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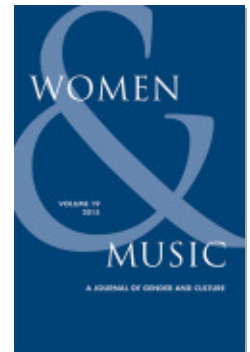
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## The Sounds That Know: Synaesthesia, Sexual Trauma, and a Musicological Confession

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# The Sounds That Know

Synaesthesia, Sexual Trauma,  
and a Musicological Confession

Jenny Olivia Johnson

The watery organ . . . I'm seeing this deep mauve color, almost a deep  
dark red, liquid, like blood

—Amelia Something, email to author, September 15, 2006

What follows is an experiment in something I'm tempted to call “confessional musicology.” It will unfold both as musicological inquiry on the topic of music and memories of childhood sexual abuse and as personal meditation on the challenges of ethnography. In some ways a confessional tone comes more naturally to me than a professional one. As a composer, almost all of my music is confessional—exaggerated, deeply personal, intensely emotional—and almost all of it explores issues related to traumatic memory. My musicological prose writing, though infused with a similarly self-reflective and emotive ethos, has a much more stunted and bullet-holed history, one strain of which I wish to unravel here, with increased transparency about the anxieties this work produces in me. Were it not for the immensely important roles that music and trauma continue to play in my intellectual and personal life, I would have long ago stopped my writings about trauma in their tracks. The difficulties I have faced in pursuing them over the past decade have more than once brought me to moments of heartbreak, panic, and blank dissociation. I have abandoned essays midsentence, choosing instead the far less anxiety-producing medium of composition for any rumination I still felt I needed to do on the deep relationships that sounds and extreme experiences can form.

As it turns out, however, composing music about this subject is not enough. I still have things to say; I still have questions to ask. I still have sto-

ries generously donated by abuse survivors, with hopes that my insights could prove useful. Sheer luck brings me to this moment, as I cannot envision a more appropriate space in which to return to this work than a collection honoring Suzanne Cusick. Imagining Suzanne's graceful allowance of just this sort of writerly tone, I am suddenly finding the courage to come back to my unfinished business and to do it with as much of Suzanne's own intellectual rigor and candid self-reflection as I can muster.

I am tempted to turn to the broken prose of the survivor whose story will guide my thinking in this essay: a woman ("Amelia Something") whose memories of being molested as a child are largely inaccessible when asked to describe what happened to her and are yet keenly available on highly somatic, sensory, and synaesthetic levels whenever she hears certain songs.<sup>1</sup>

and I feel this drippiness between my legs . . . this intense sadness flowing out of my body . . . it's like a trail of tears<sup>2</sup>

Amelia's descriptions of her traumatic memories are vivid and intense, written with an aching, disturbing beauty. The fact that her words are so moving has, in the past, inspired me to open conference papers with them, to let their impact place listeners in positions similarly vulnerable to those she has experienced. I now find this technique problematic: were I to turn to Amelia's words, your emotions might become immediately heightened and her testimony become ossified into an art object unto itself, a monument to be initially beheld with sympathy and then hermeneutically scrutinized—rather than a dynamic, fluid testament to a past experience that she is by necessity continually rewriting and recontextualizing.

Much of my exchange with Amelia has been characterized by her painful inability to decide whether the abuse even happened at all. While many trauma experts have argued that an emotional memory can be just as valid (and as psychically damaging) as an "actual" one—a distinction that Judie Alpert describes as "story-truth" versus "happening-truth"—this is little comfort to Amelia, who is simultaneously desperate to eradicate the traumatic event from her life history by deciding it never happened and desperate to legitimize the emotional difficulties she continually experiences in its wake by acknowledging

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<sup>1</sup> I am actually conflating the stories of two different women with whom I had communication during my dissertation research between 2006 and 2009. The story of Amelia Something belongs to her, but the subsequent dialogue actually occurred between myself and someone else who does not wish to be identified. Both parties granted permission for me to reprint selections of this dialogue under Amelia Something's name.

Richard E. Cytowic defines synaesthesia as follows: "Two or more senses are automatically and involuntarily coupled such that a voice, for example, is not only heard, but also felt, seen, or tasted. Synesthesia is a physical experience of the brain, not the product of imagination or learning. . . . Some couplings are more common than others: sound-sight synesthesia (colored hearing) is plentiful, whereas combinations involving taste and smell are rare." For more information, see Richard E. Cytowic, *Synaesthesia: A Union of the Senses* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Amelia Something, email sent to author.

that it did.<sup>3</sup> I am beginning to wonder whether it is for this reason that my earlier incarnations of this article could not find an adequate close. Instead of acknowledging the complexity of Amelia's painful memories, I would instead analyze them as though they were stable texts, close-reading their rich materiality and paradoxical beauty, only to fade out, eighties power-ballad style, with a long, reverberant delay line of unanswerable questions. Although I never sought an "adequate close" to Amelia's story (if such a thing is even possible, or appropriate), I did in the past write about her experiences with the sense that something previously silenced had been given crucial voice, that justice had somehow been done, and that new and important dialogues on music and memory had been initiated. Instead, I fear my earlier work—which overlooked Amelia's ambivalence in favor of insisting that her memories, however fractured, were in fact *real*—participated in something far more damaging. I wonder to what extent this has roots in my own fragmented emotional history, one that, like Amelia's, is indelibly tangled up with music in such a way that music more often than not wields a particular form of ownership and power over me, sometimes to the extent that I cannot listen to it, that I feel violated by it, that I feel it knows some important, painful truth. This may have something to do with music's omniscience in my early youth, the way it oozed and seeped like blood or condensation from car stereo speakers, from the walls of retail stores and restaurants, and from the glass of the TV screen; the way it vibrated floorboards and walls like a couple making loud love a few doors down. I couldn't control anything about my earliest encounters with music, and thus, I felt watched by music, surveilled, followed. Encountering Amelia's story, therefore, forced me to acknowledge my own past to such an extent that her words—dangerously—began to feel like my own.

I hear that song from *The Big Chill*, "A Whiter Shade of Pale" . . . the watery organ . . . and I have to pee. I'm seeing this deep mauve color, almost a deep dark red, liquid, like blood, and I feel this drippiness between my legs . . . this intense sadness flowing out of my body . . . it's like a trail of tears. I'm in the bathroom again with her, and I can't get out, I can't get out, I can't find the door.

I was seven years old, at a truck stop on a road trip at 3 a.m. The bathroom was really echoey, and on the radio, piping through the bathroom from invisible speakers somewhere, was that drippy organ song, kind of wet-sounding, like tears. I started crying, because then I was thinking of her and me in our bathroom. As we drove away in the dark, I remember feeling like I left my soul in that bathroom, and our car was tracing my trail of tears.

I hear that song "Missing You," and I'm in her brother's bedroom, I'm in the bathroom with her, where I feel so empty and drippy and disgusting. I'm in a

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<sup>3</sup> Judie Alpert, "Story-Truth and Happening-Truth," in *Memories of Sexual Betrayal: A Psychoanalytic Discourse on Truth, Fantasy, Repression, and Dissociation*, ed. R. B. Gartner (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 1997). See also Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

smelly park at dusk, at daycare, where the daycare workers would listen to that song over and over again on a boombox. I'm playing these games with other children in the bathroom . . . we're pulling down our pants and playing with ourselves and pretending that "strangers" will come see us, and I'm getting really drippy and upset, thinking of her missing me. Wanting me back with her in the bathroom, and that voice, the way it says, "misssss-ing you," all "shooshy" like that, I smell pee, and between my legs it hurts.<sup>4</sup>

Every time I read this testimony, I experience a vivid desire to defend these memories as "real," especially against those likely to dismiss them as confabulations and "false memories."<sup>5</sup> I could, of course, avoid a painful discussion of the problematic "real" and the philosophical aporia of the subconscious altogether by performing a more humanities-based reading of Amelia's story, citing its resonances with literary metaphor and magical realism, with the poetic formal logic of music itself. For the sake of persisting with an honest history of my work on this topic, however, I will initially present what Ruth Leys might call an "antimimetic" reading of Amelia's acoustic memories, one that foregrounds their connection to the perceptual phenomenon of synaesthesia and synaesthesia's relationship to memory.<sup>6</sup> I will then turn back to Amelia herself to help me think through my strong impulses toward positivity and clarity in a situation that clearly resists both, recognizing that I may still fail to achieve anything here other than an undecidable, uncloseable hermeneutic fade.

As Amelia herself notes, her "memories" are deeply nested; most of them are memories of remembering, and what is being "remembered" in them—being molested—emerges less as an explanation and more as immediate, present-tense somatics, all triggered by sounds: *feeling* "drippy" sensations between her legs, *seeing* mauve and liquid red, *smelling* urine. This no doubt poses a challenge to the veracity of the initial event. Yet if we consider Amelia's memory-sensations to be synaesthetic perceptions—immediate, involuntary perceptual experiences of sounds as physical sensations in response to Procol Harum's "watery" Hammond organ and John Waite's "shooshy" sibilants—we might find it possible to consider these sensations memories in their own right, just memories of a very different and particular kind. The recent research findings of Nathan Witthoft and Jonathan Winawer indicate a strong connection between synaesthesia and early childhood memory, demonstrating that the correlations of letters and colors perceptually experienced by a group of synaesthetes who grew up in the 1980s are remarkably similar to the colors of individual letters in a popu-

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4 Amelia Something, email sent to author.

5 These scholars include Elizabeth Loftus, who has written extensive critiques of the recovered-memory movement, and Ruth Leys, who criticizes contemporary trauma scholars for supporting a far too literal ("antimimetic") understanding of human trauma as necessarily fracturing and memory-disruptive. See Elizabeth Loftus, *The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse* (New York: Saint Martin's Griffin, 1994); and Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

6 Leys, *Trauma*.

lar Fisher-Price magnetic alphabet toy from the same era.<sup>7</sup> Amelia's traumatic childhood experience took place roughly during the same developmental period during which these subjects were playing with the toys and learning to associate the visual qualia of color with the phonetic sounds, conceptual dimensions, and basic shapes of the letters. Amelia, too, may have "learned" her experience this way, associating certain sounds and the sensations accompanying them as semiotic and emotional equals. Indeed, the phenomenon of synaesthesia in general—which entails a dissolution of boundaries between the so-called five senses—seems an apt metaphor for the common experience of sexual trauma as one that destroys boundaries between bodies and identities. Yet Amelia's nonmetaphoric experience of synaesthesia seems also to serve as a kind of unconscious defense mechanism, fragmenting her narrative into tiny multisensory shards that reduce the memory's full emotional impact while still allowing the sounds to "testify" to her body that the memory actually occurred.

If this is indeed the logic by which Amelia's acoustic memory functions, why is it that *musical* sounds in particular—as opposed to quotidian sounds of water dripping, someone urinating, or someone whispering—are exclusively able to trigger her sense-memories? I am reminded of two questions once posed by Suzanne Cusick: "What if music *is* sex? What if ears are *sex organs*?"<sup>8</sup> If, as Cusick suggests, music is fundamentally sexual, and hearing music is erotic—if music is able to invaginate our ears and "put us on our backs"—then it would stand to reason that music has a far more immediate and privileged access to sexual memories than other, less consciously organized sound stimulæ, even (and maybe especially) if the sexual memories are of unwanted sex. As I intimated earlier, hearing music in contemporary society is rarely a choice; indeed, like unwanted sex, music can corner us and take violent emotional control over what and how we remember merely by being present in an unexpected context.

I accept the proposal that music is sex and ears are sex organs and that our bodies are primed to respond in an erotic way to musical vibrations. Yet I am also drawn to the idea that sound, while perhaps richly sensual for many of us, is a fundamentally empty signifier, a vessel waiting to be filled with our most poignant emotional materials. This idea comes to me from Vladimir Jankélévitch's *Music and the Ineffable*, a philosophical investigation of music's perennial escape from being adequately described in language. Jankélévitch writes that music has "broad shoulders," that it "has a meaning and does not have a meaning," and that music is a thing of which "infinite and interminable things can be said."<sup>9</sup>

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7 Nathan Witthoft and Jonathan Winawer, "Learning, Memory, and Synaesthesia," *Psychological Science* 24, no. 3 (March 2013): 258–65.

8 Suzanne G. Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 67–83.

9 Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 71–72, emphasis in original.

These descriptions help me to imagine musical works as large, indiscriminate masses able to withstand the myriad hermeneutics of any human within earshot, to make one person cry with joy and—with equal validity—another cringe in pain. Again, music is often playing in the backgrounds of our lives, thus attaching itself (perhaps by synaesthetic proximity) to memories across divides of time and sensory modality. Yet Amelia’s musically triggered memories of trauma are very much about music being in the *foreground*: the movements, textures, and vibrations of her “sounds that know” represent quite specific mimeses of her physical, sensational memories. It strikes me that Cusick’s and Jankélévitch’s notions of music are equally at play in this kind of synaesthetic-traumatic recall: Amelia’s “sounds that know” are broad-shouldered enough to carry the deeply individual specifics of her experience without themselves being linguistically or culturally related to abuse or trauma; and they are also fundamentally connected to aural mimeses of generic sexual sensations (moans, sighs, whispers, screams, repetitive motions, tremblings), enabling direct communication with Amelia’s body’s own specific sexual memories.

The remaining question, then, is why more songs don’t trigger Amelia’s somatic memories. Why, in her testimony, does she focus on just these two songs? It seems crucial that the architectural spaces in which Amelia describes hearing them are both bathrooms—a bathroom at a truck stop and a bathroom at a park. She suspects, of course, that she was once molested in a bathroom. While bathroom sounds alone weren’t enough to store and save and later trigger her memories, *musical sounds* once heard in a bathroom were. It is as if the *music* were needed, at least in Amelia’s case, to dramatize the soundscape of the trauma’s location: by ratcheting up Amelia’s aural-kinetic-synaesthetic sensations into self-consciously emotional psychic spaces, Terry Reid’s grainy, heartbroken vocals and John Waite’s fighting-back-tears-croons ventriloquize Amelia’s otherwise indescribable emotions, locked inside a sound of running water, a scent of urine, and a sensation of dripping blood. These metonymized timbres, still sometimes encountered randomly in public spaces without her consent, play out the physically dominating traits of her abuser; her ears cannot close to their suggestive, emotive vibrations, just as her body’s sexual cavities, years earlier, could not be kept closed to her abuser’s intrusive touch.

AMELIA: I’ve been having trouble lately, knowing that my story is out there in your words. I’ve been thinking about your project a lot. I do believe in what you’re trying to do, but I wish I felt more honesty behind it.

JENNY: It means a lot to me that you would open up to me about this. I need some time to consider this. If you feel this way, this project clearly needs re-thinking.

AMELIA: It seems like you have everything all figured out, you have your theories about it, and there isn't much room for me or anyone else to respond.

JENNY: I hear you, I get that.

I feel the need to explain why I approached your story the way I did. Your words speak so poignantly to my own experiences of being completely downed and owned by music, made completely vulnerable, even made to feel recognized, to feel understood.

Your words made me wonder about my own sounds, the ones that remind me of mysterious things in my own past, and it made me wonder if for once I could find answers to my own questions about my life, using—of all things!—the tools of musicology. You made me ask myself: does my love for Olivier Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time" have anything to do with the fact that the timbre and chord progression of the second theme of the sixth movement so closely match the music of a *Sesame Street* cartoon from my childhood—one that frightened me beyond measure, and whose sounds have stayed with me ever since? When that particular moment in the Messiaen occurs, I feel immediately recognized, spotted, "touched" by a ghostly hand. "I know you," the passage seems to whisper (for this is a suddenly quiet moment, tucked inside an otherwise bombastic and relentless movement, blocked sections without transitions, one strange idea after another. . . . not unlike actually watching an episode of *Sesame Street*, which unfolded as a series of randomly concatenated vignettes and cartoon shorts, butting up against each other with no discernable logic, some funny, loud, diatonic, and carefree, and others suddenly muted, shy, chromatic, and unnerving). These sounds know me, whether they show up in mid-century French chamber music or 1980s American children's television. Their cultural context seems to matter less to my memories than their granular, timbral detail, their atemporal moments of resonance, pulled out of time and obsessively replayed inside my inner ear, just as your relationship to Procol Harum seems to happen not on the order of the song's unfolding in time, or anything related to its history or use in the 1980s movie *The Big Chill*, but on the register of one fractured, nano-second vibration—that of the trembling Hammond organ, a frozen musical representation of your trembling, sexual drippiness and wetness, the streaming-down of the "trail of tears" following you home, a sound "that knows." Your story moves me deeply; I don't know what else to say. Maybe I should say nothing.

I identified with your story. I'm afraid I may have made it on some level my own. I became drawn into your sound world, and instead of actually confronting the pain it causes you, I have become entranced by



the idea that a sound can be this powerful, that it can speak to us across the leagues of time that separate one version of ourselves from another.

AMELIA: I understand this. And it moves me the way your work has before. I just think you need to recognize that there isn't necessarily an answer. I didn't expect or need you to look for an explanation about my life. I just wanted you to know you aren't alone.<sup>10</sup>

There I was again. Arranging my thoughts about Amelia the way I organize musical compositions, building up tensions and cliffhangers with repetitive layers and run-on sentences, finding a climax and then fading slowly to *niente*. I am aestheticizing; I am responding to Amelia as an artist rather than a scholar, which means I am searching for a form, for harmonies and timbres, for a key, an ending . . . an answer. My confession, therefore, is not that I seek out the confessions of others (although I have) but that I find it impossible not to respond to them in the musical languages in which they are offered to me, in bound spaces with beginnings and ends, promising closure and return, catharsis and deliverance and eventual peace. Perhaps my response to Amelia, which I want to believe is a loving gesture, is also a defense: I remove myself from the devastating emotional impact of her words by trying to create something beautiful out of them, by trying to amplify the beauty they already contain, yet unwittingly overlooking the fact that she and most of the other abuse survivors with whom I have worked will not find redemption anywhere, let alone in a musicological redux of their relationships—abusive, sexual, therapeutic, and otherwise—with music, or with sounds.

Perhaps instead of analyzing them, or composing about them, I should instead urge them—as well as myself—to build within our current practices of self-care a calm awareness around music's powers over us, subtle and otherwise. To say to a sound that knows: "I know you back"—or, "message received; thank you"; or, perhaps: "Thank you for having my back. When I doubt myself and what happened to me, I know I can turn to you for confirmation, for truth . . . even if that truth is written in a vibrational language of my body that only you can translate, a language that spells out in sounds, not words, what it also knows."

And then maybe—just maybe—a sound that knows can also become an ally. A tool. A weapon against being passively triggered, refashioned from trigger into beacon, into a place not necessarily of healing, but of understanding.

### Acknowledgments

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<sup>10</sup> As previously mentioned, all portions of this dialogue come from a separate set of email correspondences with an informant who does not wish to be identified.

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