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25 August 2021

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Harling-Lee, Katie (2021) 'Caught in the Regime: Classical Music and the Individual in the Contemporary Novel.', *Open Library of Humanities*, 7 (2).

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.4685>

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Harling-Lee, K 2021 Caught in the Regime: Classical Music and the Individual in the Contemporary Novel. *Open Library of Humanities*, 7(2): 5, pp. 1-23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.4685>



Open Library of Humanities

Caught in the Regime: Classical Music and the Individual in the Contemporary Novel

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The twenty-first century has seen the identification and development of a new literary genre: the musico-literary novel, defined as a novel thematically concerned with music (Harling-Lee, 2020). As a comparative case study, this article considers two musico-literary novels set during conflict: *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (Thien, 2016) and *The Noise of Time* (Barnes, 2017). Set, respectively, in Communist China and the Soviet Union, two communist regimes which historically targeted classical music and musicians, the novels use their conflict contexts as a springboard to explore existential—and existentialist—crises concerning the survival of the self in relation to music. Following Adler and Ippolito's proposal that 'extreme cases are valuable in revealing phenomena that are often camouflaged in less extreme ... more familiar circumstances' (Adler and Ippolito, 2016), analysis of the novels' representations of classical music reveals the powerful potential that music is presumed, by the popular imagination, to offer. With a focus on individual composers and performers, the novels depict classical music as a source of personal identity that is relied upon by individuals for personal and existential expression; for when the state threatens a character's musical life in these novels, it also threatens a character's sense of self. Due to the legacy of absolute music, classical music is seen as a source of hope through its potential autonomy from 'meaning' even as it promises to be a refuge for the self, embodying a paradox that becomes central to the representation of western classical music in the popular imagination of the contemporary musico-literary novel.



Introduction

In the novels *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016a) by Madeleine Thien and *The Noise of Time* (2017) by Julian Barnes, musicians caught in the midst of a communist regime are concerned with the survival of their identity, mortally and in memory: ‘It is one thing to suffer, another thing to be forgotten’ (Thien, 2016a: 178). The novels tie identity to classical music – understood in the ‘vernacular’ (Bull, 2019: xvii) – moving between contextual and abstract conceptions of the self under threat. Set during China’s Cultural Revolution (*Do Not Say We Have Nothing*) and the rise of the Soviet Union (*The Noise of Time*), two communist regimes which historically condemned canonical Western classical music as ‘bourgeois’, the novels focus on the fate of music and musicians in their respective settings. As ‘extreme cases are valuable in revealing phenomena that are often camouflaged in less extreme, ... more familiar circumstances’ (Adler and Ippolito, 2016: 60n4), the conflict contexts of the novels crystallise our understandings of the potentiality of (classical) music. Thus, while music’s ‘meaning’ is philosophically debatable (Kramer, 2001; Stock, 2007), analysis of representations of classical music in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and *The Noise of Time* — contemporary novels which are part of, and inform, the popular imagination¹ — reveals the powerful potential classical music is presumed, by the popular imagination, to offer, through its possible and ambivalent ‘meaning(s)’.

In their depiction of twentieth-century communist regimes, *The Noise of Time* and *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* focus on the violent actions taken against civilian musicians as the result of the Soviet and Chinese cultural revolutions. While many types of music were under threat during these revolutions, both novels focus primarily on classical music. Building on Marxist theories, the revolutionary aim was to make music ‘accessible’ to the masses, and Western classical music (in its widest sense) was seen as counter to such aims. The official Soviet regime attempted ‘to theorize all dimensions of artistic endeavour in Marxist terms’, subordinating ‘all creative agendas to the regime’s demand for popular mobilization’ (Nelson, 2004: 11). Similarly, the Chinese Communist Party claimed Western classical music was counter to their ideology, as it was ‘an elite cultural form enjoyed by the few’ and ‘contained decadent capitalist ideologies’ (Luo, 2018: 436–437). Soviet composers were criticised for not furthering ‘Soviet ideals’ when accused of composing ‘formalist’ music, a term which ‘had no established meaning’ (Puolakka, 2017: 49) yet was traditionally associated with Western music. The ambiguity of this term mirrored the instability of the Soviet context, characterised

¹ *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and *The Noise of Time* can be considered ‘popular high culture’: literary novels that appeal to scholars whilst also functioning as entertainment on the contemporary literary marketplace.

by political repression, cultural censorship, and the threat of the Gulag, and ‘disgust at these excesses naturally filtered through into the West’s reception of Soviet cultural production’ (Fairclough, 2019b: 157), a reception present in *The Noise of Time*. China’s communist regime was equally unstable, as seen in Thien’s depiction of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*’s ‘chaotic’ primary setting, the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–76), which was described as a ‘cultural wasteland’ (Lu, 2004: 2) where ‘the musical styles acceptable to the regime were limited’ (Clark, Pang and Tsai, 2016: 2).² The Chinese Cultural Revolution was ‘an attempt to completely destroy the existing bourgeois culture’, as Mao ‘adopted the Leninist practice of replacing bourgeois ideology with class consciousness’ (Lu, 2004: 4). Consequently, many civilians, including musicians, were condemned (as in the Soviet context), ‘human rights were wantonly violated, ... and crimes against humanity went unpunished’ (Lu, 2004: 5). In settings of political violence like these, the state threatens not only the physical security of individuals but also their psychological and moral security, the tripartite conditions required for ‘individual security’ during political violence (Wolfendale, 2012: 100–101). *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and *The Noise of Time* thus use their settings of political violence to explore the powerful potential of music by focusing on the imagined experience of musicians whose psychological and moral security is under threat. By depicting the repercussions for civilians when the state threatens the intellectual lives of musicians connected with Western classical music, the novels use the conflict setting as a springboard to explore existential — and existentialist — crises concerning the survival of the self in relation to music.

Word and Music studies — the analysis of music in literature — is an area which first focused on structural imitations of music in literary form (Wolf, 1999; Petermann, 2014). My methodological approach focuses on the thematic uses of music in literature, building on Benson (2006) and Smith (2016) to identify *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and *The Noise of Time* as ‘musico-literary novels’ — ‘a novel which thematically engages with musicological and music philosophy concerns throughout its narrative’ (Harling-Lee, 2020: 373). Benson argues that ‘literary music’, which is created by the literary narrative in which it is contained, ‘allows us to see, literally and literarily, how music is received as music’; thus, a fictional text can become ‘a record of why, where and how music is made, heard and received’ (Benson, 2006: 4). What I call the musico-literary

² These descriptions of communist culture fit the settings of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and *The Noise of Time*, reflecting the Western popular imagination of twentieth-century communist regimes. However, recent scholarship argues for a reconsideration of the cultural world of these settings. Clark, Pang and Tsai (2016) argue for a reassessment of cultural life during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, while Fairclough notes that pejorative reference to ‘socialist realist’ music can be ‘to some extent ... just another manifestation of still-unresolved mistrust and resentment towards music that appeals to a wide audience’ (Fairclough, 2019b: 158).

novel considers the instance of ‘literary music’ within the broader context of the novel as a whole (Harling-Lee, 2020: 373), while utilising Smith’s proposal to use ‘a broad spectrum of disciplines to augment the scope of the analysis’ (Smith, 2016: 7). As such, my analysis of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and *The Noise of Time* is informed by musicology and music philosophy, while maintaining a primarily literary perspective through which I analyse the novels’ shared themes of existentialist and mystical philosophy, as well as the significance of coded and ironic communications, as explored below.

Tying these themes together is the concept of ‘absolute music’, a significant musicological influence on both texts, yet one which has been generalised within the popular imagination. Richard Wagner pejoratively coined the term ‘absolute music’ in 1846 ‘to expose the [social] limitations of purely instrumental music’ (Bonds, 2014: 1); Eduard Hanslick then appropriated the term to refer, positively, to ‘the “true” music’ (Dahlhaus, 1991: 27). For Hanslick, absolute music ‘function[ed] as a refuge of pure beauty from the realm of the mundane. ... A theoretical justification for insulating music from the turmoil of social and political change [of 1848–49]’; it is now understood as the common term for ‘the idea of music’s essence as autonomous, self-contained, and wholly self-referential’ (Bonds, 2014: 3, 1). The concept has ‘shaped basic conceptions of what [Western] music is and how we respond to it’, particularly in the understanding of absolute music as ‘free from all contingencies’ (Bonds, 2014: 16, 298), and seeps into the popular imagination of classical music and instrumental music more generally. Hanslick identified instrumental music as absolute, but while he called for the rejection of vocal, titled, and programme music (Hanslick, 1986: 15), it is the instrumental element that is central to the popular imagination’s representations of classical music, for to be ‘free from all contingencies’ implies that, by one argument, music is without or apart from ‘meaning’, where abstraction, in this instance, is taken to be the absence of words. Yet ‘absolute music’ has a contradictory nature, for while Hanslick’s ‘purely musical idea’ may exist ‘for no other purpose than simply to be itself’ (Hanslick, 1986: 10), ‘we always listen to or think about music within a specific historical moment and cultural context’ (Bonds, 2014: 4). Benson identifies the common ‘notion of music as paradox’, where music can be ‘at once both palpably present and manifestly intangible’ (Benson, 2006: 90), and this paradoxical understanding of absolute music as being both/either autonomous and/or culturally and historically specific informs the novels’ depiction of (Western classical) music generally, and their depiction of music and identity. Frith identifies that ‘different sorts of musical activity [e.g., classical, popular] may produce different sorts of musical identity’ (Frith, 1996: 112). In *The Noise of Time* and *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* the characters’ ‘musical identity’ is part of the classical tradition, producing an identity which is tied to a generalised conception of absolute

music as potentially autonomous, and a potential refuge, made pertinent in the context of political conflict.³

A musical identity where music becomes a potential ‘refuge’ for an individual’s sense of self and existence touches on existentialist themes. *The Noise of Time* and *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* address both existential and existentialist themes in their characters’ lives: ‘existential’ refers to general existence, while ‘existentialist’ is a ‘philosophical attitude or mode of philosophical inquiry’ which ‘thematizes the problematic character of human existence in a world in which there is no pre-given source of meaning or significance’ (Malpas, 2012: 293). The revolutionary conflict context and the extreme shifts in ideology proposed by the Soviet and Chinese communist regimes, which questioned and uprooted established centres of authority, parallel the existentialist approach to a world with no ‘pre-given source of meaning’. As such, characters in *The Noise of Time* and *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* experience ‘the problematic situation of the solitary individual ... for whom the usual standards of morality and conduct, even the standards of reason itself, no longer seem to hold, and whose very existence is rendered uncertain and ambiguous’ (Malpas, 2012: 297). When faced with this ‘problematic situation’, an individual is thus concerned with ‘a condition of self-making’, known as existentialist authenticity, where ‘to be authentic can also be thought as a way of being autonomous’ (Crowell, 2020). When individual musical characters in *The Noise of Time* and *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* face an uncertain existence, classical music is represented as a medium which has powerful survival potential. This potential is informed by existential concepts tied to general ideas of classical (or absolute) music as autonomous: an autonomy which offers an individual hope and refuge when caught in an oppressive regime.

The Noise of Time

In *The Noise of Time*, Barnes imagines a fictional version of the Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich. Shostakovich’s music is not a common example of absolute music, and it is often construed within its communist context. ‘Untangling composers’ relationships with totalitarianism is a tricky exercise’ (Ross, 2008: 218), but for Barnes *The Noise of Time*’s difficult historical context became a creative exercise: ‘truth was a hard thing to find, let alone maintain, in Stalin’s Russia. ... This is highly frustrating to any biographer, but most welcome to any novelist’ (Barnes, 2017: 184). Barnes’s depiction of

³ Hoene (2020) identifies alternate ‘registers’ of absolute music in contemporary fiction, in which absolute music takes on an ‘implicit superior aesthetic status as compared to other kinds of music’, thus othering ‘other’ types of music (578–79). Contrastingly, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and *The Noise of Time* make use of absolute music’s paradoxical qualities, rather than its othering potential.

Shostakovich has been criticised, for ‘what got him keen on Shostakovich’ was reading the controversial *Testimony: The Memoirs of Shostakovich* by Solomon Volkov (Adams, 2016), a publication with contested reliability (Fay, 2000: 289n7). The publication of *Testimony* (Volkov, 1979), four years after Shostakovich’s death, ‘held out the promise of something ineffably precious to the Western side of the Cold War: evidence that the Russians’ greatest cultural icon had lived all his life in hatred and fear of Soviet power’ (Fairclough, 2019a: 9). Barnes’s reliance on *Testimony* is troublesome, if viewing *The Noise of Time* from a historical perspective, and Midgette criticises Barnes for ‘offer[ing] what amounts to an unquestioning echo of “Testimony’s” stance’, lacking extensive research into Shostakovich scholarship (Midgette, 2016). However, Barnes’s primary interest is not in the historical details, but the narrative potentiality of Shostakovich’s musical life: ‘Whatever the truth, it [*Testimony*] did make Barnes realize that “there was a novelistic side” to the Shostakovich story. ... “I think it’s the story, really, of a man who loses his soul. I think it’s a tragedy”’ (Adams, 2016). Barnes’s concern is thus not with Shostakovich as a person, but with the parable of an artist’s relationship with political upheaval.

The Noise of Time’s narrative ties the ontological question, ‘what is music?’, with an existential question: ‘What could be put up against the noise of time? Only that music which is inside ourselves—the music of our being—which is transformed by some into real music. ... This was what he held to’ (Barnes, 2017: 125). The ending statement qualifies the preceding ideas as Shostakovich’s hopeful belief, rather than incontestable fact: a belief that ties one’s ‘being’, one’s existence, to music. There are two types of music for Barnes’s Shostakovich: (1) music (‘which is inside ourselves’) and (2) ‘real music’. ‘Real music’ comes into existence through an alchemical transformation, implying that ‘we’ all have music inside ourselves, but only some people, i.e. composers, can ‘transform’ that ‘inner music’ into ‘real music’: a musical composition to be played and heard by others. While the concept of ‘real music’ raises musicological and philosophical problems, my concern here is how music is represented in a specific text: for Barnes’s fictional Shostakovich, ‘real music’ is an expression of one’s ‘being’, communicated to others through performance. Barnes’s distinction between ‘the music of our being’ and ‘real music’ takes music metaphorically to refer to one’s existence, subsequently implying that any ‘real music’ composed by an individual is an expression of one’s existence for others to hear. The metaphorical turn raises two inter-related questions: (1) What ideas of music inform *The Noise of Time*’s articulation of ‘being’? (2) What ideas of ‘being’ (existence) inform *The Noise of Time*’s articulation of music? ‘Music as being’ draws on ideas including abstract expression and the creativity of the musician, while ‘being as music’ draws on ideas including

individualism and personal expression, thus tying music and identity together to represent music as the expression of an individual's identity, and an individual's identity as something both abstract and creative.

Complicating *The Noise of Time*'s exploration of one's being in music is the temporal dimension of the self. In *The Noise of Time*, Shostakovich considers the possibility that 'real music ... over the decades' may be 'strong ... enough to drown out the noise of time' (Barnes, 2017: 125). 'The noise of time' is an intertextual reference to Osip Mandelstam's *The Noise of Time*, a 'lyric autobiography' first published in Russian in 1925 (Harris, 1990: 99). It is also the title of a performance piece about Shostakovich by the theatre company Complicité (2000)—a performance which, according to Midgette, 'took almost the same view of Shostakovich-as-persecuted-hero that Barnes does' (Midgette, 2016). *The Noise of Time*'s reference to Mandelstam emphasises the theme of time: how time is tied to one's identity *and* one's historical context. Harris's description of Mandelstam's aim as 'the recovery of a sense of time through ... analogies or parallels between his individual destiny and Russia's cultural history' (Harris, 1990: 100) could equally be applied to Barnes's Shostakovich. Mandelstam demonstrates 'faith in the word as the vehicle of cultural memory' (Harris, 1990: 102), and Shostakovich's faith is in music—but it is a turbulent faith, repeatedly questioned and scrutinised. For Mandelstam, 'his life is time conscious, historical' (Terras, 1969: 345), not ahistorical, a description applicable to Barnes's Shostakovich. However, *The Noise of Time* also presents the relationship between an individual life and history as a conflict, as Shostakovich's inner (musical) life is interrupted by outer threats:

He hoped ... that death would liberate his music ... from his life. Time would pass, and ... his work would begin to stand for itself. ... Because music, in the end, belonged to music. That was all you could say, or wish for. (Barnes, 2017: 179)

While Mandelstam establishes 'the self with reference to historical context' (Harris, 1990: 100), Barnes's Shostakovich is not so willing to believe in an historical self. Referring back to Barnes's ontology of 'real' and 'inner' music, the final lines (before the epilogue) of *The Noise of Time*, noted above, hope for an *ahistorical* self, and for the existence of ahistorical—autonomous, absolute—music, a hope made more desperate when caught in political terror.

Yet even as Shostakovich hopes for his music to become 'liberated', there remains in *The Noise of Time* a concern for the survival of one's 'inner music'. There is a dual meaning in Shostakovich's question, 'could irony protect his music?' (Barnes, 2017: 86), as he considers the possibility of musical irony in compositions *and* the possibility

of irony protecting his ‘inner music’, his sense of self, being, or existence. *The Noise of Time* can be read as an extended exploration of irony: the narrative’s tone is often ironic and darkly humorous, and fittingly, Shostakovich’s music has been read as a textbook example of irony in art (Garmendia, 2018: 9). *The Noise of Time* values irony for its built-in principle of deniability: ‘in irony, the speaker does not intend to communicate that which she appears to be putting forward’ (Garmendia, 2018: 14). Barnes explores irony and its relation to music through the novel’s structure as a ‘series of snapshots and vignettes’ (Robson, 2016); one aphoristic statement concerning irony is declared confidently, only later to be undermined, or explicitly contradicted, by an opposite yet equally confident statement, creating an uncertain narrative tone, as demonstrated below. *The Noise of Time*’s indecisiveness concerning irony is akin to Shostakovich’s volatile life under Communism, as during one stage of life he was a condemned composer, yet later celebrated as one of the country’s finest composers: ‘what the Party had said yesterday was often in direct contradiction to what the Party was saying today’ (Barnes, 2017: 89).

The Noise of Time’s narrative instability explores semantic ambiguity and speaks to the debatable definition of irony, which is ‘often confused with parody, satire and, in particular, sarcasm ... [W]hat certain authors label ironic is considered to be sarcastic or parodic by others’ (Garmendia, 2018: 9). As Sheinberg writes, ‘irony in its broadest sense ... could be regarded as a structural prototype for all other modes of ambiguity’ (Sheinberg, 2000: 27), and *The Noise of Time* is an overt exploration of the difficulty faced when defining irony, sarcasm, and general ambiguity—in both art and life. Shostakovich muses over what irony is and how it might differ from sarcasm—‘might’, because Barnes’s exploration of ambiguity is (ironically) presented ambiguously: ‘Sarcasm was dangerous ... the language of the wrecker and the saboteur. But irony—perhaps, sometimes, so he hoped—might enable you to preserve what you valued’ (Barnes, 2017: 86). In this example, a definitive statement about sarcasm is followed by what should, if the structural parallel is followed, be an equally definitive statement about irony. However, this is interrupted by a parenthetical qualifier featuring a triplicate of phrases, casting doubt on the statement: ‘perhaps, sometimes, he hoped’. A statement of fact becomes a doubtful hope, illustrating the difficult task of delineating irony. *The Noise of Time*’s ambiguous narrative creates a feeling of circularity which can be understood through Sheinberg’s two functions of ambiguity: (1) ‘a prolongation device in a deciphering process, at the end of which there will be a resolution’, aiming to ‘[express] statements that cannot be uttered directly’, e.g. during political oppression; (2) ‘the main topic of discourse, ... a stagnant condition to which there can be neither

solution nor clarification', creating 'an autonomous reflection on unresolvable paradoxes' (Sheinberg, 2000: 15). *The Noise of Time* combines both functions: Barnes's narrative explores the possibility of function (1) within Shostakovich's music, while ultimately framed in the narrative of function (2), as Barnes's narrative includes declarative statements which are later contradicted, creating a literary depiction of 'the unresolvable paradox', or uncertainty, of Shostakovich's opinions and motivations. When Shostakovich muses about how, in 'perhaps 200,000,000,000 years', 'someone might read it [Shostakovich's letter to Stalin], and wonder what exactly—if anything—he had meant by it' (Barnes, 2017: 85), Barnes makes a self-reflexive comment on his own position as the author of *The Noise of Time*, as he becomes the 'someone' who wonders about Shostakovich's 'meaning', writing the interior monologue of a hyper-self-aware Shostakovich.

Barnes is thus concerned with the role that irony might play in an individual's artistic existence. In *The Noise of Time*, Shostakovich moves through the philosophical possibilities and limits of irony for the artist, paralleling romantic irony's 'claim that through an ironic perspective of the world, the artist creates freely, in a sense having the capacity to be the creator of their own self' (Cherlin, 2017: 11). A further parallel appears with existentialist philosophy's idea that the self is 'contingent ..., that human nature is self-making' (Crowell, 2012: 9): the artist becomes a creator not just of art, but of one's self. In *The Noise of Time*, Shostakovich believes irony can preserve the 'truth' of his thoughts while protecting his 'music' (metaphorically his self). However, Cherlin notes irony's limits, identified by Hegel: 'a pervasively ironic attitude toward the world leads to a ... lack of earnestness, and to a condition that ultimately contradicts and destroys itself' (Cherlin, 2017: 12). Barnes's Shostakovich reaches this condition near the ending of *The Noise of Time*: 'There were limits to irony: you cannot sign letters while ... crossing your fingers behind your back, trusting that others will guess you do not mean it. ... He had betrayed himself' (Barnes, 2017: 166). Shostakovich, who 'believed that as long as you could rely on irony, you would be able to survive' by using irony as a daily 'defence of the self and the soul', discovers that 'he was no longer so sure. There could be a smugness to irony, as there could be a complacency to protest ... irony had its limits' (Barnes, 2017: 173–5). By tying irony to art and identity, *The Noise of Time* explores the limitations of irony's use in existential, and existentialist, matters concerning the 'defence', or survival, of the self.

Barnes's ontology of 'real music' is tied to Shostakovich's identity as a composer, who muses on 'personal honesty' and 'artistic honesty'. At first, Shostakovich believes the two types of 'honesty' are inextricable: 'He found himself reflecting on questions

of honesty. Personal honesty, artistic honesty. How they were connected, if indeed they were. ... [I]f ever he repudiated *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, they were to conclude that he had run out of honesty' (Barnes, 2017: 33). However, in *The Noise of Time*'s distinctive style, Shostakovich later adjusts his belief:

Stravinsky had spent decades ... unconcerned when artists and writers and their families ... were imprisoned, exiled, murdered. ... That silence had been contemptible; and just as he revered Stravinsky the composer, so he despised Stravinsky the thinker. Well, perhaps that answered his question about personal honesty and artistic honesty; lack of the former didn't necessarily contaminate the latter. (Barnes, 2017: 133)

Shostakovich's shifting beliefs on personal and artistic honesty are typical of *The Noise of Time*'s narrative style, which performs the instability of living through revolutionary, ideological change through Shostakovich's turbulent existential(ist) questions of the self. Yet in Barnes's 'real music', the performer's role is limited to performing the *composer's* work: 'the Borodins could only play the fourth quartet in the way the composer intended' (Barnes, 2017: 125).⁴ One must ask: can only composers transform 'inner music' into 'real music', or can performers (who are not composers) play a role in *The Noise of Time*'s existential self-making through musical composition? Barnes's limited consideration of the performer is likely due to his limited musical background (Adams, 2016), but it is also due to his presentation of Shostakovich as an isolated individual, alone in his circling thoughts—a representation that perpetuates the tragic, 'popular' image of Shostakovich, 'the idea, commonly held, that Shostakovich's music is depressing, and that he himself was a broken man at the end of his life' (Fairclough, 2019a: 11). To be tragic is to be isolated, yet Barnes's Shostakovich as an isolated composer — an element which may speak to the Romantic idea of the 'genius' — does not match the historical Shostakovich who, for example, 'found in [the Russian cellist] Rostropovich ... a supremely talented musician and interpreter of his music' (Fairclough, 2019a: 115). While Barnes does not consider the potential two-way collaboration between performer and composer, Thien does consider this relationship in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, a contrast which further illuminates discussions of musical identity and expression as represented in the contemporary novel.

⁴ While this statement is musicologically problematic (see Goehr, 1994), it is later questioned in *The Noise of Time*'s fluctuating narrative.

Do Not Say We Have Nothing

Thien examines the composer-performer dynamic through the creative and familial relationship between two characters: the cousins Sparrow and Zhuli. Both work at the Shanghai conservatory, Sparrow as a teacher, Zhuli as a violin student. In their collaborative relationship as composer and performer respectively, each affects the other's understanding of both their music and sense of self, criticising their own musical limitations while recognising each other's strengths: Zhuli envies Sparrow for his compositional skills, seeing herself as 'a performer, a transparent glass giving shape to water', while Sparrow believes that 'he would not be a performer, he did not have the genius of interpretation' (Thien, 2016a: 138, 224). Integral to their relationship is collaboration: 'When his cousin played his work, it was as if she sifted the dust away, lost the notes and found the music' (Thien, 2016a: 120). *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* thus re-establishes the importance of the composer-performer dynamic in the popular imagination of musical lives. Yet the Shanghai conservatory was historically closed in 1966, at the start of Mao's Cultural Revolution, and the Chinese government's condemnation of classical music(ians) meant that the music that was central to those musicians' lives became mortally dangerous. Thus, when the conservatory closes in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, in step with historical events, Sparrow and Zhuli's musical lives are threatened: to preserve her 'self', which is tied to music, Zhuli chooses suicide, while Sparrow chooses silence, and I focus here on how each character attempts to achieve a survival of the self in relation to music during this political instability.

As noted above, existentialist themes are prominent in both *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and *The Noise of Time*. In *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, there is a particular focus on the concept of 'nothing(ness)', a familiar concept in existentialist philosophy — but due to Thien's blending of Eastern and Western cultures in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, alongside existentialism valuable comparisons can be made with mysticism. Heidegger's existentialist conception of 'nothingness' as 'absolute and nongenerative' is, according to Chai, affected by the 'Western conception of nothingness as pure negativity' (Chai, 2014: 591). Despite Heidegger's work being 'indebted' to East Asian philosophy, particularly Daoism (Taoism), he 'failed to fully grasp the cosmological significance of ... nothingness', for in Daoism, nothingness 'existentially and perpetually grounds us', as 'Daoist nothingness is life-creativity at its ultimate' (Chai, 2014: 583, 600). *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* does grasp this significance, intertwining nothingness with the similar concept of zero: a mathematical concept commonly associated with duality, destruction, and beginnings. 'Nothing is quite something' when it comes to zero (Crilly, 2007: 7), and Thien uses the concept of zero

being nothing *and* something in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* to ask existential — and mystical — questions concerning individuals and music.

In *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, Thien includes multiple styles of music, including pop, folk, and Western and Chinese classical, but she centralises Western classical in her focus on musicians at the Shanghai Conservatory. A formative text for Thien was *Rhapsody in Red: How Western Classical Music Became Chinese* (Thien, 2016b). *Rhapsody* addresses the conundrum of why, in China, with ‘its own rich, varied and ancient musical traditions ... Western classical music develop[ed] such deep roots’, demonstrating how Western classical music ‘was nurtured, promoted, adopted and eventually transformed by generations of talented Chinese musicians, music educators, and music lovers’ (Melvin and Cai, 2004: 335). Thien’s approach involves blending Chinese Classical music traditions with that of Western classical, such as when Sparrow learns Bach’s *Violin Concerto in A minor* arranged for the erhu, transcribed into jianpu, a Chinese musical notation which uses numbers to represent notes, claiming to be ‘accessible to everyone’ (Thien, 2016a: 33). In a later reference to jianpu, Thien emphasises the role of 0, which denotes a rest:

What was a zero anyway? A zero signified nothing, all it did was tell you nothing about nothing. Still, wasn’t zero also something meaningful, a number in and of itself? In jianpu notation, zero indicated a ... rest of indeterminate length. ... If zero was both everything and nothing, did an empty life have exactly the same weight as a full life? (Thien, 2016a: 292)

The questions, What is nothing? What is zero?, are an established concern of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* from the title. In *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, zero, nothing, and music are thematically tied together, as one musician declares, ‘music is nothing. It is nothing and yet it belongs to me’ (Thien, 2016a: 301). If ‘music is nothing’, and *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is concerned with ‘having nothing’, further questions arise: what constitutes ‘having’ music? Does, or can, music ‘belong’ to anyone? Similarly, *The Noise of Time* asks: ‘Who does art belong to?’ Shostakovich responds: ‘Art belongs to everybody and nobody. Art belongs to all time and no time. ... He wrote music for everyone and no one ..., for the ears that could hear. ... [A]ll true definitions of art are circular’ (Barnes, 2017: 92). While Barnes does not explicitly reference zero, he employs similar paradoxical themes around music (as an example of art) to that of Thien: that music ‘belongs to everybody and nobody’. Robson (2016) may criticise *The Noise of Time* for being ‘circular’, but that is precisely Barnes’s point: we shall perpetually go around in circles when attempting to understand art, music, or the life of an individual who

lived in an oppressive regime. At the end of *The Noise of Time*, however, Shostakovich reaches a seemingly determined conclusion: ‘music, in the end, belonged to music’ (Barnes, 2017: 179). *The Noise of Time*’s conclusion parallels elements of existentialist philosophy:

As Heidegger puts it, existence is ‘care’ (Sorge): to exist is not simply to be, but to be an issue for oneself. In Sartre’s terms, while other entities exist ‘in themselves’ (en soi) and ‘are what they are,’ human reality is also ‘for itself’ (pour soi) and thus is not exhausted by any of its determinations. (Crowell, 2020)

Who does music belong to? Music. Who does an individual’s life belong to? Oneself. Yet another layer of understanding is added when considering the Daoist sense of nothingness alongside that of Western existentialism, for music as ‘everything and nothing’, belonging to ‘everybody and nobody’, becomes a place of possibility, of ‘life-creativity’. The novels’ existential questions about music and human existence take on a sense of mystery, ‘grounded’ in a nothingness that is ‘nonnihilistic’ (Chai, 2014: 587), informed by both existentialism and mysticism. Music, and its associations with zero and nothingness, is dualistic, representing nothing and something. Under the threat of a communist regime, this duality is an analogy for both music and self trying to achieve the safety of nothingness, while also maintaining a sense of self, and the memory of identity. Nothingness becomes both a place of negation *and* creation: a hope for survival.

Thus, while at times the self and music are represented as existing independently (think of absolute music noted above), both novels hope that music might *also* belong to, or express, one’s sense of self—hence the theme of zero and paradoxical concepts. When Zhuli, a performer, finds her beloved music condemned as bourgeois, she is threatened with losing the opportunity to play ‘her’ music. She is also at threat due to her prodigious musical skill as a violinist: ‘being outstanding was contrary to the CCP’s “radically egalitarian” beliefs’ (Luo, 2018: 439). In response, Zhuli chooses suicide: ‘How could she put these thoughts in a note? She wanted to preserve the core of herself. If they took away music, if they broke her hands, who would she be?’ (Thien, 2016a: 271). To ‘preserve the core of herself’, she ends her life at a moment when she is still able to play the violin, and Zhuli’s decision speaks to Korsgaard’s philosophical arguments concerning suicide. While some forms of suicide result from a ‘rejection of all value’ (‘if value is the fact of life’), ‘not every case of suicide is like this’; for some, ‘suicide ... may be the only way to preserve your identity, and to protect the values for which you have lived’ (Korsgaard, 1996: 161, 162). There is a dual meaning in Zhuli’s concern with how

she might ‘put these thoughts in a note’: a ‘note’ could refer to a written suicide note, or to a musical note. Zhuli establishes her sense of personal expression in music as performed in a present moment, but she cannot compose: ‘She envied the composer’s intellect ... and wished to cultivate it within herself, but it was impossible. She was a performer’ (Thien, 2016a: 138). Thus, she cannot compose her thoughts into a note, and she faces a world where she can no longer perform them, either. Suicide becomes the only way in which Zhuli might ‘preserve’ her identity.

Conversely, the composers in *The Noise of Time* and *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* survive past the initial phases of political unrest, choosing not to commit suicide. In *The Noise of Time*, Shostakovich chooses not to because he realises that those in ‘Power ... would steal his story and rewrite it. He needed, if only in his own hopeless, hysterical way, to have some charge of his life, of his story’ (Barnes, 2017: 97). *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and *The Noise of Time* represent two contrasting approaches to suicide which both prioritise a character’s sense of self: while Shostakovich chooses to live so as to maintain some control of his ‘story’, Zhuli chooses suicide ‘to preserve the core of herself’. Zhuli is concerned with her inner sense of self, Shostakovich with his outer or historical sense of self. Zhuli is not a nationally acclaimed musician like Shostakovich, so her ‘story’ would not be dwelt on long, while Shostakovich is not only nationally but internationally known, held up as a representative figure for the Soviet communist regime. These contrasting examples add to the general sense of contradiction explored in both novels, presenting two approaches to understanding the relation between the self, music, and wider society. Both decisions are reached through a character’s personal reasoning which bears a strong resemblance to the existentialist concept of choice and authenticity. Readers of either novel can follow the characters’ reasoning towards a sense of sympathy with either decision, and by extension a sympathy with the varied decisions made by real-life named and unnamed civilians who suffered (and may still suffer) under oppressive communist regimes. In both examples, despite leading to different outcomes, Zhuli and Shostakovich maintain an authentic self through choice.

Sparrow, too, decides against suicide, although grief-stricken after Zhuli’s death: ‘Sparrow wanted to follow her, but even despite the promise of an ending, of freedom, this was the life he couldn’t leave behind’ (Thien, 2016a: 280). Rather than silence his life, Sparrow silences his music. He becomes ‘the Bird of Quiet’ and contemplates silence in his compositions: ‘His unfinished symphony played on in his head, unstoppable. All it lacked was the fourth and final movement, but what if the fourth movement was silence itself?’ (Thien, 2016a: 306, 277). However, like Shostakovich’s changing convictions in *The Noise of Time*, Sparrow reconsiders his previous beliefs as time passes. An older Sparrow concludes that ‘Qù [quiet] could be a substance that begins

as a strength and transmutes, imperceptibly, into loss' (Thien, 2016a: 357). When his daughter, Ai-ming, is motivated with a new revolutionary energy during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, Sparrow further doubts his decision to silence himself and his music: 'He'd always tried to refrain from pushing her towards the Party, but what if his silence had let her down or failed her in some crucial way?' (Thien, 2016a: 358). While considering Ai-ming and silence, Sparrow has an epiphany: 'He heard ... a music in his head, shaken loose He could still write music. The thought jolted him' (Thien, 2016a: 358). Sparrow's turn to silence after Zhuli's death is due to music being an integral part of his and Zhuli's relationship as composer and performer; silence for Sparrow is the absence of Zhuli and consequently of music. Yet 'the absence of music only serves to bolster its (music's) strength, to make it more palpably present' (Benson, 2006: 142), akin to Thien's concern with the lost ('absent') records of individuals: *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is a 'book of records and an alternate memory of history. Remember what I say: Not everything will pass' (Thien, 2016a: 466). *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*'s theme of silence, as akin to absence, or nothingness, is something both feared and hoped for: 'the idea of quiet terrified him [Sparrow]', but in his grief, Sparrow has a vision of Zhuli: 'He asked her what in this world a mere sound could accomplish. She said, "... The only truth is the one that lives invisibly Silence, too, is a kind of music. Silence will last"' (Thien, 2016a: 280). Whether it has substance remains questioned, but silence, like zero, provides both something and nothing for Sparrow when preserving the sense or 'truth' of oneself.

Along with the fear of being silenced during political conflict, however, an existentialist fear arises for the authenticity of one's self, and of music. This is Malpas's 'problematic situation of the individual' and existentialism's concern with the authenticity, and autonomy, of the self. Existentialism places importance on one's own *choice*, or 'commitment', to be 'a person of a certain sort' (Crowell, 2020), and the novels explore characters' struggles to achieve autonomy of both the self and music. In *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, Sparrow and Zhuli have inner debates concerning the (in)authenticity of music, and whether they can present one regime-accepted self on the surface, while maintaining an authentic self beneath, potentially through coded communications. After Zhuli's death, Sparrow begins to doubt music, asking:

How had he never noticed ... how deeply music could lie? ... The authorities had taken Zhuli's body while Sparrow and his father ... had praised the Chairman, the Party and the nation. They'd had no choice but, still, they had performed disturbingly well, ... as if one could just as easily play Bach as repeat the words of Chairman Mao. (Thien, 2016a: 278–79)

Sparrow's concerns speak to how 'the possibility of authenticity is a mark of my *freedom*, and it is through freedom that existentialism approaches questions of value' (Crowell, 2020). As the Cultural Revolution dramatically shifts the cultural ideology of Sparrow and Zhuli's home country, they question their own values alongside their country's. Zhuli is particularly affected, due to her young age and her identity as a musical performer:

She wanted to ask him how he could acquiesce on the surface and not be compromised inside. You could not play revolutionary music, truly revolutionary music, if you were a coward in your heart. ... Every note would reveal you. Or perhaps she was wrong Maybe, no matter his or her convictions, a great musician ... could play any piece and be believed. (Thien, 2016a: 205)

Two understandings of authenticity are at play here: in the general sense, as genuine and truthful, and in the existentialist sense, being true and committed to one's own self. In attempting to achieve personal authenticity, particularly in the tense setting of oppressive regimes, coded messages are often used, and in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, the possibility that music might be such a code is explored, questioned, and hoped for. In *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, Sparrow describes the historical Shostakovich as 'a composer who ... used harmony against itself, and exposed all the scraping and dissonance inside' (Thien, 2016a: 323). Shostakovich's music is commonly associated with dissonance, ambiguity, and the possibility of coded music, leading to what Abbate refers to as the 'cryptographic sublime' musical works can 'induce': 'The more impenetrable or complex the mechanism by which it is assumed something important has been encoded by a medium, the deeper the fascination commanded by that medium becomes' (Abbate, 2004: 524). With the possibility of coded, dissonant music comes the vital question for an individual caught in a regime: can music provide a medium in which an individual can express themselves in a protected way?

Demonstrating an awareness of music's ambiguity, or 'indeterminacy' (Abbate, 2004: 516), both novels raise and question the possibility of music's cryptographic sublime. Thien's interest in codes and conflict pre-dates *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*: her debut novel, *Certainty*, features a coded journal kept by an inmate of a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp (Thien, 2017). *Certainty* articulates the existential danger of the cryptographic sublime, paralleling it with the search for meaning in life:

Cryptography ... holds a particular danger of its own. People expect to find patterns. You are handed a code, someone says, 'Break this' Once you begin ... to wonder if the code is indeed a code, if it contains any meaning at all, it throws your life into disorder. What if, in the end, this book is no more and no less than a book of numbers?

What if the surface is all there is? ... I think codebreaking is part of a very human desire, the desire for revelation, for meaning. (Thien, 2017: 204–5)

Once decoded, the diary reveals the man's attempt to create a stable reality for himself: a certainty, to use the novel's telling title. The diary contains 'no detailing of violence witnessed and endured, of friends executed, of resistance', instead protecting 'a different kind of existence ... their rituals, what time they got up in the morning': 'Through these sentences, these pages, he would make the world cohere' (Thien, 2017: 220–21). In *Certainty*, the diary makes coding an existence an overt theme; in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, the theme of coding is woven into the characters' musings on music. Bach and Shostakovich, two composers repeatedly referenced in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, are also historically known for 'coding' their names into their compositions. When Zhuli's mother is trying to send coded messages to her father, who is hiding from the regime, Zhuli imagines that Sparrow has coded her father into his music as another way of communicating to him: 'Zhuli imagined she could hear her father's presence in the music', wondering, 'Could his name be written there in secret? Bach, for instance, had encrypted the four letters of his name into a single motif. These four notes ... served as his signature, surfacing through the music' (Thien, 2016a: 137). Sparrow describes how '[Shostakovich's] signature, D, E-flat, C and B, ... curled like a dissonance, or a question, in Shostakovich's music' (Thien, 2016a: 320). By considering *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* in relation to *Certainty*, a thread can be traced in Thien's development of thought around codes and their relation to life—and, in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, to music. For the fear voiced in *Certainty*—'What if the surface is all there is?'—can apply to the music that is heard, performed, and composed by the characters in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*. Like the composers' coded names, the characters wonder if their identities can be embedded beneath the 'surface' of music.

The theme of cryptography extends to *The Noise of Time*, which embodies the 'familiar narrative' of 'the coded dissidence' in Shostakovich's music (Fairclough, 2019a: 7). Shostakovich's Fifth symphony is a conventional example of musical political dissidence, 'the work that speaks most eloquently of the terror years', and 'Shostakovich's single most popular and well-known work' (Fairclough, 2019a: 61). In *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, a recording of the Fifth absorbs the attention of Ai-ming (Sparrow's daughter, who escapes to Canada in 1990, after the Tiananmen Square protests) who 'gazed into the speakers as if into the face of a person she knew', while Marie (the frame narrator of the novel and the daughter of Sparrow's close friend who escapes to Canada in 1979) feels 'disturbed by the music and the emotions it communicated' (Thien, 2016a: 34). Yet Marie then wonders, 'perhaps this is all hindsight', as she later learns that:

Shostakovich had written this symphony ... at the height of Stalin's Terror ... Under terrible pressure, he composed the symphony's third movement ... The first movement had been deceptive. Inside [the third], concealed and waiting to be heard, were ideas and selves that had never been erased. (Thien, 2016a: 34)

Ai-ming takes part in the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations during which her father, Sparrow, is killed, thematically tying Ai-ming to Shostakovich through a shared experience of state terror. While Thien's passage initially relies on an understanding of Shostakovich's Fifth as containing emotions which listeners are able to hear, this assumption is then questioned: 'perhaps this is all hindsight'. Thien produces a self-consciously contextual interpretation of music, relying on knowledge of the contexts of Shostakovich's composition both to question and understand the piece, while also giving it value to other listeners—here Ai-ming, who 'gazed into the speakers' (i.e. the music) 'as if into the face of a person she knew'. As Ross writes of the Fifth's first performances, 'the audience seemed to identify strongly with the symphony's assertion of will' (Ross, 2008: 236). Thien is nodding to the musicological difficulties in the Fifth's interpretative ambiguity, outlined by London:

Is it wry satire and criticism of the Stalinist regime ..., or is it just derivative bombast? Much hinges here on what Shostakovich intended to mean, what listeners (both then and now) believed Shostakovich to mean, and the extent to which those intentions might be encoded in the music. ... [The Fifth] show[s] how a thick discursive/cultural context can allow instrumental music to do some fairly heavy semantic lifting. (London, 2014: 500)

London's semantic 'heavy lifting'—akin to Abbate's cryptographic sublime—is part of music's use in the musico-literary novel, but it is not its only narrative purpose. To return to *The Noise of Time*, Barnes imagines Shostakovich's thoughts on the Fifth:

Let Power have the words, because words cannot stain music. Music escapes from words: that is its purpose, and its majesty. ... [They could] hear in his symphony what they wanted to hear. They missed the screeching irony of the final movement, that mockery of triumph. They heard only triumph itself, some loyal endorsement of Soviet music. (Barnes, 2017: 58)

The Noise of Time demonstrates how ideas of music's autonomy, stemming from the concept of absolute music, can be tied up in cultural understandings of a musical piece — in parallel with the historical appropriation of the term 'absolute music' by Eduard

Hanslick who, with underlying political aims, turned Wagner's negative understanding of abstract music into an 'aesthetic ideal', 'to provide a theoretical justification for insulating music from the turmoil of social and political change' (Bonds, 2017: 2, 3). 'Music escapes from words: that is its purpose', but this particular 'purpose', or power, is valued precisely because of the cultural context in which the music was composed; even an understanding of music's autonomy relies on a related cultural understanding of music, and in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and *The Noise of Time*, room is left for musical ambiguity, which adds to music's value. Recalling the concept of zero and nothingness, music takes on a dual existence: as something separate from individuals, but also as something that is always heard, performed, or composed within a specific context. Just as Hoene writes that 'music's essential ambivalence of meaning constitutes our experience and understanding of it' (Hoene, 2014: 4), music in *The Noise of Time* and *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, through its ambiguity, becomes a space where both 'no meaning' and 'hidden meaning' can co-exist.

Conclusion

There is a parallel between Barnes's concern with irony and Thien's fascination with codes, for irony is itself a kind of code, requiring the receiver to decipher it. Yet both novels ask: what use is a code, like irony, if there is no one to decipher it? In irony, intention is a determining feature, just as choice and commitment are determining features of the existentialist aim for authenticity.⁵ From the perspective of existentialist philosophy, the intention behind irony and codes may be 'sufficient' to validate an individual's utterance as authentic; while the ideal is that there be an interlocutor to understand these coded communications, the uncertainty of the interlocutor's existence does not void an individual's authentic being when caught in a conflict which psychologically threatens their sense of identity. Whether there is someone on the other end of a coded communication of one's self remains unknown, an (im)possibility that takes on the quality of zero and nothingness, both hoped for and doubted, potentially something and nothing. The 'autonomy' of absolute music is comparable to the existentialist concept of the self, and a self which takes on the qualities of absolute music may shield the artist from oppressive Communist regimes. Even as the hope it offers is paradoxical, like nothingness and zero, the characters in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* and *The Noise of Time* hope that music is both separate from their situation *and* can contain them inside it, providing a medium for the survival of their sense of self.

⁵ I am referring to verbal irony ('somebody can *do* something ironic') rather than situational irony ('something ironic can occur') (Garmendia, 2018: 3).

Rather than being a negation of hope, this duality or paradox becomes what is valued in music — it is akin to Daoist nothingness as life creativity, and the authentic existentialist self that relies on intention, just as codes and irony rely on intentional ‘hidden’ meaning. The fact that absolute music aspires to be separate, yet is always heard through specific cultural contexts, does not mean that it does not provide protection or means to an existentialist self — instead, it embodies the duality experienced by the characters, in their lives and in music. Thus music, in these two musico-literary novels, is complicated in the popular imagination in a way that extends its value. Rather than presenting classical music as one or the other — of the world or outside of the world (which would be reductive) — these novels complicate a popular understanding of music in a way that brings poetic value to its duality. Thien’s mix of Eastern and Western perspectives in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* offers an optimistic perspective on the semantic ambiguities in *The Noise of Time*, by bringing the mystical understanding of nothingness as a place of autonomous creativity and potential into contact with representations of Western classical music. Music’s duality is not a problem to be solved, but a paradox — like nothingness and zero — to be utilised as a point of existential, and mystical, grounding.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Wolfson Foundation (United Kingdom), as part of a Wolfson Foundation Postgraduate Scholarship (2018–2021). Thanks also to my anonymous peer-reviewers for their extremely helpful comments.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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