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The Sonic Mirror

When I was around ten, my piano teacher, Diana Graa, had me play on the radio. She took me to the Municipal Building in lower Manhattan, to the WNYC studio, where several students of other teachers and I would tape a piece or two each, to be heard later that week on a program that may have been called “Young American Artists.” It was a strange experience. I’d never been recorded before. I’d never heard myself recorded. I’d never been to the Municipal Building. I’d never been to a recording studio—although I’d spent a lot of time *listening* to piano music on both WNYC and WQXR. I’d never met these kids, who seemed both older and quite used to this kind of thing. One girl, I recall, wore sneakers so as not have her performance—of a Chopin nocturne—marred by intermittent foot stomping. It was beautiful. She was pretty, too. My own performance, however, was a bit of a disaster. Although my first piece—a Mazurka—went all right, my second—something by Bartok—didn’t. I kept having memory lapses and so was never able to play the thing all the way through. After three or four attempts, each one worse than the last, I was asked to stop. I’m not sure by whom. Imagine my shame—made so much worse by the fact that no one said anything about this fiasco. Needless to say, I assumed the Bartok couldn’t make it onto the broadcast. But it did. Some technician had managed to splice together a perfect recording. So, to my surprise, it sounded like I’d nailed the thing. It sounded a lot better than I was. Or than I thought I was. But I don’t think surprise—or *pleasant* surprise—was the only feeling connected with that primal self-audition. I imagine I was also, still, a bit ashamed.

One thing you should know about me—maybe *the* one thing—is that I didn’t always want to be an English professor. I used to want to be a pianist. But it wasn’t till I was around twenty that I had to accept my now rather obvious limitations. I lack virtuoso technique—for which I’m still petty enough to blame Mrs. Graa. And I lack musical intelligence—for which I don’t even have genetics to blame. My older brother, Robert, is a successful pianist. (Bob, in fact, is the one I heard most, growing up. And many of the pieces

I've tried to learn have been ones I used to hear him practice and perform.) At any rate, having been serious about the instrument for so long, I did have other opportunities to hear myself recorded. But I didn't have enough of them—nor did I bother to listen enough, over time, to those other recordings—to develop a less ashamed relation to self-audition. I don't even have the tapes anymore. And I have to wonder if this arrested development is idiosyncratic—whether due both to my limitations and to my relatively limited experience of self-audition, or due to my unrealistic desire, or due to that first, possibly traumatic experience. Maybe my arrested development reflects something other pianists experience as well.

I also have to wonder whether the experience of hearing one's piano-playing recorded bears any relation to the experience of hearing one's own voice, or to seeing either photographic or mirror images of oneself. But these, too, may be quite idiosyncratic. Most people, they say, can't stand to hear themselves speak. Yet a lot of people like it. Actors, for example. (*Seeing* themselves, however, is usually another matter.) Even I like it. In fact, I've always thought I'd make a good radio announcer. Some nice classical station, like WNYC or WQXR. And maybe I'll do just that once I realize my limitations—or reach my limits—as an English professor. Or as a writer. And, for some reason, even people who don't like to hear themselves speak do like to hear themselves sing. Maybe you've seen the 1981 film *Diva*, in which a beautiful soprano who, for perverse reasons, refuses to record, finally and for the first time gets to hear herself perform an aria. She doesn't say so, but she seems quite as ravished by the sound as is the cute fan who made the tape. In fact, she seems as ravished as she *looks* ravishing up there on the screen. Of course, the relation to one's voice is far more unmediated than the relation to one's piano playing, or for that matter, to one's playing of any instrument.

I say “I have to wonder” these things. Why, you ask? Well, I've already worked out most of my piano issues in *Beethoven's Kiss*, a book about the anxieties of amateurism. I worked out a few more of them in “Critical Virtuosity,” an essay about problems I think professionals have. But I haven't quite fathomed the “mirror stage.” To paraphrase Jacques Lacan: three different orders structure all human existence: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The Real isn't simply synonymous with external reality, nor is it the

opposite of “imaginary.” It exists outside or beyond the Symbolic, is menacingly homogeneous, and isn’t composed of distinct and differential signifiers. It’s that which resists symbolization and signification, and is usually encountered in the context of trauma and psychosis. The Imaginary, likewise, isn’t synonymous with the imagination, or the capacity to form images. It’s that which frees the imagination and gives the psyche the experience of openness and novelty. The Imaginary is the element of both daydreaming and poetic creation. And the Symbolic, which isn’t simply synonymous with language, should be understood as comprising the entire domain of culture. Roughly speaking, everyone is born into the Real, enters the Imaginary in the mirror stage, and enters the Symbolic with the acquisition of language—not that you ever really leave the Real and the Imaginary behind.

The mirror stage always occurs between the ages of six and eighteen months. A helpless infant—still unable to differentiate himself from his mother or from the world around him, still unable to speak and without any control of his motor activities—is confronted with the image of his own body in a mirror or some equivalent. (Some cultures, after all, have no mirrors, and some babies are blind.) His immediate reaction is one of jubilation, as the image displays an integrity or functional unity he has yet to experience. The child thus identifies with an image of what he will become, but that image is illusory. And so the child’s identification signals the beginning of a dialectic in which recognition is simultaneously a form of misrecognition. A child, after all, is not an image in a mirror. Nor is a performance a recording. For Lacan, the element of misrecognition signals that the ego is, fundamentally, the product of the Imaginary, or an illusory structure in which the individual becomes trapped into alienation—by which is meant a sense of loss or estrangement. The loss is of that initial jubilation. The estrangement is from that too-perfect self-yet-nonselself-image that provoked such delight. The mirror phase, moreover, is associated with the threatening fantasy of the fragmented body, which expresses the fear that the unity perceived in the mirror will disintegrate or be torn apart. But maybe it’s also associated with the fear that the illusory unity I perceived in the Bartok broadcast would disintegrate into the fragments of what actually happened back in the studio.

What, then, have various professional pianists—ones I don't know personally—said on the subject? I'll transcribe some of this in order of seniority—in order, that is, of least to greatest potential exposure to accurate recording technology.

Vladimir Horowitz claimed never to listen to his own recordings both because he didn't want to “influence” himself and because “[s]ometimes you recognize the person and sometimes you don't.” Unfortunately, he doesn't specify that “influence” (Mach 1:125). Nor does he indicate which recording or audition conditions promote self-recognition and which ones prevent it.

Emil Gilels seems to have listened to such recordings a lot, never troubled by the anxiety of influence and never failing to recognize himself:

I have watched my style change over the years. There have been quite a few periods in my life when I have played in different styles, with varying influences and new interpretations. I have my ear tuned to my recordings as models. I made my first record in 1934 in Moscow, where I recorded all the small pieces for piano on 78-RPM records. In the ensuing years I recorded more and more. I began to look to the recordings as my map. By listening to a progression of my recordings through the years, you can hear how my pianism has changed. In fact, just recently I listened to an old recording I did of the Rachmaninoff Third Piano Concerto, one that I made over fifteen years ago. Then I listened to a more recent recording I did of the same work. The first was more proper musically, but it was not what I considered “alive.” The second recording, I feel, is much more inspired, much more imaginative. (Mach 2:122–23)

The main thing to notice about this report is that Gilels deploys visual metaphors for an aural experience. By listening to his recordings he can “watch” his style change over the years and “look” to them as a kind of “map.” Unbeknownst to him, probably, there's a basic tension here. Whereas you can see yourself at a glance, you can't really listen to yourself that way. Listening takes time. In visual terms, it involves glance after glance after glance. We disavow this basic temporality when we imagine self-audition as something *imaginary*.

Glenn Gould, of course, preferred recording to live performance. But he was exceptional as well. Some say he may have been autistic. If true, this may have a great deal to do with the exceptional pleasure he derived from seeing himself in sonic mirrors of his own making—a pleasure about which he happens to have been quite voluble. But since Gould is exceptional—since this narcissism, if you want to call it that, probably doesn't have much to do with our own—I'll restrict myself to one brief comment he made. "The recording studio and the kind of womblike security it gives," he explained, "is very much integrated with my life style" (Mach 1:107). For Lacan, the mirror stage represents both one's departure from the Real, or rather from one's unmediated access to the Real, and one's entry into the Imaginary. And the Real, if anything, is associated with both literal and figurative "womblike security." It is the order of human existence in which we sense no separation, no alienation from our selves, our mothers, or from the world around us. For Gould, some recordings must have been less like mirrors than like sonograms—auditory traces of relatively small private spaces, both studio and studio apartment, if you will—as well as of his own blissful, oblivious, non-alienated life, or "life style," within them. I'm not sure how many non-single, not to mention non-autistic musicians can say the same. Other recordings—live recordings in which the spaces traced, various concert halls, are relatively large public venues—couldn't have been anything like that for him. And so I doubt Gould listened to them much.

Notice the oppositions: aural experience vs. visual image; private recording vs. public performance. They may come up again. And there may be others.

Misha Dichter has something to tell us about the difference between hearing oneself playing and hearing oneself having played. Simply put, one need no longer attend to the physical mechanics of music making—something even singers probably have to do. Mere speakers, of course, don't. One needn't, that is, think about hitting the right notes, or hitting the pedals right, or getting the balance right, or watching the conductor in concerto work and listening for orchestral cues, or about both watching and listening to the soloist in accompaniment, both watching and listening to other instrumentalists in chamber music. All you have to do now, Dichter implies, is listen—really listen—to yourself:

I'm constantly learning. Even in the last four or five months I've made adjustments in my style. There is this matter of getting the wrists lower, and now I am beginning to flatten the fingers a bit for closeness. And I think there's a greater precision now that recording again has forced me to listen better to my own playing. Initially, all the things that sounded fine in the practice room sounded quite different in the playbacks; this caused me to rethink many things and has been a very rewarding learning process. (Mach 1:67)

But really listening, here, involves attending to the metaphysical mechanics of music making—something easier to do when having played than when playing. Something easier to do without all the physical distractions. Something easier to do without the distraction of having played terribly. *So that's what it sounds like when I lower my wrists and flatten my fingers. That's even better!* Such successful attendance, I suspect, must be one of the things that separate the virtuoso from the amateur.

So much for technique. What about interpretation? Yuri Egorov, when listening to recordings, didn't attend to the metaphysics of music-making so much as to the music itself. And the way he expressed this helps us see what Horowitz meant by: "I never listen to my own recordings because I don't want to influence myself." According to Egorov:

I don't really listen to my recordings, at least not often. They are too plastic, too firm. They are dangerous sometimes, because as one changes, so do one's interpretations, or suddenly there is a new insight into a score, but the recording is done and is fixed. So when I do listen to my recordings, I always think, "Oh, it could have been better." Music and one's attitude toward it and one's interpretations of it grow. I listen to my Debussy, for example, and I think that now I play it better; maybe I don't, but I think I do. I'm not sure, but I think I've discovered more than I knew at the time I was recording it. (Mach 2:47)

I take it that self-audition must have been—or, having perfected his technique, that self-audition must have become—a decidedly mixed experience for Egorov. *Nothing wrong with the mechanics, but*

that interpretation certainly left something to be desired. Or maybe it didn't. Maybe I should start playing it that way again. Writers, incidentally, often react this way to their own work. You feel you're at your peak during the process of composition. You think you've never worked and played better with literary form, language, thought, information, and imagination. Then you read what you've done the next day and it looks—or sounds—like crap. But people tell you you're wrong, or you tell yourself, and so you publish anyway. Then, a few years later, you read what you've published, and despite the fact that, or maybe because, you don't remember having written it—you don't “recognize” yourself, to quote Horowitz—it seems terrific. Better than anything you could do now. Or maybe it's not. Maybe it's worse. Who knows. Maybe it's just that I've changed—changed and developed over time, like a single performance or recording. Of course, there's a limit to this analogy. Creating your own new material, whether in words or tones, isn't exactly the same thing as re-creating someone else's—let alone re-creating your own re-creation of someone else's.

Ivo Pogorelich sounds a bit like that woman in *Diva*. “I hate live recordings of the actual concert,” he says, “can't stand them.”

I never do them, and I will never allow them in my concerts. No man can serve two masters; you can't please the microphone and an audience of two thousand people equally well. You simply can't do both well at the same time. (Mach 2:240)

As with Horowitz, this is rather elliptical. Why *can't* you please the microphone and an audience of two thousand people equally well? Why can't you do both well at the same time? I'm not exactly sure. But the comment, like that of Egorov, does relate to interpretation. And it does raise an issue to which writers can relate. You should know who your audience, your reader, is. Or *think* you know. Don't play, or write, for people with different literary tastes, different kinds of intelligence, different sensibilities, different ideologies. Or don't *imagine* you do. Because you can't please them all. Imagine, instead, an ideal audience member, an ideal reader: someone who thinks and feels a lot like you. Someone who knows the same books, the same music. Someone who's interested in what you're interested in, who likes what you like. Someone who may have had

pretty much the same life experience. After all, there are probably a number of such people out there. And as for the rest, well, what can you do. They'll have to hear someone else. Read someone else. *Review* someone else, if possible. In other words, imagine an *ego* ideal. A mirror image. You—only better. This of course, is a lot easier to do in a recording studio than in a concert hall. And it's a lot easier to do, as a writer, in a room of one's own than it is to do, as a teacher, in a lecture hall filled with undergraduate English majors too young—not to mention too Midwestern—to have had anything like your life experience.

But I digress. You'll have noticed that we haven't heard from any women yet. Such apparent sexism is neither deliberate nor inadvertent on my part. I searched interviews of as many female virtuosos as of male ones, but found no responses relevant to my concerns. Perhaps it's the interviewers who are biased: less interested in what women think of themselves than in what men do. At any rate, according to Lacan, one shouldn't expect gender difference in mirror stage-based experience, if that's what self-audition is, because gender difference isn't learned until entry into the Symbolic. And even if that's not what self-audition is, you're about to hear from women. Because by sending a survey to almost every such pianist I could think of, I discovered what various amateurs and professionals with whom I've had personal contact have said on the subject. Here were the questions:

- (1) *Can you describe and, if possible, explain the experience of hearing yourself play for the first time?*
- (2) *Have you ever particularly enjoyed hearing yourself play?*
- (3) *Have you ever hated hearing yourself play?*
- (4) *Has hearing yourself play ever been a decidedly mixed experience (pleasure/displeasure)?*
- (5) *Has the experience of hearing yourself play changed over time?*
- (6) *To what extent have your reactions depended upon what you're playing?*

Now, not everyone answered. Not everyone stuck to this script, preferring instead to ignore certain questions or to collapse them into one other. And, having been told that I'd be incorporating their answers in this article, my respondents were, in effect, called upon

to serve two masters: me, in the role of microphone, or mirror image; and you, in the role of audience. (I'm called upon to serve two as well: you, the audience; and the respondents who will read this as well.) Yet I think they did, somehow, manage to serve both of us well. And the responses I got were, I think, very interesting. Some were even well written. So I'm now going to set my own ego aside, more or less, and let these people speak for themselves.

But I'd like to present them in a different order of seniority. Instead of oldest to youngest, I'll present these people in the order in which we met. In this way I hope to accomplish two things. I hope to blur the distinction between amateur and professional, in large part because I think it's wrong to presume these two experience self-audition differently. I also hope to provide an oblique autobiography. So much, then, for setting my ego—my narcissism, perhaps—*aside*. I've simply shoved it into the background.

We'll start with my older brother Robert—thirteen years older, to be precise. My earliest, mirror-like impression of his playing was that it represented musical perfection I myself could never hope to achieve. In fact, I still feel that way. More to the point, however, I still expect *him* to feel that way. But he doesn't. In fact, he never did. Instead of finding self-audition satisfying, Robert has always found it rather alienating—especially at first. “In early years,” he writes, “I had the impression that I was listening to someone other than myself.” (In some cases, he quips, “I found myself *wishing*... it was someone else.”) Later on, though, “I was more able to recognize myself, recalling as I listened the physical sensations of the performance.” This sounds a bit like Dichter. But my brother's eventual yet paradoxical sense of self-recognition within estrangement doesn't, for him, seem to depend upon the quality of the playing. “In a minority of cases,” he writes, “[I have enjoyed hearing myself play]. Naturally, it's very much a function of the success of the performance. If it had the right expression, energy, and accuracy, one enjoys reliving it. If it was a bad performance, one still relives it, along with the pain.” Nor does the sense of self-recognition within estrangement depend upon *what* he's played: “Every work has a particular character,” Robert explains; either “one realizes it successfully, or one doesn't.” Note the all-or-nothing, quasi-spatial attitude: either a performance is good, or it's bad; either a realization is successful, or it's not. And he attributes the pain of a bad

performance—or the “unpleasant recognition of insufficiency”—to what he calls the “hyper-sensitivity” of self-audition. “As hypersensitive ([or hyper]-alert) as one is during the performance,” Robert writes, “one is even more so when listening to a recording after the event. Every blemish seems magnified. Sometimes, if one listens after more time has elapsed, blemishes can diminish in magnitude depending on the egregiousness of the errors.” But he’s figured out how to manage this hypersensitivity in, if not constructive, then at least nondestructive ways. “I’ve learned over time when to listen and when not to: not too soon after the event, not on inferior playback equipment; rather when there are no distractions, when one has a reasonable block of time and the right level of energy and focus to devote to the act of listening.”

I met Beth Sussman in Juilliard’s pre-college division, at about fourteen. (She went on to attend college there and have a musical career. I went elsewhere.) Like Robert, Beth had an alienating mirror-stage experience: “Hearing myself on tape for the first time was a bizarre experience,” she writes. “I was quite [young], but do remember listening in disbelief since I felt I was hearing something so different from how I thought I played.” Like Robert, Beth became less and less alienated by self-audition. “I taped myself fairly regularly as I was growing up” she reports, “and feel that as I became older and more experienced, what I heard listening back to the tape became closer and closer to how I thought I played. I imagine that I started listening to myself more completely (and perhaps more honestly) as I grew as a person and as a musician.” And despite this growth, Beth—like Robert—has maintained a quasi-spatial, oppositional attitude. “I guess I’m [still] an all-or-nothing kind of person,” she writes, “and can’t recall ever feeling a mix of pleasure and displeasure while listening.” But whereas for Robert such eventual self-recognition doesn’t depend upon what he’s played, for Beth it does. “One of the best things about being out of school,” she writes, “is that now I only play (and record) what I love and have an affinity for.” And whereas for Robert self-recognition involves recalling—or “reliving”—the physical sensations of performance (the mechanics), for Beth it involves recalling aural ones. “There usually isn’t too much of a shock when I hear myself now,” she writes; “I’m guessing it’s because I’ve gotten better at listening as I’m playing.” In other words, Beth seems to have trained herself to

bring the hypersensitivity of self-audition more and more to bear on performance itself. Or if not more and more to bear on *performance*, more and more to bear on *studio recording*. Like Pogorelich, but unlike my brother, Beth prefers, if not to serve, then to hear herself serve, one master alone: the microphone:

The two most recent times that I recorded were done under special circumstances. I had a friend set up recording equipment in my house, rented an excellent microphone and recorded at my own pace over the course of a few days. With no one but myself to listen and no clock ticking, I had tremendous freedom to listen back, do as many takes as I wanted (I don't edit or piece together recordings—they are, in a sense, “live”) and take breaks when I wanted to. I could play without any fears or inhibitions because there was no one else listening (or sitting in judgment—real or imagined). It was a fabulous experience and I think the recordings came out well.

This, apart from the refusal to edit, is what Horowitz did toward the end: have himself recorded playing whatever he liked whenever he liked on his own instrument and in his own home.

I met Alex at Juilliard too, and both of us went on to major in music at Yale. After that, while I was in law school, he worked toward an M.M. at the Manhattan School of Music. He then got a J.D. as well. But whereas I neither perform music nor practice law now, Alex does both. As his response is the longest and most detailed one I got, I'll give it to you in full before providing commentary:

(1) *Can you describe and, if possible, explain the experience of hearing yourself play for the first time?*

[M]y actual, specific recollection dates only back to recordings of performances as a young teen. I think the “first time” was probably a home-made tape, made on a portable cassette player, of a piano concerto audition in a local orchestral competition when I was maybe eleven, playing the Haydn D Major.

At that age, I think I focused on whether I played the right notes, the tempo, dynamics, and other technical issues, rather than the overall quality of the playing and whether it was particularly effec-

tive, moving, thrilling, etc. Given the context of the performance, I guess I was also thinking whether it was good enough to meet whatever standard the judges had in mind.

A special aspect of this first experience, if it was indeed the first, was that I was accompanied by my piano teacher, who played the orchestral part. Thus, it was inevitable that, in listening to myself, the sound of her playing alongside me served as an immediate benchmark of my own performance. I strongly recall how fluid and driving her playing was during the *tutti*s, and secretly hoping that the judges didn't think she sounded so good that I sounded relatively terrible and incompetent.

Ultimately, while listening to the tape, I probably impressed myself for having gotten through the competition audition, my first one, with no major technical errors, although I do remember wishing that I simply somehow would sound better and more musical or professional, like my teacher, even though I likely had no clue what that meant or really how to achieve it, short of re-birth and a complete genetic transplant. Although I'm Asian-American, even back then I sensed that hard work, perseverance, and ambition could only take me so far.

While the real-time act of listening to the tape also provided an occasion to reflect silently on all of these things, I'm not sure that I wouldn't have considered or weighed these things without the tape. It certainly served as one additional means of judging whether I had accomplished the specific goal of that performance, although it didn't necessarily override whatever independent assessment I'd made in my own mind as I left the room. I probably had some other emotions while listening to the tape, principally a sense of egotistical excitement at simply hearing oneself perform, in the way that people like seeing themselves on TV or reflected in a mirror. In that regard, I no doubt also felt some disappointment, and perhaps most of all, a sense of my own musical limitations, which perhaps didn't (and still doesn't) strike me so directly when I'm merely playing for myself at the keyboard.

Even back then, as a child, I think I was a little frustrated by the primitive nature of the portable recording technology—this was the early '70s—knowing that the tape had captured only the basics but probably not the real nuances of my playing, if there were any in my breakneck performance, and secretly wondered

what it would have been like if there had been some “real” recording equipment in the room. So, in that sense, I think I probably reserved myself a little hope that perhaps I might actually sound better than I did on the tape, and that somehow I’d improve, depending on the recording conditions.

(2) Have you ever particularly enjoyed hearing yourself play?

[I have enjoyed hearing myself] from time to time, although the predominant feeling in those cases is probably satisfaction, rather than true pleasure at what I’m hearing. Indeed, when listening to a recording of myself, I’m most pleased when I think I sound better than I thought I played. In those cases, I sheepishly confess that it’s the surprise and pride in the playing that pleases me most, the sense that I didn’t utterly fail, if it’s a live recording [and] the playing was any good by so-called objective standards. Since I’m only a part-time professional musician, my personal standards tend to relate to my own playing and goals, and less to others, so the greatest pleasure, if it can be called that, when hearing myself play well occurs when I don’t even recognize myself. This feeling perhaps reflects a not uncommon desire to be someone else, to transform oneself, either willfully or by chance, into another musical character or persona. When I hear something that I don’t normally recognize in my playing when I’m practicing, it holds out the promise that I might be able to repeat the experience through dint of effort or planning, and often serves as motivation to practice a little bit more, or commit to the idea that I have the capability to create something that would please me as well as others.

Perhaps the happiest performance and recording experiences I’ve had have been accompanying singers or others, doing several takes, and hearing the results of that collaboration. Overall, I think I tend to be a responsive player and am pleased when I can help the other performer(s) establish a mood or feeling that I would’ve been too distracted or unfocused to create if left on my own. For me, the better qualities of playing come out in such collaborative moments, and there is pleasure in the mere fact that the moment has been captured and can be aurally recreated. This is [particularly gratifying] in the case where I’m accompanying on a demo, the very goal of which is to show the other performer in his or her best light, so I’m happy if I can honestly say, after listening to the tape,

that I think I held up my end of the bargain. Of course, it doesn't always work out that way, but when it does, it's a huge relief!

(3) Have you ever hated hearing yourself play?

As they say, "hate" is a strong word! But of course. I've also been discouraged, frustrated, disappointed, and sad. You realize how much you don't know, especially about how to "fix" or supply what's missing. Usually it's things you thought went well at the time, but then you have the mirror to give you the "true" reflection. To compensate, you begin to wonder whether it's not really as bad as you think it is. But even when you hate what you've heard, you're usually glad you listened anyway, for the reality check, rather than have to wonder in the abstract what it sounded like.

(4) Has hearing yourself play ever been a decidedly mixed experience?

Yep, see above.

(5) Has the experience of hearing yourself play changed over time?

Absolutely. I'm a firm believer that the first time, you hear the truth. The second time and thereafter, you learn the truth. Somehow, in subsequent hearings, you can rationalize what sounded wrong on the first hearing and understand the reasons why your first impression may be unfair or simply wrong. On the other hand, sometimes first impressions are correct.

I've also been pleasantly surprised that, when the right recording equipment is used, the piano is in tune, and other external circumstances are favorable, a performance does indeed usually sound better, something I've come to accept over time. I had this realization listening to historic recordings, where the technology sometimes gives the lie to even the greatest performers. I remember the first time I heard a Josef Hoffman recording, then later hearing him on a less than fabulous instrument on a sonically terrible disc. I couldn't believe it was the same person, and I'm sure his standards were more consistent than the average player.

(6) To what extent have your reactions depended upon what you're playing?

I definitely have higher standards when playing scored music, rather than when improvising in whole or part. The former tends

to be more challenging technically for me, so it's easier to be disappointed.

Unlike mine, which involved a single microphone in a recording studio (plus, I suppose, all those other kids), Alex's initial experience of self-audition—at about the same age—involved serving not one, not two, but *multiple* masters. It involved having to please both his teacher and all those competition judges. I'd have been traumatized, which Alex clearly wasn't. But of course he's always been the better player. Still, I'm not surprised he'd rather not have to do such a thing. Nowadays, he writes, “my personal standards tend to relate to my own playing and goals, and less to others.” In other words, he's learned to serve one master alone—his own ego-ideal. Nor am I surprised that the experience sparked a desire on his part, thankfully satisfied, to take that teacher's place. Like her, back then, he's become the kind of accompanist who secretly out-performs the soloist and, in doing so, displays her to advantage. “The happiest performance and recording experiences I've had,” he writes, “has been accompanying singers or others, doing several takes, and hearing the results of that collaboration.” In other words, Alex has *become* his own ego-ideal: Ana Maria Trenchi de Bottazzi, *c'est moi*.

The most interesting aspect of this response may be that, without any prompting on my part, Alex describes self-audition in Lacanian terms. He imagines musical recordings as specular: “you have the mirror,” he writes, “to give you the ‘true’ reflection.” And he articulates both the jubilation and the loss that accompany mirror-stage misrecognition. He notes, that is, both “egotistical excitement at simply hearing oneself perform, in the way that people like seeing themselves on TV or reflected in a mirror” and “disappointment [at] my own musical limitations, which perhaps didn't (and still doesn't) strike me so directly when I'm merely playing for myself at the keyboard.” But whereas for Lacan the infant sees a first mirror image as better than himself, on some level, Alex imagined that first recording as worse. (Due to the primitive nature of the portable technology, “[he] probably reserved [himself] a little hope that [he] might actually sound better than [he] did on the tape.”) And whereas for Lacan it's the sense of loss, the sense we'll never measure up to that mirror image, that truly marks our lives to come, for Alex, on balance, it's been the sense of jubilation. “It's the surprise and pride

in the playing that pleases me most," he admits. How so? How is this possible? It's possible, of course, because he plays so well. It's possible because he now serves that one master. But it's also possible because, unlike Robert, Alex actually *prefers* estrangement to self-recognition. Like an attentive reader of a good novel—or like Flaubert himself (*Madame Bovary, c'est moi*)—he most enjoys having been imbued with otherness. "The greatest pleasure...when hearing myself play well," Alex writes, "occurs when I don't even recognize myself. This feeling perhaps reflects a not uncommon desire to be someone else, to transform oneself, either willfully or by chance, into another musical character or persona." It would be interesting to know if he doesn't recognize himself even when listening to those recordings of improvisations, as opposed to other people's compositions ("scored music"), but Alex doesn't address the issue. (Nor does he indicate the nature of the improvisations. Are they classical? Are they jazz?) Since it's easier to transform oneself into another person when reading a novel than when devising one—trust me, I speak from experience—I'd imagine he doesn't recognize himself then. But this may be a false analogy. Improvising music isn't exactly composition, nor is it much like writing a novel. It's more like telling a story.

Alex and I had different piano teachers at Juilliard. But we shared one at Yale: a woman named Deborah Dewey. Deborah still teaches, and performs. And although her response is quite short, it's as interesting as that of Alex—which, by the way, it resembles. Our teacher also had an initial, mirror-stage-like experience. Note, for example, the double sense of jubilation and loss, as well as the *delighted* sense of alienation, that attended her first self-audition. "It was a combination of being shocked and delighted," Deborah writes. "Someone was playing wrong notes and/but they expressed the music exactly the way I thought it should be! It was disconcerting to have the inaccuracies preserved, yet *strangely satisfying* to hear someone breathe the way I do" (emphasis added). The uncanny ability to hear this "someone" breathe anticipates, moreover, Deborah's eventual ability to hear that person—more attuned to the piano's vocal aspect than to its percussive one—sing. Sometimes, after waiting long enough not to remember having made the recording, much like the writer who waits long enough not to read his work as crap, which in her case is "at least a year," Deborah does

enjoy hearing herself. If the piece is difficult, she enjoys hearing herself meet the technical challenges. But mostly, she writes, “the pleasure [comes] from being able to relax and *be sung to* in a familiar way” (emphasis added). But even that initial sense of loss, which of course never goes away, is rather felicitous for Deborah—both inevitable and inspirational. Because even when she hears “nuances that I’ve ignored, or places where my sound could have been more varied, or wrong notes,” Deborah finds it “inspiring to know that there is always more to think about.” And even though, over time, “some of the athleticism has waned,” she’s become increasingly “aware that...perfection is, in fact, unattainable”—something it’s “easier to [accept] now.”

At this point, I have to say that the sense of loss that accompanies mirror-stage misrecognition isn’t really the same thing as the loss that accompanies self-audition. In the former, we sense that we’re not—on some level, that we’ll never be—as integrated, as functional, or as perfect as the image we see reflected. In the latter, of course, we sense such non-integration, dysfunction, and imperfection in both ourselves and the relatively accurate recordings we’ve made. But I’m not sure this distinction makes much difference. Just as the mirror stage initiates what Lacan calls an *asymptotic* trajectory—the course of a lifetime in which we both attempt to approximate that imaginary perfection and manage to feel we do, to a greater and greater extent—self-audition can prompt a long, if ultimately unfulfillable career of self-improvement. The difference, if there is one, is that whereas the trajectory, for Lacan, is usually rather depressing (and sometimes farcical), the career, as Deborah indicates, can be quite encouraging.

My college friend Jesse Green—now a professional writer—provided a most unusual response. More specifically, Jesse had an odd, almost Gouldian experience of which his having been a self-taught musician appears to have been determinative. As with Alex, I’ll give that response in full. Unlike Alex, Jesse answered all six questions at once:

I gave up on piano lessons after six weeks when I was very little and therefore, even when I later began to be interested in playing and found I had a good ear, I had no technique at all. It wasn’t just a matter of slow fingers but of some fundamental multi-chan-

nel wiring that had never been installed. I could play show tunes because there were almost never any inner voices or contrary motion to confound me. But when I discovered Sondheim, my oom-pah left hand technique wasn't going to suffice anymore—let alone when I later became interested in Bach fugues. I tried to imagine that each voice was its own little train, with its own little conductor leading a merry path, but the entrance of any third voice derailed me.

So I started recording myself. That is, on a cassette recorder, I'd make a tape of myself playing one voice (or, in simpler music, one hand) at a time. Then I'd play it back and add another voice (or the other hand) live. In this way—sometimes rerecording on another machine and continuing the process—I was able to simulate the experience of hearing myself play complicated music. Without that cassette recorder I would never have experienced even that much.

It did, in part, feel fraudulent; why not just listen to a professional recording? But frauds by definition participate (more or less successfully) in the same reality as what we call genuine, and the experience had its own kind of profundity. For the first time I felt what it was like to be inside the stream of the music. I began to understand the fractioning of consciousness that is the burden and joy of this great music. Not fractioning, perhaps: that's why it was not quite genuine. The real experience of a fugue is the pleating of consciousness: expansion and overlaying. Fractioning was the closest simulation I could achieve. And yet without that cassette recorder I would never have experienced even that much.

Then, too, I could actually master a single voice of Bach, or a single hand of Chopin. Dynamics and phrasing and expressiveness became possible. Hearing myself in the finished laminate, I felt like the handicapped people I'd read about, people who would briefly, only in a dream, access the joy of running or leaping. Or like the boy I still was in my own dreams, who, released from the shackles of a physical or neurological limitation, could fly.

If Jesse's experience of such self-audition was determined by his having been self-taught, his *understanding* of the experience is determined by his writerly—by which I mean poetic—sensibility. He's not limited to figuring the music in static, visual terms, nor to fig-

uring musical recordings as mirror images. Instead, he likens each voice in polyphonic music to “its own little train, with its own little conductor leading a merry path.” Even better, he likens such music to an aquatic “stream” inside of which his semi-fraudulent playing enables him to either float or swim. (Jesse doesn’t specify which.) The word “stream” seems to suggest the word “consciousness”—as in “stream of consciousness.” But “stream of consciousness” can’t have described his experience of self-audition very well, because Jesse suggests “fractioning” of consciousness instead—as opposed, that is, to the “pleating” of consciousness he thinks non-fraudulent playing must entail. I’m reminded of a scene in Jesse’s novel *O Beautiful*, where an alter-ego says to himself:

Consciousness is not a stream. It’s more like a canal. You’re not carried along randomly by currents, you sit in a thought until it drops steeply down into a different thought, discrete from the first. The path is arranged and the water is still. It’s not a stream, it’s a system of locks. (237)

Finally, and rather beautifully, Jesse likens listening to himself—or rather to part of himself on tape, with another part at the keyboard—to both dreaming he could run, were he as physically challenged as he is, in fact, technically, and, even better, dreaming he can fly. I’m reminded of another writer, Annie Dillard, who, in *The Writing Life*, analogizes both composing (monophonic) music and working well at another keyboard—her typewriter or computer—to being a skilled stunt pilot, as well as both listening to such music and reading literature (possibly, after enough time has passed, her own) to watching such a display.

I met Burkhard Bastuck—another attorney and, like Alex, a far more accomplished musician—shortly after I got that J.D. from Columbia. We were both first-year associates at a rather awful law firm. Burkhard got married in our second year there—to another pianist—and, as his best friend at the time, I got to be best man. I’d have to say he’s the least neurotic of all my respondents. I say this not because the rest are crazy, but because he’s the sanest person I’ve ever met. He’s also very German. Like me, and at about the same age, Burkhard first heard himself on the radio. The Schumann solo “sounded okay,” he reports, even though “there

were little glitches that I was not aware of when playing.” But when he first heard himself perform a concerto, the Mozart sounded wonderfully “grown up [and] professional, [mostly] because of the combined solo/orchestra sound.” In fact, he’s never hated hearing himself. Nor has Burkhard ever been “disappointed” by an entire piece because while he’s been annoyed by “little accidents that [he hadn’t] noticed during the [performance], such as one note jumping out of a line, or [his] touching a neighboring key,” for the most part it’s been by matters beyond his control. Recordings—all live, so far—are never as good as he wants them to be, the sound quality in particular, because the recordings aren’t professional. “I’m a perfectionist,” Burkhard explains, but a perfectionist who’s rarely had to “struggle.” Quite sane, you see, not to mention lucky.

After about four years at that firm, I left law for literary criticism. While in graduate school at Brown, I met Michael Lucey, now a French professor at Berkeley. Like me, Michael works in sexuality studies. Unlike me, but like Alex, he’s become interested in improvisation—jazz improvisation, which, as you’re about to hear, has altered his experience of self-audition:

I can’t remember the first experience of hearing myself play because it’s something my first piano teacher did regularly—in preparation for various annual piano competitions or recitals in which she would have her students participate. It was just a regular ritual in the months before any particular competition or performance. Out would come the reel-to-reel tape deck with the big white buttons, and off we’d go. I’m not sure I had any detailed sense of how it was supposed to be helpful.

It was a fairly routine experience that I don’t remember as being particularly painful early on, though it became so as the years went by and my ability to hold increasingly complex pieces in memory didn’t keep up with my ability to read them with the music in front of me. The experience of listening to myself did become more painful over the years, as it came to be associated with anxieties about memory or, after the fact, with embarrassment over memory failures. The anxiety seemed even worse in the case of actual major recitals which, for some reason, it seemed obligatory to record. In the immediate aftermath of those record-

ings they seemed only to be the records of the moments in which something went wrong.

On the other hand, the playing, I now realize, was often quite fine, even when a big blooper was only a few moments away. Part of me knew that at the time, but couldn't acknowledge it. The process of arranging to record recitals was thus a weird one: it aggravated the anxiety around the performance, held out the promise of masochistic post-recital self-dissection, and held out the impossible-to-fully-acknowledge pleasures of hearing myself to be a musical player.

I can remember the experience of a musician friend of mine seeing I had a shelf full of tapes of old recital performances, having to force me to play one for her—of a Bach *French Suite*—this being four or five years after the recital. Having forgotten the actual performance by that point, I was astonished to be able to listen to the performance with equanimity and even pleasure, even if the pleasure was a hard one to avow. My friend, in an odd gesture, I'm sure having sensed my ambivalence about possessing this set of recordings of myself, asked if she might keep the tape—thereby unburdening me of it, and even allowing me to miss having it.

In recent years I've been working a lot on jazz piano, where there's a different relation to recording. You learn solos from recordings as a form of ear training in melody, harmony, and rhythm. It's part of a process of stylistic development. You listen to yourself in relation to other people's recordings in order to see how much you can hear and match from those recordings, not only in terms of the same notes, but in terms of time-feel, texture, swing, rhythmic nuance, and so on. To me it feels like more of a game, more fun, more of a learning experience for the ears and fingers, less ego-based and less anxiety-ridden.

Learning to play jazz has also been great for developing my practical sense of harmony and form which is a big help when I return to classical playing and am drawn to learning pieces differently because I understand them and hear them along multiple axes that weren't quite so available to me when taping was about testing your memory and verifying you were playing all the notes right without speeding up too much or slowing down. Recording and listening to myself isn't part of my practice in relation to classical

music these days. I'm not sure how I would understand and use recording if I were to use it again in my classical playing.

Three things strike me as particularly significant here. First, all Michael seems to recall listening for in classical recordings are memory lapses. Only at the very end does he admit that such self-audition was about “verifying you were playing all the notes right without speeding up too much or slowing down” as well as about “testing your memory.” So the term “memory” must function here as a kind of shorthand. It’s a figure of speech—to be precise, a metonymy or synecdoche—for all sorts of things that go wrong, or that could have been done better, in performance. As such, it’s indicative of a mind-over-matter mind-set, of a Cartesian approach to both the physics and metaphysics of pianism—to its mechanical as well as cerebral aspects. Of course, one expects such things from intellectuals. More importantly, however, the approach is to blame—or credit, depending on your point of view—for an understanding of self-audition in which it’s always one’s mind that’s at fault, never one’s body, or the piano’s body, or even that of the tape recorder. That can get to be, as it seems to have been for Michael, pretty hard on the ego—especially when, for some reason, he found it nearly impossible to acknowledge any musicality. So it’s not surprising—and here’s the second thing that strikes me—that he describes classical self-audition as both “ego-based” and (therefore) “anxiety-ridden.” How could it not be? The third is that listening to himself play jazz is much less ego-based, even though Michael describes such improvisation as more tied to the imitation of other pianists than playing classical music must have been. I wish I knew his secret. I’d find the self-conscious imitation of Art Tatum on my part far more anxiety-ridden than the relatively unself-conscious imitation of, say, Artur Rubinstein.

That’s it for improvisers, for now. Now for composers. Thomas, the only respondent to analogize musical self-audition to hearing himself speak, is a music professor at The University of Iowa. The sound of Thomas’s playing at ten or twelve (shockingly “inaccurate and without grace or tone”) seemed to him not unlike the “awful” sound of his voice—neither of which he knew “how to improve.” Maybe, he reflects, it was some inner “striving” for—or as Roland Barthes once put it, *hallucination* of—perfection that made the real-

ization he wasn't even close all the more striking. (Barthes was an amateur pianist—and singer—who wrote a lot about his playing.) And although self-audition can still resemble that initial experience (Thomas “recently recorded some...works in Moscow,” where the sound engineer provided a “reality check” by pointing out “this could be better,’ ‘don’t bang,’ ‘softer approach,’ etc.”), he doesn’t really need recordings anymore to tell him where he’s “fucked up.” He already knows where, and so rarely listens to them. This has to be because Thomas did figure out how to improve. “I’m [no longer] shocked, or disappointed,” he writes; “I guess I know what I still need to work on, and what I do well.” It’s also because some playing doesn’t really matter to him anymore:

[M]y reactions are more vivid when I have invested a lot of time and energy into something, but found them wanting. For instance, I have to learn a difficult two-piano work for a concert in two weeks. I really don’t give a shit if it goes well or not. The music is awful and I don’t know why I said yes...but there you are.

“On the other hand,” he admits, “I have to make a recording in Vienna this summer, and I’m really concerned with the Debussy Violin Sonata, and trying to play perfectly two bars in the second movement. I *am* going to get it right, because it counts—it’s important for me to prove that I *can* do it.” Prove to whom, I wonder.

Such insouciance, I imagine, is due in large part to the fact that Thomas’s creativity is far more central to his musical self-identification than any re-creativity. If I’m right, if Thomas “doesn’t give a shit” about some playing because he’s basically a composer, or because he now *sees himself* as one, primarily, this suggests another difference between the mirror stage and self-audition—one, moreover, that really does make a difference. Whereas the infant’s ego, according to Lacan, is first formed by specular misrecognition, by the time we first hear ourselves (not to mention all the times thereafter) our ego, or identity, has already been formed in other ways as well—ways, moreover, that complicate our relation to sonic reflection. It’s been formed by identifications with people other than ourselves—with teachers, for example, or with various composers and performers. If we’re old enough to be existentialist, it’s been formed by actions performed in either good faith or bad. (An

example of good faith performance might be Thomas's part in that Debussy; an example of bad might be his part in that "awful" duo.) If we've played piano long enough, it's been formed by an almost post-human sense of ourselves as cyborgs: part man (or woman), part instrument. And it's been formed by ideological interpellations that have us occupy various subject positions, some of them somewhat incompatible—like that of "amateur" and "virtuoso." Or "student" and "teacher." Or "composer" and "pianist." Of course, such subjection can be site specific. You can self-identify as a teacher when you give a master class in the morning and then as a student when you take one in the afternoon. You can be a composer when you write a sonata in the evening and then a pianist when you record one the next day. Which is why, in that Viennese studio but only there, Thomas will have had to "prove" he can do those bars perfectly. Prove to himself, of course.

Noam Elkies is a math professor at Harvard. We met a few years ago when I had a fellowship there. (We'd also been at Juilliard together, but without knowing it at the time. Nor does Alex remember him. Beth does, though.) Noam agrees that there's "a continuum rather than a divide" between amateurs and professionals, largely because whereas he doesn't consider himself a virtuoso he's way "beyond what [the term] 'amateur' usually connotes." (He also wonders both if better pianists (like him) are "more self-critical" than ones like me and if they're "better... partly *because*... more self-critical.") And since Noam neither specifies nor suggests whether (or, more to the point, where and when) he identifies more as a composer than as a pianist (or mathematician), or more as a pianist than as a composer (or mathematician), I suppose it's possible he sees himself as both (if not all three), all the time, and all at once—much as he sees himself (if only as a pianist) as both amateur and virtuoso. (When Barthes is bothered by such oppositions, he tries to find what he calls some *third term*. I suspect that Noam feels the need for one as well. "Polymath" might do.) But he certainly doesn't have what Beth calls an "all-or-nothing" (quasi-spatial) attitude to performance, and so nothing like mirror imagery—let alone the mirror stage—comes to mind.

Although Noam's parents, he writes, "still have tape[s] of me playing things like movements from the Anna Magdalena book when I was about four," he doesn't recall hearing any such recording

for the first time. Nor did self-audition ever become a big enough part of his musical life for him to discern a trend in how his reactions may have changed over time. This is due, in part, to his never having had a lot of “time to spend listening to [any] recordings...let alone [to] recordings of [himself].” It’s also due to Noam’s suspicion “that spending a lot of time listening to [oneself carries] a taint of narcissism.” Not that he’s worried *he’d* find the experience too pleasurable. He’s worried that *other people* might think he did—that other people might mischaracterize, misrecognize, or interpellate him as a narcissist even though he’s too self-critical, too much of a composer, and too much of a collaborator to be one:

I’d have to say that in general the experience [of self-audition] is practically always mixed, and unavoidably so since it comprises many events over some length of time—it’s not like a work of visual art where one can at least have the illusion of seeing everything at once and being entirely delighted or disgusted. I’m a sufficiently imperfect and self-critical pianist that in any recording there’s bound to be some misjudgments and false notes to cringe at, and sufficiently good that there’s usually some parts I can enjoy re-hearing. This also means that the experience depends—but in an entirely obvious way—on what and how well I played. [And if] it’s not a solo piece then there’s also the element of enjoyment or dislike of the other performers’ contribution. [S]imilarly, if it’s my own music [being performed] then there’s also the element of self-judgment of the composition.

Noam must listen to any such recordings when alone—on the rare occasions, that is, when he does listen. Why, then, does he imagine other people—the ones he worries might mischaracterize him as a narcissist—watching him listen? Why, rather, does he imagine other people watching when he imagines himself listening? And just who are they? Those parents of his, still holding on to all those tapes? Perhaps. But I don’t know Noam—nor do I know his parents—well enough to say so.

We have three more people to hear from. Jay Gottlieb and Marioara Trifan are professionals I’ve only ever met on the internet—so all I really know about them is what they’ve chosen to say in response to my questions. Like Robert, Beth, and Deborah, Jay sensed alien-

ation at first. But that lessened over time, as he came to blame literal others (tuners and technicians, sound engineers) instead of some figurative or imaginary one for any self-sabotage—Jay’s word. Like Jesse, he has a poetic sensibility. Jay, too, deploys an original, non-specular figure for self-audition. For Jesse it’s like imagining he can fly; for Jay it’s like being submerged. Like Burkhard, he’s pretty happy with himself, for the most part. Like Alex and Michael, he’s an improviser as well as performer. Like Thomas and Noam, he’s a performer as well as a composer. Unlike Noam, however, Jay finds these identities distinct. And he now sees himself as more of a performer—a possibly asymptotic, possibly cataclysmic development that’s certainly changed self-audition for him.

“The first time I heard myself playing,” Jay writes, “I had the impression of hearing myself playing under water. As if the *reality* of my usual control of the pianistic situation was out of my hands, literally, and someone else was doing the playing for me, and sabotaging my efforts. Very painful.” Self-audition can still be painful. Jay’s hated it when he’s not “in really top form,” or when he’s played a faulty, badly-tuned, or poorly-regulated instrument, or when he’s dealt with bad sound engineering or acoustics. But only somewhat painful. He likes it when he is in “really top form”—when, as Jay puts it, “every aspect of my playing pleased me immensely”—even if the “sound range chosen by the engineer was so limited that the result was as if the grandeur were occurring in a fish bowl.” (There’s that submersion again.) He *loves* it—in fact he’s “elated”—when “every intention has been served, [and] the piano was perfect, the sound as well.” This has been especially so with recordings of live improvisations. “Since there is, in addition to a pianist, a composer in me,” Jay explains, “there exists the possibility to create the split which provides a healthy distance between conception and realization.” Such enjoyment, however, was really “a sense of relief: no betrayal.” (Any “elation,” then, isn’t what Lacan meant by jubilation. Infants can’t see a mirror image as *faithful*. Nor can they sense *relief*.) And now that he identifies as a performer, primarily, such love, such narcissism perhaps...well, let’s have Jay describe it first:

[The experience of hearing myself play has changed insofar as it’s] linked with an increased sense of identity as a pianist. Over time, what was crucial was being able to consider myself a bona

fide pianist, and not just a “composer who plays.” The period that precedes this epiphany is one in which hearing myself was not particularly rewarding: like listening to an impostor. [But] with solid work and eventual mastery, the pleasure came.

So the development—ontologically speaking—was both asymptotic and cataclysmic. Jay’s latest identification, as a pianist, both “increased . . . over time” and required a fair amount of “solid work.” But it was “epiphanic”—his word—as well. You wake up one morning and—*boom!*—suddenly you’re a pianist. This apparent contradiction is less unusual than you might think. Another aspect of *any* post-mirror-stage identity formation is that we conceive it, like music, in both spatial and temporal terms. We think of *being* who we are (at some imaginary point in time) as well as of *becoming* who we are (a gradual process death alone terminates). Hopefully, at some point along the way, like Jay—also like Jesse, with his realization he wasn’t “fraudulent”—we stop thinking of ourselves as mere “impostors.” If, in fact, we ever did think that way.

“I’ve been sitting here for about a quarter of an hour trying to remember *when* it was that I first heard myself play,” writes Marioara Trifan. “It mustn’t have been a particularly traumatic experience, otherwise I wouldn’t have any trouble remembering!” Marioara does, however, recall one teacher—Dieter Weber—who in addition to individual instruction held class once a week. Whoever wanted or needed to play did so, and the performances were all recorded. Then—before going home—they’d all listen to the tapes. “Doing this,” she feels, “was better than any other kind of lesson.”

On the other hand, it “didn’t do much for my ongoing relationship with microphones.” And so—nowadays—Marioara doesn’t particularly enjoy studio recording. “I tend to ‘freeze up’ in the conscious presence of a microphone, [which] surely has to do with the implied and/or enhanced expectations of perfection.” She does, however, enjoy recordings of herself perform—as during class. Almost always, “what I’m hearing was what I was feeling as I was playing.” Almost always, “the recording is the proof that the concert was indeed better than I’d feared.” Almost always, “I’d achieved what I had set out to do.” The sole exception, a 1980 concert in Heilbronn: “I’d wanted to take a section [in the first Tchaikovsky concerto] very fast and was frustrated when the conductor had trouble keeping

up with me. I was convinced that this was the right way for me to play it. Listening to my 'homemade' recording later I got very upset with myself." Not that Marioara—nowadays—listens to the other recordings uncritically. ("I'm aware of my own characteristics as a pianist and hypersensitive to them. I get very irritated with myself if a negative characteristic manifests itself, especially if it's one with which I'm familiar.") Nor does she listen to them repeatedly. The recordings "are just there, and I'm glad I have them as a chronicle of my life and moments in my career, but at the same time I'm not a musical narcissist, nor am I a 'nostalgia buff' constantly looking back at moments of past 'glory.'" Yesterday's concert, she adds, is yesterday's news.

Marioara's response doesn't call for much symptomatic reading. The woman understands herself better than I could claim to. She's a perfectionist, but not obsessive. She likes "hearing" what she "felt" in performance—call it the synesthesia of self-audition. She's self-critical and hypersensitive, but neither narcissistic nor nostalgic. She now realizes that she took the Tchaikovsky way too fast—much like Horowitz under Beecham. (Maybe it was his debut that made her rush.) I would, however, like to suggest a connection between Marioara's inability to recall the first time she heard herself on tape—the failure, that is, to have been "traumatized" by such an experience (her word)—and her enviable realism. Never having misrecognized herself in any sonic mirror, nor ever having "hallucinated perfection" (to paraphrase Barthes), Marioara is in a good position—a perfect position, in fact—to claim with neither false modesty nor smugness, as she does claim in conclusion: "my reactions to my own playing have pretty much borne out what I've always known." No mirror stage, no ego problem.

Our final respondent is Julie Tabatabai. Of them all, Julie—a multi-talented medical practitioner living, as I do, in Grinnell, Iowa (she's the former wife of my partner David)—is probably most like me: the same early aspirations, the same musical limitations, the same mental disposition. Their three sons, for example, find it funny that both she and I, in their view, are basically control freaks. (Jay's one too, in his view.) The kids also think we're obsessive. So it's no surprise her answers pretty much coincide with—or reflect—my own. All she recalls being concerning with, hearing herself play for the first time, was if she'd made any mistakes. In fact, all she's

ever really listened for has been “mistakes, missed notes, wrong interpretations, wrong tempi, whatever.” And so, although she has played a few recitals where “everything came together beautifully,” Julie’s always basically hated hearing herself recorded. (Unless it’s been a *voice* recital.) Julie’s both troubled and mystified by such self-hatred. “I’m sure that I’m more critical of myself than anyone else would ever be,” she writes. “Why is that?” One explanation may be found in her answer to question five: Has the experience of hearing yourself play changed over time? “I haven’t played for an audience for quite some time and the thought of doing so or being recorded would terrify me,” she writes—notwithstanding those times when everything worked beautifully.

I’d be so critical that it wouldn’t be a pleasurable experience. I never liked performing even when I was regularly doing so. I think the development of increased anxiety over hearing myself play is because it’s out of my comfort zone now. If I were more laid back, I’m sure I could listen to myself play, with all the mistakes, and think it was pretty good for someone who hasn’t done that in a while. Instead, I’m a perfectionist and would be much too critical. No excuses would suffice.

You see, I’ve never liked performing either. At least, not at the keyboard. Or rather, not *solo* work at the keyboard. And so, on those relatively few occasions when I’ve listened to myself play such things for an audience, the only “feelings” I hear (to invoke Marioara’s synesthesia), the only “sensations” I “relive” (to quote Robert), are ones of both physical and metaphysical discomfort. So I guess it’s a good thing we stopped. It’s a good thing Julie and I now play for—now please (to quote Pogorelich)—ourselves alone. No audience. No microphone.

Now for my conclusion. I don’t think we’ve seen a basic gender difference reflected here. Nor have we seen a sonic mirror stage across the board. Some people have such a primal and possibly traumatic experience, some people don’t—which is to say that my own experience wasn’t *completely* idiosyncratic. I also have to say I’m not surprised. What does surprise me is that, having listened closely to all my respondents, I’m not so sure the ability to hear yourself recorded is very good for anyone. Despite Alex telling me that it’s

a great “reality check” and Marioara telling me it’s a great teaching device, I can’t help but think that most of us—Burkhard aside, *Gilels* aside—would have fewer ego problems without that ability. Call me nostalgic, but not for “yesterday’s concert.” I’m now somewhat nostalgic for the time when the only sonic mirrors available were other pianists—the parents, siblings, teachers, friends, and colleagues who’d both “show” us what we’re doing wrong and tell us how to fix it. Can you even imagine such a thing?

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