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Stairways in the Dark: Sound, Syntax and the Sublime in Haas's *in vain*

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Abstract:

The glowing critical response to Georg Friedrich Haas's *in vain* (2000) has focussed particularly on the visceral effect created by Haas's use of 'endless' scales, richly saturated microtonal chords, and passages that take place in total darkness. Discussion of these features has often led reviewers and commentators to use forms of description and praise which evoke the old (but lately rejuvenated) aesthetic category of the sublime. This paper will explore these connections with sublime aesthetics in more detail as a way of clarifying both philosophical and interpretative perspectives on *in vain*. The idea of the sublime serves as a thread connecting aspects of spectral technique and aesthetics, the mathematical visions of M.C. Escher, and the charged socio-political context in which the work was written.

Georg Friedrich Haas's monumental chamber-orchestral work *in vain* (2000) has attracted widespread (if somewhat belated) attention and acclaim since the late 2000s for a number of reasons. At the most basic level, as a statement of compositional intent its ambition is undeniable: running for over an hour continuously, the work makes enormous demands of its twenty-four players (and, indeed, its audience) in terms of virtuosity and endurance. Its musical language is likewise uncompromising, based on gradual transformations between a series of complex and unsettling sonic webs built upon harmonic materials that span the gamut from untempered harmonic spectra, through complex aggregates taken from the early microtonal composer Ivan Wyschegradsky (1893–1979), to the chromatic scale. The work has also attracted attention for the visceral effect created by Haas's use of techniques that show his debt to spectral thinking, most obviously his use of 'endless' scales based upon the Shepard tone auditory illusion, overtone chords that function as narrative goals, and *Klangspaltung* effects – jarring conflicts between spectral harmonies based on incompatible fundamentals.¹

The aspect of the work that has been most discussed, however, arises not from the notes on the page but from the performance situation. Twice during *in vain*, Haas asks for the lights in the concert hall to be gradually dimmed, until audience and players alike are sitting in total darkness; even the fire exit signs are to be blacked out. Considered in isolation, this is not an unusual gambit for the composer: several of his works make use of unconventional

¹ For a further discussion of *Klangspaltung* and other auditory effects in Haas's work, especially those inspired by Wyschegradsky, see Robert Hasegawa, 'Clashing Harmonic Systems in Haas's *Blumenstück* and *in vain*', *Music Theory Spectrum* 37 no. 2 (2015), pp. 204–23.

lighting arrangements, and *in vain* is actually rather restrained by comparison to his third string quartet *In iij Nocht* (2002), which takes place entirely in the dark, or the ‘concerto for light and orchestra’ *Hyperion* (2006), where pre-timed changes in lighting serve as a mechanistic visual replacement for a conductor. Yet none of these other compositions attempts the particular expressive trajectory followed by *in vain*. As its title suggests, this work is built upon the experience of futility, frustration and despair, the gradual transformation of musical materials that always end up back where they began; the slow changes of lighting that accompany these cycles serve to articulate them with greater force. In this sense, each of the most well-known features of the work – its extreme length, the endless spirals of its musical materials, and its passages of total darkness – are all closely enmeshed with an underlying political dimension. The work was written in response to the rise of the far right Freedom Party to a position of coalition government in Austria during the 1999 elections; it evokes the fear of history painfully repeating itself, the sense of ‘returning to a situation believed to have been overcome’, as Haas has put it.²

In his review of the work, the American critic Alex Ross describes Haas as ‘an esoteric Romantic, dwelling on the majesty and terror of the sublime’³; this fleeting remark hints at an important connection which deserves unpacking further. In its function as a counterbalance to the beautiful, the category of the sublime has a long vintage within philosophical aesthetics, stretching from Classical antiquity, through the Enlightenment critiques of Burke, Kant and Schiller, to the postmodern reflections of Jean-François Lyotard and Simon Morley. Yet its application within musicological circles is much more recent: only in the last few decades has it emerged as the basis for a growing body of literature exploring questions of compositional aesthetics and musical meaning, albeit primarily in repertoire from the Classical period that overlaps with Kant’s influential formulation of the concept.⁴ Yet in many ways, sublime aesthetics aligns very naturally with the broader concerns of contemporary art music, concerned as it is with the moments where ‘reason falters and certainties begin to crumble’, with ‘the relationship between disorder and order, and the disruption of the stable coordinates of time and space’;⁵ it raises questions in particular about the relationship between perception and imagination, the self and the other, and the extent to which disturbing or destabilising experiences are to be welcomed or resisted. Analysing *in vain* through the lens of sublime aesthetics thus offers new perspectives not only on the basic materials and form of the piece, but also on questions of its meaning and effect, in particular as far as its widely-discussed political dimension is concerned. Indeed, the viewpoint of the sublime even poses a potential challenge to certain aspects of the public reception of *in vain* (as mediated by new-music evangelists such as Alex Ross and Simon Rattle) that have by

² Bernhard Günther, programme note to *in vain*, <https://www.universaledition.com/composers-and-works/georg-friedrich-haas-278/works/in-vain-7566>, accessed 22 April 2017.

³ Alex Ross, ‘Darkness Audible’, *The New Yorker*, 29 November 2010.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/29/darkness-audible>, accessed 9 July 2015.

⁴ Key texts in musicological scholarship on the sublime include James Webster, ‘*The Creation*, Haydn’s Late Vocal Music, and The Musical Sublime’, in *Haydn and His World*, ed. Elaine Sisman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 57–102; and Elaine Sisman, *Mozart: The ‘Jupiter’ Symphony* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁵ Simon Morley, ‘Introduction’, in Morley (ed.), *The Sublime* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010), p. 12.

now become so widely accepted as to be taken almost as interpretative truisms. It is this interface between musical structure, sublime aesthetics and political protest that this article will explore.⁶

Sublime futility, Kristeva's semiotic and spectral aesthetics

The title of Haas's work provides a fertile starting-point for discussions of sublimity: a sense of futility and paradox – of anguished striving that is nonetheless 'in vain' – is a common thread that runs throughout much writing on sublime aesthetics. Simon Morley notes that Kant's conception of the term is built upon the negative experience of limits to our understanding or control, even though for Kant these actually provide a means of *reinforcing* our status as rational beings.⁷ Likewise, Jean-François Lyotard, writing two centuries after Kant, described the sublime as the feeling associated with the identification of an 'abyss' that separates imagination and reason.⁸ Sublime effects in art thus provide a way of confronting aspects of reality that seem impossible, features of lived experience against which rationality struggles fruitlessly. As such, they represent an experiential counterbalance to Enlightenment ideals of logic, reason and progress; their impact is social, even political, as well as aesthetic.

There is a connection here with the distinction Julia Kristeva draws between *symbolic* and *semiotic* aspects of the signifying process.⁹ The symbolic features of language or art use shared cultural codes to delineate a world of ordered and stable concepts, within which we reside as distinct communicating subjects. By contrast, their semiotic aspect (in Kristeva's idiosyncratic use of the term) is based on an appeal to pre-symbolic, pre-rational drives that are disordered, unstable, and focussed on the body; these dissolve the distinction between subject and object. Sublime effects often depend on the focus of attention being shifted from the symbolic to the semiotic dimension of the artwork, where logic is overcome by paradox or irrationality. They are disturbing because they tap into aspects of the imagination, or of the brute physicality of nature, that cannot be decoded or made safe by being translated into symbols. Again (as the title of Kristeva's seminal essay 'Revolution in Poetic Language' implies) this shift from symbolic to semiotic carries a social and political charge.

For Kristeva, music, as a non-verbal signifying system, is 'constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic'.¹⁰ Yet in the light of contemporary debates about musical structure, cognition and expression, the dialectic of symbol and semiosis offers fertile ground for discussions of meaning in contemporary music that address its relationship to linguistic structures whilst also recognising its distinct expressive potential. One starting-point is to map Kristeva's polarity onto a musical tension between *syntax* and *sound*. Listening to a

⁶ For another thought-provoking perspective on the tension between existing readings of this piece and Haas's own (sometimes contradictory) statements about musical meaning and politics, see Max Silva, 'Heard Utopia vs Utopian Hearing: Haas's *in vain* and Political Ambivalence in New Music', *Twentieth-Century Music* 15 no. 1, pp. 75–102.

⁷ Morley, 'Introduction', p. 16.

⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1991), trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 24.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language' (1984), trans. Margaret Waller, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 91–98.

¹⁰ Kristeva, 'Revolution', p. 93.

piece of music necessarily involves some focus on its *syntax* – the structural, topical and expressive patterns it affords, and the way these match (or mismatch) with a listener’s grammar of expectation for a particular style or setting. Yet any experience of a piece of music is likewise concerned with its *sound* as a sensuous, material phenomenon, felt physically even though it is ephemeral; here, acoustic qualities such as dynamics, consonance and timbre are understood not only in terms of their syntactic potential but also as raw and self-contained physical realities. Sublime effects in music arise at the boundary between these two modalities of listening, at the moments where syntactic expectations somehow break down, or where the ‘material acoustic phenomenon’ of the sound itself – to use a term from Carolyn Abbate’s influential article on the subject¹¹ – overrides concerns of syntax altogether.

An interest in these kinds of liminal conditions has been at the centre of spectralist thought since its inception in the mid-1970s, and so it is hardly surprising that much spectral music engages with concerns central to sublime aesthetics. The result is a dialectic which parallels the Kristevan distinction between symbol and semiosis (or syntax and sound, as they are presented here). On the one hand, spectralist compositional techniques, with their use of computational aids and emphasis upon acoustic and perceptual realities, suggest a view of composition as science, as rational experiment or investigation. On the other, the resultant music, with its frequent aural *trompes-l’œil* (*trompes-l’oreille?*) and complex plays on resonance and memory, frequently carries an air of magic or ritual wholly appropriate to the secondary connotations of the term ‘spectral’ (ghostly, ethereal). Spectral music frequently produces sounds that tap into primal experiences of harmony or discord, and that bring from them an expressive charge which seems inexplicable, paradoxical, even at times disturbing.

There is thus a complex of relationships between sublime aesthetics, spectral thinking and the specific compositional and political concerns of *in vain*. In order to draw out these connections more clearly, the rest of this article focusses in turn on three distinct perspectives on *in vain*, each of which carries connections with core philosophical treatments of the concept (particularly those of Kant, Burke and Longinus), as well as with a quasi-Kristevan distinction between syntax and sound. The first of these perspectives explores Haas’s creation of an ‘impossible syntax’ through careful manipulations of texture, tempo and pitch space, to create an effect of infinite layering. The second looks more closely at the two passages that take place in darkness, and the way this theatrical element combines with compositional processes that foreground sound above syntax, to the extent that the sonorities become almost physically threatening. The third returns to the political dimension of the piece, considering the relevance of sublime aesthetics (which has its origins, after all, in a rhetoric manual) to questions of power, control and protest; these provide a basis for reshaping existing interpretations of the work.

Impossible syntax: infinite zoom and the mathematical sublime

In spite of its extended duration and instrumental virtuosity, the structure of *in vain* is quite

¹¹ Carolyn Abbate, ‘Music – Drastic or Gnostic?’, *Critical Inquiry* 30/3 (2004), pp. 505–36.

straightforward. At root, it is based around the opposition of two types of material: the first (Example 1a), which opens and closes the piece, is built upon rapidly descending patterns in equal temperament, based primarily on layered octatonic scales and fifth-tritone oppositions; the second (Example 1b), which dominates the middle section of the piece (and in particular the two passages which take place in darkness), focusses on static overtone chords as points of referential stability onto which the music slowly converges. This opposition implies a number of other, secondary contrasts: the scalar material is presented from its first appearance as a dissonant web of interlocking lines moving at extreme speed, whereas the chordal material is based upon very slow changes, often using *glissandi*, with little or no sense of measured tempo; texturally, in the first kind of material every performer is acting as a soloist, with the result a texture of irreducible complexity (comparable to the perceptually saturated, ‘micropolyphonic’ textures of mid-century Ligeti or Xenakis), whilst in the second the ensemble is treated as a single *gestalt*, almost in the manner of a pipe organ, with the result a total unity and almost an erasure of the distinctions between different sonorities – except at certain structural turning points, where a particular instrument (especially harp or percussion) comes to the fore as a soloist.

[Example 1 here]

Even considered individually, both types of material are ripe with challenges to syntactic clarity, since they both exploit different kinds of perceptual ambiguity. Lisa Farthofer has described Haas’s reliance on a number of compositional techniques she describes as ‘projections’, in the sense that they all involve the translation of concepts taken from acoustics or music psychology into the compositional sphere. Within *in vain*, material A is a compositional adaptation of Roger Shepard’s famous illusion of continual ascent or descent,¹² transforming the chromatic sequence of the original into the non-octavian cycles derived from the writings of the idiosyncratic Russian theorist Ivan Wyschnegradsky, a notable source of inspiration for Haas. There is a connection here, too, with the endless staircases portrayed by M. C. Escher’s 1960 lithograph *Ascending and Descending* (Figure 1), which Haas has noted as an important source of inspiration; the implications of this will be discussed further below. Material B makes use (albeit in less systematic fashion) of a number of other auditory projections: most obviously, the frequent presence of richly--orchestrated overtone chords serves to blur the boundaries between pitch, timbre and harmony, whilst at other points Haas creates jarring timbral complexes through processes of *Klangspaltung* (‘sound-splitting’), whereby multiple incompatible harmonic spectra are combined to create highly dissonant compound sonorities.¹³

¹² For a full description of Shepard scales, see Roger N. Shepard, ‘Circularity in Judgements of Relative Pitch’, *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 36 no. 12 (1964), pp. 2346–53. As in other works by Haas that feature a compositional projection of this illusion, its effect here relies not on the seamless crossfading of upper and lower partials, but rather on carefully-staggered octave leaps in each part which allow the apparent descent to continue indefinitely. See Hasegawa, ‘Clashing Harmonic Systems’, p. 216.

¹³ Hasegawa, ‘Clashing Harmonic Systems’, pp. 218–221.

[Figure 1 here]

If the materials themselves already provide ample opportunities for syntactic ambiguity, these ambiguities are multiplied still further as *in vain* continues. An initial overview of Haas's two primary kinds of material suggests that they are opposed in almost every respect; yet the structural trajectory of *in vain* is in fact based around the gradual *erosion* of these initial distinctions, using a variety of strategies for perceptual manipulation which interfere with the perception of tempo, texture, harmony and timbre simultaneously. The result is that the work unfolds not as a clear confrontation between opposite poles, but as a series of unsettling reorientations and *dénouements*; by the end, the boundaries between the two types of material have become so blurred that the formal syntax of the piece itself becomes paradoxical. This approach to structure shows again the clear influence of spectral aesthetics, where formal trajectories are often articulated by means of processes of transformation that 'affect all the musical parameters together' and 'permeate all levels of the piece', such that 'the idea of continuous transformation from one state to another [...] has taken on a special manifestation and played a crucial role in the formal construction' in this music.¹⁴ Tristan Murail wrote in 1984 of the search within spectralism for a "differential" conception' of music, 'where the interest is in the relationship between objects rather than in the objects themselves, where time is organised by flux and not by segment';¹⁵ it is this 'differential' conception which forms the basis for the processes of perceptual destabilisation that take place within *in vain*.

[Table 1 here]

A structural overview of the work (Table 1) gives an idea of the broad stages into which these processes fall. However, in practice these stages are too continuous to be easily perceptible in such discrete terms, relying often on carefully staggered interpolations between several parameters simultaneously. The first few minutes of the work are a case in point. Once the opening texture has been clearly established, from bar 41 a layer of held chords enters imperceptibly on violas in the centre of the rapidly descending patterns; what follows is a very gradual exchange of foreground and background, as players move one by one from scales to held pitches and the aural focus gradually shifts from the faster to the slower material. This happens in tandem with interpolations of pitch and register: as instruments drop out one by one, the registral span slowly rises and narrows until the scalar material disappears off the top of the stave at bar 75. The lights first begin to dim in the final bars of this multi-parameter interpolation, and this theatrical gesture (although itself equally gradual) serves as a clear formal landmark; arrival at total darkness coincides with the end-point of the shift from material A to B.

Over the course of the work's hour-long duration, these processes of continuous transformation become more extreme, and their effects start to enter the kind of paradoxical

¹⁴ Joshua Fineberg, 'Guide to the Basic Concepts and Techniques of Spectral Music', *Contemporary Music Review* 19 no. 2 (2000), pp. 107–8.

¹⁵ Tristan Murail, 'Spectra and Pixies', *Contemporary Music Review* 1 no. 1 (1984), p. 159.

territory that hints at connections with the sublime. From bar 296 onwards, the opening interpolation is reversed, as the harmonic and textural language shifts gradually back towards the rapid scalar descents of material A; by contrast, bar 357 (around the centre of the work) marks the beginning of a drastic extended *decelerando*, which transforms this material into a series of slow synchronised chords running at less than a sixteenth of their original tempo, and mimicking the Shepard scale effect even more clearly. By contrast, the final section of the piece (running from around bar 530) is devoted to an equally enormous *accelerando*: this time, a series of descending overtone chords gradually speed up and morph into equal temperament, until they have returned to the character of the opening material; at this point, a new layer of chords emerges out of the background, and the same *accelerando* repeats. In theory, the process could continue to cycle indefinitely; when it breaks off sudden in the middle of its third repetition, there is no sense of closure or arrival – the abrupt silence is ‘disconcerting, even frightening’, as one reviewer put it.¹⁶

This escalating process of cyclic *accelerandi* and *decelerandi* goes beyond the continuous interpolations of first-generation spectralism in its effect. In its potentially endless nature, it is more akin to a journey through fractal space, whereby listeners are confronted with the vertiginous experience of infinite zoom, as the endless ascents or descents of the Shepard scale and Escher’s staircase are translated into the formal dimension of the piece. This confrontation with infinity is central to Kant’s conception of the ‘mathematical sublime’, one of two aspects of sublimity outlined in his influential *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790). The mathematical sublime describes objects or situations that frustrate any attempt at measurement in terms of quantity or comparison – for example, the well-known sense of wonder that arises when an individual looks up into the night sky, in its unfathomable vastness and countless stars; in Kant’s terms, it is ‘a magnitude that is equal only to itself’.¹⁷ By this token, mathematical sublimity can never arise purely from sense data (since our senses are intrinsically finite), but relies on the interaction between finite perception – the limited number of stars we can actually see – and the infinite reality which our rationality extrapolates out of this limited data. Importantly, for Kant these experiences carry their mingled charge of fear and delight because they highlight the pre-eminence of human powers of reason over the surroundings of nature, since reason is able to conceptualise infinities that are beyond perception.¹⁸ The illusions of aural ‘infinite zoom’ that unfold over the course of *in vain* create a similar tension: from out of the perceptually finite we are confronted with the idea of infinity.

In the dark: sonic threat and the dynamical sublime

There is more to sublime aesthetics than a sense of wonder at the infinite, however. Once a viewer has become accustomed to the paradoxical geometries of Escher’s staircase, other

¹⁶ Mark Berry, ‘London Sinfonietta/ Pomarico - Haas, in vain, 6 December 2013’ (review), 7 December 2013. <http://boulezian.blogspot.co.uk/2013/12/london-sinfonietta-pomarico-haas-in.html>, accessed 21 April 2017.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790), trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 134.

¹⁸ Kant, *Critique*, pp. 140–143.

responses may emerge beyond the immediate sense of curiosity, bewilderment or disquiet at the impossibility of the construction. Most noteworthy among them is a kind of horrified empathy with the humanoid figures depicted in the image, who must spend all eternity trudging up or down, with no obvious way out of their predicament. Escher's own commentary on *Ascending and Descending* takes this sense of identification further, suggesting an imaginary context for their activity:

'The inhabitants of these living-quarters would appear to be monks, adherents of some unknown sect. Perhaps it is their ritual duty to climb those stairs for a few hours each day. It would seem that when they get tired they are allowed to turn about and go downstairs instead of up. Yet both directions, though not without meaning, are equally useless. Two recalcitrant individuals refuse, for the time being, to take any part in this exercise. They have no use for it at all, but no doubt sooner or later they will be brought to see the error of their nonconformity.'¹⁹

Beyond the visual paradox itself, then, there is a subtle air of hopelessness and even of coercion in the image. Escher's description of the two 'recalcitrant individuals' and their likely fate is chilling in its understatement.

These undertones of control and threat resonate closely with the way Haas manipulates the performance situation within *in vain*. When the lights dim for the first time, and the audience is left wholly in the dark, the heady mixture of fear and exhilaration likely to result has clear sublime connotations running as far back as Edmund Burke, whose influential 1757 text *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* was one of the earliest Enlightenment-era treatments of the subject (and a notable influence on Kant). For Burke, darkness is central to sublime experience: 'to make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes'.²⁰ Again, it is the tension between rationality and imagination that is the source of this effect: when we are unable to see the full extent of what is facing us (or, indeed, the fire exit we might use to flee from it), our imagination can run riot, and our sense of peril is much greater.

Within *in vain*, this instinctive sense of threat is reinforced by the challenge the darkness poses to the conventions of concert-hall listening: once the audience can no longer see the music being played in front of them, they are forced to listen acousmatically, with none of the clear demarcation that a normal concert situation creates between their own listening subjectivity and the existence of players on a stage. Shorn of the reinforcement of visual sense data, there is no way of knowing for sure whether the music being experienced is really happening, or whether it is simply an aural hallucination, or a siren-song produced by some invisible, alien presence. Indeed, it is notable how many reviews of the work describe the passages of darkness in terms of hallucinations, a loss of self, or an awareness of other,

¹⁹ M. C. Escher, *The Graphic Work of M. C. Escher*, trans. John E. Brigham, rev. ed. (London: Macdonald, 1967), p. 16.

²⁰ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), p. 54.

uncanny subjectivities: Simon Rattle hears a sound that ‘throbs and glows in this total darkness, as though you are seeing some kind of psychedelic vision’;²¹ Simon Cummings invokes ‘an entity – call it a machine if you like, but it felt more organic than that – attempting to recalibrate itself’;²² Xenia Pestova writes of ‘strange realms of universal experiences [...] We were all sharing something, yet separate; intensely present, yet forgetting who and where we were’.²³ The result is an experience – irrational but nonetheless unavoidable – of a threat to the self from an irresistible external power.

The music played during the two dark sections of *in vain* capitalises on the intensity of focus and sense of immersion that arises from this unusual performance situation. In both cases, the musical processes follow a deliberately restricted and single-minded musical logic. In the dark, with visual cues impossible, Haas instead sets up a chain of slow processes of sonic transformation, each of which is triggered by a previous event or arrival point. For example, the first dark section consists almost entirely of staggered semitonal glissandi in individual instruments, each of which is triggered by the completion of a previous instrument’s glissandi (with approximate timings for each process given to individual players); each of these glissandi is laid against the original pitch in another instrument, so that the changing beats between the two pitches are clearly and viscerally audible – each gesture is a reduction of patterns of musical tension and release to their simplest and most primal form. These gestures treat the whole ensemble as a single sonority, overlaying parts carefully to control the shifting timbres, and fading individual instruments in and out quietly enough that it is often nearly impossible to distinguish them. The chain of events leads gradually and seamlessly to a final convergence onto a B overtone chord (Example 2a): it is only at this point that instruments regain their independence, with a harp solo emphasising the untempered partials of the sonority (Example 2b). Throughout this first section, then, the tension between familiarity and discomfort is carefully managed (in spite of the unusual performance situation), so that the overall effect is less a sense of present danger than a fascinating, enveloping ‘otherness’.

[Example 2 here]

The second passage of darkness occurs much later, at the climax of the work. By this time, the destabilising formal processes described earlier have become firmly established, and so it is perhaps no surprise that the character of this section is much more overtly threatening, musically as well as theatrically. As before, the music here is based on a slow process of convergence from a dissonant fifth-tritone complex onto an overtone chord (this time upon a C fundamental); here, however, the shifting harmonies are presented as pulsating chords

²¹ Simon Rattle, spoken introduction to performance of *in vain*, Orchester-Akademie of the Berlin Philharmonic, 18 January 2013. Transcribed in programme for London Symphony Orchestra performance, 6 December 2013. https://issuu.com/londonsinfonietta/docs/haas_programme_for_issuu, accessed 20 April 2017.

²² Simon Cummings, ‘HMCF 2013: London Sinfonietta’ (review), <http://5against4.com/2013/11/16/hcmf-2013-london-sinfonietta/>, accessed 20 April 2017.

²³ Xenia Pestova, ‘Georg Friedrich Haas’ in *vain* by the London Sinfonietta at Southbank’ (review), <https://www.icareifyoulisten.com/2013/12/georg-friedrich-haas-in-vain-london-sinfonietta-southbank/>, accessed 20 April 2017.

rather than long notes, with instruments drifting in and out of time with each other, and layered string *glissandi* creating a hypnotic aural shimmer out of partials of the fundamental sonority. When the overtone chord is finally reached, the sensory supersaturation is completed by a shift in the lighting arrangements: Haas requests a ‘light beat’ to synchronise the players within the score, which in most performances is interpreted as a series of gradually accelerating pulses of light – providing not only a practical solution to issues of ensemble co-ordination, but also a further visceral shock for an audience now grown accustomed to the dark. Perhaps the climactic moment in the growing sense of threat comes at Figure 8, when (at a point of darkness between light pulses, which are still fairly infrequent at this point) both percussionists launch into a series of *ff* tam-tam strokes that run completely counter to the emerging pulse (Example 3), with the audience not afforded even the visual preparation of seeing them raise their beaters.

[Example 3 here]

It seems clear that the heightened intensity of this experience, and its edge of fear and control, are central to Haas’s intentions. Speaking about his third string quartet *In iij. Nocht*, a piece written just after *in vain* that takes place entirely in the dark, he has said, ‘I would like my music to affect people, and that works more powerfully and more intensely in the dark. The audience is more aware; they feel more at the mercy of the sound’.²⁴ This sense of being ‘at the mercy of the sound’ carries connotations of helplessness which are just as relevant to *in vain*²⁵. There is a connection here with the ‘dynamical sublime’, the second category which Kant identifies in his *Critique*. Kant associates this with the sensation of danger felt when an observer views, *from a position of safety*, an object or force which they would be powerless to resist – such as a volcanic eruption, a violent thunderstorm or a tempestuous sea. In Kant’s words, it is concerned with the experience of ‘a power that has no dominion over us’.²⁶ The coexistence of a *sensation* of danger and a rational awareness of security is crucial, and it revolves again around the tension between reason and perception: Kant suggests that it forces a realisation that ‘the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion’.²⁷ In other words, the sensation of being under physical or existential threat awakens in the perceiver an equal and opposite sense of *resistance*, an awareness that even at the point where control seems to have been wholly relinquished there remains a perceiving self whose independence cannot be obliterated. It thus provides the sensation of courage in a situation where courage is not needed (since the danger is entirely imaginary), reawakening the observer to their potential for resistance in situations of genuine threat.

²⁴ Lisa Farthofer, *Georg Friedrich Haas: im Klang Denken* (Saarbrücken: PFAU, 2007), p. 46, my translation.

²⁵ This is something that has been noted also by Max Silva, who reads it as an ‘ethical tactic’ for challenging ingrained habits of listening and awakening a more immersed, attentive focus on Haas’s complex soundscapes; see Silva, ‘Heard Utopia’, pp. 82–3.

²⁶ Kant, *Critique*, p. 143.

²⁷ Kant, *Critique*, p. 145.

The politics of the sublime

This tension between control and resistance, real and imagined danger, leads back to the political dimension of *in vain*, as mediated through both sublime aesthetics and the prevailing reception of the work. On one level, any political reading is likely to be fairly straightforward: Haas has directly located it as a response to the re-emergence of far-right politics as a potentially viable force in Austria, and in this context his description of it as evoking the sense of ‘returning to a situation believed to have been overcome’ is painfully unambiguous. Certainly, if the endless spirals of the opening are taken as a hermeneutic lever, the other features described here – the cyclic formal processes, the disorienting sense of ‘infinite zoom’, the moments of theatrical danger – could be understood primarily as adding expressive force to this basic impetus. Interpretatively, there is no need to read more into the musical processes than this.²⁸

Nonetheless, a number of the early English-language reviews of the work (following its US and UK premieres in 2009 and 2013 respectively) did not stop there, but offered more sophisticated – and potentially more problematic – readings, which deserve closer examination in the light of the sublime connections discussed here. The foremost example comes from the critic Alex Ross, who portrays the work as ‘a narrative of oppositions, setting light against darkness, dissonance against pure intervals, modern tuning against natural resonances’.²⁹ In Ross’s account, the tension between overtone chords and equal temperament that runs through the piece is identified implicitly with an imagined battle between utopian visions of the future and the destructive cycles of history. In the climactic second dark passage, as he puts it, ‘a new kind of beauty seems ready to come into the world, but in the light of day it falters, and we end up back where we started’.³⁰

This reading is based on two assumptions about the work. The first is that it is indeed conceived in terms of binary oppositions (light–dark, consonance–dissonance, unity–plurality); it should be clear from the foregoing analysis that in fact *in vain* continually *destabilises* these oppositions, in keeping with the lexicon of spectral techniques upon which it draws. The second, arguably more disturbing, is that within this piece the overtone series is to be identified with the ‘natural’ materials of music, perfectly consonant and unspoiled, and that these utopian sonorities are then to be set against the uncomfortable compromises of equal temperament and chromatic dissonance. Although as an interpretative proposition this is hardly novel, the biggest problem with its application here is that it stands directly at odds with Haas’s own aesthetics. In his writing he has repeatedly emphasised that the overtone series is just as much an artefact as the chromatic scale; in reality it is impossible to produce perfect consonance with imperfect instruments, and even if it were possible it would be

²⁸ It is worth noting that Haas has changed his own stance on politically-motivated work a number of times in his career; in 2008 he turned his back on the concept of composing for political purposes, suggesting that it was futile and detracted from the distinctive qualities of musical experiences. By 2013, however, he returned to this arena with another protest piece, *I can’t breathe* for solo trumpet. For further discussion of the ambiguous ramifications of Haas’s shifting ideological position, see Silva, ‘Heard Utopia vs Utopian Hearing’, pp. 75–8 and pp. 97–101.

²⁹ Ross, ‘Darkness Audible’.

³⁰ Ross, ‘Darkness Audible’.

undesirable, since dissonance is an essential part of music as a human experience, even the beats created by tempered tuning systems.³¹

It might seem pedantic to labour these points, but in fact they are far from arbitrary – a critical interpretation in these terms carries with it some troubling ideological overtones (as it were). Given the political context of *in vain*, even the terminology that inevitably surrounds such distinctions should be cause for concern: Ross's descriptions of 'pure' intervals and 'natural' resonances, although reflecting a widespread and innocently-intended musical metaphor, carry potentially disturbing connotations. Haas himself critiqued the implicit ideological baggage of much conventional language about acoustics in 2001, shortly after the premiere of *in vain*: 'Even the choice of words is dogmatic: "natural overtones", "pure tuning" – as if everything else were unnatural or impure'.³² These resonances come to a head in Ross's description of the work's climax, which sidesteps the aura of manipulation and threat evoked by the pitch-black performance situation in favour of all-out abandonment:

'Then comes one of the most animally thrilling episodes that any composer has created since Ligeti was at the height of his powers. [...]. At the climax, all these shimmering fragments are derived from a fundamental C, meaning that the music accumulates a glorious sheen, like a new dawn of tonality. Repeated gong strokes add to the sense of elemental ritual. A revelation is at hand. But it all goes awry: notes bend from their 'natural' paths, the lights come back up, the frantically scurrying figures return, and, after several herky-jerky accelerations and decelerations, the music abruptly switches off. And you finally understand the title: a new kind of beauty seems ready to come into the world, but in the light of day it falters, and we end up back where we started.'³³

In Ross's reading, the climax of the work offers a moment of long-anticipated arrival, to be unambiguously welcomed: it is 'animally thrilling', 'glorious', a 'new dawn', and a 'revelation'. The thrill of this moment is undeniable, but this thrill is surely more complex than this utopian reading suggests. It is more sublime than beautiful, an excitement that is mingled with terror, a kind of instinctual being-moved that evokes Kristeva's semiotic more than a 'new dawn'. A wholesale embrace of this loss of self risks obliterating the hard-fought independence, the inner resistance, that is central to Kant's reading of the dynamical sublime.

Simon Morley has noted the emphasis placed in almost all treatments of the sublime as a concept – however distinct they might be in style or expressive content – on 'experiences of self-transcendence that take us away from the forms of understanding provided by a secular, scientific and rationalist world view'.³⁴ For Morley, exposure to experiences such as these – in art or in life – can generate one of two opposing reactions, however:

One re-envisages the self as existing in the light of some unnameable revelation arising in a gap between, on the one hand, a dull and alienating reality, and on the other an

³¹ Georg Friedrich Haas, 'Fünf Thesen zur Mikrotonalität', *Positionen* 48 (2001), pp. 42–44. For further discussion of the manifold nuances of microtonal tuning within *in vain* specifically, see Silva, 'Heard Utopia', pp. 86–98.

³² Haas, 'Fünf Thesen', p. 42, my translation.

³³ Ross, 'Darkness Audible'.

³⁴ Morley, 'Staring into the contemporary abyss'. *Tate Etc.* 20 (2010), <https://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/staring-contemporary-abyss>, accessed 2 August 2018.

unmediated awareness of life. [... The other] ends up as a resigned sense of inadequacy, in which we are made aware of our emotional, cognitive, social and political failure when faced with all that so blatantly exceeds us.³⁵

In a sense, the political dimension of *in vain* is built upon the tension between these two reactions. Ross's review (whilst capturing brilliantly the immediate impact of the passages that take place in darkness) is characteristic of many responses to the work in focussing on an imagined dialectical conflict between the 'unmediated awareness' of consonance and dissonance presented in these dark sections, and the 'dull and alienating reality' of the scales which open and close it. Yet the blurring of the boundaries between these two realities is surely just as central to the message of the piece: the title of the work, and Haas's description of it as evoking the return 'to a situation believed to have been overcome', both highlight the sense of inadequacy Morley identifies.

A final connection with sublime aesthetics, going back to the first extant text on the subject (attributed, probably falsely, to the ancient Greek writer Cassius Longinus), could perhaps shed further light (or dark) on the complexity of this effect and its relevance for a political reading of the work. Longinus's text was not a theoretical treatise but a practical manual of rhetoric, and he advocates sublime effects as a powerful alternative to traditional techniques of persuasion. In his words, 'a well-timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and reveals the full power of the speaker'.³⁶ The sublime as it appears in art is thus almost always bound up with a complex power dynamic; it invites the observer to relinquish their felt autonomy in the face of something external to them. Although Kant's account of this 'dynamical' aspect of the sublime emphasises the positive aspects of this loss of self, highlighting its ability to awaken a sense of independence at a higher level, without a conscious awareness of this dimension it is equally possible for the effect to be misused: as the artist Mike Kelley noted, the voluntary loss of self through sublime means is an essential part of the power of propaganda, relied on by many of the most chillingly effective works of totalitarian art.³⁷

One famous example which Simon Morley gives of sublime aesthetics being co-opted for such coercive purposes is Albert Speer's *Lichtdoms* ('cathedrals of light'), constructed for the Nuremberg rallies from 1933 to 1938 (Figure 2).³⁸ The shared role played by light between Speer's and Haas's works makes for an unsettling comparison: instead of a cathedral of light, Haas has created a stairway in the dark, harnessing the troubling power of the sublime for an act not of propaganda but of protest. The provocation is more intense because the two stretches of *in vain* that take place in darkness are in many ways the most viscerally enthralling of the piece, in the literal sense that they take us in their thrall. Their effect is 'animally thrilling' because it combines instinctive allure and aesthetic wonder with a sense of veiled threat, as the sublime always does. The first dark passage can easily be heard as an

³⁵ Morley, 'Staring into the contemporary abyss'.

³⁶ Longinus (attr.), 'On the Sublime', trans. T. S. Dorsch, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, ed. T. S. Dorsch (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 100.

³⁷ Mike Kelley, interview with Thomas McEvelley (1992), in *The Sublime*, ed. Simon Morley (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010), pp. 201–204.

³⁸ See Morley, 'Introduction', p. 19.

invitation to a brave new world (or, in Ross's terms, an invitation *back* to a 'pre-modern', natural environment), tempering its visual discomfort through calm, consonant and enveloping sonorities; the second, with its aura of menace and its visual and auditory shocks, then exposes the violence which can so easily lurk behind such fantasies. Perhaps it is better to hear the dark passages (*pace* Ross) not as the call of a utopian vision which is then rejected or lost, but rather as a siren call that we are *supposed* to reject as fantasy, a kind of musical propaganda that demonstrates the ease with which a utopian dream can turn into a nightmare – and in the process wakes us up to the falsity of some of the political visions surrounding us.

[Figure 2 here]