1 Musical Elements

Anyone who only understands music, doesn’t understand that either. Hanns Eisler (Goebbels, 2015: 73)

I don’t think that music should have a definition. That would keep it from being what it necessarily is. John Cage (2016: 484)

An elementary particle is not an independent analyzable entity, a basic building block of matter, but rather a set of relationships extending outward to other things. Natalie Crohn Schmitt (1990: 34)

This Element touches on elementary questions. Questions of first principles are usually ‘the basics’ that all can agree on, a preliminary consent on common sense and core concepts that make a shared discourse possible. Introduced to ‘beginners’, they pave the way for more ‘advanced’ study. Elementary matters act as keystones on which disciplinary edifices are built.

Looking back from 2022, perhaps the defining characteristic of ‘music since 1945’ is a loss of definition – a loss of foundational certainty – catalysing numerous returns to basics. As composers and artists challenged music’s ‘first principles’, demonstrating that the discipline was not natural or self-evident but constructed, musicologists similarly began to dismantle cherished assumptions of the discipline in earlier repertoires. Elementary questions arose. Is music different from sound, and if so, in what ways? Is all music of equal value or do some forms merit greater consideration, prestige, attention, and study than others? Can music be understood separately from its social, political, and economic contexts? Indeed, can music be understood at all if abstracted from the particular time, place, and circumstances of its experience?

The humbling figure most associated with this return to music’s elements is John Cage. I will begin with Cage not in order to put the elements back in place, but to consider with him the specifically musical question of what can be done without such foundation stones. What becomes possible ‘if zero is taken as the basis’, as Cage put it, adding ‘that’s the part that isn’t often understood’ (Kostelanetz, 1988: 208). Conventional wisdom claims that such gnomic statements came from Cage’s turn to Eastern philosophies, especially Zen Buddhism. By contrast, I show that he was following the musical logic of his composition teacher, Arnold Schoenberg, but rejecting the Austrian’s definition of music’s ‘basic unit’ (Grundgestalt). Without an a priori principle such as ‘musical’ tones that could be fixed in notational form, the concept of ‘music’ began to lose definition.

In pursuing the consequences of this move in the work of Heiner Goebbels, I want to underscore a distinction between ‘music’ and ‘the musical’ – or
‘musicality’–to acknowledge that the latter is not dependent on the former, and that compositional forms can be manifest without sound, in ‘non-musical’ mediums such as video installations or watercolours, and especially in the construction of encounters.¹ In brief, whilst Cage has been appreciated as a gallery artist and Goebbels as a ‘postdramatic’ theatre-maker and installation artist, both are composers shaped by musical concerns. The composed relationship of form and content shifts here from the work to the event and resonates in novel ways with invocations of ‘the musical’ (das Musikalische) by Schiller, Schlegel, and others from the late eighteenth century as a key concept both for aesthetics and for philosophical practice more broadly (Bowie, 2007; Goehr, 2017). For now, then, let ‘the musical’ indicate a structuring process irreducible to any prior principle, definition, origin, or foundation. It is in this sense that the title of this Element in Music Since 1945 refers to the notion of ‘curatorial composing’ for the musicalisation of events in which music – conventionally understood – may form only a part.

This approach demands a parallel shift in methodology with significant implications for readers from differing ‘subject’ positions. It would be perverse either to place such anti-foundational practices within the accepted conventions of an established discipline or to build a narrative ‘from the ground up’, from elementary conditions. This will not, then, be a musicological study in the customary sense; nor does it fall wholly within sub-disciplinary topics such as concert studies and performance curation – though readers familiar with these literatures will, I expect, find much to engage with. Rather than put a new foundation in place, I aim to draw out a metamorphosis of musical possibilities by putting in counterpoint aspects of music theory, philosophy, (ethno)musicology, and art history.²

Musicology has itself been divided at least since the late 1980s by the felt loss of its foundational supports and the value structures they once sustained, torn between considerations of its proper objects of study – whether scores, recordings, or performances – and the social, environmental, political, and economic contexts in which they arise. The fault line of this split falls over another divide, that between aesthetics and ethics. On the one hand, music’s objects are invested with value, implicitly or explicitly made significant if not canonic; on the other, contextual studies are usually more concerned with music’s role in the articulation of identities and relations within social systems structured by power.

¹ By ‘encounter’ I am pointing to Louis Althusser’s Philosophy of the Encounter (2006), though Cage’s project takes the notion further, as I have argued elsewhere (McKeon, 2021).
² My narrative includes elements of participant observation, both as an audience member – in particular of Goebbels’ work – and as a curatorial producer of post-experimental music, including staging performances of Cage and events by Goebbels.
Rather than adjudicate by privileging either production or reception, musical object or political reality, I follow the immanent compositional logics of Cage and Goebbels in constructing encounters that address both together through musical form whereby value is both aesthetic and ethical.

This partitioning between the work of artists and the contribution of audiences and publics is not limited to musicology, of course. Visual culture studies made thematic the problems of mediating objects and subjects, products of culture and of nature, through the prism of a constitutive visual difference. In contrast with vision as a physiological apparatus, ‘visuality’ marked the asymmetrical chiasm whereby to know (savoir) was already to see (voir), but to see was no longer simply to know. Plain sight – like plain thinking – was ideological. Visuality concerned, for example, the work of ‘scopic regimes’ in producing subjects identifying with and troubled by self-representations: in a world constituted by identity and difference, the subject becomes an object for itself and for others. It comes as no surprise that visual culture studies emerged contemporaneously with curatorial studies in the late 1980s, overlapping with theories of visual art after painting and sculpture to account for practices that were not predominantly optical. For example, sound art – in similar ways to its sibling sound studies, a younger cousin of visual culture studies – has been conceptualised and differentiated from music through this problematic of mediation. It was either primarily conceptual (or rather, ‘post-conceptual’, the ‘condition’ of art after Conceptual Art (Osborne, 2018)) and so in contrast with music’s supposed emphasis on the phenomenal experience of sound, or it was vibrational, pre-subjective and pre-conceptual, and so again unlike music now conceived as already constituted by conceptually entrained modes of listening. Within the gallery, in short, curating has been preoccupied with ‘ocularcentrism’, the myopia of visual knowledge, to the exclusion of musical practices and musical logic.

This has come at a cost. The profession has faced continual crises over its proper relations to art and museum history, art theory, techniques of display, artists’ social practices, and the formation of observant publics (McKeon, 2021). In particular, attempts to establish a ‘critical’ visuality have foundered.
on the paradox of trying to correct the poverty of ‘pure vision’ with a more discerning ‘eye’, or a perspective capable of staring at its own optical distortions. Similar difficulties, I suggest, occur with attempts to apply the discourse of critical curating to contemporary music, which focus predominantly on the politics and ethics of selection or programming, as if a more receptive ear might compensate for the erosion of any essential distinction marking out one musical heritage from our field of seemingly limitless possibilities. Rendered as a form of judicious selection, the notion of curating left the museum’s hallowed confines to become almost ubiquitous (Balzer, 2015). Music playlists, restaurant menus, data gathering, and the production of festivals and other myriad experiences are now routinely ‘curated’. As a result, many of its practitioners in the formerly ‘visual’ arts have abandoned the term. More significantly for my purposes, some theorists of the discipline have proffered ‘the curatorial’ – an adjectival noun, like ‘the musical’ – as a conceptual gambit with which to address directly the problem of mediation and to do so without privileging the visual, critical or otherwise; indeed, without imposing any elementary or founding framework (Martinon, 2013). The curatorial is premised neither on the task of ‘making visible’ nor on ‘revealing’ an inner, hidden, or invisible truth. For at least one prominent theorist, this too has shifted the question of value from one predominantly concerned with aesthetics and art theory to one equally understood as a practice of ethics (Martinon, 2021). Curatorial composing complements this approach.

One influential elaboration of the construction of music’s foundation in its modern form – ‘classical’ and beyond – and its erosion in more recent times is presented through the ‘musical work-concept’, as developed philosophically and critiqued by Lydia Goehr in The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works (2007). I will proceed with a schematic reading of her argument, in part as her title suggestively implies the ‘imaginary’ work of the curator and in part as she deliberates at length on the limits of this elementary condition in the work of John Cage, especially on 4’33” (1952), his ‘silent’ piece. In contrast with Goehr, I will show how Cage dislodged this keystone in particular in his later practice from 0′00″ (1962) – or 4′33″ No.2, as he dubbed it – which marked a turn towards the social articulation of staging encounters. Placing this within the context of his studies with Schoenberg and his later turn towards other media – including texts, typography, printmaking, and watercolours – I show how his compositional logic was manifest in such curatorial projects as his Musicircus and museumcircle.

Having established this example of curatorial composing, I turn to Heiner Goebbels. I show how his practice similarly moves beyond any notion of ‘music itself’ and argue that his technique of sampling can be understood as
a compositional principle that could be ‘scaled up’ from a snippet of recorded music or sound through to whole productions presented whilst Artistic Director of the Ruhrtriennale (2012–14). Just as strategies of appropriation render moot the question of originality so, I claim, Goebbels shifts the issue of authorship.

I develop this with a focus on his astonishing production of Louis Andriessen’s *De Materie* (2014), and in particular on an otherworldly scene marking the transition into its fourth movement. This then provides a point of reference through which I examine other dimensions of his practice: his composition of temporal and spatial relations; his consideration of the public and the situation of encounter; and his overriding concern for the signifying affect of wonder that animates this.

The work of Hannah Arendt and Elias Canetti – both inspirations for Goebbels – guide my approach, to which I add that of the philosopher Catherine Malabou. I will show that his interest lies less in appropriation as such and more with the polyphonic staging of public encounters in which each element – lighting, scenography, text, performers, sound design, and music – features as an independent ‘voice’ in counterpoint with others. This form of composition is designed to shift the relationship between audience and performance from one of an implicit detached listening and observation to a situation akin to what Arendt called a ‘space of appearance’ in which value is articulated as a mode of public encounter.

### 2 The Work-Concept and Its Limits

In order to appreciate the notion of curatorial composing, it helps first to detach the notion of composing from the concept of the ‘musical work’. Curatorial practice here is not something that acts on works by making them public. Rather, it is the composing itself of the elements of an encounter. I begin by briefly developing the musical work-concept as elaborated by Lydia Goehr, which I approach schematically and synoptically in a manner distinct from her own method. This will both clarify her presentation of Cage’s 4’33” as a limit point that does not dispense with but rather reinforces the notion of a musical work and will provide a framework with which to return with Cage to question whether his late work really does leave this foundational structure intact.

The work-concept is fundamentally a question of musical value – or more precisely, of musical authority. Goehr’s *Imaginary Museum* first appeared in 1992, precisely at the time that the New Musicology was dismantling the idealist trappings of the Western classical canon and its concert practices, and also just as curatorial studies emerged in recognition of the problematic stature that curators had acquired. It marked a moment when modernist notions of...
musical value and its prestige were being deconstructed and when a new and disconcertingly performative form of value production – the power to make visible – was being established. Her work has often been celebrated by those welcoming the elimination of Western classical music’s privileged status, but this has frequently obscured her ongoing concern for the production of aesthetic value, a concern that by no means abandons the work-concept. I will follow her critique and its implications for musical aesthetics in turn.

Goehr does not set out to define what a musical work is. Rather, she addresses the question of definition itself as an historical project, a consequential project that structured classical music as a set of cultural practices. A notion of music was needed ‘around 1800’, she claims, to give it a value that would dignify the work of composers and musicians alongside their counterparts in the literary and ‘fine arts’. Within the emerging field of philosophical aesthetics, especially in the writings of Kant and Hegel, music ranked the lowest of the arts. It was considered too emotional and subjective to ground an objective appreciation of beauty. In the case of instrumental music, detached from language and discourse and so lacking a concept, it was too diffuse, ethereal, and ephemeral to offer a revelation of universal truths. In this context, the notion of the musical work – or rather, of Werktreue, fidelity to the work’s ‘inner’ truth – provided a kind of philosophical anchor, a foundation stone on which this imaginary museum might be built (Bonds, 2006, 2014).

This idea of an imaginary museum, adopted from André Malraux’s essay on the ‘Museum Without Walls’ (1974), helpfully draws attention to a crucial distinction between the work-concept and any concrete pieces this structure might contain. The framing concept defines and distinguishes what is and what is not ‘music’; works themselves are founded through conventions of authorship. In describing the musical work as a ‘regulative concept’, Goehr indicates that it is not only an Ideal category, a fixed and eternal notion of Art determining what can or cannot be viewed or listened to as such. It is instead historically contingent and shifting, and so requires new ‘galleries’ and shifting strategies of display reflecting contemporary understanding. To acknowledge her borrowing from Wittgenstein, the musical work-concept is an ongoing curatorial ‘language game’ and task concerning the lawful relationship between artists’ constantly innovating practices and the identity or ideal self-image of the field itself.

With this distinction, the question of the work-concept shifts from that of definition – of what a musical work *is* – to what effect it is designed to achieve. In Freudian terms, the work-concept can be understood to function like a homeostatic principle, a means of maintaining a (human) subject’s continuity and integrity over time, ever ageing yet always recognisably the same, defending the organism from trauma and avant-gardist ‘shocks of the new’ by regulating...
the relationship between its ‘outside’ and ‘inside’. Goehr therefore emphasises two principal tasks that it performs. On the one hand, it is concerned with the production of musical autonomy, the distinction between ‘music itself’ and its social function or context – the ‘extra-musical’. On the other, the work-concept addresses the issue of ‘medium specificity’, of what makes music ‘music’ – the question of music’s essence.5

These are the conditions that structured what has become familiar as Western classical music and its cultural practices. Goehr draws attention to several recognisable characteristics, which I divide here according to my schematic outline of her argument. On the one hand, the construction of public concert halls as dedicated spaces for music performance separate from everyday life helped to constitute music’s autonomy with its own hallowed rituals, which in turn necessitated a new type of entrained listening supported by music criticism, programme notes, and the pedagogical project of ‘music appreciation’. ‘Musical’ listening was necessarily differentiated from commonplace hearing (Thorau and Ziemer, 2019). A host of intermediary roles ensued, tasked, for example, with concert production, programming, artist management, and promotion. The public was further distanced from this institutional form of music through the distinction of amateur and professional, with repertoire for the latter gaining in complexity and virtuosity and so requiring specialisation and elevation in ways that paralleled a division between the tastes of connoisseurs and the broader public.

On the other hand, musical works were articulated as exemplars of music’s essence through an increasing separation of composers – who acquired what Foucault (1998) called the ‘author function’ – from performers. This placed an emphasis on the definitive score (or Urtext) as a true original that was both permanent and perfectly repeatable, distinct from improvised forms and practices of transcription, arrangement, musical borrowing or parody, and also differentiated from juvenilia, sketches, and so on. It also required faithful interpretation, with increasing standardisation of notation and performance conventions such as metronome markings and concert tuning in order for works always and everywhere to be played ‘correctly’, at least in principle. Lastly, works were given an ancestry and lineage – the musical canon – that obscured the work-concept’s own historical emergence. For example, Goehr

5 This relationship between autonomy, which regulates an external border, and essence – commonly a transcendental principle – provides the structural logic of a parergon as elaborated by Derrida (1987), notably, in visual terms, in relation to painting. As a supplement to the work – the ergon – it operates like a passe-partout ‘between that which is framed and that which is framing in the frame’ (24). It distinguishes inside from outside, whilst also indicating an interior (and anterior) perspective or ‘inside of the inside’.
argued that J. S. Bach did not write works because the work-concept was not operative when he composed, yet his music acquired the ontological status of works through a retrospective gaze (Steingo, 2014). Her claim that ‘it is rather a contingent, retroactively discovered, bonding and roping process’ (Goehr, 2007: 108) thus echoed Malraux’s statement that ‘the notion of art as such must first come into being, if the past is to acquire an artistic value’ (Malraux, 1974: 53). It also resonates with Arendt’s argument in her essay ‘What Is Authority?’ (1961), an issue that runs through Heiner Goebbels’ work and to which I will return.

The work-concept’s operation on music history was matched by its attention to contemporary practices. Goehr does not develop an historical account of this process but dwells on what she perceives to be its continuing utility after the erasure and erosion of many of the cultural practices through which it had taken regulative form.

I was interested in how persons thought in the past to increase understanding of how we think in the present under the regulation of the work-concept, even though the reason I wanted to understand how we think in the present was to prevent our concluding that this is the only way to think (Goehr, 2007: xlv).

More specifically, she is concerned precisely with the question of authority in the wake of the work-concept’s decline. In contrast with what I characterised as the turn to ethical considerations by many writers in the New Musicology, her focus remains consistently on aesthetics. The challenge was to avoid either the work-concept’s continuing operation by fiat or its uncritical application (or relativisation) to other music practices. ‘The generic work-concept apparently stripped of all historical meaning or the view of a row of perspectives equalized and standardized: these are both positions upon which some of the most dangerous forms of modern authority have come to depend’ (Goehr, 2007: xlv).\(^6\) In short, with the weakening of the work-concept – of the articulation of Western classical music’s foundations – the question of aesthetic value had neither been nullified nor made arbitrary but remained a productive problematic and task.

On the one hand, the extension of the concept to jazz, folk, and film music could be understood as adapting its force, not abolishing it. Marking a relation of ‘derivative’ to ‘original’ use of the work-concept, this approach could lead to its refinement and evolution. On the other hand, Goehr argues, attempts to contest the work-concept from ‘within the musical institution’ are doomed to

\(^6\) The persistence of this binary can be seen, for example, in the arguments advanced by Boris Johnson’s former adviser Munira Mirza (2012), endorsing claims for transcendental ‘universalism’ – an unquestionable essence of art – as the premise for and counterpart to the sovereign individual in opposition to ‘relativist’ arguments for cultural diversity. As has often been noted, this privileges some individuals as more sovereign than others.
failure for two reasons: ‘First, those who wish to challenge a concept’s regulative force usually find themselves paradoxically situated in a practice that is regulated by the very concept they want to challenge; second, that a regulative concept’s alteration or demise is no less complicated a process than its emergence.’ (Goehr, 2007: 260)

Cage’s music – and 4′33″ in particular – provides her exemplar. To begin with, she argues that by accepting the terms of concert practice by which its authority was exercised, the framework of Werktreue had actually been consolidated. Its silences may have shocked in the 1950s, but the celebrated composer’s eccentricities had been absorbed with benign good humour by the 1990s; its score continues to be performed to appreciative audiences. Cage maintained his promise to Schoenberg, she noted, as a composer of musical works, however far he may have stretched the term. The historical lesson of this structural problematic came from the fate of the avant-garde – as outlined by Peter Bürger (1984) – whereby the ‘anti-art’ of Dada, the Futurists, and Constructivists was soon incorporated into museum and private collections, the objects of curators’ recuperative projects to reconfigure art history. Cage may have weakened the discourse of music’s essence, the work-concept’s ‘internal’ articulation, but its external border – its separation from the everyday – remained firmly secure.

I will focus on 0′00″ to show how Cage began to break this framework down further, but the critique of his musical silence merits a brief reflection. For example, Richard Taruskin attacked Cage in typically pugilistic fashion, writing to bury his legacy shortly after the composer’s death:

Sounds that were noise on one side of an arbitrary framing gesture are suddenly music, a ‘work of art’, on the other side; the esthetic comes into being by sheer fiat . . . . The audience is invited – no, commanded – to listen to ambient or natural sounds with the same reverent contemplation they would assume if they were listening to Beethoven’s Ninth. (Taruskin, 2009: 275)

To claim that 4′33″ commands silent listening because of its un-notated performance conventions is both a misrepresentation of any actual performance – it famously provokes giggles, coughing, and audible nervous twitching in concert halls – and a projective ‘reading’ of its instructions and intent. Goehr is more measured, stating only that it remains within the work-concept ‘because of his specifications that people gather together, usually in a concert hall, to listen to the sounds of the hall for the allotted time period’. Yet the various scored versions of 4′33″ make no such specifications.7 Moreover, the premiere, at Woodstock, was given in the Maverick Concert Hall, the back doors of whose barn-like structure were opened to the surrounding rural environment, whilst the

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7 On the different versions of the score, see Gann (2010: chapter 5).
most famous document of Cage’s own performance – in Nam June Paik’s 1974 documentary _Tribute to John Cage_ – took place in Harvard Square surrounded by students, passers-by, and traffic.

Goehr would no doubt also disagree with Taruskin’s characterisation of the framing aesthetic discourse as ‘arbitrary’. On the contrary, she argues that such a framing gesture remained a necessity. The determination of what is or is not an artistic work was not merely a conceit of power but constantly negotiated, and it was this process that constituted the value of the work-concept. Whilst the ‘locus’ of music’s authority was now in doubt – potentially to be reclaimed ‘in the work itself, in its realization through performance, or in the interpretive act of listening to a work’ (275) – the positing of the question itself remains unavoidable. Any new consensus would, as before, depend on the language games of ‘complex theories, and the practices to which these theories become attached’. In this minimal sense of preserving musical art’s autonomy from the social everyday – or ‘the commonplace’, as Arthur Danto (1981) put it – the work-concept remains operational. ‘Sounds that were noise on one side’ of the frame might indeed become ‘suddenly music’ on the other, but what matters is the ‘fidelity’ to a conception of how this might be achieved. The transfiguration of the ‘extra-musical’ into the musical corpus requires the work of theory, and for Goehr this applies as much to Cage’s _4’33”_ as to any other musical work.

Returning to these issues in _Elective Affinities_ (2008), Goehr elaborates the possibilities for changing the paradigm once more in relation to Cage’s musical silence, considering it alongside Max Neuhaus’ _Times Square_ (1977–92), a concealed sound installation in the New York district that blended almost seamlessly with the surrounding acoustic environment. Cage’s work was explicit in exposing the work-concept’s limits, she argues, but did so from within the institution; Neuhaus’ critique was implicit and therefore perhaps ‘more subversive’, whilst the artist nevertheless claimed his work to be a work. ‘The question here is whether it is more effective to challenge the work-concept from the outside or from the inside, by an external and explicit idea or by changing conditions that internally compel a change in our understanding’ (Goehr, 2008: 85). Siding with Adorno and Danto, her exemplars for theorising contemporary music and art, she opts for the latter. Our understanding ‘can only be developed by reflecting historically from inside the musical experience itself’. This logic – that the work-concept could only be reconfigured immanently and dialectically through its internal contradictions – is correct, I argue, but the understanding of Cage on which it is developed is not. He did not fail because he attempted to impose ‘external’ ideas – from Zen Buddhism, for example – on musical practice whilst firmly established ‘within’ music’s institutions. The shift from composing works to composing encounters – to curatorial composing – involves precisely an