crucially, actuality is both influenced by the societally formed subject and by agreement between different subjects: we are formed by society to see things in certain ways, and we see things differently after discussing them with others. Actuality is the perceptually mediated realm between the subject and reality, whatever the latter might be. It is, then, far from static, as self-reflection can both change how actuality is construed and increase knowledge of the work of the subject—or indeed subjects—in constituting what we perceive of as our reality. Just as Adorno warns of the consequences of presuming identity between concept and object, Spahlinger believes that there is a danger in a general belief that our perception of events (actuality) corresponds absolutely to an objective reality. By attempting to disorientate listeners’ perceptions he wishes to raise this important distinction, to create a space between perception and any absolute sense of reality. The influence of Adornian dialectics is apparent here in the immanent character of this critique: Spahlinger does not invoke any authority outside listeners’ perceptions but rather attempts to bring about reflection from *within*.

Though his interest in this theme manifests itself in the majority of his work, *ocean* engages particularly closely with these ideas of actuality and reality due to the use of technology, which allows Spahlinger to contrast (sonic) reproduction with an original, in this way paralleling the relationship between the media’s representation of events and the events themselves. This idea is particularly unusual for the composer as, in appearing to suggest a certain primacy of the original over its reproduction, it creates a hierarchy that goes against his usual arguments concerning the work done by perception in constituting any event, even if the perceiver is party to its original occurrence. The original, it appears, is somehow superior to, or even more truthful, than its reproduction, even though both are perceived within actuality. This hierarchy is further emphasized by the fact the opposition between original and reproduction brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura as discussed in ‘Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’,⁶² one of the arguments of which attempts to explain how an original art-work differs from its almost perfect reproduction. Though Spahlinger makes no direct reference to this essay, he does mention it in correspondence. Yet—at least on the evidence of this piece—he would appear not to agree with Benjamin’s argument that non-auratic production immediately produces more democratic art.⁶³

⁶¹ Mathias Spahlinger, ‘thesen zur “schwindel der wirklichkeit”’, *MusikTexte*, 142 (2014), 15–17. This references a programme of events at Berlin’s Akademie der Künste on the ‘sham of actuality’. The fact that Spahlinger is quoting this part of the title means that it is unclear how this ‘Wirklichkeit’ described by the *Akademie* sits within his separation of *wirklichkeit* and *realität*.

⁶² Benjamin, ‘Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, 211–14.

⁶³ Mathias Spahlinger, private correspondence with the author (31 Aug. 2016).

THE TITLE

It is in this context that the work's title can be seen to relate to the theme of the piece. For despite its length—narrowly beating *vorschläge, konzepte zur ver(über)flüssigung der function des komponisten* (1992) and *Über den frühen Tod Fräuleins Anna August Marggräfin zu Baden* (1995) to the accolade of Spahlinger's longest title—it is not immediately apparent how this title relates to the question of world hunger. It is in fact a quotation of part of a passage from Johann Gottfried Herder's *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772), in which he talks about the conditions for reflection:

Man demonstrates reflexion when the force of his soul becomes freely active in such a manner that it isolates in the whole ocean of sensations which rush through all the senses, a *single* wave, if I may say so, when it arrests this wave, directs its attention to and is conscious of its attending to it. He proves his reflexion when he gathers himself into a moment of awakening out of the whole floating dream of images which passes his senses, if he freely rests on a *single* image, takes it into calmer observation and isolates for himself those marks that make it this and no other object.⁶⁴

As Schick demonstrates, it is likely Spahlinger came to this quotation through Liebrucks.⁶⁵ The philosopher takes up this passage to describe what he calls 'first' and 'second reflection': 'Man can in the ocean of his perception arrest one wave, he can direct his attention to the wave and to his attention to it. Here lie two reflections.'⁶⁶ A situation in which listeners direct attention to their own perception is precisely what Spahlinger wishes to achieve in his music. Liebrucks's second reflection is the basis of what the composer calls the self-reflexivity of art.

For Spahlinger, then, this quoted passage is evidence of the potential of art to alter perception in the manner he seeks. Evidently he wants to make listeners aware of this wider realm of perception and to encourage a reflexive attitude in relation to the means by which the 'reality' of such situations is conveyed. More than this, however, he appears to want to mark original events as distinct from their reproductions—for a reflexive attitude, according to Herder, can assess the distinctive details of an object of experience. Attention to the 'single wave' appears to allow greater understanding of the distinction between actuality and reality. Wilson describes how this reflection relates to two particular aspects: first, the 'the horrifying, familiar and yet politically tolerated fact of world-wide hunger', and secondly the 'way this fact begins to take on an illusory character through its daily presentation in the media'.⁶⁷ Spahlinger talks of how media representations of world hunger present a 'dichotomy between the perceived object and its perfect reproduction',⁶⁸ one that Wilson states is 'a difference not simply of degree but of kind' for the composer.⁶⁹ This is why Spahlinger's divide between actuality and reality becomes so important to his chosen theme: his political engagement takes on a vital perceptual character. He puts a social theme at the centre of this piece, but he approaches it through attending to the faculties of his audience.

⁶⁴ Johann Gottfried Herder, in Dorothea von Mücke, 'Language as the Mark of the Soul: Herder's Narcissistic Subject', in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (ed.), *Herder Today: Contributions from the International Herder Conference, November 5–8, 1987, Stanford, California* (Berlin, 1990), 331–44 at 335.

⁶⁵ Schick, 'Musik, Gesellschaft, Wirklichkeit', 118.

⁶⁶ Bruno Liebrucks, *Sprache und Bewußtsein*, i (Frankfurt am Main, 1964), 63.

⁶⁷ Wilson, 'Music as a Play of Language and Society', 25.

⁶⁸ Spahlinger, quoted *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

It is in such explorations of the false ‘reality’ of the media that art, for the composer, can contribute to this political issue:

with the victory march of the objectivist, in reality illusory, media, art must thematize the question how presentation should relate to its object in order to make actuality visible; it must bring to consciousness that the negligible difference between the object and the perception of its perfect reproduction makes the world of difference . . .⁷⁰

Art can, according to Spahlinger, show the inadequacy of the media’s attempts to approach this theme, while also breaking through its claims of purely objective representation. All this suggests a rather abstract engagement with media messages, one that encourages reflection in similar manner to that recommended by Lachenmann; yet, as discussed above, this approach has very concrete effects on the material employed. Concentration on media message rather than the events themselves is intended as a way of avoiding the anaesthetization that Adorno warned against. More effective than this, however, is the fact that the ‘real world’ of objective report and clock time, of suffering and injustice, is not smoothed over in *ocean* but is presented on an even footing with the aesthetic argument.

EXPRESSING THE POLITICAL MESSAGE

Thus far, the discussion of *ocean* has focused on how Spahlinger attempts to explore the theme of world hunger in this music using text, sonic events, the contrast between original and reproduction, and dramatic elements. The impression may be that the theme of world hunger and its concrete political nature is always at the forefront of the audience’s experience. Yet, when listening to the piece, obvious engagement with this theme is far from omnipresent. Of the three main sections identified above—the breath section, the held D, and the emerging rhythmic chanting—only the latter contains unambiguous political material, and that relatively fleetingly. The atmosphere differs somewhat from Manzoni’s *Ombre*, in which the regular rhythmic chants give the impression of dwelling on the edge of public unrest. The chants in Spahlinger emerge from a texture of rhythmic breath sounds, making the text inaudible for much of the time, thereby encouraging a mode of listening sensitive to the musical, as well as semantic, attributes of spoken text. Breath has an obvious connection to life and death but is, at the same time, appreciated as a part of the sonic argument of the piece and not necessarily as an exploration of the transience of human life. Sung material—usually without any obvious semantic comment—can be understood as contributing to a musical argument and, often, as cries of anguish. All this suggests a complex relationship between abstract musical material and unambiguous political content.

It is in this question of textual comprehension that we also come to the most fundamental opposition the piece contains. The politically charged texts employed in fact shift in and out of focus, with moments of complete clarity at a premium. Text is used for its sonic possibilities as well as to be clearly understood, encouraging a musical understanding of spoken words and an (albeit often frustrated) attempt at semantic understanding of more complex textual textures. It is here that we come up against the divide Schick identifies in *verfluchung*, in which an ‘unmistakeably clear political

⁷⁰ Spahlinger, quoted *ibid*.

statement of the text is opposed to a contrastingly more differentiated and complex music'.⁷¹

Text, in the same way as screaming chords or breath material, is understood as contributing to the political meaning and to the sonic argument. It acts as both, yet this dual function does not serve to illustrate how Spahlinger has overcome the divide between abstract material and protest music. On the contrary, these moments show that our perception of these two poles is fundamentally, and for politically engaged composers tragically, divided. The piece presents the impossibility of reconciling the desire to present an autonomous musical narrative and make specific political points—just as the duck-rabbit made famous by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* is both duck and rabbit to our eyes but never both simultaneously.⁷² The different layers of the piece identified above are open to various interpretations but they can never be comfortably whole: the compositional approach is one that starts out from contradiction. This approach is thoroughly Adornian, stemming from the latter's exposition of his 'negative' dialectics. In the aptly named 'The Dialectical Composer' the philosopher says of Schoenberg that 'the work does not turn the contradiction into harmony but conjures up its image, again and again, looking for duration in its cruelly ravaged traits'.⁷³ In *ocean* there is a prolongation of just such a contradiction.

Contrast, an area of great interest to the composer, can then be seen not just as a question of differing musical materials but of colliding aesthetic-political stances. Yet, the piece does not feel like an aesthetic or stylistic collage. For although much of this discussion has focused on the two contrasting positions from which *ocean* diverges, its most startling achievement is how it creates a continuity of experience: the piece is not defined by a dialogue between two characters but the contradictory existence of presenting an irreconcilable divide within itself. The debate between Nono and Lachenmann appears fully subsumed, though not resolved, by this dialectical compositional process. As Adorno states: 'Dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking.'⁷⁴ Spahlinger's approach also does not take a standpoint, but works against the pre-established positions that have significantly defined thought on political commitment in twentieth-century composition.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: INTRUSIONS ON MEDIATED ACTUALITY

The description of Leuschner—that this piece concerns itself with opposition between 'original and reproduction'—is a little misleading in its simplicity.⁷⁵ Saxer notes that 'To follow and comprehend these relationships [between tape and live material] with the ear may prove very difficult: the connections Spahlinger creates are too complex',⁷⁶ while Schick argues that, despite some very detailed imitation present in the score, the tape part primarily contains the same material as the live singers and presents it simultaneously.⁷⁷ The complexity of the interaction between

⁷¹ Schick, 'Musik, Gesellschaft, Wirklichkeit', 113.

⁷² I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this analogy. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford 1958), 165–6.

⁷³ Theodor Adorno, 'The Dialectical Composer', in *Essays on Music*, ed. Leppert, 203–12 at 205.

⁷⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London, 1973), 5.

⁷⁵ Saxer, 'Die "anderen Räume" der Medien', 120.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 116.

⁷⁷ Schick, 'Musik, Gesellschaft, Wirklichkeit', 120.

original and reproduction occurs to a similar degree in the spatial element of the piece, which often gives the listener little time to assess from which direction sound is coming—and rarely offers exact repetitions from different angles to hammer home its point. The effect in much of the piece of such explorations of space and the relationship between original and reproduction is more an overload of sensation—though often one that is musically compelling. In this, *ocean* can be seen to echo the often uproarious expression of a piece like Nono's *Intolleranza 1960*.

The more serene sections in which these spatial and imitative relationships are more easily discernible may help to make sense of the previous music—offering moments of aural recovery—yet it is clear that the density of ideas, particularly in the opening of Parts I and II, makes this very difficult. Spahlinger's regularly stated interest in perception does not result in music that is easily perceivable. Instead, he often oversteps what is possible for a listener to grasp easily to explore the limitations of listeners' perceptual apparatus. Completely separating original and reproduction in this piece is probably impossible, but continually reassessing the differences between the two is a challenge for listeners who approach the work with an analytical ear.

The relatively complex level at which the interaction between original and reproduction occurs can, therefore, make it rather difficult for listeners to grasp what Spahlinger describes as a crucial element of the piece: the critique of media representation. This is an example of the reflective attitude to listening that the composer assumes, proving potentially vulnerable. The sonic variety heard here does not necessarily invite the ear to compare and contrast live and recorded sound—though in live performance this may come further to the fore. Perhaps even more significantly, during the moment in which this comparison is truly encouraged—the held D section—one of the chief impressions inferred is how beautifully live and recorded notes dovetail. A message drawn from this experience might be quite different from that intended: one of humans living in harmony with technology, for example, or technology as a liberating force, or even the spirit of the departed moving from this life to another.

ocean certainly brings the themes Spahlinger is dealing with into a more visceral and arresting form than an objective news report, while the objectivity of the factual statements begins to lose its moorings in this musical context. There may well be an intention that, through the complex material the piece offers, any claim to an objective, complete experience of the music is impossible, just as the truth cannot be transported by any media report. This is certainly a point that is attempted by a later piece, *und als wir . . .* (1993), which uses a cross-form layout and unconventional audience positioning in an attempt to preclude any sense of there being a central and 'correct' way of listening to the piece. Ultimately, the complexity of both the spatial elements and the relationship between original and reproduction point to the tension, identified before in relation to Nono, between composers' wish to explore a theme and their preferred musical material. Direct connections between live and recorded sound in *ocean*, for example, would imply a music in which repetition has a much more important place than is usually the case in the composer's work and would, for him, blunt its critical potential.

There is also another, more telling interpretation of this complexity, one the composer himself does not advance but which he does make use of his conceptions of reality and actuality discussed above. For, if the material of the live performers, as well as that of the tape, is perceived as contingent within individuals' conceptions of actuality, then this piece does not offer the hierarchies between original and reproduction that appeared to be the consequences of Spahlinger's position. Instead, it shows a rela-

tivist emphasis on the inevitability of mediation. In this complex experience, listeners are given a musical object to behold that overreaches any attempts at fully grasping its features.

What saves this from relativistic meaninglessness is the incontrovertible fact, embodied in the statistic that runs through the work, that millions in the world are starving to death. Listeners are confronted with both an exploration of different ways of perceiving the world and a seemingly uninterpretable truth. In a move that gives more freedom to the listener even than Spahlinger's perceptual explorations, the question of how far this uninterpretable truth extends is left open for individual listeners to decide. This is in fact the centre of the composer's dialectical composition: the point at which concrete fact, relativistic perception, and abstract musical expression meet. Though in *ocean* there is an acceptance of the necessary work of interpretation the audience does—the impossibility of fully removing the veil of actuality—this constant mediation is nevertheless continually rooted in the insistent tug of the fact that people have died during this piece's performance because of a lack of food. That Spahlinger himself does not point to this is an indication of the somewhat experimental nature of this work, even for an artist who regularly attempts to revisit his compositional foundations. As Paddison notes,⁷⁸ the composer attempts what Adorno describes as making 'things in ignorance of what they are'.⁷⁹

Above all, *ocean* demonstrates that Spahlinger is a composer keen to engage with some of the biggest issues facing society, using a diverse range of musical tools. In this he cannot be said to be advancing a version of modernism that encourages social disengagement, though he does very much fit the mould of the modernist composer as someone who wants to challenge and provoke the audience. In this piece's particular answer to the question of music and politics, Spahlinger has found a different way of approaching this issue, one that problematizes previous modernist positions of engagement. The foundations of the debate between Lachenmann and Nono are taken as the contradictory spark of an Adornian, negative-dialectical approach. Spahlinger reveals the tragic divide between the abstract and the political, presenting a profound contribution to established debates around musical autonomy and political expression in twentieth-century music.

ABSTRACT

This article explores a large-scale political choral work by German composer Mathias Spahlinger, *in dem ganzen ocean von empfindungen eine welle absondern, sie anhalten* (1985). It maintains that this piece is a concentrated presentation of a fundamental opposition between abstract musical narrative and protest piece. This opposition is contextualized through a discussion of exchanges between Helmut Lachenmann and Luigi Nono, which articulate a divide between vulgar-Adornian abstraction and 'committed' agitprop—two viewpoints that have characterized much discourse on music and politics in the twentieth century. Spahlinger's own extensive writings on the political

⁷⁸ Max Paddison, 'Composition as Political Praxis: A Response to Mathias Spahlinger', 173.

⁷⁹ T. W. Adorno, 'Vers une musique informelle', in *Quasi una fantasia*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London, 1992), 269–322 at 322.

are also illuminated to furnish an understanding of his aesthetic position. *ocean*, it is argued in an analysis of the piece, constitutes a startling example of Adorno's conception of dialectical composition by presenting the irreconcilable nature of this central divide without attempting to synthesize its conflicting materials. It is argued, therefore, that the piece is a vital example of the diversity of modernist responses to music's relationship with politics.