“Ein seltsam Spielen”:
Narrative, Performance, and Impossible Voice in Mahler’s Das klagende Lied

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Once upon a time, two brothers entered the forest in search of a lovely red flower that would reward the finder with the hand of a beautiful, proud queen in marriage. The brothers separated in their search, and the younger, finding the flower quite quickly, tucked it into his cap and lay down beneath a tree to rest. The elder brother found him sleeping there and, seized with jealousy, murdered him and took the flower. Some time later, a wandering minstrel spied a small white bone under the tree and fashioned a flute from it. When he played it, though, it emitted a most shocking utterance: the voice of the murdered younger brother sang from his bone, telling the story of fratricide. The minstrel brought this rare treasure on his travels, astonishing listeners far and wide with its extraordinary lament. Eventually he arrived at the royal castle, where the marriage of the queen and the older brother was being celebrated. On hearing the accusatory song issuing from the minstrel’s bone flute, the new king seized the instrument and put it to his own lips, whereupon it accused him directly, exposing his crime through its fearful song.

This dreadful performance ended in catastrophe: the terrified wedding guests fled, the queen collapsed in horror, and all the lights were extinguished as the castle walls crumbled into ruin.

This is my version of the tale Gustav Mahler set in the form of a narrative poem in his dramatic cantata Das klagende Lied. Composed in three movements for orchestra, soloists, and chorus, the cantata is the earliest large-scale work by Mahler that has survived.1 Its story may be, and has been, told in innumerable ways. What I wish to highlight are the elements that make Mahler’s setting much more than merely another retelling of a frightening and rather gruesome tale that gives prominent place to a musical idea. Das klagende Lied is also a work about music, voice, and the extraordinary effects of performance. In it, Mahler uses a fairytale-like narrative as a vehicle for a uniquely

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1My discussion is focused on Mahler’s initial concept of a three-movement work comprising “Waldmärchen,” “Der Spielmann,” and “Hochzeitsstück,” rather than his later, revised two-movement version, which omits the first movement—to the detriment, in my opinion, of both the narrative and signifying musical-motivic structure of the piece.
modern exploration of the disturbing, disruptive forces of performed sound.

The claim that the piece foregrounds performance may at first seem surprising: what else is a composer likely to intend for a musical work other than its eventual sounding in and through a performed rendition? Yet I am suggesting something more here—that this work gives special prominence to an extraordinary idea of performance, rendered in remarkable ways. Das klagende Lied is a narrative work that thematizes the experience of sound. Its orchestral writing and settings for multiple voices deliver a narrative discourse that foregrounds explicit moments of musical performance and sonic interruption. The work is thus explicitly concerned with both the idea and the experience of performing presence in all its potency.²

Jeremy Barham’s characterization of Das klagende Lied as “the first work in which Mahler recognized his true voice . . . [and] the source of many of the structural and expressive hallmarks of his idiosyncratic, mature vocal and symphonic practice” echoes the composer’s own assessment of the work and that of its numerous treatments in the scholarly literature.³ The hallmark of this early work is its investment in the potent significance of both telling and performing. This significance, made themetic, is first narratively constructed and then sonically and vocally enacted within Das klagende Lied. Its recognition of the compelling effects of heightened sonic presence is one of the most vivid characteristics that it bequeaths to the composer’s later oeuvre. The work exhibits what Julian Johnson describes, in relation to Mahler’s earliest surviving song, composed around the same time, as “an aesthetic self-consciousness about musical voice.”⁴ In what follows, I attempt to trace, through narrative source, poetic text, and musical setting, the signs of this consciousness, or what Carolyn Abbate has described, in relation to opera, as “acoustic images of performance [that] press into musical works themselves.”⁵ Manifesting complex issues of sound and vocality, bodies and disembodiment, narrative and enactment, in both textual and musical dimensions, Das klagende Lied as composed embodies the vivid traces of its own imagined performance.

Folktales, Hybridity, Orality

Mahler’s text presents his own poetic rendering of a well-known folktale that exists in many versions and in numerous sources.⁶ The tale has been classified according to the Aarne-Thompson system as A.T. Type 780, “The Singing Bone” type, so named after the version that was published in 1819 by the brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm.⁷ A.T. 780 is a type of “magic tale” that has drawn special attention from folklorists because of the extraordinary role played in it by music. According to folk-

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²This effect resonates to some degree with what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has theorized as the “production of presence”—the “bringing forth,” in space, of a presence that has a tangible effect on bodies and on the senses. However, in explicitly opposing the awareness of presence to the search for meaning, the latter represented by the dominance of hermeneutics in the academic disciplines of the humanities, Gumbrecht invokes a binary that I do not accept (nor do I wish to take on what seem to me, at times, the alarming ethical implications arising from his argument). See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004], pp. xiii–xv, 17, 2.


lore scholar Joseph Nagy, although the fratricide and retribution are central to the plot, the musical element is the tale’s most striking feature. Music takes on the role of upholding cultural values by exacting supernatural vengeance for wrongdoing through revelatory narrative song. Not only the music per se, but also the remarkable musical instrument, the Singing Bone itself, is the focus of Nagy’s fascination with the “radical transitions” undergone by the story’s victim, whose body becomes at once performer and instrument. “These bewildering passages,” he asserts, “are marked by music and song, which are the projection of the anomalous figure experiencing radical change.”8 The force of song is not just politically potent but it transforms the subject as well. Ultimately, as Nagy realizes, “music, as it is represented in tales that feature the Singing Bone Pattern, proves to be an unclassifiable phenomenon, a sine qua non of human society that paradoxically transcends the distinctions between culture and nature, living and dead, animate and inanimate.”

This idea of music is powerfully evocative; yet song, through its prominent and extraordinary position within the narrative, has the power of crossing other boundaries as well. Lee Haring singles out Type A.T. 780 as marked by a hybridity exemplified by the roles music plays in it.10 The multivalent concept of hybridity proves to be a valuable framework for encoun-

tering music’s capability to transcend limits, as signaled by Nagy. Hybrid folktales, as Haring explains, are “narratives that transgress linguistic and symbol-system boundaries.” The “Singing Bone” type is exemplary of such transgression on multiple levels. The first level is generic hybridity, which is evident in the types of folktales that feature riddles or that thematize the creation of a song. The presence of a musical interlude sets up a dialogue of genres in which one genre is the miniature of the other, for the song essentially retells the story in which it is embedded. Crucially, the song itself, Haring observes, is “not subordinated to the rest of the tale, [but] is the very means of its climax.”11

The theoretical concept of hybridization in folk literature extends beyond the content and structure of the narrative to the mode of performance that conveys the tale to an audience. Within the European tradition, where the spoken delivery of a folktale is the norm, the incorporation of singing as part of the telling of the tale is considered a hybrid practice of performance, one that exhibits what Haring refers to as channel hybridization, “the switching of channels between speech and song.”12 The dramatic potential for exploring heterogeneous modes of performance in the act of telling is thus an integral component of the “Singing Bone” narrative. A.T. 780 retains this hybrid-channel feature even in its literary incarnations: “Since the channel governs the contact between performer and audience,” Haring explains, “the very writing of an oral tale is another case of channel hybridization, whether it is a verbatim transcript, an elaboration or revision of an oral tale, a literary invention based on oral folklore, or a literary fairy tale based on other literature.”13

For folklorist Donald Ward, the elements of channel hybridity highlighted by Haring become the most vital feature of the musical magic tale. Ward’s interest in A.T. 780 revolves around its status as an example of a tale-type that crosses the boundaries between oral and literary transmission and that leaves, in those

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9Ibid., p. 182. Nagy’s reference to a “Singing Bone Pattern” stems from his goal in this article to link exemplars of European folk narratives that have been variously classified according to their content, but that are connected nevertheless by a crucial plot element, that of the presence of music as part of retribution for a wrongdoing. Into the orbit of the “Singing Bone,” the “outstanding example” of the narrative pattern on which he is focused, he draws “The Juniper Tree,” classified as A.T. type 720, and several other tales and variants drawn from varied geographical sources and historical time frames. Nagy’s project thus highlights music as a model for a mode of scholarly narrative analysis that “can transcend boundaries of space and time creatively” (p. 189)—also, of course, the boundaries of classification erected by previous folklore scholarship.
11Ibid., pp. 464, 465.
12Ibid.
13Ibid., p. 466.
crossings, traces of the survival of a distinct oral tradition. These remnants endure in the presence of the musical interlude—the bone-flute song at the heart of the tale—and in the practice of performing the song as part of an oral recounting of the narrative. “While there is a substantial natural barrier that exists between the domains of print and orality,” Ward writes, “it is—especially at times when calamity threatens—a barrier than can be and has been bridged.”

The question of oral and literary sources bears both on Mahler’s own sources for the folktale he fashioned into a narrative ballad in 1878 and on the traces those sources may have left on the resulting work. The available literary versions in German that show significant correspondences in detail with Mahler’s retelling include not only “The Singing Bone” of the Brothers Grimm but also “Das klagende Lied” of Ludwig Bechstein, published in 1856. These literary accounts are the sources usually cited in the scholarship on Mahler’s Das klagende Lied. But matters may be more complicated than that. The question of orality versus literacy in the transmission of folk narratives and poetry had been a subject of debate for more than half a century by the time Mahler started his work. Jon Finson has discussed the conflict between “the notion of orally transmitted Volkslieder and their recension by men of letters” in relation to early critical responses to the “folk” poetry of Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano later used by Mahler for his Wunderhorn Lieder. The poems, like the songs after them, had a mixed reception. Whereas some responses to von Arnim and Brentano, such as that of Goethe, saw their Wunderhorn anthology, which “came only ‘in part’ from the people,” as “a means of renewing the nationalist-oral tradition,” other reviews highlighted “an intrusion of learned standards upon a less formal and somewhat inconsistent oral tradition.” This literary treatment of cultural material, a hybrid product, had claimed in the early years of the century to hew to oral practice, yet had been critically distinguished from it well before the publication of the hybrid Grimm and Bechstein tales—purportedly transcribed from oral sources—on which Mahler’s work is presumed to have drawn.

Perhaps it did. But it is also possible that Mahler, too, may have first learned the story not through a published text, but from an oral source. According to Henry-Louis de La Grange, this was indeed the case; he records that Mahler was told this very story repeatedly as a child by “Nanni,” the nursemaid of the neighboring family Fischer from whom his father bought their house in Iglau. This is not to

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16Another version of the tale in circulation around the time of the creation of Mahler’s work was the poem Das klagende Lied by Martin Greif (a pseudonym for Friedrich Hermann Frey), a dramatic rendition of which was performed by a student drama group at the Vienna Conservatory in 1876; some sources in the literature on Mahler’s work point to the Greif version as a possible influence on Mahler. There is no proof, however, that Mahler saw this performance, and Edward Reilly has essentially discounted its influence. See Edward R. Reilly, “Das klagende Lied Reconsidered,” in Mahler Studies, ed. Stephen E. Hefling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 34–35.

Henry-Louis de La Grange states that Mahler “made a thorough and scholarly study of the poem’s literary sources . . . and thus found a wide range of inspiration in the rich world of folk legend,” but gives no documentation to corroborate this assertion; however, according to John Williamson, “so widespread is the subject of Mahler’s poem in folk and ballad literature, so individual is his interpretation, that La Grange is justified in asserting that Mahler went beyond immediate literary inspirations to investigate deeper sources.” See Henry-Louis de La Grange, Mahler, vol. 1 [London: Victor Gollancz, 1974], p. 731, and John Williamson, “The Earliest Completed Works: A Voyage towards the First Symphony,” in The Mahler Companion, ed. Donald Mitchell and Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 40.

18Ibid., pp. 94, 97.
19Edward Reilly acknowledges, almost in passing, that, “as is also the case for some of the Wunderhorn songs, Mahler may have been acquainted with the story through an oral tradition that differed in various ways from the published texts.” See Reilly, “Das klagende Lied Reconsidered,” p. 34.
20See La Grange, Mahler, I, 14. Heinrich Fischer was Musikdirektor of the Stadtkapelle—La Grange asserts that it was to him that Mahler owed his introduction to music—and his son Theodor Fischer, who was Mahler’s childhood friend and very close to him in age, later published an article about Mahler’s childhood, as well as a monograph on musical life in nineteenth-century Iglau.
suggest that Mahler’s use of the folktale would somehow gain greater validity if he had learned it directly from an oral source, nor that its significance would be greater if his acquaintance with it dated from his impressionable childhood. Rather, the point is that the experience of hearing a story could well differ from that of reading it in ways that might resonate powerfully in one’s own later act of retelling it.

There is no real reason to doubt the anecdote about Mahler’s childhood knowledge of the narrative. Certainly, distinct oral versions of tales of the Singing Bone type survived in parts of Europe well into the latter half of the twentieth century. For example, a Polish version of A.T. 780 was conveyed orally to Nicole Marzac by Irène Cieślak in 1964. Her account did not merely relate the story but involved the repeated singing of the spectral song of the shepherd’s pipe. Cieślak explained that she had learned the tale in childhood from her grandfather, who was born in 1874 and who had similarly learned the tale, including its tune, as a child. Unlike the Grimms’ tale, also supposed to have come directly from an oral source, Marzac’s record of A.T. 780 includes both the text related to her by Cieślak and the transcribed melodies for the sung verses.

It is this musically performed element of “The Singing Bone,” and of musical interludes in similar magic tales, that Donald Ward singles out as special evidence of the distinct existence and survival of oral and written versions of the same tale (or tale-type). Ward provides examples of tale versions with integral songs that specify the singing of the verses, including those sung by the mad Gretchen in prison in the first version of Goethe’s Faust from around 1773. Published by the Grimms some forty years later, that tale and its sung verses, Goethe claimed, were recalled from his childhood. The Grimms, by contrast,” asserts Ward, “when they mention the verses of their tales, go out of the way to insist that they are never sung but recited without melodies. Today . . . we know they were wrong, the singing of the verses is an important part of the story-telling tradition.”

As Rudolf Schenda has demonstrated, the intertwining of literate and oral traditions in European storytelling practices dates back to the sixteenth century. The practices of reading aloud and of repeating orally what had been read provide examples of processes of transmission that mix the oral and the literate. But the presence of the performed musical interlude distinctly marks A.T. 780 off from written culture. The songs within the tale form “a highly visible strand of orality [that remains] sharply defined from literacy.” Although the tale survives in both written and oral versions, only the latter can retain the potent feature of sung music. As Ward asserts, “the songs with their haunting melodies do not appear in the print Märchen . . . their haunting effect could never be captured in print. It is evident that these verses are signposts pointing to the domain of orality that successfully resists the intrusion of literary influence.” The single most striking feature of the tale for Ward, then, is once again the extraordinarily potent element of musical performance. The performance constitutes a locus of interference between narration and dramatic enactment. Conveying the immediacy, the presence, of the song as sung is the quality that, seemingly, only an oral telling can attain.

Narrative, Temporality, Voice

Mahler, then, chose a narrative that thematized and incorporated the powerful and sometimes disturbing effects of performed music. These are effects that resonate throughout his mature works and exhibit again and again the power of intrusive timbre, sonic shock, and the sheer physical force of sound. In its double emphasis on telling about and enacting such effects, Das klagende Lied may even attempt to efface the trace of the written and the composed in its entanglement with the oral/aural and the performed. At the center of the work is the fearful

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23Ibid., p. 19.
idea of disembodied song, the inanimate object that sings in human language, the voice from the grave that transcends the boundary of death to disrupt the living. Three times within Mahler’s text, this uncanny voice sounds; its final utterance is not merely disturbing but also destructive, bringing about the physical collapse of an edifice through sheer sound. As Haring asserts, many hybrid narratives are “double-voiced, carrying layers of meanings, valorizing voices from the margins,” but surely very few such voices are as materially catastrophic in their effects. The poetic evocation of this sound is joined by others throughout the text: references to sounds of nature and to the human music-making of celebratory trumpets and drums.

Beyond this level of story, the performative nature of the content shaped in unique ways the structural disposition of Mahler’s ways of telling it. Unlike literary versions of A.T. 780 such as those by Grimm and Bechstein, Mahler’s text seems to make space for moments of a heightened sense of presence and to give prominence to the idea of voice, in a manner that might be interpreted as approximating the effects of [oral] enactment rather than [written] telling. One of the most interesting features of Mahler’s poetic version of the tale is its vocal and temporal instability, marked by frequent shifts between past and present tense and inexplicable temporal anomalies or rifts in the narrative. Some temporal manipulation can be taken for granted as a hallmark of what Gérard Genette, one of the most influential theorists of textual time, has referred to as “the narrative game.” But there are some features of Mahler’s narrative poem that make it stand apart from its folk sources with their typical fluctuations in internal speed (the ratio between how long events take to occur and the time it takes to tell about them), which linger over some event sequences and summarily encapsulate others.

Both the Grimms’ “Der Singende Knochen” and Bechstein’s “Das klagende Lied” contain an example of such a moment of summary. The time between the slaying of the younger brother and the discovery of his bone is encapsulated in a typical fairy-tale phrase: “Nach langen Jahren” [After many years], say the Grimms. In Bechstein, whose version sends a brother and sister in search of a flower to determine who will succeed to the throne of their father, there are two such phrases: “Und da sind viele Jahre hingegeben” [And then many years passed] between the brother’s childhood crime and his adult ascension to the throne, and “nach manchem, manchem Jahre” [after many, many years] before the finding of the remarkable bone. But there is no such indication in Mahler’s text of the passage of weeks, months, even years, as the body of the slain brother decays in the forest. The minstrel fashions his mysterious instrument, travels far and wide demonstrating its uncanny power, and yet arrives at the castle just in time for the wedding of the guilty brother to the proud, lovely queen. In a passing reference to the wedding celebration as “anachronistically delayed,” Peter Franklin seems to be the only other analyst to have taken note of this lacuna. If the events of the “Waldmärchen” [Forest Legend]—the search for and discovery of the flower—lead as promised to those of the “Hochzeitsstück” [Wedding Piece], how do the events of the middle part, “Der Spielmann” [The Minstrel]—the creation of the flute and its marvelous lament—fit into the temporal scheme? Possibly they do not. This small but oddly con-

27This allusion to “ways of telling” refers to Vera Micznik’s study of the “discourse” of the first movement of Mahler’s Third Symphony, which she reads as a narrative text, querying the multiple significance of musical “events” and their discursive disposition within the work. See Micznik, “Ways of Telling’ in Mahler’s Music: The Third Symphony as Narrative Text,” in Perspectives on Gustav Mahler, ed. Jeremy Barham (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 295–323. My study rests on similar narrative-theoretical understandings of the “story” (in this case the folk narrative of the “Singing Bone” type) and the “discourse” of individual versions, including Mahler’s—the way it is told—in examining both the features of the tale and the means of Mahler’s poetic retelling of it as pointers to the extraordinary sonic qualities of its musical embodiment.
spicuous temporal collapse in the midst of Mahler’s narrative has the effect of removing the uncanny spectral song from the course of narrative time.

An even more strikingly anomalous moment takes the form of a crucial omission: the actual event of the murder is not narrated at the time it takes place. The text speaks fearfully of the approach of the older sibling, his malignant laughter, and the glint of steel as he draws his sword; and it turns gently to the innocent young brother lying under the willow, with the red flower in his cap, smiling in his sleep as though dreaming—“wie im Traum.” But the act itself is merely hinted at, implied, and then passed by. The text seems to surround the event without actually speaking it; it turns away, averts its eyes in fear and horror. This omission has the damaging effect of repression that Freud warned of: it engenders return. Untold, the trauma of the fratricide resurfaces repeatedly later in the work, manifest as a recurring act of narration in the form of the bone-flute’s multiple performances, the last of which is devastating. Ultimately, the temporal effect of repetition amounts to a dramatic multiplication of the event in which the trauma is experienced again and again. For the moment, though, it is as if the flash of the drawn sword foretells an event that the text cannot bear to witness. Evasively it turns instead to a contemplation of the natural surroundings—dew-strewn flowers, birdcalls, and the whispering of the breeze—as if to arrest the flow of time by invoking the eternal qualities of nature. The folktale’s generic hybridity is manifest in this sudden slip between the epic and the lyric.

The potentially infinite temporal suspensions of such descriptive passages, in which the progress of the narrative pauses altogether, are like widening fissures in a text already fractured by frequent shifts between past-tense narration and present-tense engagement with events. Although such shifts are not untypical of the genre, this flux is not necessary to the telling. It is perfectly possible to deliver a compelling rendition of this tale entirely in the past tense, as the Grimms and Bechstein do, and for that matter as I sought to do at the start of this article. Mahler’s rendering relinquishes the protection of pastness that relegates the violence and horror to a safe distance, in favor of moments of immediacy that collapse the progressive time of the narrative. It is as if the text were attempting in such moments to mimic the effect of presence found in an oral rendition of the tale, like an after-echo of a live experience of storytelling. Across the progress of the poem as a whole there is a trajectory of narrative-temporal collapse. We begin in the proper past tense of narrative, but by the time the minstrel arrives at the castle, the story has essentially caught up with itself. The entire third part is told in the present tense, with the notable exception of one line in the Minstrel’s spectral flute song and one in the song’s repetition by the King. We end in the immediacy of a dramatic present, caught up in the horror of the unfolding events through the experience of voice and sound. The immediacy is so potent that it overrides the fleeting references to the past; everything is caught up in the present.

What is perhaps most interesting about these temporal shifts in the text is that they often indicate changes in narrative voice. A grammatical shift such as a change from the past to the present tense gives the sense that the narration has begun to emanate from a different place or time, and hence from a different speaking subject. These are traces of the performing act of telling within the text. With them comes the sense of voice, of a presence that speaks; and the varying level of temporal engagement, of position relative to the story, makes it clear that the narrative presence is not unitary but multiple.

Indeed, the vocal plurality of Mahler’s text is evident almost from the beginning:

Es war eine stolze Königin
gar lieblich ohne Maßen
kein Ritter stand nach ihrem Sinn,
sie wollt’ sie alle hassen.
O weh, du wonnigliches Weib!
Wem blühet wohl dein süßer Leib!

Both past-tense lines directly reference the murder—in the minstrel’s song, “my brother murdered me,” and in the song played by the brother himself, “you murdered me”—ironically so, as it is the murder that cannot be relegated to the past.

On temporal distancing as the trace of narrative voice, see Genette, Narrative Discourse, pp. 214ff.
[There was a proud queen
lovely beyond measure
no knight pleased her,
she despised them all.
Oh woe, wondrous lady!
For whom will your fair body bloom?]

This opening stanza of “Waldmärchen,” the first of the work’s three movements, starts by narrating in the past tense: “Es war eine stolze Königin. . . .” Then it shifts to a dramatic exclamation of involvement that contrasts with the detachment of third-person, past-tense telling and seems, through its declaration of woe, to foresee a tragic outcome: “O weh, du wonnigliches Weib!” As the text veers from telling the past to looking anxiously toward the future, the locus of the utterance shifts. The verse ends in a new mode, unexpectedly questioning: “Wem blühet wohl dein süßer Leib?” If the story is in the past and thus already ended, a narrator should know the outcome, yet here the narrating presence speaks as though it does not. The tale continues this oscillation between the distant narrating voice, the sudden moments of engagement marked by a dramatic address to characters within the story, and the questioning utterances of a voice caught up in the progress of the narrative.

In S/Z, in a passage subtitled “The Dissolve of Voices,” Roland Barthes invokes a musical metaphor to explain the workings of multivoiced texts: “The best way to conceive the classical plural is then to listen to the text as an iridescent exchange carried on by multiple voices, on different wavelengths and subject from time to time to a sudden dissolve, leaving a gap which enables the utterance to shift from one point of view to another, without warning: the writing is set up across this tonal instability [which in the modern text becomes atonality].” Mahler’s text exhibits several such “gaps” in which voices dissolve or shift abruptly. The passage in “Waldmärchen” surrounding the unspoken act of fratricide is one such instance, wherein the principal past-tense narrating voice, which has been most prominent for the better part of the movement, is eclipsed by a voice increasingly caught up in the emotional import of the events. Suddenly, the boundary of the work is transgressed: the voice from outside the story addresses elements within it, imploring the birds of the forest to awaken the sleeping brother with their song. Tellingly, at the same moment, the text also begins to manifest a consciousness of sound, evoking the voices of the birds and even hearing the wind as a whispering voice:

Du wonnigliche Nachtigall,
und Rotkelchen hinter der Hecken,
wollt ihr mit eurem süßen Schall
den armen Ritter erwecken?

Ihr Blumen, was seid ihr vom Thau so schwer?
Mir scheint, das sind gar Thränen!
Ihr Winde, was weht ihr so traurig daher,
Was will euer Raunen und Wählen?

[You, wondrous nightingale,
and robin behind the hedge,
won’t you wake the poor knight
with your sweet sound?]

Flowers, why are you so heavy with dew?
It looks like tears to me!
Winds, why do you blow so sadly?
What does your whispering and murmuring mean?]

But Barthes also points to utterances whose source seems unidentifiable: the voice seems to be suddenly absent. “Waldmärchen” ends with just such an unidentifiable utterance. “Waldmärchen” ends with just such an unidentifiable utterance. After the aporia of the omitted telling of the murder comes a statement marked grammatically in the text by quotation marks. It simply declaims: “Im Walde, auf der grünen Heide, da steht eine alte Weide.” Peter Franklin discerns that this line is “like the quoted beginning of another story” (or, rather, a song). Yet it is an utterance without locus. To echo Barthes, “Who is speaking? . . . It is impossible to attribute an origin . . . to the statement.” It may happen, he says, that “in the classic text, always haunted

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33Franklin, “A Soldier’s Sweetheart’s Mother’s Tale?” p. 121.
by the appropriation of speech, the voice gets lost, as though it had leaked out through a hole in the discourse.”

I find it striking that Barthes’s musical metaphor and his references to “listening” to the text, to voice and wavelength, so directly and suddenly invoke sound in the analysis of a text that exists exclusively in written form. It is as though the “dissolve of voices” he describes causes a rift in the text through which voice becomes heard; to borrow his phrase, “the text speaks”—perhaps even, the text performs. In Mahler’s text, the most dramatic rift is the one that allows the voice of the dead to speak. The quotation marks surrounding each of the bone’s three songs indicate not an unidentified voice but an impossible and unknowable one, a voice that should not be heard. These utterances, these vocal dissolves and shifts in the text, become specially marked in performance—and by performance.

**Vocal Dislocation, Sonic Rupture, Radical Performance**

_Das klagende Lied_ is a multivoiced work from both textual and musical points of view. In the musical setting, all the textual intimations of voice and presence in folktale and narrative poem finally become manifest in sound. The musical-vocal structure of the work underscores—but does not always mirror directly—the multivoicedness of the text. In part, it is the very lack of direct correspondence between textual and musical voices that lends to the experience of the performed work a sense of plurality and even instability—a sense echoed at times in the work’s instrumental component. The literal singing voices do not assume stable character identities, nor do they function in a fixed relationship between solo narration and choral accompaniment or commentary. Rather, they are all narrating voices, whose roles fluctuate, and who speak at times from different narrative levels of the text. Caught up in an aural experience of the work, the fundamental perceptual experience is one of continuous vocal flux: a virtual “phantasmagoria of voices,” as Franklin describes it. By the time we reach the clamorous “Hochzeitsstück”—call it complex or chaotic—the calmer moments of forest idyll from the “Waldmärchen” and “Der Spielmann” seem long past. We are on the verge of being overwhelmed by a welter of ensemble and solo voices combined with noisy instrumentation whose ultimate aural effect is fragmentation.

It is worth noting, despite the warranted focus on actual voices, that the instrumental component of the music is equally implicated in the pervasive impressions of temporal and sonic diffusion and sometimes dislocation. Julian Johnson recognizes in the juxtaposed forces of orchestra and singers, chorus and soloists, an implied opposition between social collectivity and repressed individuality. He describes their balance as an “uneasy” one: “the social edifice, embodying historical, rational, collective power, comes crashing down in the face of the immediacy of the lyric.”

Despite these conceptual distinctions, though, the roles of all these forces frequently overlap and intertwine in both the narrative and the dramatic-participatory dimensions of _Das klagende Lied_. The orchestra’s leitmotivic content works on the level of meaning and contributes narrative continuity throughout, but its position relative to the narrative frequently shifts, as do the positions of the voices. Its interventions in and ruptures of the narrative, like those of the textual voices, are carried out in both time and space.

For example, the orchestra, no less than the unexplained narrative lacuna between “Waldmärchen” and “Der Spielmann,” accomplishes the mysterious removal from narrative time of the traumatic death beneath the willow tree. In the passage near the end of “Waldmärchen” wherein the voice draws back from recounting the murder and instead describes the surroundings of the younger brother who smiles “wie im Traum,” the orchestra contributes to a remarkable sense of temporal suspension in the

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35See Franklin, “A Soldier’s Sweetheart’s Mother’s Tale?” p. 124. Franklin closely examines the vocal plurality of _Das klagende Lied_ in terms of an intricate gender fragmentation based on who sings when and its implications for the narrative discourse.

36Johnson, _Mahler’s Voices_, p. 27.
surrounding musical texture (reh. nos. 38–44). Sustained notes, harp arpeggios in irregular groupings, soft tremolos and undulating chord patterns in the strings, all contribute to the virtual cessation of forward motion. Long, exposed trills appear high in the piccolo in a conventional depiction of birdsong; they echo similar gestures in the flute and piccolo that had accompanied the previous pleas to the nightingale and robin to awaken the sleeping youth with their songs (reh. no. 32). Both voices and orchestra are complicit in the invocation of timeless nature as a means of halting the narrative flow, lingering over the instant before death. Adorno could have been describing just such a moment when he said that Mahler’s music “watches over the sleep of those who shall never wake. If each of the dead resembles one who was murdered by the living, that person is also like one they ought to have rescued.”

The multiple voices lament both the primal murder and their own failure, despite their cries of warning, to prevent it.

A counterpart to the orchestra’s radical temporal dissolution in “Waldmärchen” occurs in the dramatic spatial rupture wrought by the intrusion of the offstage orchestra in “Hochzeitsstück,” the sonic spatialization of which contributes decisively to the final movement’s theatrical character. Here Johnson’s characterization of the instrumental forces as an oppositional social collective is borne out in the chaotic juxtaposition that pits the obliviously noisy band celebrating the wedding against the plaintive solo voice of lament and accusation. The offstage orchestra, much commented upon in the literature, is the source of Mahler’s earliest use of acousmatic sound (sound we hear without seeing its cause). The estranged sound is a surprisingly modernist stroke, and a prescient one; and in the present context its effect reaches beyond the dimension of space. For at the same time that the sudden acousmatic event breaks open the space of the work, it also ruptures the temporal framework of the narrative with an intrusion of the dramatic. It is as though the exuberant description of the celebration by the chorus had opened a rift in the narrative through which the sound of the band reaches our ears, bringing it forth and making it present. In this paradoxical immediacy-in-distance, the band mirrors the effect of the spectral flute song, which its clamor does not drown out. The temporal oscillations and spatial shifts in orchestral sound thus replicate and multiply those of the kaleidoscopic voices that variously tell, witness, and enact the events of the tale.

Yet one voice in particular stands out from the rest. Mahler originally requested that the spectral flute song be sung in each instance by a boy, whose vocal timbre—not heard otherwise—would be sharply distinguished from those of the other performing voices. Later, as a concession to the challenges of actually having the work performed, he made allowance for the replacement of a boy with adult women. “Women,” plural, because he also added a shade of further difference. Whereas the final iterations of the song are given to a soprano, its first instance is marked for the contralto voice. The contralto quality contributes its own degree of ambiguity to the sound of this striking voice from the grave. Its range and openness to equivocal gender interpretation allow it to suggest the maleness of the character, yet in its richness it conveys not the supposed innocence of the victim, but rather a mature knowingness that plays into its chilling accusation of guilt.

Perhaps more than any other possible choice of voice type, the contralto bone-voice is as liminal as the voice of the dead must surely be. However, when the rarer performing possibility of the boy voice is actually realized (as it has been in some recent renditions), the result is not merely dramatically effective but

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38The term “acousmatic” was first applied by Pierre Schaeffer in the 1950s to the experience of listening to musique concrète—it is defined in his Traité des objets musicaux (Paris: Editions Seuil, 1966) as sound that is heard in the absence of a visible source for it. My use of the term here is thus anachronistic, but technically accurate, and aptly characterizes the perceptual experience of Mahler’s offstage music.

39Thanks to Lawrence Kramer for highlighting the import of the choice of contralto voice as a substitute for the boy voice Mahler first intended.
Not only is the youthful voice dramatically suited to the role of the innocent younger brother, but the “purity” of this voice type also coalesces readily with the pure, sinusoidal tones of the flute. The boy’s voice marks the intersection between the narrative implications of the bone flute’s rare interjections and the timbral quality of their sonic presence in performance. The first entry of this voice is preceded by a hushed sense of anticipation in the chorus, interrupted by a solo cry of premonition of the strangeness that is to come: “Das wird ein seltsam Spielen sein!” [That will be strange playing!] Note that the reference is still to playing and not to singing. The soloists and chorus are no longer omniscient narrators but anxious observers and listeners. Their poetic description of this sound warns us of our own danger of perishing at the sound we are about to hear:

Der Spielmann setzt die Flöte an
und lässt sie laut erklingen.
O Wunder, was nun da begann
welch’ seltsam traurig Singen!
Es klingt so traurig und doch so schön,
wer’s hört, der möcht’ vor Leid vergehn!

(The minstrel puts the flute to his lips
and lets it sound loudly.
O, what a marvel now began,
What strange, sad singing!
It sounds so sad and yet so beautiful,
Whoever hears it could perish of sorrow!)

In contrast to the past-tense verses preceding it, this verse is related in present-tense narrative, which effectively closes the gap between the telling of the minstrel’s discovery of the bone and the uncanny occurrence of its performance. After a bard- or minstrel-like gesture, a series of broad harp arpeggios (reh. no. 25) announcing the beginning of a song, the performance finally ensues (reh. no. 26). As if to emphasize its liminal existence, the bone flute’s song effects its own sense of temporal disjunction from its surroundings through a series of metrical shifts that occur in every measure throughout the first two lines. The song’s shocking impact is hardly mitigated by the tenor soloist’s warning about its strange voice. On the contrary: its voice is a poisonous residue, an instance of what Mladen Dolar calls “the object voice”—a remainder not reducible to the meaning of the words it conveys. As an “intersection of presence and absence,” the voice inhabits the void between language and the body; but here there is no body, merely the remnant of one. Impossibly, the materiality of the flute-voice has survived the death of the body whose voice it was. But “if it was successfully murdered,” as Dolar asks about the object voice, “why does it recur? Does it not know that it is dead?”

In fact, the flute voice does know, but it sounds anyway, and this awareness is one of the more disturbing aspects of its utterance (see ex. 1):

(“Oh minstrel, dear minstrel mine,
I must lament to you!
For a beautiful flower
my brother struck me dead.
My young body bleaches in the forest,
my brother takes a wondrous wife!”)

There is a marked disjuncture at this point between text and performance. In Mahler’s text, as in the source texts of Grimm and Bechstein,

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40 In the 1991 Decca recording by Riccardo Chailly and the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, the first instance of the flute song in “Der Spielmann” is entrusted to a boy soloist, and the later two songs in “Hochzeitsstück,” which are higher and more virtuosic (on this point see the discussion later in this article), are given to adult female voices. This performance is based on a version of the work that combines the recovered first movement, “Waldmärchen,” of 1880, with the later two movements of Mahler’s revised version of 1898. In the 1998 Erato recording by Kent Nagano and the Hallé Orchestra, which more fully restores Mahler’s original conception by combining all three movements from the original 1880 version, all three instances of the flute song—including the final, highly virtuosic one—are performed by boys. The result is quite stunning.

41 Dolar’s concept of the “object voice” is derived from Lacan (and contra Derrida) and is defined, negatively, as a remnant that is produced by, but is not reducible to, linguistic signification. See Mladen Dolar, “The Object Voice,” in Gaze and Voice as Love Objects, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 7–31; for a more extended meditation on voice (as “voice-object”), see also Dolar, A Voice and Nothing More (Short Circuits) (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).


there are quotation marks surrounding the words of the flute’s song. These marks are hugely important: they signal narrative distance, implying a concluding, but missing, “he said” at the end. Yet when this song begins in performance, it is clear that we are hearing not the narration of the external, quoting voice, but the quoted voice itself, which breaches the barrier of the past tense to confront us with the immediacy of its sound. Its “haunting” quality, which Donald Ward rightly asserted “could never be captured in print,” is released in performance. Paradoxically, in the very act of telling its tragic story, the bone flute’s voice escapes the bounds of narrative into the dramatic realm of live presence.

For Carolyn Abbate, such a dislocated voice, such disembodied singing, is an essential index of the operatic. Here, however, it stands out as yet another instance of internalized hybridity, of the dialogic confrontation of generic voices—voices of narrative, of song, of description or commentary—that characterizes Das klagende Lied. Numerous dramatic gestures implied in the poem are realized in the startling effects of their orchestral and vocal setting. Such proximity of his music to the dramatic genre was noted during Mahler’s own time, significantly in relation to another of his musical encounters with folkloric texts. As Jon Finson has noted, the critic Julius Korngold’s impression of the Wunderhorn songs “hints that [their] eclecticism . . . involves a mixture of genre.” Korngold’s “perception of operatic elements in Mahler’s settings of the Wunderhorn” arises in the context of his discussion of the suitability of a sophisticated orchestral setting for the naive material of the folk poetry.44 “It depends on the poetic texts,” Korngold asserted; and his description of the texts from Des Knaben Wunderhorn as “rich in epic and dramatic traits” that give the Lied the potential to “expand to a scene” points in his view to the potential for a dramatic orchestral setting.45

The idea that certain characteristics of a folkloric text might not only justify but even demand a musical setting that at first seems in-

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congruous with the tone of the text is particularly pertinent to *Das klagende Lied*, in which the musical setting replicates the multileveled hybridity of the “Singing Bone” tale in a startling multiplicity of generic implications. Julian Johnson’s observations of the work’s “radical hybridity” enumerate its generic proximity to cantata, oratorio, tone poem, and symphony as well as to opera. Undoubtedly, the numerous textual and musical elements that are conspicuously theatrical make the suggestion of operatic semblance particularly fascinating. However, despite ruminations in the literature on what might have been but never was, Mahler’s work is no opera.

One might say that the cantata assimilates opera to itself rather than the other way around, and that its doing so would be typical of Mahler. Even apart from the qualities of story or of the narrative-versus-dramatic discourses implied by one genre or another, it is striking how often the music of this opera-conducting, nonoperatic composer is implicated with the operatic. Abbate also suggested this when, in *Unsung Voices*, her monograph on operatic narrative, she engaged Mahler’s Second Symphony in narrative and operatic terms: tropes of the sonic intrusion of a “numinous” presence and a disruptive consciousness of sound. *Das klagende Lied*, with its narrative text that so explicitly foregrounds the topics of sonic disruption, otherworldly voice, and self-awareness of sound, also involves itself repeatedly with operatic tropes that Abbate elaborates further in her later book *In Search of Opera*: the recurrent motif of disembodied sound and the orphic theme of powerful song from a dead body part that sings. Indeed, the loud sweeping strokes of the harp arpeggios that presage each song of the bone flute, invoking the voice of the dead, are quintessential signals in *Das klagende Lied* of what Johnson calls “the orphic capacity to summon presence.”

Adorno must have heard something like this when he said cryptically: “Like Eurydice, Mahler’s music has been abducted from the realm of the dead.” One crucial distinction from the Orpheus theme is that, in this tale, there is no singing head, no mouth as a source of music and language. In life, the brother’s bone never spoke or sang. It sounds now when placed to the lips of a musician, but a musician whose breath transmits not an instrumental sound but a voice, and not his own—some other voice with no natural source. It is a “wandering voice,” in Lawrence Kramer’s terms, “detached from the subject for whom it speaks.” Like opera, Mahler’s work, in Abbate’s words, “attempt[s] something impossible: to represent music that, by the very terms of the fictions proposing it, remains beyond expression.” And yet not quite, because it is manifestly not opera, not staged, and thus it forgoes literal dramatic representation. In implying a theater that remains invisible, the cantata insists on the uncanny condition of the song—dematerialized like the victim’s body—that sounds at the very limits of representation. Johnson’s comment that the “Hochzeitsstück” “implies the visual component of opera” refers to a quality that is easily imagined but, in the end, never realized.

The visual dimension implied by the tale was realized, though, in 1962, in the Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer film “The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm.” The film uses a fanciful story about the lives of Jakob and Wilhelm...

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49Johnson, *Mahler’s Voices*, p. 10 (my emphasis).
50Johnson, *Mahler’s Voices*, p. 10 (my emphasis).
51Adorno must have heard something like this.
52Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, p. vii (my emphasis).
53Johnson, *Mahler’s Voices*, p. 10 (my emphasis).
54Shot in part on location in Germany, *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm*, directed by Henry Levin and produced by George Pal, was the first release of a widescreen Cinerama film with a continuous fictional narrative (the best-known Cinerama release, *How the West Was Won*, was shot first but released later). The film has not been commercially released in DVD format. However, it has recently been broadcast on television by Turner Classic Movies.
Grimm as a frame for the dramatization of three of their tales. My apparent digression here is of interest because the film deals with “The Singing Bone,” especially with regard to the flute-voice, in narrative, structural, and sonic terms that at times resemble those of Das klagende Lied. Like Mahler’s cantata, the film is preoccupied with narrative framing devices, evident within its repeated use of the story-within-a-story conceit; it even frames the whole doubly with a prologue that sets the Grimms and their work in the context of the turmoil of the Napoleonic wars. The prologue presents both the sociopolitical context for the overall narrative and the film’s internal work of narration in terms of sound: a voiceover contrasts “the fearful sounds of war” with “another sound, soft, and gentle,” which has “echoed down the years”—that is, the subtle noise of Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm’s quill pens moving across paper.

Presenting history and narrative creativity in terms of opposing sonic experiences, this introduction is the first indication of the film’s unproblematized conflation of the oral and the literary dimensions of the folk tradition that the Grimms are admired for preserving; it depicts the relationships between telling, listening, and writing as transparent and straightforward. The same conflation explicitly returns later for the genealogy of “The Singing Bone.” Once again, the tale is framed, this time as a story overheard by Wilhelm Grimm, who listens, unseen through the window of a hut in the forest, to an old woman telling the story to a group of children (as “Nanni” perhaps related the tale to Theodor Fischer and Mahler), and then writes it down.

The film’s realization of the bone flute’s song disrupts this continuity, and at a price. Although something is gained from the medium’s capacity to present the phenomenon of the bone flute visuall and to engineer a special voice for it technologically, something is certainly lost in comparison to Mahler’s work. The accusatory song in the film is acousmatic. Its sound draws the shepherd’s incredulous stare at the instrument in his hands, a gesture that is probably necessary not only to convey his astonishment but also to ensure the movie audience that the sound is really supposed to be coming from the flute rather than from the generalized background of the soundtrack. Like Mahler’s flute song, the film’s version emanates from the context of nature and is preceded by a musical evocation of stasis, provided here by sustained strings. The remarkable sound itself is generated from an electronically manipulated combination of flute and human (adult male) vocal sounds. It intones its lyrics, “Oh shepherd, listen to my tale / I sleep beneath a tree” (the actual melody is irritating in its banality), with a reedy, buzzing quality that transforms both instrument and voice into something distinctly other. It fully captures the aspect of strangeness that the solo tenor voice anticipated before the first sounding of Mahler’s “klagende Lied.”

What is lost, though, in all the veracity of this visually and sonically enhanced representation, is the sense of the “liveness” of the voice itself, the quality that makes it so disturbing in light of its supposed origin. Lost, too, is the acute awareness of the voice’s impossibility. The technologies of 1962 turn the visible bone flute into a trick device, a machine, a kind of musical automaton, rather than the channel of a voice from the other side of death. Both the lack of representation and the presence of a real human voice that should not sound so real make Mahler’s flute song more enthralling, because more inexplicable, than the technologically magical rendering by MGM that (more or less) plausibly aligns appearance with artificial sonic presence. In contrast, Das klagende Lied’s crucial moment of performance is doubly dislocated—as Barthes would say, it involves a voice for which any reference is impossible—for there is no flute from which the voice can emanate. We must simultaneously imagine a dead voice animating an inanimate instrument, and a live performer becoming that dead instrument. Without an operatic staging or a filmic scenario that allows us the comfortable fiction of a magical object, the performance itself pushes us to confront its own impossibility, even as we experience the effect of its presence.

**Impossible Voice**

If this voice is a “voice-object” in all its liminality, it also carries with it the special condi-
tion of its own narrative existence, which is an impossible one. It resonates uncomfortably within the realm of what Lawrence Kramer has called “impossible objects”: in its emanation from a “body or body-substitute” (in this case, a bodily fragment), its excess of beauty, its “irrevocable strangeness,” and the disturbing fascination it exerts on the listener. Mahler’s narrative poem makes a special point of describing the voice as an object of wonderment, dwelling not on its story of the primal murder that brought it into existence, that made it (im)p possible, but on its curious loveliness, and the deep emotion—“so traurig, und doch so schön”—inspired by the very sound of it. Indeed, the bone from which it seems to emanate appears as exemplary as one could wish of the condition of the subject’s “bodily incoherence” discussed by Kramer.\textsuperscript{55} But it also indicates the one respect in which this object-(flute)voice differs from Kramer’s simultaneously repulsive and alluring object. The flute voice is not “constrained by the trope of embodiment,”\textsuperscript{56} and its disembodiment, its non-object-ness, renders its presence as inexplicable as that of the impossible object, if not more so. It sounds and resounds in a void between absence and presence.

That sound itself is truly the essence of the story and the musical work, as suggested by both Ward’s meditations on folk narrative and orality and Abbate’s on the troubling undercurrents of uncanniness in musical performance. The real point is the way in which the phenomenon of the latter so compellingly animates the former and produces its presence. On one level, Das klagende Lied is manifestly about narration, about the power of telling and retelling. It is a story that contains stories, and that both tells and demonstrates the concepts of narrative as a performed act, as a voice of moral social commentary, and as a force of political change. This is why my discussion has been bound up with the resonances between the work’s narrative-structural complexities and its thematic insistence on the capacity of narrative to engender obsessive acts of telling. But because of the flute’s song and the voice that sings it, any engagement with the piece must be pressed beyond the workings of narrative meaning to those of performance and sounding presence. The tale even says so: for it is not only to spread the story that the minstrel takes the flute on tour, so to speak, but also to showcase the wonderful sonic properties of the miraculous instrument. Mahler’s text describes how the minstrel ranged far and wide, letting the voice resound everywhere—läßt’s überall erklingen—but then it confronts us with a troubling question, marked by the third instance of quotation marks in the text: “Was soll denn euch mein Singen?” What do you think of my singing?

To whom is this question addressed? And further, who utters the question? Is it the minstrel, addressing the folk he encounters in his travels through the tale, and confusing his action of playing the flute with the flute’s singing? Or is it the impossible voice itself, demanding to know of us, the audience, what we think of its performance? If so, it is suddenly, uncannily self-aware, exhibiting, perhaps, the kind of self-consciousness that Kramer describes as the source of the impossible object’s “curious magnetism.” After this demand is voiced, we come to the final verse of “Der Spielmann,” but the movement does not conclude quite yet—not before that question re-echoes: what do you make of my singing?

As if emboldened by rehearsal, the accusatory flute song grows more elaborate in its recurrences in the last movement of the work. Johnson states that “on each occasion it is characterized by the same music,” which is partly true.\textsuperscript{57} But this sameness really applies only to the first phrase of the song, thereafter, in its second and third appearances, it alters itself. It is, by the end, a far cry from the naive sung verses Ward describes as characteristic of those folktales whose oral performance features a sung musical interlude, with “the enchanting simplicity of children’s songs and the compelling


\textsuperscript{56}Ibid., p. 89.

\textsuperscript{57}Johnson, Mahler’s Voices, p. 10.
rhythm of magical incantations.” \textsuperscript{58} We cannot imagine the bone as a primitive recording or playback device, for what it transmits is not fixed but is constantly transformed. The song’s mutability closes the distance between narration and enactment by heightening the sense that it is not being told about but heard directly.

Mahler’s transformational treatment also contrasts notably with Marzac’s personal observation of the repeated oral performance of both A.T. 780 and its recurrent embedded songs as immutable, identical in not only narrative content but the precise details of the manner of telling. Marzac discovers this fixity from the behavior of her oral source, Irène Cieślak:

As permission to use a tape-recorder was withheld, I decided to take down Irène’s story verbatim. This method turned out to be a blessing in disguise. As I had to write down everything in long hand, I would occasionally have to ask Irène to repeat part of a phrase. I soon discovered that, whenever I stopped her, she would repeat exactly the same words she had spoken before, even using the same intonation. Indeed, after I had taken down the whole tale, I asked her on the following day to repeat it. She did so without changing a single word. \textsuperscript{59}

In this remarkable example, the “text” of the performance is fixed down to the last details of rendition in a way that a written version could never replicate; the oral version in all its nuance is transmitted and retransmitted with a degree of specificity that eludes writing. In Marzac’s account, Cieślak’s telling of the tale has the chilling quality of the bone-flute song itself: she, the performer, has somehow become like the dead bone, a fixed medium that transmits the tale as if from elsewhere. \textsuperscript{60}

The voice in Mahler’s work behaves differently: already dead, it sings as though alive. It seems, in fact, that the flute song is being composed and recomposed as we hear it, and this possibility raises a new specter: that of the dead bone not only as reanimated performer but also as composer. Mahler told a story of suffering hallucinations while composing this work: he imagined a horrifying vision of himself struggling to emerge through the wall of his own room. This well-known, fantastic anecdote of a spectral composing Doppelgänger called forth by music, relayed to us through the faithful Natalie Bauer-Lechner, resonates disturbingly with the ideas raised by the uncanny performances at the center of Das klagende Lied. Each uniquely evolving envoicing of the accusatory song gives the sense of the performance actually producing the work as (impossible) sound-object. As if this were not enough, this performing effect is itself redoubled within Mahler’s work. Resounding amid the cacophony of the royal wedding celebrations, the flute-voice competes with the first of the composer’s many evocations of Musik in der Ferne—that boisterous offstage orchestra performing noisy festive banalities whose clear audibility and simultaneous spatial distinction from the principal orchestra leave us in no doubt that we, the concert audience, are hearing no narration, but the performance itself.

Meanwhile, the spectral flute’s final performance—I mean, the last one we hear within the work—grows higher, increasingly melismatic, and virtuosic, culminating in a phrase that, like operatic coloratura, distorts the words and turns away from meaning as it approaches pure sonority, becoming an object-voice that nearly relinquishes what little trace of humanity it may have retained in death (see ex. 2):

(“Oh brother, my dear brother, you murdered me! 
Now you play on my dead bone, 
I must lament eternally! 
Why did you sacrifice my young life to death?”)

Like the bravura quality of Kramer’s musical “impossible object,” the flute-voice’s virtuosity here “reduces music to sound production.” \textsuperscript{61}

Further, in its melodic excess, it tends away

\textsuperscript{60}This idea is somewhat reminiscent of the fearful mode of operatic performance imagined by Abbate, in which the performer seems like a mere puppet of the work that animates it. See In Search of Opera, p. xiv.  
\textsuperscript{61}See Kramer, Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900, pp. 89–90.
from the vocal and toward the instrumental—veering toward an actual flute melody—and thus threatens to recross that boundary between song and instrumental sound: it hovers precariously at this limit. As if to emphasize the proximity of voice to instrument, of human utterance to the technical means of sonic reproduction, Mahler has accompanied every iteration of the spectral song with a counterpoint of solo wind phrases—including English horn, oboe, and yes, flute—tracing melodies similar to but distinctly not identical with that of the flute-voice (see ex. 1). We cannot mistake these instrumental melodies for acoustic echoes of the voice. Rather, they may lead us to wonder if the instrumental sound is what issues from the bone flute after all, while that impossible voice comes from a still-unknowable elsewhere. In this conceptual flight into the realm of the acousmatic, the voice hovers ambiguously between distance—as though it might be resounding from the dramatic space opened by the rupture of the offstage band—and presence, grounded and yet displaced by the instrumental voices that follow and cling to it. The inti-

macy of instrument and voice, here emanating from a narrative theme, itself becomes thematic in Mahler’s later music—music in which, as Adorno said, “the instrumental and vocal forces are not of unmixed nature; the instruments cling to the singing voice, while the latter moves in a presubjective, melismatic way.”

The spectral song of Das klagende Lied thus looks forward to Mahler’s song-symphony transformations and imagines an infinity of echoes of sonic rupture in performances of Mahler’s works to come.

“Infinity” here is not a casual term. In the Grimms’ and Bechstein’s written accounts of folktale A.T. 780, the existence of the spectral flute song, its performing life, is limited to its purpose of retribution. After the final catastrophe, both tales end by asserting that the song never again sounded from the flute. In the Grimms’ version, the evil brother is executed by drowning, and the bone is then buried and rests in peace; in Bechstein, the flute is physi-

Example 2: Mahler, Das klagende Lied, Part III, “Hochzeitsstück”—the final flute song (mm. 363–404).

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62 Adorno, Mahler, pp. 22–23.
cally broken so that it can be played no more. But Mahler’s work has no such ending. Even after the collapse of the castle ramparts and the solo soprano’s final cry of woe—“Ach, Leide!”—the dead bone, with its strangely living voice, is yet lying in the ruins of the castle. Its threat of eternal repetition hangs with the dust in the air: “Des muß ich ewig klagen!” [Thus must I always sound!] In defiance of the supposed ephemerality of performance, this performing voice is not to be silenced by the formal closure of either narrative or music. It threatens to transcend such limits, to sound eternally. And indeed, it resounds again in Mahler’s fahrenden Gesellen songs and the First Symphony, both of which quote from Das klagende Lied; in the distant musics in the Second, Third, and Sixth; in the shriek of the woodwind passages marked kreischend in “Rewelge” and in the Seventh; in the fiddling specter of “Freund Hein” in the Fourth and the march of the skeletal soldiers in “Rewelge”; in the Weltschmerz that wells up in the Urlicht; poignantly in all those instrumental passages in the Fourth and Seventh and the Kindertotenlieder that Mahler marked klagend; in the “heavenly” music of Das himmlische Leben, which sounds like “no music on earth”; in the sleighbells, cowbells, whips, Ruthe strokes, hammer blows; in the breakthroughs, climaxes, and collapses of extreme volume; and in all those other moments throughout his oeuvre that echo repeatedly with the disturbing and potentially violent rupturing effects of performed sound.

Abstract.
A quest, a murder, and musical retribution through a dead body part that sings: these are the elements of the folktale known as “The Singing Bone,” a traditional narrative that appears in numerous versions in both oral and literary European traditions. For decades, this tale has drawn the special attention of folklorists because of the remarkable and indeed sensational role played in it by music: its narrative reflects a fascinating ideology of the cultural power of music as the voice of the oppressed, while its musical interludes, chilling spectral songs sung by the bone of the murder victim, invoke the potent and at times unsettling effects of musical performance. Gustav Mahler’s first large-scale work, Das klagende Lied, takes up this extraordinary narrative and translates its exceptional features into poetry and musical sound in a manner that especially foregrounds and amplifies the effects of a performing presence in both textual and musical dimensions. Mahler’s narrative ballad is a multivoiced text whose temporal and vocal shifts create oscillations between narrative and drama, telling and enactment, giving rise to a remarkable instability of utterance from which repeated evocations of sound and voice emerge. Its musical setting delivers a discourse that similarly exhibits explicit moments of performance, temporal suspension, and sonic dislocation in both voices and orchestra. This extreme volatility of utterance and its resultant effects of presence become the means of the work’s embodiment of its own narrative content, such that, in performance, it evokes an experience of the radical sonic rupture that is the story’s theme—a theme that reverberates powerfully throughout Mahler’s oeuvre. Keywords: Mahler, Das klagende Lied, narrative, performance, voice, voice-object.