In James M. Cain's 1937 novel Serenade, the down-and-out narrator John Howard Sharp arrives in Acapulco with his mistress, a prostitute named Juana Montes, to help her open a brothel. But even before a fit of sexual jealousy encourages him to punch out one of the town's leading politicos (at which point he finds himself a wanted man), he decides he wants to get away; and at a local hotel, he comes across a feisty ship captain who might be able to smuggle him across the border. To get his help, of course, Sharp needs to prove himself; and in a traditional and highly coded macho confrontation, parallel to the one between Robin Hood and Little John, his worthiness is put to the test. But despite the reference to "feinting and jabbing" (62), it is a verbal rather than a physical sparring. More significant, the subject is neither sports, nor politics, nor sex, although the style used is appropriate for such topics. Rather, the struggle climaxes in a dispute over the relative merits of Mozart and Beethoven—and Sharp wins the argument (and hence saves his life) by tossing off the serenade from Don Giovanni ("Deh vieni alla finestra"), accompanying himself on a guitar that he borrows from a mariachi.

Cain, author of the notoriously successful Postman Always Rings Twice (1934), is of course remembered as one of the toughest of those tough writers that Edmund Wilson called "the boys in the back room."
The New York Times review by Harold Strauss that helped launch Postman claimed that “Cain can get down to the primary impulses of greed and sex in fewer words than any writer we know of”; and David Madden, besting that Times reviewer’s characterization of Cain as a six-minute egg, dubbed him the “twenty-minute egg of the hard-boiled school” (James M. Cain 23). Indeed, he’s so tough that even Raymond Chandler dismissed him as “the offal of literature”: “Everything he touches smells like a billygoat” (qtd. in Madden, Cain’s Craft 6). Given this reputation for toughness, given the plot situation, and given the language, “Deh vieni alla finestra” is sufficiently incongruous that one might at first suspect irony. But while the hard-boiled label helped market Cain, over the years he found it an increasing hindrance. In a letter to Alfred Knopf, he protested that “Being tough or hard-boiled is the last thing in the world that I think about. . . . I am shooting for something quite different” (qtd. in Hoopes 256). And in the preface to The Butterfly he warned his readers, “I belong to no school, hard-boiled or otherwise, and I believe these so-called schools exist mainly in the imagination of critics, and have little correspondence in reality anywhere else” (352).

Indeed, Chandler may have been closer to the truth than he thought when he knocked Cain as “a Proust in greasy overalls” (qtd. in Madden, Cain’s Craft 6). For like Proust, Cain was not only obsessed with sexuality, but also with music. Indeed, Cain considered his writing career a “consolation prize” failing as an opera singer (qtd. in Hoopes xii), and singing figures as the central subject in three of his best novels, and as a subsidiary concern in many of the others. Even the mobster Sol Caspar, in Love’s Lovely Counterfeit (Cain’s icy equivalent of Hammett’s The Glass Key), takes time out from running the rackets in Lake City to assess a new recording of Il Trovatore. And what I would like to argue here is that, if treated seriously, Cain’s novels can offer valuable insights into the relationship between music and ethics.

That vexed relationship, of course, has been explored by a wide variety of theorists from Plato onward. But as Wayne Booth points out, no one has yet come close to a “full ethical criticism” of music (Company 19, italics in original). What might that entail? Ethical analysis is always an analysis of actions, not of objects. As Booth’s rhetorical analyses since The Rhetoric of Fiction have continually made clear, there is thus no way to talk seriously about literary ethics simply by looking at the doctrines espoused in a text, without taking into account the transaction between author and reader. Similarly, while it might be possible to pro-
duce an ethics of composition or an ethics of performance, such study
would inevitably be subsidiary to an ethics of listening—in particular, a
study of the way musical meaning is tied, not simply to abstract shapes,
but to the rhetorical dynamics through which works of art “change” us
(Modern Dogma 165). Booth himself, in his occasional forays into music,
invariably takes this position. Thus, for instance, one of his discussions
of “what art teaches” starts with a “mental experiment” that attempts
to unpack the experiences of listening carefully to Beethoven’s A Minor
Quartet (Modern Dogma 168–80).

But although Booth, in his stress on reception, points clearly in the
right direction, he has never explored the dynamics of listening with
anything like the scrutiny he has applied to the dynamics of reading—
especially the increasingly contextualized notion of reading that has
come to ground some of his later work.1 What follows, then, is not so
much an analysis of Booth, nor even a debate with him, but rather an
expansion beyond his work, asking what kind of insights we might gain
if we treated the process of listening with the same kind of detailed at­
tention, say, that Booth gives the process of reading irony in A Rhetoric
of Irony.

It is perhaps not surprising that Booth has not taken this next step, for
until recently most theorists of music—whether they have praised music
for its ethical benefits, blamed it for its corruptive influence, sorted it out
into various ethical categories, or steadfastly refused to admit its ethical
dimensions at all—have started with questionable postulates that have
deflected our attention from the complexities of listening. In particular,
they have tended to assume that, as W. J. Henderson put it in a once-
popular guide, the best music “exercises her sway upon us wholly by
means of her own unaided powers” (87).2 Of course, not everyone is so
flowery; but for all the differences in vocabulary and style, Henderson,
in this regard, is not far distant from Leonard Meyer or Milton Bab-
bitt.3 That is, all of these theorists skim over, or at least fail to develop,
that process of mediation through which the composer’s acts are trans­
formed by the listener. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that
Booth too, even though he is not unaware of this intermediate process,
is apt, like Henderson and Meyer, to treat it as outside the realm of
his analysis, as if, like the best digital–analog processing, it were for all
practical purposes a self-canceling coding-decoding procedure.

Thus, it is not, as it might at first appear, a hubristic claim when he
tells us that “listening well [to Bach], totally engrossed in the musical
moment, Bach and I—the implied Bach and the postulated listener—
become indistinguishable” (Critical Understanding 238).⁴ Rather, this vision of unity is but the logical consequence of bracketing the complexity and variety of the mediation between listener and music—of assuming, as he puts it, that “music does not offer me as many invitations [as literature does] to create epicycles of meaning on my very own” (Critical Understanding 238) and of assuming, as well, that “whether all such meanings [of detailed musical structural relationships] are conventional and learned, or (as I believe) some are innate and universal, the repertoire of such ‘reasons of art’ possessed by everyone in a given culture, in advance of any one experience, is immense” (Modern Dogma 169).

In going beyond Booth, I would like to complicate this model by asking what the process of listening would look like if we don’t assume that those “invitations to create epicycles of meaning” are negligible and if we look, not at the shared repertoire of interpretive procedures, but at the points where cultural agreement breaks down. In other words, I would like to propose that listening, no less than performing (or reading), is an interpretive act, and that like any other interpretive act, it is always grounded in mediating principles that are both ideologically charged and contextually variable. I will be using Cain’s novels in my case study to illustrate the process of listening; but before turning to them, I need to respond to the traditional assumptions of theorists of music with some countertheorizing, specifically by setting out a musical distinction that Jay Reise and I have developed in detail elsewhere.⁵

As Reise and I conceptualize it, the act of listening involves the braiding together of three separate strands. The first is what we call the technical, and it consists of only those elements that are specifically represented in the notation—or, in the case of un-notated music, those elements that would be captured by a transcriber. Statements about the technical level would include, for instance, “The first note of Scott Joplin’s Maple Leaf Rag is an eighth-note octave E-flat on the second half of the second beat of a measure.” To a large extent, traditional analysis has assumed that the technical component is the totality of the music. It is this assumption, for instance, that supports Alan Walker’s claims not only that meaning is inherent in the notes, but that quality is inherent as well (“You need not prove that the Eroica symphony is a masterpiece before you can be certain that it is a masterpiece . . . ; its mastery is self-evident”) (xii).

In fact, though, the technical is only the raw material of the music. In and of itself, for instance, it has no hierarchy of importance, no shape,
no content, no symbolic force. To put it more sharply, on its own the technical is meaningless—which is why we are generally disoriented when we hear pieces from radically different cultures. Despite the long tradition of theorizing to the contrary, listeners can only make sense (and I would like to stress the act of “making” here) of the technical in combination with what Reise and I call the attributive, a second component of the listening process that assigns (or proposes) meanings (in the broadest sense), a component that is inevitably extracompositional (usually even what traditionalists would call “extramusical”), a component that is always at least provisionally in place before the act of listening begins.

Many types of information coexist on the attributive level, but they can be loosely divided into two categories, what Reise and I call codes and mythologies. Codes consist of “regulations” of conventional behavior, and are often arrived at through statistical analysis. Harmonic practice, at least during Western classical music’s common practice period, is especially subject to codification. But for my purposes here, the second type of attributive information, the mythological, is more relevant. The mythological consists of the verbal discourse and the other cultural apparatus that surrounds and in a sense grounds the experience of the music in question. It includes, for instance, the stories about Beethoven raging against his deafness, stories that help determine, before we start to listen, what kind of stance we will take toward the music. Many music-appreciation analyses of “sonata form” (especially those couched in narrative terms, which often assign gender roles to various themes) are, despite their apparent stress on technical matters, mythological in spirit. Performance practice, too, is a part of the mythological—as are the systems, such as Schenker’s, that provide the philosophical underpinnings for the claims made for particular analyses or analytic techniques.

Especially in its more overt forms, the mythological makes many contemporary musicians uneasy. Ernst Krenek went so far as to try to exorcise it completely, calling on composers “to avoid the dictates of such ghosts” as “recollection, tradition, training, and experience” (90). Milton Babbitt is an even more fiery ghostbuster. He takes as his example the sentence (unattributed, but taken from a work by Paul Henry Lang) “There can be no question that in many of Mendelssohn’s works there is missing that real depth that opens wide perspectives, the mysticism of the unutterable.” Such a “verbal act,” Babbitt insists, should not “be allowed”—indeed “a book containing a sentence such as this [should not be saved] from the flames” (11).

But Babbitt’s incendiary arguments light up serious misconceptions
about the nature of what we are calling mythological discourse. He sets himself up in opposition to any utterances in which there is "virtually nothing to be communicated." In theory, of course, it is hard to take issue with such a wholesome (albeit Quixotic) position. But in practice, his argument depends on the assumption that "responsible normative discourse" is synonymous with "cognitive communication"—which is in turn equated with empirically verifiable statements (11). That is, he depends on the assumption that the only valid form of communication is through the kind of speech act that J. L. Austin called *constatives*, "'statement[s]' [that] 'describe' some state of affairs, or . . . 'state some fact,' which [they] must do either truly or falsely" (1). In fact, however, the statement about Mendelssohn is more properly viewed as what Austin calls a *performative* (an utterance that performs an act rather than describes a situation), specifically as an *advisory*. That is, instead of describing a state of affairs, Lang's sentence offers a framework within which to make sense of and evaluate Mendelssohn's art.

Babbitt's complaint that such statements are nonfalsifiable, while undeniable, thus has no bearing on the issue. For to judge the legitimacy of the sentence, we need to assess not its "truth" but its utility: its ability to provide a grid that can help guide and support listeners as they attribute meaning (or, in this case, a lack of a certain kind of meaning) to the music at hand. The same holds true, as I have suggested, even for many supposedly formalist statements that appear on the surface to be descriptions of what is "objectively there" on the technical level: they too, more often than not, turn out to be not descriptions at all, but advisories in formal attire. Whatever his claims to the contrary, Alan Walker's complex thematic analyses do not in fact reveal a preexisting unity within the "masterpieces" he discusses. Rather, they attribute unity to them, to persuade us to hear them in the same way he does.

Although listeners can switch or merge attributions (even during listening), attributive screens are only available if they precede the particular act of listening. Likewise, the technical is always in place before the act of listening begins; even in improvised music, the performer decides what sounds to play before the audience hears them. Where is the activity of the listener in all of this? Listening is an active process: although it requires both the technical and the attributive, their mere presence only make the music potentially available. It is up to the listener to *apply* (whether self-consciously or not) attributive screens to the technical material at hand in order to transform it into a particular listening experience. Reise and I call this the *synthetic* level.
The difference between the levels can be seen as follows: "The next-to-last chord of Joplin's *Crush Collision March* (reduced to closed position) is \( \text{FACE}^b \)" is a statement about the technical level; "*Crush Collision* is a turn-of-the-century parlor piece ending in \( B^b \) major, and in that context, such a dominant seventh chord is most likely to be followed by a tonic" is an attributive statement; "On hearing that dominant seventh, I expect a \( B^b \) major chord to follow" is a synthetic conclusion drawn from the application of attributive information to technical facts. The lines between technical, attributive, and synthetic, of course, are imprecise: one listener's synthetic activities, for instance, can become part of the attributive information for another listener, or even for that same listener at a different time. Despite the smudged boundaries, however, these distinctions, as we will see, are of considerable analytic use.

What does all this have to do with ethics? If our analysis is correct, then, *even when talking about music without texts*, "the music itself" (especially the music as listened to) is not to be found in the sounds on their own, but in a complex interaction between sounds and the discursive practices that surround them and open up their potential for meaning. And whatever the ethical dimension of that raw sonic material, those *discursive practices* are inevitably ethical in Booth's broad sense of the term, which refers not simply to morals or to "the approved side of choices," but rather to "the entire range of effects on the 'character' or 'person' or 'self'" (*Company* 8). In other words, the ethical dimension of music should be sought not in the technical, but rather in the attributive and the synthetic. For regardless of what, if anything, the music teaches us that we could not otherwise know (*Modern Dogma* 169), and regardless of whether we are, in the long run, "better" because we have been exposed to Bach, the attributive and synthetic levels, by their very nature, require us to engage in one or another kind of ethically implicated practice before and while we listen. And Cain's novels, because they provide such highly charged examples of how attributive screens and synthetic strategies operate, give us a sharpened vision of the way listening is intertwined with ethics.

Cain might seem an unlikely source of insight into the ethical grounding of so-called absolute (that is, non-texted) music, for his musical interest is directed primarily to opera—and this preference would seem to sneak the problem of texts back into our discussion. In fact, though, while Cain writes extensively about operas, he hardly ever touches on their texts. Indeed, he seems to hold opera plots in con-
tempt: when Columbia Pictures asked him for a film script to star Rita Hayworth in *Carmen*, one of his favorite operas, his response was blunt: "It is a skimpy, dated little tale, and considerable work would have to be done to it to explain why Columbia Pictures Corporation saw fit to bring up the subject in connection with Rita Hayworth in this year 1945" (qtd. in Hoopes 377).

Why was Cain so consumed with music? In part, I suspect, it was the result of nostalgia for his lost career, or for his opera-singer mother. But he also had an aim that makes his work especially valuable for my project. Like most of us, he wanted to offer (and perhaps justify) what he loved to those he respected; and opera, he felt, was the property of the wrong crowd. As John Dillon notes in *The Moth*, "There's something about a guy who uses steel that goes for football more than he does opera" (215). Conversely, in Cain's eyes opera audiences were dominated by the decadent: by the "gray-haired women with straight haircuts and men's dinner jackets, young girls looking each other straight in the eye and not caring what you thought, boys following men around" that we see attending Winston Hawes's concerts in *Serenade* (131); by the woman "that goes to concerts because they give her the right vibrations, or make her feel better, or have some other effect on her nitwit insides" (*Serenade* 128); by the Social Register types who were "so cultured that even their eyeballs were lavender" (*Career* 4). In other words, opera audiences are effete in ways that link to both class and sexuality.

Cain's perceptions do not come out of nowhere; they replay familiar myths about opera, class, and sexuality. They may have their origins, in part, in the ambiguities of gender introduced by the castrati of early Italian opera. Certainly, in the Anglo-American tradition, these myths go back to the early eighteenth century, and the works of Defoe, Swift, and especially Pope, who was particularly concerned with opera's breakdown of clear sexual difference. It is found, as well, in the portrayal of Maggie and Jiggs's responses to opera in George McManus's long-running comic strip *Bringing Up Father*, a portrayal that neatly illustrates Herbert Gans's claim that while "high culture condemns popular culture as vulgar and pathological," popular culture can counterattack by insisting that high culture is "overly intellectual, snobbish, and effeminate" (43). Things haven't changed much in the past sixty or seventy years: the same image of opera as effete, pretentious, and unfit for men showed up a few years back [March 4, 1990] on *The Simpsons*. Indeed, even Catherine Clément, who should know better, falls into gay-bashing when her anger at opera audiences is aroused.
James M. Cain and the Ethics of Music

The issue, of course, is not whether Cain’s sociological analysis of the interconnections of culture, class, and sexuality is correct. The point, rather, is that Cain tries to remedy the perceived problem by proposing an alternative way of listening, one that is straight, masculine, and working class. Or, to put it more accurately, he tries to come up with a set of attributive strategies that is consistent with what he believes to be the worldview of the working-class guy who uses steel and goes for football. And the resulting strategies provide an especially vivid illustration of the ways in which ethics and listening intersect.

Cain’s musical aesthetics snuggle up against the “art for art’s sake” tradition (he criticizes producers who haven’t yet understood that singing might be “good for its own sake”) (Serenade 99), but the object under scrutiny is almost always a performance. That is, for Cain, you don’t listen to music in the abstract, but rather to a particular act of music making. When he describes an operatic event, he’s directing our attention neither toward the relationships among the characters, nor toward what traditional music analysis would call the music’s eternal formal properties. Instead, he proposes a set of interpretive strategies through which a performance can be redefined and made comprehensible.

As I have argued in Before Reading, literary interpretive strategies fall into four basic categories: what I’ve called rules of notice (which tell us where to focus our attention), rules of signification (which allow us to draw the meaning from particular elements), rules of configuration (which allow us to predict the future course of events), and rules of coherence (which allow us to ascribe generalized meaning to the completed experience of the work). Such procedures are not exclusively “literary”; they have analogs in other arts, as well. In particular, the scheme is useful for charting out the synthetic activities of listening, and I would therefore like to use it to clarify what synthetic activities Cain is proposing. And since the core of Cain’s attributive screen is found in his recommendations for acts of signification, I will start there. Cain offers two major strategies of signification: he equates meaning and technique, and he equates voice and body.

The first strategy advises us to judge musical events less in terms of so-called musical expression than in terms of virtuosity. Not for Cain’s stars is the slow, painful process of spiritual self-discovery undergone by Thea Kronborg in Willa Cather’s Song of the Lark; the quality of your musicality has little to do with the quality of your soul. It is consistent with this virtuosic vision that Cain’s best singers are immediately recognizable, and that they learn quickly. Once coloratura Veda Pierce
is discovered by her teacher Treviso—who can measure her singing talent simply by hearing her hum a few bars of Schubert on her way home after a concert (Mildred 212–13)—she emerges as a great singer in just a few months.

Because Cain is concerned with the meaning of an event, not an object, the virtuosity involves the ability to handle not only the demands of the written music, but also whatever unanticipated difficulties arise out of external circumstances. A good singer, Sharp points out, “can spot trouble a mile away” (Serenade 90)—and can improvise his or her way around it. When the scheduled Escamillo backs out of a Hollywood Bowl Carmen, Sharp can jump into the role without preparation—even though he has to sing some music added to the opera in order to accommodate a local ballet school. Since the interpolated music comes from L'Arlésienne—and was not even originally scored for voice—he has never sung it before; he consequently sails past a repeat. “The dancers were all frozen on one foot, ready to do the routine again, and there was I, camped on an E that didn’t even belong there.” But he shows his musicianship in the way he handles the crisis: the conductor “looked up, and I caught his eye, and hung on to it, and marched all around with it, while he spoke to his men and wigwagged to his ballerina. Then he looked up again, and I cut, and yelled ’Ha, ha, ha.’ He brought his stick down, and the show was together again” (Serenade 93–94).

But besides valuing virtuosity, Cain also believes deeply in the sensuality of the human voice, and he proposes a second set of synthetic strategies to enable his readers to interpret that sensuality in a way that he thinks will appeal to them, equating voice and body, often through fairly direct analogy. “What makes a great voice,” notes Sharp, “is beauty, not size, and beauty will get you, I don’t care if it’s in a man’s throat or a woman’s leg” (Serenade 77). Consequently, in Cain’s novels voice often becomes the locus of the erotic. Indeed, Mildred Pierce ends as clumsily as it does because of Cain’s fixation on the voice he had created. The “keystone” of the novel is “the implication of having a big coloratura soprano in the family” (qtd. in Hoopes 348) and the story pivots around Veda, a singer whose musical talent is equalled only by her moral bankruptcy. At the climax, Veda’s mother Mildred learns that her husband has been seduced by her daughter; finding them in bed together, she turns against that crucial throat, strangling the young woman for whose musical advancement she has sacrificed so much, and “destroying,” as Cain himself put it, “the one thing she loved most on this earth, Veda’s beautiful voice.” But Cain could not follow through.
Instead, he engineered an improbable denouement where Veda only pretends to lose her voice to get out of an onerous contract. As he later admitted, “It got the curtain down, but that’s about all I can say about it. Believe it or not, I had by that time fallen in love with Veda’s totally imaginary voice, and I couldn’t bear to think it was permanently gone” (qtd. in Hoopes 309).

Cain’s infatuation with so monstrous a character as Veda, a passion so strong that he forfeited the integrity of his novel to preserve her voice, makes it clear that he listens in a way that elevates voice over character, at least over moral character. But if, according to Cain’s attributive screen, voice is divorced from moral character, his attempt to counteract High Cultural effeteness leads him to marry it all the more tightly to sexual character. Specifically, Cain gives his own twist to some traditional mythology about the voice. There’s a long history, of course, connecting sexuality, variously defined, and vocal quality. Catherine Clément, for instance, summarizes Phantom of the Opera as follows: “Voices bring down lights; they do things, they kill. But their power depends on a pitiless chastity” (27). Thus, the soprano will lose her voice (or stop singing) when she becomes married. Song of the Lark presents a variation of that theme. So, more distantly, does the legend of Echo, whose reduction to pure voice derives from erotic failure.

None of these stories, of course, would appeal to Cain’s intended audience, so he proposes a countermythology, one that explicitly reverses the Echo story (simultaneously conflating it with a distorted reference to the corollary story of Narcissus): in Serenade, Sharp is enraptured by the echo of his own voice which—following his crackup—is restored precisely through sexual activity. Cain’s tough style may cloak his argument in a crudeness that seems laughable in an academic essay. But in fact, his strategic equation of voice and body (especially his emphasis on the throat) bears a striking kinship to the academically respectable strategies in Roland Barthes’s “The Grain of the Voice.” Barthes privileges the throat over the lung (the lung “swells but gets no erection” [183]), equates “the grain” with “the body in the voice as it sings,” and proposes an orgasms of listening that overlaps considerably with Cain’s. “I am determined,” notes Barthes, “to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic” (188).

Of course, for Cain’s intended audience, proper erotic activity is strictly bounded. Indeed, it is precisely the assumed association with homosexuality that helps make opera distasteful. So it is no surprise
that Cain and Barthes part company when it comes to the nature of the sexual component of listening. Cain insists that you can determine the affectional preference of a singer, at least a male singer, by his voice, and that good singing is congruent with straight sex. As Juana puts it in Serenade, men who love other men “have no toro in high voice, no grrr that frighten little muchacha, make heart beat fast. Sound like old woman, like cow, like priest” (Serenade 142). Or as Cain puts it himself, a good singer sings “with his balls,” and there is a “peculiar color of a homo’s voice” (qtd. in Hoopes 266). Serenade represents a scandalous version of this myth, for the tale centers around the deterioration of Sharp’s voice whenever his homosexual side (the “five per cent” he claims that every man has in him [Serenade 144]) is brought out. From the perspective of the 1990s, the novel may seem distastefully homophobic, but (especially considering its historical context) its ambiguities are many. After its publication, Cain found himself attracting numerous gay men who thought he was, as he put it, a “brother” (qtd. in Hoopes 287). More interestingly, Leonard Bernstein (whose sexuality was more complex than Cain thought his own to be) met with Cain in 1948 with the hopes of turning Serenade into an opera. The project never materialized, but a few years later Bernstein wrote another work of the same name—a violin concerto based on The Symposium and celebrating Platonic love.16

Given this traditional masculine approach to signification, Cain’s proposed rules of notice, if unconventional, follow readily. Standard guides to music offer varying suggestions about what to listen for, where to direct our primary attention, but more often than not it is something formal, something divorced from the particular performance—melodic contour, or harmonic motion, or contrapuntal structure. Booth, for instance, starts his analysis of the act of listening with the “innumerable detailed structural relationships that must be perceived before even the simplest fragment [of the slow movement of the Beethoven A Minor Quartet] can be experienced” (Modern Dogma 169). Cain, in contrast, urges us to give priority to something quite different. First, in terms of the body/voice equation, you listen for the color, for the balls. Second, in terms of the meaning/technique equation, you pay attention to virtuosic difficulties. Thus, in Career in C Major, Leonard Borland describes the quartet from Rigoletto: “Well, you’ve heard the Rigoletto quartet a thousand times, but don’t let anybody tell you it’s a pushover. The first part goes a mile a minute, the second part slower than hell, and if there’s one thing harder to sing than a fast allegro it’s a slow andante, and three
times out of five something happens” (Career 108–9). Likewise, we are warned, in Serenade, that the interpolated high F-sharp at the end of the Don Giovanni serenade is treacherous, because it “catches a baritone all wrong, and makes him sound coarse and ropy” (Serenade 119). Thus, as we imagine listening to a particular performance he describes, the traps that await the singers are highlighted.

From this, Cain’s proposed rules of configuration also follow readily. When Borland tells us that “three times out of five something happens,” the something that happens has little to do with the kinds of events (motivic repetitions, thematic variations, modulations, and returns) that traditional guides to music teach us to anticipate, nor even with what Irving Kolodin calls the quartet’s “dramatic effect” (170, italics in original). Rather, the something that happens is performative disaster. From this perspective, the repetition of the Duke’s opening phrase is anticipated not because of its contribution to formal balance, but because it provides a potential trap for the person singing Maddalena, who might thoughtlessly come in at the wrong time. For Cain, music is less an organic structure than, say, a roller coaster, and anticipation is primarily directed toward the virtuoso challenges that remain. Thus, a Proppian analysis of Cain’s narratives might see the operatic performances as functionally equivalent to such activities as driving a train (in Past All Dishonor) or drilling for petroleum (The Moth): as we look ahead, we steel ourselves for the possibility of a collision or a blowout. It is thus appropriate that Borland’s disaster with the Rigoletto quartet is described in terms similar to those Cain uses to describe the catastrophic explosion of the oil well John Dillon is managing in The Moth. And, as we have seen, how a skilled musician handles those challenges is more a matter of quick thinking and practical know-how than it is of traditional “musicality.”

Technical expertise, quick thinking, sexual glamor, stamina, ingenuity, successful negotiation of difficult challenges: these are among Cain’s key points of orientation, and they provide the attributions by which he urges us to map the raw sounds into coherent experiences. And this map is consistent with his larger cultural project of making classical music accessible to a broad audience, for the coherence he proposes is both familiar and highly valued. A rite of passage that tests the character of the performers, it is more like a battle or athletic contest than an abstract form of expression or communication.17 Indeed, the contest exists not only between the performer and the composer, but between the performer and the audience as well. As Cecil Taylor
warns Borland, the audience is “‘always a pack of hyenas, just waiting to tear in and pull out your vitals, and the only way you can keep them back is to lick them. It’s a battle, and you’ve got to win’” (Career 37). Opera is often loosely referred to as a sport. But rarely is that metaphor treated as seriously as it is in Cain. No wonder Sharp compares John McCormack to Ty Cobb (Serenade 75) — and no wonder Borland compares himself, after his failure at the Hippodrome, to Georges Carpentier after his defeat at the hands of Jack Dempsey in 1921 (Career 112–13).

That strategy of coherence makes good rhetorical sense: since Cain’s aim is to open up opera to the guy who uses steel and goes for football, what better way than by showing him (and the masculine term is crucial) that opera and football can be viewed and evaluated according to the same principles? But it is worth looking at some of the ideological baggage this recasting involves. Cain once praised opera singers as “a separate breed” because “opera is ten times as tough as any other challenge to a singer” (qtd. in Hoopes 508). Toughness is a loaded term, and it signifies roughly the same thing here that it does in his novels. That is, opera becomes just one more arena in which traditional male American virtues can be demonstrated: the ability to think quickly, to meet challenges, to improvise, to “troupe” (that is, to operate as part of a team). Thus, Sharp is a musical hero because he consistently shows his mettle by doing what has to be done with whatever he’s got on hand — for instance, by knocking off the prelude to the last act of Carmen on a guitar: “You may think that’s impossible,” he tells the reader, “but if you play that woodwind stuff up near the bridge, and the rest over the hole, the guitar will give you almost as much of what the music is trying to say as the whole orchestra will” (Serenade 15). Likewise, he manages to save a mediocre movie by composing an elaborate five-part overdubbed version of “Git Along Little Dogies” that allows the filmmakers to incorporate some visually spectacular footage of a snowstorm that otherwise wouldn’t fit in. It’s no wonder that one of Sharp’s idols is a man named Harry Luckstone, who insisted that you didn’t have to know a song to sing it (93); no wonder, either, that in Hollywood, he is most appreciated by the tech people who, unlike the producers, know what they are doing.

Given his project of opening opera up to guys who like football, it is obvious why Cain found it useful to cast music in such terms — terms with provocative ties to the aesthetics of such American musicians as
Gottschalk and, especially, Ives, and terms with serious implications for both the sexual politics and the class politics that surround high art in America today. But for my purposes here, it is important to see not only the content of Cain’s implied ethics, but also its locus: for Cain’s novels seriously challenge traditional musical thinking in two ways. First, like any significant analysis of music, Cain’s turns out to be not a description but a proposal for a way of listening, and that way of listening is profoundly contaminated by a preexisting ethical (especially sexual) hierarchy, a contamination that inevitably colors whatever he hears. You can, of course, reject the masculinist assumptions of his proposals; but you cannot do so without falling back on some equally ideological alternative. Thus, for instance, while she is not responding specifically to Cain, Clément is clearly trying to escape from masculine habits when she remarks, “One day, I became aware that opera did not come to me from my head. . . . Opera comes to me from somewhere else; it comes to me from the womb” (176). Listening for the balls and listening with the womb are obviously different strategies; but together they suggest that the very act of listening is bound up with the ideological categories with which we live; and using them as a background, we can see that Booth’s image of listening as if we could become “indistinguishable” from Bach is not a description of the ethical consequences of immersing oneself Bach’s notes, but an ethically charged piece of advice that encourages us both to listen in a certain kind of way and to attribute a certain kind of ethical value to that act.

Second, this analysis suggests that if we want seriously to understand the ethical implications of music, we have to learn to attend less to what used to be called “the music itself” and more to the processes by which listeners make sense of it: for as surely as Cain’s novels represent the ideology behind the act of listening, they remind us that the act of listening is in fact an act that alters the object listened to. In Opera and Ideas, for instance, Paul Robinson distinguishes the politics of Mozart and Rossini. Specifically, he points out the “striking emotional difference” between their Beaumarchais operas (Figaro and The Barber of Seville), and argues that this difference “reflects . . . the changes in the European climate of opinion over the thirty-year span separating the two works” (11). The post-Enlightenment reaction, the “modulated cynicism” (16) of Rossini is marked particularly by the fact that, for instance, in “Largo al factotum,” what we listen for is “the demonstration of vocal technique, not the revelation of character” (29). What is significant here is not simply that Serenade takes on the relative merits
of Rossini and Mozart, too, but even more that Cain presents Mozart in the same terms that Robinson reserves for Rossini alone. Robinson, in other words, clings to the formalist notion that the attitudes he finds in Rossini are "forced on us by the composer himself" (29). Cain demonstrates, in contrast, that the differences are as much brought to the music by the procedures through which we choose to interpret it.

In the end, then, my interest lies less in the particular cultural reformation Cain has in mind than in the means he chooses for putting it into effect, and the implications those means have for ethical study. Booth’s work, from The Rhetoric of Fiction on, has always reminded us that rhetoric and ethics are inextricably linked. And if Booth’s own work on music has been limited by its tendency to privilege the technical level, Cain’s fiction suggests a direction in which his insights can be profitably expanded. For if music exists, as his novels seem to confirm, not simply in the notes, but in the verbal discourse around them and the synthetic acts that this discourse encourages listeners to engage in, then rhetoric about the notes may be more significant than the rhetoric we used to think was in the notes. If we want to think seriously about the ethics of music in the ways that Booth has thought seriously about the ethics of fiction, therefore, we have to turn away from the technical level and concentrate instead on the attributive and the synthetic: on those stories we tell about music, whether as novelists or critics or theorists, and the ethical dimensions they inevitably bring with them.

Notes

1. See, in particular, his discussion of Rabelais in Company, ch. 12.

2. Other critics, of course, have analyzed the ethical implications of the words set to music. But although words, as we shall see, are important in any music criticism, analysis of the texts that are set hardly leads to an ethics of music.

3. In the past few years an increasing number of musicologists—in particular, feminist musicologists—have come to question the traditional assumptions of the field; and I see my work here as a complement to that of such colleagues as Lawrence Kramer (for instance, in Music as Cultural Practice), Susan McClary (in Feminine Endings), and Ruth Solie (in “Whose Life?”). There has also been an increasing interest in the semiotics of music; see, for instance, Nattiez. For the most part, however, the study of music remains wedded to formalist principles. For a fuller discussion of this point, see my “Chord and Discourse” and “Whiting the Wrongs of History.”
4. A similar model is found in Modern Dogma: “I take the work in, or, as phenomenologists say, it enables me to dwell in it. I live the work; it lives its life in me. Its creator and I become, in a part of our lives, indistinguishable as we live in the work together” (169).

5. Indeed, this analysis of listening is so much a product of our collaboration that claims to authorship of this essay are hardly unencumbered. For further discussion of this issue—the subject of a forthcoming, jointly authored book—see also my “Chord and Discourse” and our “The Phonograph Behind the Door.” I appreciate Jay’s willingness to allow me to use these ideas here.

6. While traditional analysis, of course, often deals with such codes, it usually treats them as if they were part of the technical level, rather than a cultural apparatus for processing the technical. Such analysis thus ignores the degree to which the choice of what code to apply when listening to a given piece is an interpretive decision, subject to debate. For a fuller discussion, see our “Phonograph.”

7. For a fuller discussion of sonata form from this perspective, see my “Chord and Discourse.”

8. The citation comes from Paul Henry Lang, Music in Western Civilization (New York: Norton, 1941) 811. Thanks to Fred Maus for helping me find the original source. Babbitt’s burn-the-books rhetoric is an allusion to the final paragraph of Hume’s Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.

9. Of course, by the end of How to Do Things with Words, Austin has dismantled the constative/performative distinction; it is, nonetheless, useful for our purposes here. What I call advisories would fall under Austin’s general class of “exercitives”; see Austin 155–57.

10. In the “mental experiment” described above, Booth begins with “a highly intelligent, sensitive adult who had never heard any music but who had... a complete capacity to ‘take in’” the Beethoven A Minor Quartet (Modern Dogma 168). Booth recognizes this as an “impossibility”; but although he never explains where the impossibility comes from, it seems to be a kind of sociological impossibility: in our culture (indeed, in any culture I know of), no intelligent, sensitive adult capable of hearing at all could grow up without experiencing music. I would agree that his experiment hinges on an impossibility, but would argue instead that it is a cognitive impossibility: such a listener would not know how to perform synthetic activities at all, and would thus be listening to sounds, but not to music.

11. Sharp talks enthusiastically about this opera—indeed, he calls the Prelude to the last act “one of the greatest pieces of music ever written” (Serenade 15). There’s good reason to believe that he is echoing Cain’s sentiments at this point, too, since Cain elsewhere called Bizet one of his “favorites” (qtd. in Hoopes 552).

12. See Bloom’s claim that in the 1950s, “emotive experience” with classical music “was probably the only regularly recognizable class distinction between
educated and uneducated in America" (69). Cain would agree, in the 1930s, with the fact; he would, of course, disagree with its significance or its possible remedy.

13. See Robert Ness; see also Michael Bronski on Defoe's *The True Born Englishman* (1701) (Bronski 137). Thanks to John O'Neill for advice on this issue.

14. In her discussion of the men who posthumously adulated Callas, she remarks: “She died a banal death. But her ashes were stolen from the Père-Lachaise cemetery; a pyre of books was built for her; hastily pressed records were sold in abundance. Come on, men, shut up. You are living off her. Leave this woman alone, whose job it was to wear gracefully your repressed homosexual fantasies" (Clément 28).

15. Bronski, in contrast, argues that stress of form over content is one of the features that ties opera to gay sensibility (136).

16. Although the violin piece sits right next to Cain’s novel in the index, Joan Peyser—surprisingly—makes no connection between them, although it would fit neatly into her lurid Bernstein biography.

17. Richard Ohmann insists this applies to television news broadcasts as well (173-74).

18. Arthur Groos, for instance, refers to “the blood sport of opera” (2).

19. See also Ann Douglas’s praise of “toughness” as an antidote to sentimentality (11).

**Bibliography**


