

MUSICHOLIA, OR, VARIATIONS ON A MELANCHOLIC SUBJECT



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ABSTRACT

This essay undertakes an auto-theoretical inquiry into some dimensions of a formative childhood experience and its enduring influence on the author's life over six decades. At the core of the experience is the temporal proximity of the author's birth to the unexpected death of his maternal uncle, a man who had returned to post-Holocaust Vienna to pursue his dreams as a musician/conductor. The essay draws heavily on Freud's classic "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), and some subsequent readings of that essay, to frame and inform the discussion. It then teases out the relationship between melancholia and music (Steinberg 2014) to illuminate some of the ways they have been entangled with the author's capacities for self-formation, becoming, and creative expression.

KEYWORDS

music, melancholia, psychoanalysis, temporality, auto-theory

Musical prelude

Opening *Sonatina* of Bach's *Cantata BWV106* [first 2:40].¹

...is it not possible—I often wonder—that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence?... I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start. (Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 67)

Melancholia, whose definition fluctuates in descriptive psychiatry, takes on various clinical forms the grouping together of which into a single unity does not seem to be established with certainty; and some of these forms suggest somatic rather than psychogenic affections...We shall, therefore, from the outset drop all claim to general validity for our conclusions. (Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 243)

Distant and damp

This essay begins in Vienna, where I visited for the first time in 2017 to present a (different) paper at a conference on 'Music and Death'.² I spent 10 days prior to the conference seeking traces, or "invisible presences" (Woolf 1985, 80) of an uncle, my mother's brother, who studied and worked as a musician/conductor in Vienna between 1955 and 1960. The most salient features of the story relate to my uncle, a child refugee/survivor from Nazi Germany who returned to Europe (from Australia) to pursue his ambitions and career as a musician in Vienna (the city of music); that he died there suddenly, in early 1960, just 6 weeks after I was born; that his sister (my mother) experienced shattering grief around her brother's sudden death, an event that informed and infused the milieu in which I was nurtured as an infant; that the conjunction of music, death, and Vienna constituted, by virtue of these circumstances, some fundamental ground of my being; that, although we never met directly, the stories and mythology surrounding my uncle's life haunted me from a very early age; and that, working through these archives materially, psycho-emotionally, intellectually, and creatively, has been a much-needed lubricant for a sedimented loss that built up over many years. In combination, these

various features, threads, excursions, and musings comprise a form of auto-theory, an attempt to “connect affect to everyday life or to attend to the resonant landscape between the personal and the historical” (Wiegman 2020, 7).

The research I undertook in preparation for attending the ‘Music and Death’ conference in Vienna allowed me (albeit tentatively and tenuously), to align some of my movements and activities with those I imagined my uncle to have undertaken, as a musician in Vienna, in the second half of the 1950s. These movements and activities included a visit to the music academy where he studied; attending concerts in venues which he would also have frequented and performed in; meeting a few of the aging musicians with whom he played; and locating the addresses of apartments where he had resided.

Tracing the last years of my uncle’s life in Vienna also generated some very potent moments which included: unexpectedly encountering his lingering spirit in the hospital where he died; listening to a recording of him playing the French horn, while standing alongside his original place of burial; singing out the notes, and shaping the musical phrases as he produced them; phrasing the melodic line with him and thereby sharing the very breath (co-inspiring) that had once kept him alive; realizing that I could continue to breathe with him through that recording of his horn-playing, as the music was being produced by his (living) breath; registering the paradox of him being simultaneously alive (in his playing) yet otherwise dead (in his own reality); offering, in song and chant, belated and consoling prayers on behalf of his parents, his sister, his lover—none of whom were able to attend his actual funeral in the *Zentralfriedhof*, Vienna; experiencing some of my own delayed grief and belated mourning for the uncle I never knew, who died so suddenly, many years ago, just prior to his thirtieth birthday (Levy 2020).

Mourning and melancholia

Arguably the most significant aspect of Freud’s essay on “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917/1955) is the way he couples mourning and melancholia, both rooted in either actual and/or affective experiences of loss. For Freud, pathological melancholia is characterized by “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings” (244). Freud suggests that “the same painful frame of mind” characterizes mourning, with the “absence of self-regard” being the “one exception” (244). The other key point of distinction for Freud is that

the melancholic person may know “*whom* he [sic] has lost but not *what* he has lost in him [sic]” (emphasis original, 245). This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss that is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning.

Within this schema, qualities of the lost object remain unknown to the melancholic, and the content or details pertaining to this lost object remain (in the) unconscious. Freud suggests that the ongoing unknownness (and perhaps unknowability) of certain qualities belonging to the lost object inhibits the melancholic’s capacity for knowing and/or becoming themselves (through building a strong and healthy ego). The melancholic remains predisposed to “an extraordinary diminution in self-regard,” and an “impoverishment of ...ego on a grand scale” (245–6). For Freud, the whole “complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound” (253).

Again, for Freud (1917/1955), “mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead” (257). Melancholia, however, in Butler’s reading, “refuses to make any such declaration, [and thus] denies speech” (Butler 1997, 185), perhaps thereby also throwing into doubt the truth/actuality of the object’s loss. Butler outlines the spatializing effects of Freud’s conceptualization of melancholy. She reads his conception of melancholy as “precisely what interiorizes the psyche” (170), understood through the way melancholia “initiates a variable boundary between the psychic and the social, a boundary...that distributes and regulates the psychic sphere in relation to prevailing norms of social regulation” (171). Thus, for Butler, “our ability to refer to the psyche through tropes of internality are themselves effects of a melancholic condition” (171).

In Butler’s reading of Freud, the melancholic subject incorporates, and thus becomes, some of the loss or abandonment it is unable to accept in relation to the object. Freud writes how “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego” (1917/1955, 249), and Butler notes the “biblical cadence” accompanying this reference to the “shadow of death” (1997, 187). In this reading, “melancholia operates in a direction directly counter to narcissism” (187). Whereas the narcissist is able to “control love, even when that narcissism appears to give way to object-love,” the melancholic is left “impoverished, wanting” (187), an expression or embodiment of the object loss. “In narcissistic love, the other contracts my abundance. In melancholia, I contract the other’s absence” (187).

Ruti (2006) suggests that “melancholia begins to give way to narrativization, interpretation, and application” when “the other’s limit has been firmly set—when there is no longer a convenient place for the subject’s fantasies to attach themselves to” (183). Although I did not fully comprehend it at the time, my encounters in Vienna punctured the “melancholy fit” (Keats 1917, 246) that first began to fall on me through my mother’s grief and mourning, immediately following the sudden death of her beloved brother in early February 1960. Brennan (2004) usefully identifies an “energetic dimension” (6) to the transmission of affect, and the way in which one person can carry the “affective burden of another” (6). From an early age, and consistent with Freud’s formulation, I became aware of ‘whom’ the lost object was, through his name and limited stories about him; but not ‘what’ he was, in substance, as a man, son, brother, musician, aspiring artist, friend, lover, colleague, dreamer. Nevertheless, also in keeping with Freud’s schema of the melancholic, the actual lived qualities of my dead uncle remained unknown to me, while the memories of those who knew and loved him, remained either underarticulated (too painful to endure, given his death) or buried in their unconscious.

As quoted above, Freud rounded off his initial schema by referring to the “whole complex of melancholia” as acting like an “open wound.” This wound, for Freud, manifests a variety of negative and constraining forces on a developing or healthy ego. The Freudian analysis of the relationship between mourning (the death of a love object) and melancholia (the sedimented, persistent aftermath of that loss) resonated truly for me, more than other discourses or prior modes of analysis (including various periods of psychotherapy). In a profound way, my uncle’s death became a wound that marked and weighed upon my character for many years, right up until the time I began preparing for the Vienna conference in 2017.

Suspended survival

Ultimately, the melancholic has to work with and/or through a central dilemma, that being “whether to follow the lost object into death or to seize the opportunity to live” (Butler 1997, 192). Such challenges may require “redirecting rage against the lost other, defiling the sanctity of the dead for the purposes of life, [and/or] raging against the dead in order not to join them” (193). Survival, in this context, becomes “not precisely the opposite of melancholia, but what melancholia puts in suspension” (193). Regardless of the efforts and degrees of success in rupturing “the melancholic bind, there is no final reprieve from the ambivalence and no final separation of mourning from melancholia” (193). Butler’s reference to survival as that which melancholia puts in suspension invites further consideration and extrapolation.

Baraitser (2017) explores some of the “affectively dull or obdurate temporalities” (2) that can operate for some who encounter bereavement, dislocation, incarceration, existential negation, the rupture of historical memory, psychoanalysis, and other forms of delay and waiting. In each of her case studies, the normal flow of time has been interrupted or suspended, necessitating that time or duration be differently endured. Baraitser is interested in what a study of those living in suspended time with their “persistent attachments,” including to “those who are dead” (1), can tell us about our capacities to survive and care both in the present and into the future. Integral to this exploration is Baraitser’s recognition of the way in which Butler’s reading of Freud’s “melancholic processes” points to the force that generates, mediates, and governs interiority and sociality (42). Baraitser refers to these processes as creating “a sliver of a gap between subject and object, and in doing so internal and external worlds are instituted” (43).

A sliver of a gap

Butler and Baraitser’s interest in the co-constitutive nature of the internal and the social both reflects and informs (but also overlaps and dovetails with) various conceptual and methodological ‘turns’ over recent decades from the post-structural and discursive, through the corporeal and affective, to the post-human, more-than, and other-than-human. The disruption and subversion of binaries, as well as the blurring of boundaries through these turns, has made possible different and differing conceptions of self, thought, knowledge, being, becoming, action and change. Blackman (2012), for example, seeks to dissolve notions of a solid and singular subject in favor of “a concern with those processes, practices, sensations and affects that move through bodies in ways that are difficult to see, understand and investigate” (ix). Within the sliver of the gap too, affect is “born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulative *beside-ness*” (emphasis original, Seigworth & Gregg 2010, 2). Whatever the slippery or elusive dimensions may be, “affect acts”, is “put to work” and “operationalized” (Seigworth 2003, 76), not being a tool for analysis or reflection.

Ngai’s analysis of “ugly feelings” (2005) provides a useful bridge. Firstly, her primary aim is to explore “situations of suspended agency” (1). This aligns with the notion of melancholia placing survival “in suspension”, as well as the nature and potentialities of suspended time, explored by Baraitser. Secondly, Ngai de-

finds tone (in literature, film, and critical theory) as “the dialectic of objective and subjective feeling that our aesthetic encounters inevitably produce... [and whose] power resides precisely in its amorphousness” (30). This reference to ‘our aesthetic encounters’ points more directly to my particular interest in music, and how music and melancholia are entangled and mutually constitutive.

Grant (2020) draws some sharp and convincing parallels between the reciprocal workings of music theory and a form of affect theory in early 18th century Europe, and ways in which contemporary theories of affect also “sound so musical” (20). He highlights key musical terms like resonance, vibration, and attunement that are also used in “paradigmatic or explanatory ways” (20) by recent and current affect theorists. Guattari (1990), for example, wrote of “discordance” and “*ritornellizations*” (emphasis original, 70), and the need for (psycho-) analysis to give the “interpretation of phantasms and “displacement of affects” a “new ‘stave’ in the musical sense of the word” (78). Drawing partly on this call from Guattari, Seigworth (2003) re-views and reframes Freud’s well-known account of his grandson’s *fort/da* game as “a kind of rhythmic movement and provisional song... for staking out momentary order in the midst of chaos” (96).

Musical interlude

Adagio from the Brahms *F major Piano Quintet Op. 34* [start at around 15:50]³

Music and melancholia

Steinberg (2014) notes that a certain “mood of melancholy” (288) appears to inhabit (haunt?) all music, regardless of when and where it was created. Steinberg also makes the bold and risky assertion that “melancholy *is* the condition of music—all music” (emphasis original, 289). He justifies this totalizing claim (‘all music’) with reference to the “heuristic precedent” (289) offered by Freud concerning all dreams functioning as wish fulfilments (even when we have nightmares, or find our wishes disguised in certain ways within the dream). Given this foundation and corollary, our interest needs to be primarily with “the music itself” (290) (as with the dream content, for Freud), rather than with the composer, or the listener. For Steinberg, “music is melancholic in relation to its own desire” (290). As an ostensible subject with its own desire, music “wants to speak and to speak importantly” yet, this is an “unfulfillable wish” which thus becomes “the

source of its melancholia” (290) just as melancholia, in Butler’s reading of Freud, “denies speech” (Butler 1997, 185). Musical melancholia, therefore, is “an epistemic predicament” given music’s inability to speak “importantly” (i.e. meaningfully or self-knowingly) or thus, to fulfill its own desire (Steinberg 2014, 290).

Music, as a non-representational mode of expression, is always confronted with, and destabilized by its inherent inability to fully articulate and communicate what it wants and means to say. Steinberg’s primary “purview” (2014, 290) is 19th century European classical music, although the line he traces is from Mozart (late 18th century) to Schoenberg (early 20th century). Steinberg proposes that some of this music developed its own “fiction of subjectivity” which enabled it to “embody melancholy, not as a descriptive or correlative of human mood, but as a function of its own inner life” (Steinberg 2014, 291; see also 2004). This claim is as provocative as it is compelling, and if we permit it (at least for the sake of the excursions here), then some of what Steinberg refers to as 19th century “modern music” also “knows its own melancholy” (291).

For Steinberg (2014), much music remains bound by its own “anxiety of articulation” (295) and this anxiety is “what makes melancholy the condition of music” (297). In response to this anxiety, Steinberg pinpoints a “fleeting melancholy moment” in Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, the moment where music (first?) manifested “the self-awareness of its own inarticulacy” (299). This self-awareness produced what can be seen (and heard) as a demand “from within itself, [for] the status of speech” (297). As the anxiety of articulation could not be resolved in purely musical terms, or tones, Beethoven introduced the voice (and words) of the singer in the final movement of the *Ninth Symphony*, declaring emphatically, ‘*O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!*’ (‘O friends, not these sounds!’).

Music’s inherent anxiety of articulation is symptomatic of “the gap between music and speech, between music and meaning, between music and the world” (Steinberg 2014, 310). For Steinberg, “this is the melancholia of music itself, the predicament that gives music so much rhetorical and emotional importance for modern listeners” (310). At the very heart of this predicament, however, Steinberg also identifies a paradox: “through its very inarticulacy,” music simultaneously has inherent within it “an unsignifying precision that speech itself may not be able to attain” (310). In ways that perhaps cannot (and need not) be fully explained or understood, but may still be heard and felt, music can sometimes express and

communicate itself with more clarity, directness, and emotional intensity than the language of speech. To cite the perfectly pithy formulation by Mendelssohn with which Steinberg also concludes his argument: “What any music I love expresses to me, is not thought too *indefinite* to be put into words, but on the contrary, too *definite*” (emphasis original, Mendelssohn 1878, 276).

Steinberg’s references to “romantic, enabling melancholy” (e.g. 2014, 304) have their own history and varieties of theorization (e.g. Del Nevo 2008). Keats’s sublime *Ode on Melancholy* (Keats 1917, 246–7) might also be the exception that proves the rule in relation to Steinberg’s aforementioned paradox. In the poem, Keats successfully conjures something of melancholy’s affective qualities through the way she manages, in her “veil’d” and “sovrän shrine,” to capture us mortals in her “Temple of Delight”. In the opening stanza of the Keats *Ode* there are multiple, emphatic refusals to succumb to any urge to remedy “the wakeful anguish of the soul” in a decisive way. Melancholy is presented as source and guide towards a more soulful embrace of Life’s beauty and goodness, despite (or even because of) Life’s transience. We experience melancholy in all her weightiness, “when the melancholy fit shall fall/Sudden from heaven.” This fall is “like a weeping cloud/ That fosters the droop-headed flowers all.” These allusions to falling, weeping, and drooping deftly capture feelings constitutive of melancholy atmospherics such as heaviness, lachrymosity, enervation.

While Ruti (2006), echoing Keats, acknowledges melancholia as a necessary condition for psychic (or soulful) health, she also argues the need for the subject to “find its way out of melancholic entombment” (158). This image owes more to Freud than it does to Keats. For Ruti, the melancholic subject works through “the sources of its despair—by digging deeply into the tender terrain of its losses” in order, ultimately, to be able to “accede to the kind of intuition that leads to self-understanding [and creative expression]” (166–7). Even when the subject manages to transcend their condition and “translate melancholia into meaning” (167), Ruti notes that such an act of transcendence “does not have to be—and rarely is—permanent” (167). Keats’s poetic insights are palpably embodied in the musical examples threaded through this essay. Each exudes melancholic tendencies, and music’s knowledge of its own melancholy, compellingly. Thus, the opening *Sonatina* of Bach’s *Cantata BWV106* placed as the musical prelude beneath the keywords at the beginning; and the *Adagio* from the Brahms *F major Piano Quintet Op. 34*, placed as the first musical interlude at the start of this section.

The Prelude to Act 3 of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*⁴ is offered here as a third musical interlude. The more intimate we become with these musical examples, the more we might sense, feel, and perhaps even 'see' the weeping clouds, the drooping flower-heads, the weighty fall from heaven that they (and melancholia) elicit. However, it is beyond both my technical abilities and the scope of this essay, to attempt any closer analysis of the music offered in the context of this discussion. As the narrator in Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva* declares, "You don't understand music: you hear it" (Lispector 2012a, 4).

The chosen extract of Wagner (above) also features the German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, still considered to be one of the greatest exponents of the art, despite his complex maneuverings during the Nazi period in Germany and elsewhere in Europe (Cowan 2017). Furtwängler's performances became entangled in the Nazi appropriation and tainting of the German music tradition such that, when listening to his recordings, we also hear Furtwängler trying to salvage something of that lost tradition. For Žižek (2000), when we listen to Furtwängler's recordings, we long to capture "not the organic immediacy of classical music but rather the organic-immediate experience of the loss itself" (661). Thus, for Žižek, a fascination with Furtwängler is "melancholy at its purest" because of this urge to (re) connect with "the very original gesture" (661) of the loss.

Music and death in Vienna, and elsewhere

It is necessary to underline the fortuitous coincidence and convergence of the 2017 'Music and Death' conference in Vienna. Had the conference been scheduled for any other city in the world, even the city where I reside (Melbourne, Australia) I would unlikely have had more than a fleeting interest in it. However, the personal resonances in the music/death/Vienna nexus were as profound as they were immediate and as alluring as they were frightening. In the inquiry, I cast myself as the 'posthumous nephew,' albeit born just before the death of my uncle. In this mode, my primary task was to come to know more about my uncle and gain closer proximity to the last years of his life (in Vienna), in order to (finally?) grieve his sudden and tragic departure from the world. When it came to developing a suitable form and mode for the conference presentation, the selection of musical items to accompany the text I composed, and the images I selected, were crucial

(Levy, 2020). I later came to understand the presentation as a form of belated eulogizing (Davis et al 2016), whereby the encounter with death was treated as “a subject of aesthetic design” (Hedtke & Winslade 2017, 161).

I was not aware, in those months of preparation (or even when I was in Vienna), that I was also working to discover more about, and find ways to gain some relief (and release) from my chronic melancholia. Baraitser’s (2017) work is again useful here. It can help to think through how melancholia had put my survival ‘in suspension,’ enough to keep me alive, but unable to thrive. Baraitser also conceptualizes “chronicity” as having a vital allegiance with “natality rather than mortality” (188). In this schema, “newness is neither breach, rupture or flash, but a quiet noticing that something remains, which is the permanent capacity to begin again” (188). The Vienna conference, unexpectedly, provided opportunities to (re) activate that natality, and the capacity for newness to open up in/through/around me.

A wandering/wondering Jew

Ruti (2006) suggests that “it [sometimes] even happens that we come to view our entire life in relation to a single mythological moment—a turning point or a sea change—and the rest of our lives, what we do, experience, and dream about, comes to be interpreted in relation to this moment” (201). I cannot be certain that my uncle’s sudden death in my infancy was that ‘single mythological moment,’ but I have been wondering a lot more about such a possibility in my post-conference research, reflections, and auto-theoretical excursions. In an astute, passing comment on W.G. Sebald’s eponymous central character in *Austerlitz*, Halberstam (2011) identifies “a menacing abyss in the center of his autobiography” (85). This image and atmosphere of a ‘menacing abyss’ is an apt description of the psycho-emotional proximity I had to my uncle’s untimely death and the enduring intensity of his death in relation to my subjectivity and affective capacities.

As a non-Jewish German, born in 1944, Sebald regarded the Holocaust—including the moral universe that imploded through the years of the second world war, and the trauma and denial in German society that persisted after the end of World War II—to be the most defining event of his existence (the heart of his abyss, one could say). In different ways, and on many levels, this Holocaust event that Sebald was born into constituted the impetus, fuel, and substance of his major literary works. The senses of outrage, shame, guilt, and responsibility for the mass murders on an unprecedented scale were imperative and definitive for Sebald. Santner

(2006) suggests Sebald's "saturnine gaze" (62) generates "apocalyptic darkenings, moments where the last traces of light are, as it were, sucked back into black holes of despair and pain" (61). Sebald describes one of his characters, Ambros Adelwarth as giving the impression that he was "filled with some appalling grief... every casual utterance, every gesture, his entire deportment...was tantamount to a constant pleading for leave of absence" (Sebald 1996, 111). Adelwarth's trauma-by-association had left him "longing for an extinction as total and irreversible as possible of his capacity to think and remember" (114). Santner (2006) suggests that Sebald perfected a "dark beauty" (63) in his writing that produces, paradoxically, enormous pleasure for many readers. This is the same pleasure, I would suggest, that one can hear and feel in examples of music-embodied melancholia, or the music that knows its own melancholy.

Santner (2006) is interested in the way Sebald "invokes the dimension of *un-deadness*, the space between real and symbolic death...the ultimate domain of creaturely life" (emphasis original, xx). The essential quality of the 'undead' owes a debt to (Walter) Benjamin's paradoxical notion of "petrified unrest" (Benjamin 1985, 40), with Benjamin (and his work) being "the ultimate embodiment" of melancholia (Santner 2006, 89), or the ultimate "figure of melancholia" (Lac 2019, 27). Along similar lines, Restuccia (2005) regards Sebald's use of photographs in his novels as an attempt to "effect a return of the dead" (305). This, for Restuccia, is one of the ways in which Sebald (also through certain characters and narrative voices) seeks to "bear witness to an unforgettable forgotten wound...that gaping wound in twentieth century German history" (316-317).

The image of an 'unforgettable forgotten...gaping wound' echoes Freud's (1917/1955) reference to the melancholic's 'open wound' discussed earlier in this essay. As indicated in letters remaining in the family archives (private collection), my uncle was acutely aware of how the old Nazi network and ongoing anti-Semitism in Vienna (and beyond) were continuing to limit, if not actually work against his career aspirations as an orchestral conductor. Certain (non-Jewish) teachers and colleagues confirmed this suspicion to him (off the record). A recent study by Leeb (2018) details in a bold and scholarly manner how the Austrians, *en masse*, were (and perhaps still are) unable to accept their collective guilt and responsibility for Nazi complicity, following the German invasion in 1938 (see also Steinberg 2000).

Given this ongoing reluctance and resistance to “touch their shameful past” (Leeb 2019, 80), the ‘gaping wound’ in 20th century Austrian history could be considered, arguably, even more raw and festering than the German one that Sebald tended to so unflinchingly, and delicately. This was the same wound within which my uncle had tried to forge a musical career. After nearly five years in Vienna, he had resolved to take his chances elsewhere (in the UK, or the US, or even back in Australia), exiling himself from the home and heartland of the music he adored, to pursue his professional aspirations and artistic goals without compromising his moral integrity (or jeopardizing his personal safety). His Jewishness was not the sole determining factor, but it was a significant one. As it transpired, this was also the point at which fate intervened and eliminated all future wandering, and wondering, for him.

A melancholic musician

As a Jew and musician living in the ‘open wound’ of 1950s Vienna and central Europe, my uncle could not have avoided experiencing the complexities and contradictions, “the collision, or mutual imbroglio, of history and psyche” (Rose 2003, 12; see also Steinberg 2007). After all, he fled with his family from Germany in May 1939, none too soon. He was nine years old at that time, unavoidably aware of his circumstances. Other members of his/our family were exterminated in death camps. When or how was he able to grieve and mourn their tragic elimination? To return to Europe, just ten years after the end of WWII, was also a hugely daring and fraught act. For nearly five years, he lived and pursued his musical and artistic dreams, under no illusions about the obstacles he was facing. Yet the passion sustained him sufficiently. It is quite likely that when he was buried in the Jewish section of the *Zentralfriedhof* Vienna in February 1960, many of the Jewish graves were still showing signs of having been desecrated during the years of Nazi occupation and collaboration. It is painful to imagine his funeral taking place, without any immediate family, or music, amidst these violations.

Ruti (2006) argues that, in the context of (self) analysis, meaning-making remains “the kind of infinitely fluid process which, ideally at least, teaches the subject that the past is never irrevocably fixed or closed off, but instead remains permeable to retrospective acts of reinterpretation” (200). It is through such acts of reinterpretation that I have been able to discover how my uncle’s untimely death, coincident with my then-recent arrival in the world, produced sedimentations of grief through and within my facilitating environment (Winnicott 1965), that have had a last-

ing impact and influence on my melancholic disposition and inclinations. Freud's seminal essay (1917/1955) and certain readings of it (eg. Butler 1997; Lac 2019; Steinberg 2014) have helped to illuminate my understanding of this condition, and its lasting impact.

Santner (2006), in his reading of Freud's famous essay, insightfully suggests that the mourner "gets on with life," with new objects of love to attach to, whereas the melancholic remains "retarded" by virtue of being attached to the lost object" (89). I suspect that I fast became one of the new objects for my grieving mother to attach to, while co-incidentally losing some of her, to her lost object. Meanwhile, I remained for many, many years, unconsciously attached to the original lost object, knowing 'whom' but not 'what' I had lost; retarded in my own further/fuller becoming, gripped by the chronic melancholia that was configuring the im/possibilities for who 'I' might/could be/come.

Clemens (2010), in his reading of Agamben, suggests that the melancholic subject lives a life that is "literally disqualifying itself" (12). Any possible cure for melancholy then is "at least partially dependent on the sufferer's ability to reinvigorate both self and world by an imaginative solution" (10). Morag (2017) refers similarly to the aim of psychoanalysis as that of achieving an "imaginative self-knowledge" (84). It was only in Vienna, almost sixty years after my birth and my uncle's death, that I could begin to let go of the aforementioned attachment to the lost object. It was equally both by chance and design that this moment of unburdening took place at the original gravesite of my uncle, with the specially-chosen music streaming into my ears, pulsing through my inner networks of blood and nerve, and soothing my stunted soul. Without both the music, and my inhabiting a site so proximal to his death, I doubt the same degree of catharsis could have occurred. This event also adds weight to the claim that permits "to music itself some agency", pointing to the equal importance of "what music does with people, as what people do with music" (Dell 2017, 3).

On the day, in the cemetery, by the grave, it was Mozart's music at its most self-knowingly melancholic (the *Rondo* in A minor, K.511), coupled with some traditional Jewish prayers, that catalyzed the moment. Nor could it have been just any performance of the Mozart. Amongst the many (very good) recordings that I knew, it had to be the one by Artur Schnabel, a Jewish musician who had lived and studied in Vienna, and who was also uprooted and traumatized by the Nazi occupation of Europe. Many other pianists capture the beauty, the refinement, and

the dramatic elements in Mozart's *Rondo*, but only Schnabel seems to fully distill and reveal the depths of melancholic longing, the aching beauty, the "chiaroscuro of major and minor" (Epstein 1946, 248), the spiralling towards an "ecstasy of anguish" (Levin, in Church, 2021, 63), embodied in this miniature masterpiece.⁵

This was also the recording I chose to accompany the extended ode to my uncle that I wrote and then presented at the Vienna conference¹. Here, the words and music intertwined, seeking to bring him briefly, back to life, through telling the story of his years in Vienna.

A breath of life

On the opening page of Clarice Lispector's *A Breath of Life*, a narrator's voice declares: "I write as if to save somebody's life. Probably my own. Life is a kind of madness that death makes. Long live the dead because we live in them" (2012b, 3). Up until the conference in Vienna I had been inhabiting a very particular form of (melancholic) 'madness' that my uncle's death had precipitated. Over all those years I had been 'living in' my dead uncle, with the time of his death contained within my own (Riley, in Baraitser 2017, 92). To the extent that my family's mourning over his death was completed, I remained the pseudo-replacement for him as the lost love object, an object (in Freud's terms) that I could know, to a limited extent, for 'whom' he was (by name, having died suddenly and tragically), but not for 'what' he was (in substance, or what he represented through his character, aspirations, and human foibles). Until I finally, by circumstance, came to face the reality of his death when standing on, and alongside his (original) place of burial, I had been 'living in him' to a problematic (albeit largely unconscious) extent. For the first time, at the side of his original grave, I was able to simultaneously register my own grief over his loss, as well as to consciously sense my right to an independent life and existence, separate from his death. None of this was premeditated.

The potency and depth of my responses seemed to carry with them a lubricating and liberating force that I have been able to access, intermittently, since that time in the cemetery in Vienna. In keeping with Ruti's (2006) conclusion, I am working through the past to establish a more "vibrant foundation" for a "redefine[d]...future" (223-4). Integral to this 'vibrant foundation' is a substantial yet distinctive body of music that consoles, informs, instructs, and inspires my (piano) playing, (choral) singing, (extensive) listening, thinking, writing, and (still tentative) living. It is not music that allows me to completely transcend my chronic

melancholia, but if we accept the Freudian conceptualizations discussed within (e.g. Baraitser 2017; Butler 1997; Freud 1917/1955), this is not a condition that can be transcended (or even desired to be). Nor is there any music that can adequately fulfill its own desire to know itself, by which it might overcome its inherent ‘anxiety of articulation’ and/or self-knowing melancholy (Steinberg 2014). Thus, the music that affects me most substantially reinforces an inevitable melancholia, helping to make my lived experiences more bearable, and sometimes more joyful.

Becoming and remaining more conscious of these enabling constraints provides the impetus to move beyond the deepest roots of my chronic melancholia. Under these conditions of natality, I am better able to honor and integrate my uncle’s life and legacy, as well as to forge a path into a future shaped more by my own volition. Ruti’s (2006) conception of the soul as “a form of energy related to one’s capacity to keep breathing in the face of life’s challenges” (18) gains traction under these improved conditions. Each new breath provides a little more for my needs, a little less for my dead uncle. Each new breath, a breath of life, holds the potential to turn sediment into sound, and murmuring into melody, enhancing the possibility of becoming more of the music, while the music lasts.

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Endnotes

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXMUpqSyJJo> [first 2:40]
2. I have, more recently, recorded a version of this presentation which can be accessed at <https://youtu.be/HSKTImJn6wQ>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ff-LGGI4wCU&t=1504s> [start at around 15:50]
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8vjlkITcCg>
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DP665A8iA8g>

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