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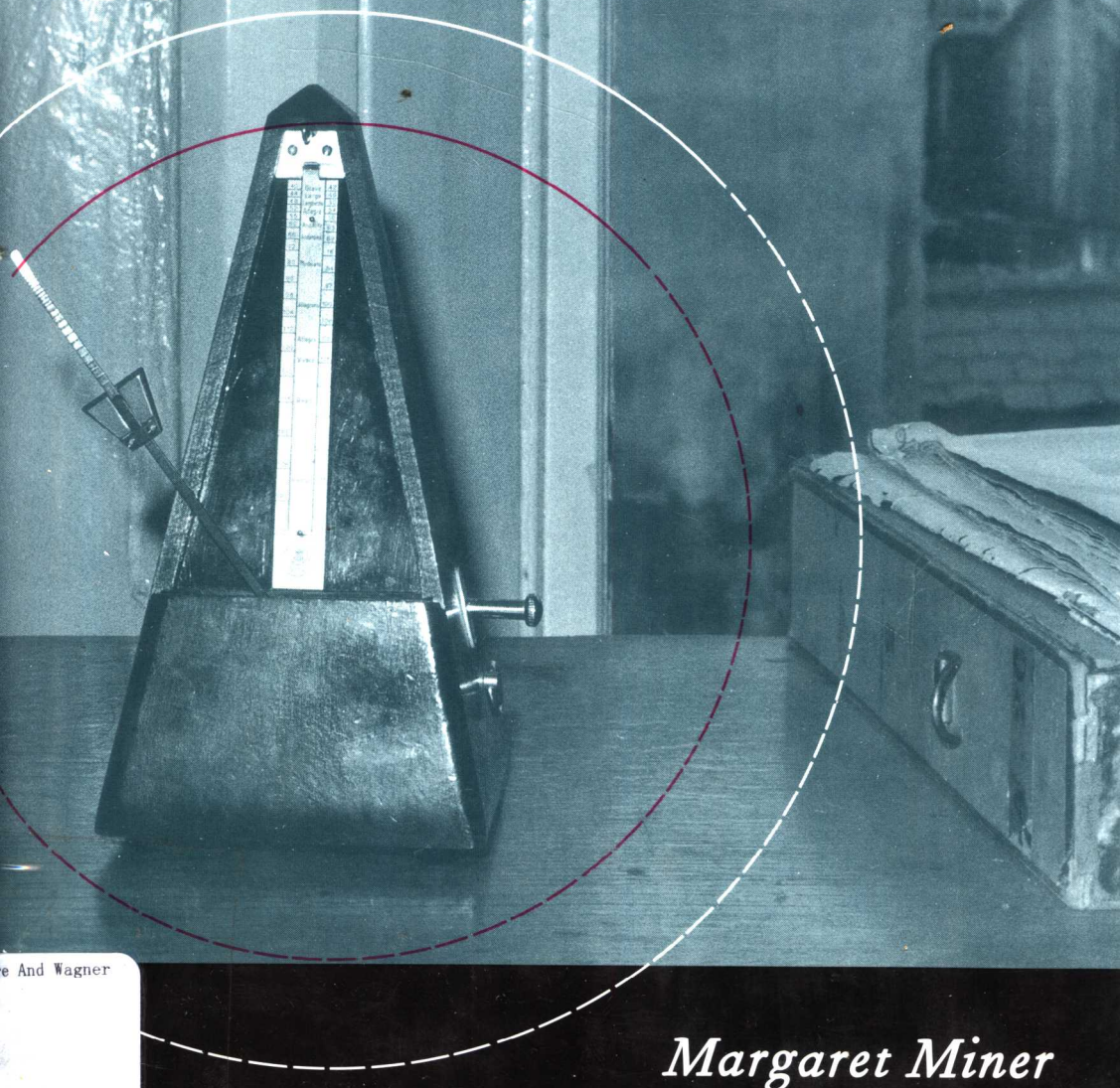
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Baudelaire & Wagner



And Wagner

Margaret Miner

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Baudelaire 江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章
& Wagner

Margaret Miner

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Set in 10½/14 Fournier by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

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Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Printed in the United States of America

99 98 97 96 95 C 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Miner, Margaret.

Resonant gaps : between Baudelaire and Wagner / Margaret Miner.

p. cm.

Contains Baudelaire's essay Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à
Paris, originally published: Paris : E. Dentu, 1861.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-8203-1709-8 (alk. paper)

1. Baudelaire, Charles, 1821-1867—Knowledge—Music.

2. Wagner, Richard, 1813-1883—Influence. 3. Music and
literature. 4. French literature—History and criticism.

I. Baudelaire, Charles, 1821-1867. Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser
à Paris. II. Title.

ML80.B35M5 1995

780'.084—dc20

94-28793

British Library Cataloging in Publication Data available

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MY SINCERE THANKS go first to Vanderbilt University, which generously allowed me a semester of leave to work on this book. I owe a great deal of gratitude to all my colleagues in the Department of French and Italian, who were as continuously encouraging as they were tactful about not asking every two minutes how the manuscript was coming along. In particular, I offer my warmest thanks to Claude Pichois and Barbara Bowen for their good counsel and their faith in me; special thanks also to Vince Bowen, Virginia Scott, and Mary-Kay Miller, all of whom dispensed quantities of high-quality caffeine and moral support at crucial intervals.

This project could not have been completed without invaluable help of all sorts from Peter Brooks. Much-appreciated assistance has also come at various times from Susan Blood, Richard Goodkin, Frank Paul Bowman, and an anonymous reader of the manuscript. Many thanks to Susan Nicholson, of Vanderbilt University's W. T. Bandy Center for Baudelaire Studies, for help with Appendix 1; just as many thanks to John Schaffer and Edward Pearsall for help with Appendix 2. Thomas H. Goetz has kindly given permission to print a revised and expanded version of "Putting the Emphasis on Music: Baudelaire and the *Lohengrin* Prelude" (*Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 21, nos. 3-4 [1993]: 384-401) as chapter 2. I am deeply grateful to Kelly Caudle and Grace Buonocore, my editors at the University of Georgia Press; a particular word of gratitude goes to Karen K. Orchard, associate director and executive editor of the Press.

Heartfelt thanks to Ruth and Walt Miner, whose unblinking encour-

agement was as vital to me in this enterprise as in all others. A demure thank-you to Bud and Rose, who may be right to give book writing a very low priority in the general scheme of things. And my most profound thanks to Brian Hyer, who, despite the difficulties of our commute, has contrived never for a moment to be far away in any sense that matters.

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1 } *From an Unsafe Distance*

THIS BOOK is about the literary project, as conceived and attempted by Charles Baudelaire, of writing on music. While examining this project, I reexplore some territory already mapped and inhabited at various times by Baudelaire specialists, theorists of romanticism and symbolism, students of Wagnerism, and a long line of music and literary critics. Although the present study by no means ignores the traces of all these previous expeditions, it nonetheless goes exploring on its own account and for its own purposes. Possibly the best way to give a preliminary overview of its aims is to emphasize that expressions such as “reexplore territory” and “inhabited” have not been chosen at random: I devote much attention to the effects produced and the questions raised by geographical metaphors, personifications, and images of both chronological ordering and mythological repetition. This book sets out, in other words, to study the ways in which Baudelaire and other authors whose work is at times bound up with his—mainly Liszt, Wagner, Nietzsche, Mallarmé, and Proust—exploit certain powers of figurative language while writing on music in general, and on Wagner’s music in particular.

The central preposition in the phrase “writing on music” has also been chosen deliberately. Especially problematic with respect to Baudelaire, this “on” hints at the effort of all these authors to superimpose some of their writing so directly onto music that the two might become fused—inseparable, if not indistinguishable, from each other. In specific instances, that is, Baudelaire and the others try to make their readers take the preposition much more literally than usual. In addition to the relatively commonplace

literary projects that consist of using language either to evoke or to imitate a piece of music, the authors studied here all attempt in one way or another to discover a common place where their writing about Wagner's music may somehow coincide with its referent, where their writing may be literal enough to erase the distinction between reading about Wagner's music and listening to it. Following Baudelaire, one might say, these authors try to use figurative language in such a manner that it inscribes itself literally on music.

The writing on music to be considered here, then, aims to put its figures at the service of the letter and thereby to render the letter profoundly, essentially musical; it is from these complex relations between the figures of language and their literal goals that this book draws its energy. I argue, ultimately, that the writing in question fails to reach its goal, that it fails to overcome the gap separating it from the music toward which it is directed. But as I also try to show, this failure is never complete: although music and letters remain in some ways distant from each other, all of the authors are nevertheless able to make that distance productive. Distance thus becomes the paradoxical means by which writing can draw closer to music, even if literal bonds between the two are always elusive. Figurative language, already vital to the project of superimposing letters on music, is also crucial to the exploitation of their irreducible distance. For this reason, figures of language and their polymorphic role in the project of writing on music dominate my critical narrative in the pages to follow.

PROVOCATIVE CIRCUMSTANCES

Charles Baudelaire's 1861 essay *Richard Wagner et "Tannhäuser" à Paris* is central to all chapters of this book. It does not occupy any of them entirely; sometimes it serves only as a point of departure or arrival or else as a means of passage between other texts. But I return to the essay repeatedly, and my argument frequently works its way outward—to varying distances—from detailed readings of quotations from the essay. It is therefore worth considering at the outset why the essay itself invites such excursions, how it promises to reward them, and what the worth of this promise might be.

From most points of view, Baudelaire's Wagner essay is an anomaly. It is the only piece of music criticism that Baudelaire ever attempted, despite the prominence of music as a theme and a metaphor throughout his writings. Baudelaire would probably have been the first to admit, moreover, that his essay did not fit very well under the heading of music criticism, except in the broadest sense given to the term by journalistic practices of his day: begun as a fan letter to Wagner, the essay eventually mixed the polemical tone of a position paper (aimed at the prejudiced few) with the exaggerated enthusiasm of an advertisement (aimed at the uninformed many).¹ By most standards, Baudelaire was not really qualified to write about Wagner at all; he had practically no musical education, a very limited acquaintance with Wagner's theoretical prose, and a notoriously inadequate experience of Wagner's operatic works. Yet since the late nineteenth century, his essay has been regarded by all sorts of people as an exemplary response to Wagner's art. Already in Baudelaire's own time, the essay was clearly the most eloquent and complex statement to come from among the French admirers of Wagner. If Baudelaire's essay is an anomaly, then, it is at any rate an outstanding and durable one.

Perhaps the most evident thing about the essay is its continual, slightly overdone effort to sidestep expectations and evade classification. Upon even a rapid skimming, it is hard to miss Baudelaire's heavy-handed presentation of his text as an exception, as discourse that counts on its unusual circumstances and peripheral status. His sudden, impassioned declarations, his equally sudden disclaimers of expertise, his sweeping generalizations followed by denials of the authority to make them—all these suggest that Baudelaire is out to exploit the seductive power inherent in the exceptional and the unprecedented. And Baudelaire has in fact succeeded: his essay has repeatedly been granted the impressive, if self-contradictory, status of an all-encompassing exception. It has been held up, for instance, as an unexpected demonstration of all the critical talents that Baudelaire usually lavished instead on the visual arts, as the unlikely occasion for a summary of all Baudelaire's major aesthetic principles, as the most extraordinary exposition of "all the recurring issues of the literary response to Wagner," and even as evidence that Baudelaire was "the most advanced consciousness" of Wagner's epoch.² Prolonging a paradox that Baudelaire

apparently wanted to set in action, readers of *Richard Wagner et "Tannhäuser" à Paris* have gotten into the habit of enshrining it as a normative deviation, a standard-setting anomaly erected in the midst of Baudelaire studies, Wagner studies, comparative studies, and the history of ideas.

This habit is probably impossible to set aside all at once; the peculiar logic at work in the reception of the essay would no doubt overturn any quick effort to take away either the normative or the anomalous side of its perceived character. I would like instead to begin by studying some of the essay's methods of keeping the two sides of its character visible. If readers have on the whole perpetuated its paradoxical reputation, it is because they have found themselves encouraged to do so both by the essay's rhetoric and by the nature of its involvement in its cultural surroundings. In this first chapter, I concentrate on what I take to be the predominant metaphor with which the essay tries not only to represent its own situation at the time of its writing, but also to figure and—crucially—to limit the uses that can be made of it at any time, in any situation. More precisely, I try to show how *Richard Wagner et "Tannhäuser" à Paris* attempts to set itself up as a particular kind of landmark, as something unusual and obtrusive that nonetheless fades into the landscape when it is not serving to mark distances and directions—when it is not serving, that is, to draw one's gaze as much *away* from itself as toward itself. My fundamental argument is that Baudelaire's essay does in fact serve as such a landmark, that the essay effectively recognizes and figures its own inability to attract critical attention without also deflecting it elsewhere.

What the essay does not sufficiently recognize, on the other hand, is its corresponding inability to determine in any reliable way where and how critical attention, once deflected, will travel. As noted earlier, the essay is strategically placed at the periphery of several disciplines, so that readers approaching from the direction of, say, literary criticism may easily reorient themselves toward music history or aesthetics. But despite his various disclaimers and apologies, Baudelaire is not always inclined to leave the view open on all sides, or rather, to make clear that his essay is a marker, not a checkpoint. Put another way, the essay does not reflect very much on the possible differences between a landmark and a monument; it confuses the enabling visibility of the one with the view-blocking mass of the other.

Seen as a monument, the essay tends to slow the circulation of readers around it, imposing normal traffic patterns and fixed stopping points. Seen as a landmark, however, the essay does not so much regulate as it facilitates movement, pointing out a network of routes in and through the regions around itself. This book attempts to turn the obedient parade of tourists (pilgrims?) into a hiking adventure: it aims to discover what kinds of travel become possible when Baudelaire's essay is allowed to stand out as an exceptional text, but is denied its traditionally monumental, normative, definitive status. Taking Baudelaire's essay as a landmark that freely draws and deflects interpretation, this study is meant to suggest how remarkably varied the surrounding circulation might become and how wide a territory it might cover.

Baudelaire himself formulated his paradoxical ambitions for *Richard Wagner* when he called it a "long-meditated work of *circumstance*."³ This oxymoron, with its emphatic juxtaposition of ephemeral circumstance and sustained meditation, serves very well to evoke the tension later implicit in the essay's reputation as an exception. The circumstance in question actually involved two events, both of them brief and explosive. Baudelaire first considered writing his essay in early February 1860, on the occasion of three controversial concerts that Wagner presented in Paris at the Théâtre-Italien in order to promote excerpts from his operas. But Baudelaire did not finish the essay until late March 1861, during the uproar that followed three disastrous performances of *Tannhäuser* at the Paris Opéra. In between these events, Baudelaire reflected, hesitated, studied books by and about Wagner, and tried to hear more of Wagner's music; having been extraordinarily moved by his experience at the Théâtre-Italien, he prolonged and delayed the work of writing about it.⁴ As a result, the publication of Baudelaire's essay was adroitly timed so as to profit both from scandals of the musical season and from leisurely, intimate meditation.

These two profit motives, however, remain somewhat at odds with each other in *Richard Wagner*. Although Baudelaire refers throughout his essay to various incidents surrounding Wagner's Paris performances, he does not always integrate them thoroughly with his personal reflections. Baudelaire in fact draws attention to this gap between event and contemplation by

means of a postscript, "Encore quelques mots," which he appended to the essay when it appeared in book form a month after its initial publication in the *Revue européenne*.⁵ In this postscript, he bitterly summarizes the combination of circumstances that led to the failure of *Tannhäuser*: the political involvement of Napoléon III in its production; the artistic inadequacies of the orchestra, the set designers, and most of the soloists; the omission of a ballet scene in the second act, to the fury of Jockey Club members whose mistresses were dancers at the Opéra; the general hostility of the Parisian press; and above all, the character of *Tannhäuser* as a serious and unfamiliar work that called for more "sustained attention" than Paris audiences were accustomed, in Baudelaire's opinion, to give operas.⁶ But Baudelaire gives his own attention to all these matters of circumstance only in an addendum that stands well apart from the essay proper, and even then, it would appear, he gives it mainly at the prompting of his publisher.⁷ In the four sections of the essay itself, most of his meditative concentration is directed elsewhere.

To discover the focus of Baudelaire's meditating, it is helpful to study those junctures at which, immersed in his intensely personal admiration for Wagner, he abruptly recalls that he must compete for the public's attention with a crowd of professional musicians and concert reviewers. Twice during the course of the essay, Baudelaire interrupts himself to declare his lack of musical expertise and to recommend that readers turn elsewhere for "an encomium in technical style" (§6) or a "complete and technical review" (§31). On the second occasion, however, Baudelaire nuances his apology and explains that he is not entirely sorry to keep his distance from such technical writing: "I must therefore limit myself to general views that, however rapid they may be, are nonetheless useful. Besides, is it not more convenient, for certain minds, to judge the beauty of a landscape by placing themselves on a height than by traveling successively over all the paths that furrow it?" (§31). This question, with its imagery of paths and overviews, figures the distance between Baudelaire's essay and Wagner's music as something salutary and productive, but it also gives reasons to mistrust that distance. Interpreted rhetorically, the question reassures readers by claiming, first, that this music is as easy to appreciate as a pretty landscape and, second, that a good look over the musical scenery will serve just as well as a laborious march down every trail. Understood in this way, the

question holds up Baudelaire's essay as an excellent telescope (or opera glass) for surveying Wagner's music from afar, or else it offers the essay as a means of traveling far enough away from the music to enjoy a panoramic view. Interpreted as a genuine inquiry, however, the question is less reassuring. Formulated negatively, it hints that a cliff-top view, no matter how spectacular, is simply a convenience for the lazy, the impatient, or the handicapped. It implies that the distance between the essay and the music must after all be crossed, and it raises the disquieting possibility that to cross with the eyes or the imagination is not as good as a journey on foot. Interpreted literally, then, the question obliges readers to wonder just how Baudelaire might help them move from his text to Wagner's music or, perhaps, just how far their reading may be from listening.⁸

While he thus leaves some doubt about its intent, Baudelaire nonetheless succeeds with his question in establishing distance as one of the fundamental concerns of his essay. This manner of problematizing critical and aesthetic distance by means of a spatial metaphor is already familiar to readers of Baudelaire's art criticism, in which his occasional references to music are overshadowed by no apologies for technical incompetence. In particular, Baudelaire raises questions of music and distance during two discussions of Delacroix as a colorist. The first is found in Baudelaire's *Salon de 1846*, the second in his *Exposition universelle* (1855):

The best way of knowing whether a painting is melodious is to look at it from far enough away so as to understand neither the subject nor the lines. If it is melodious, it already has a meaning, and it has already taken its place in the repertory of memories.⁹

[S]een from too great a distance to analyze or even to understand the subject, a painting by Delacroix has already produced a rich, happy or melancholy impression on the soul. One could say that this painting, like sorcerers or mesmerists, projects its thought from a distance. . . . Then its admirable color tones [accords de sa couleur] often make one dream of harmony and melody, and the impression one brings away from his paintings is often almost musical. (2:595)

In both these passages, Baudelaire encourages the observer to stand absurdly far away from the canvas so as to avoid taking the painting too literally. Exaggerated distance, that is, results in a closeness that has noth-

ing to do with physical proximity, since it consists in the privilege of looking beyond the exactitude of lines and colors to the intimate, synesthetic blending of painted and musical figures. It is therefore possible for observers at an exposition to maintain distance and to overcome it at precisely the same time: by exploiting their measurable separation from the canvas, they may come immeasurably closer than those who stand too near to see the painting as it "projects its thought" into the distance. For art critics and their readers, however, this exploitation of distance depends less on the floor space of galleries than on the use of figurative language. Whatever his concrete vantage point, Baudelaire proves that the canvas is very far away by writing that the "painting is melodious" and that it gives him an "almost musical" impression; he uses the linguistic distance between "tableau" and "mélodieux" to suggest his extreme nearness to the painting and his consequent discovery of the painting's extreme nearness to music. Baudelaire doubly exploits the distance between literal and figurative description by making it stand, first, for the literal distance between the eye and the canvas or between the canvas and a musical score and, second, for the figurative lack of distance between the critical observer and the painting or between the painting and a melody.¹⁰

If the art critic must rely on language to place readers at the proper distance from a painting, then perhaps the music critic must do likewise: maybe the climber surveying Wagner's music from a high lookout point corresponds to the observer studying Delacroix's painting from too far away. It may therefore be possible to interpret Baudelaire's question both literally and figuratively, since his essay must place readers at an exaggerated distance from the musical landscape for the apparently contradictory purpose of bringing them much closer to it than would otherwise be conceivable. Elsewhere in his writing, Baudelaire makes similar connections between musical understanding, concrete or spatial distance, and the abstract or conceptual distance separating different arts; a celebrated example of this is his declaration in *Mon cœur mis à nu* that "music," like "all the arts, more or less," "gives the idea of space" (1:702). But Baudelaire also shows persistent ambivalence or indecisiveness where this particular group of related distances is concerned. Just after the passage from his *Exposition universelle* (1855) quoted above, for example, Baudelaire confusingly tries

to argue further for the connections between musical, visual, and interpretive spaces while at the same time apologizing for the "subterfuges of language" that make his argument possible. He first quotes, from his own poem "Les Phares" (1:13), the quatrain in which Delacroix's work appears as a "lake of blood" where "strange fanfares / Pass like a stifled sigh from Weber," thus apparently reemphasizing that linguistic distance can serve to bring music and painting very close together. But he then proceeds to foreshorten this distance and to drain away much of its power by adding the following explanation: "*the fanfares and Weber*: ideas of romantic music awakened by the harmonies of his [Delacroix's] color" (2:595). Rather than literal closeness, Baudelaire now suggests, his writing effects only a figurative rapprochement between painting and music; like a lighthouse beacon, his poem allows the two arts to glimpse each other, but it keeps a safe interval between them.

For Baudelaire, then, it is difficult or impossible to assign a stable value to the distance that separates his writing from Wagner's music. Although determined to set his essay well apart from its musical topic, like a hilltop far removed from the lands it overlooks, he is unable to state the exact nature and consequences of the gap between them. From some points of view, this divide may be useful or even essential, paradoxically allowing Baudelaire and his readers to perceive the closeness of musical and textual composition, the synesthetic exchange of properties between music and letters. But from other points of view, this gap may function more simply as a hindrance, as an invisible barrier preventing any actual movement between the domain of Baudelaire's essay and the region of Wagner's music. *Richard Wagner* is thus a locus of hesitation or indecision: it marks Baudelaire's inability either to establish the real proximity of writing to music or to admit their definitive separation from each other. One of the results of this wavering is a persistent, mutually exploitative rapport between the tone of Baudelaire's essay, which is frequently emphatic or declamatory, and its argumentation, which often proves upon scrutiny to be neither thorough nor convincing. Uncertain whether the various "subterfuges of language" he deploys will turn their distance from the music to good use or merely push the music further away, Baudelaire remains poised like a traveler stranded on a high cliff above a magnificent landscape.

MODES OF TRANSPORT

This poised uncertainty takes a starker, more condensed form in Baudelaire's much cited poem "La Musique." Baudelaire was perhaps more at ease figuring music as a seascape than as a landscape; allusions to the musical sound and movements of water permeate *Les Fleurs du Mal*.¹¹ But since this poem is partly a meditation on the difficulty of traveling over literal and figurative distances, it explores the same fundamental problem as the Wagner essay. And more concisely than the essay, the poem shows what is at stake when figurative writing attempts to voyage into literal proximity with music.

La musique souvent me prend comme une mer!
 Vers ma pâle étoile,
 Sous un plafond de brume ou dans un vaste éther,
 Je mets à la voile;

 La poitrine en avant et les poumons gonflés
 Comme de la toile,
 J'escalade le dos des flots amoncelés
 Que la nuit me voile;

 Je sens vibrer en moi toutes les passions
 D'un vaisseau qui souffre;
 Le bon vent, la tempête et ses convulsions

 Sur l'immense gouffre
 Me bercent. D'autres fois, calme plat, grand miroir
 De mon désespoir!

(1:68)

[Music often takes me like a sea!
 Toward my pale star,
 Beneath a ceiling of fog or in a vast ether,
 I set sail;

 Breast forward and lungs swollen
 Like sails,

I climb the backs of piled-up waves
That the night veils from me;

I feel vibrating in me all the passions
Of a vessel that suffers;
The good wind, the tempest and its convulsions

On the immense abyss
Cradle me. At other times, flat calm, great mirror
Of my despair.]

At some levels, this poem insists on the visceral closeness between sea and sailor, or music and listener. The exclamation in the first line, together with the pronounced, uneven alternation between twelve-syllable and five-syllable lines, makes it clear that the narrating vessel does not observe from the far-off shore, but is tossed or cradled or becalmed in the intimacy of the water. As the first line also declares, however, this closeness is only occasional. The musical sea “often”—but not always—takes the narrator, and the ambiguous resonance of “takes” (sensual embrace or violent assault?) gives a doubtful cast to their intimacy. The quatrains both point to this separation between sea and narrator by evoking a scenario that is in some ways similar to the hilltop image from *Richard Wagner*: the narrator climbs to the crest of the waves and faces out over the expanse separating him from his “pale star.” But whereas the climber in the Wagner essay gazes at the countryside below, the wave-mounting sailor here cannot even glimpse the seascape before him, since the sail (in French, *voile*) under which he might move forward is so closely bound up with the nighttime veil (also *voile*) that makes voyaging uncertain. More immediately and urgently than the Wagner essay, therefore, this poem identifies music with distance; the music/ocean is not so much the far-off destination of the narrator’s travels as it is the still-uncrossed space that makes travel desirable and difficult, the equivocal distance that makes stars appear both excessively remote and attainably close. It might be tempting to suggest that this ink-dark stretch of sea ultimately represents the possibility of a perfect coincidence between music and writing, between the sonorous waves and currents rendered by musicians and the furrows traced on the page by star-gazing poets. But