

Malfunctioning Music and the Art of Noise: The Prepared Pianos of Jules Laforgue

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While Laforgue criticism has explored the prominent role which music plays in his work, studies have focused on *Les Complaintes* and *Derniers vers* rather than his abandoned volume *Le Sanglot de la Terre*. This article suggests that Laforgue's later poetics of discord and dissonance already takes shape here: thematically, by subverting images of mechanical music such as the barrel organ, and formally, in the various dislocations which the poet inflicts on his verse. This malfunctioning music is read alongside wide-ranging evidence, in Laforgue's prose, notes and correspondence, of a notion of sound collage which demonstrates striking similarities with avant-garde musical experiments in the twentieth-century by Russolo, Schaeffer or Cage, such as noise music and *musique concrète*. This aesthetics of explosion, decomposition and juxtaposition allows Laforgue to abandon previously secure hierarchies of beauty in favour of a modern, mobile idealism in which poetic value is unstable, dynamic, and in constant process.

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It is unsurprising that music has been a prominent theme of much research devoted to Laforgue, since he himself placed musical metaphors, forms, images and analogies at the heart of his writing throughout his short life. Studies of *Les Complaintes* (1885), in particular, are dominated by the folk songs whose forms and themes they adapt,

and the barrel organs which Laforgue heard at provincial fairs or in the streets and courtyards of Paris, and whose melancholy, nostalgic tunes he remembered fondly during his years in Berlin. Readings of the *Derniers vers*, too, take into account the Wagnerian innovations which inspired Parisian Symbolists in the 1880s and with which Laforgue was very familiar (Holmes, 2008: 171). Indeed, far from being gratuitous, empty metaphors, the notions of symphony, continuous melody and *leitmotif* capture the poet's efforts to create what Anne Holmes calls 'intricate symphonic structures' (1993: 172), a complex whole within which the poet weaves 'Ma mélodie, toute et unique, [...] Ô solo de sanglots' (VI, ll. 8-13, *Œuvres complètes*, II: 318; hereafter *OC*). While Laforgue was evidently fond of the low art forms of popular song, including street musicians in many of his poems and short prose texts, he had an excellent knowledge of high musical culture, thanks in part to countless hours spent with his friend, the pianist Théophile Ysaÿe, and to the concerts and premieres he frequently attended in Germany. As such, Laforgue's use of musical terms to describe his poetic technique is remarkably apposite, and consistent. Just as he tells Charles Henry, in early 1882, that he dreams of a new poetry resembling 'd'inextricables symphonies avec une phrase (un sujet) mélodique, dont le dessin reparaît de temps en temps' (*OC*, I: 757), he tells Léo Trézenik, in September 1885, of his *Complaintes*, 'j'ai voulu faire de la symphonie et de la mélodie' (*OC*, II: 786).

The formal diversity and innovations of *Les Complaintes* have, therefore, consistently been read through this musical lens. For Daniel Grojnowski they exemplify 'le tohu-bohu laforguien, fait de ruptures, de tonitruances et de discordances' (1988: 86); to Jean-Pierre Bertrand's ear, 'son vers sonne faux [...] son "clavier légitime" est profondément dissonant' (1997: 236); while Françoise Sylvos suggests, 'ce qui souffle dans les tuyaux de cet orgue, c'est un vent de discorde pour

une poétique qui désaccorde la lyre' (2000: 127). Dissonance and discord are fitting concepts for a poetry which frequently dislocates the alexandrine, rhymes singulars with plurals, mixes line lengths in complex heterometric stanzas, always unpredictable and sometimes irregular as in the 'Complainte de l'oubli des morts' (2/3/3/1, 2/3/2/3, 2/3/3/2, ll. 5-9, 17-20, 29-32, *OC*, I: 601), and which uses *syncope* and *apocope* to recreate the register of the fairground rather than the concert hall: 'Et allez donc, mâl's et femelles!' ('Complainte du soir des Comices agricoles', l. 15, *OC*, I: 594). As Hugues Laroche puts it, 'la complainte éta[i]t à la poésie parnassienne ce que l'orgue de Barbarie est à l'orgue d'église, une variante triviale et discordante' (2003: 111). The comparison is a useful one, since Laforgue plays, in his early years in particular, on the contrast between three kinds of instrument: powerful church organs, the pianos played by young bourgeois girls in their suburban apartments, and the barrel organ (Corbellari, 2000). Yet while the church organ and the household piano are both keyboard instruments, the apparent proximity between the *orgue d'église* and the *orgue de Barbarie* is primarily etymological, for while they share certain mechanical features – pipes and bellows – the barrel organ has no keyboard, and is 'played', if that is the right term, simply by turning a handle, thereby rotating a cylinder which can only churn out an identical copy each time. Moreover, as Laurence Tibi observes, the nineteenth-century barrel organ was often out of tune, and out of time, owing to damage caused by use outdoors in cold, wet weather, and the knocks inflicted on it by the wandering organ-grinder:

Cette musique donnait l'impression de ne jamais être jouée en mesure. Des ralentissements à entrer en pâmoison étaient suivis d'accéléérations subites. L'instrument, par moments, semblait sur le point de s'étrangler, toussotait, bloquait et repartait. (2003: 466)

Whereas Tibi sees the textual equivalent of this arrhythmia in the heterometric stanzas of the *Complaintes* (467), I would suggest, rather, that the broken barrel organ encapsulates perfectly the gradual process of sabotage which Laforgue inflicts on his metrical verse throughout each stage of its rapid evolution, or disintegration. Defects introduced into the mechanism break the impression of monotony and provide Laforgue with a model of poetry which, like the barrel organ, coughs, chokes and splutters but, as we will see, manages to reconcile an unshakeable aesthetic idealism with a resolutely modern notion of art which constantly evolves in challenging, and even painful, ways.

The early philosophical, cosmic poems written for *Le Sanglot de la Terre* have received little attention since Laforgue himself dismissed them as banal, formulaic, unpublishable (*OC*, I: 697, 757). Yet the first seeds of his radical new conception of poetry are sown here, as he rejects the interpretation offered by poets such as Lamartine and Hugo of a musical universe whose rhythms and harmonies – the Pythagorean music of the spheres – are proof of a divine presence which validates an aesthetic hierarchy based on fixed notions of value. Laforgue was certainly not the first nineteenth-century French poet to grapple with such existential questions, which were already a tired cliché by 1880, but the way in which the *Sanglot* poems question how meaning may be attributed to form in the absence of a universal measure sets the tone for the poetic project of his mature years. Earlier in the century, the regular forms of verse were seen to reflect those of the cosmos, which guaranteed their inherent worth; in *Les Orientales* (1829), for example, when Hugo contemplates the stars, he hears them pronounce God's name amid a complex and beautiful music:

Et les étoiles d'or, légions infinies,
A voix haute, à voix basse, avec mille harmonies,
[...]
Disaient, en recourbant l'écume de leur crête:

– C’est le Seigneur, le Seigneur Dieu!
(‘Extase’, ll. 7-12, 1950-1974, I: 680)

Yet that astral music is perceived by Laforgue as an almost grotesque reminder of the emptiness of the godless universe:

N’entends-tu pas sans trêve, en la nuit lamentable,
Les Astres te chanter plus nombreux que le sable
La désillusion en sublimes concerts?
(‘Pataugement’, ll. 4-6, *OC*, I: 303)

The music of the spheres does not, therefore, disappear along with the notion of a divine guarantee – the universe does not fall silent – but it is impossible, in the absence of an absolute witness beyond our earthly realm, to see certain forms as inherently more significant than others; as Grojnowski suggests, ‘les modèles qu’impose toute tradition, paraissent désuets en même temps qu’arbitraires une fois qu’ils sont désacralisés’ (1984: 403). In the face of cosmic chaos and chance, regular verse loses its prestige since its rhythms and harmonies correspond to no transcendent truth beyond it, and Laforgue expresses his scepticism in terms of a failure to rhyme, a *rime orpheline* to symbolise the orphaned planet, telling Charles Ephrussi in March 1882, ‘Je doute si notre pensée rime à quelque chose de réel dans l’univers’ (*OC*, I: 759). This metaphor recurs in ‘Hamlet’, from the *Moralités légendaires*, as the narrator asks, ‘Est-ce que ces menus conflits de phénomènes riment à quelque chose au-delà d’ici-bas?’ (*OC*, II: 389), while Hamlet himself, poet and playwright, exclaims, ‘Et puis, des mots, des mots, des mots! Ce sera là ma devise tant qu’on ne m’aura pas démontré que nos langues riment bien à une réalité transcendante’ (*OC*, II: 391). Both Hamlet and the poet struggle with the problem of how any linguistic utterance, let alone the contrived and formulaic traditions of metrical verse, should claim the authority to mean anything in the face of what Laforgue calls, in an essay of 1882 on Paul Bourget, ‘le chaos sans Cœur des anonymes tourbillonnements de

créations' (*OC*, III: 132). Why should rhyme, a chance phonetic correlation, have any special significance within this swirling vortex of forms in constant movement, in which none is more meaningful than the rest?

Je vois un tourbillon, incessant va et vient
D'atomes éternels, oublieux, anonymes,
[...]
Non, mon corps est à tout, et la nature entière
N'est qu'un perpétuel échange de matière.

(‘Suis-je?’, ll. 15-37, *OC*, I: 314)

This notion of an endless making and remaking is reflected in the process of constant rewriting to which Laforgue submits his verse. The argument for any variant being authoritative, having priority over another, is untenable – the poet simply writes and rewrites, mirroring the automatic, anonymous processes of the universe:

O convoi solennel des soleils magnifiques,
Nouez et dénouez vos vastes masses d'or.

(‘Marche funèbre pour la mort de la Terre’, *OC*, I: 341)

In two different drafts of one poem, the movement of the stars – ‘Vertige des Soleils! musiques infinies!’ – is compared to highly repetitive forms of song, or dance: ‘O rondes d'astres d'or’ (‘Désolation’, ll. 1-3, *OC*, I: 351); and of poetry: ‘un pantoum sans fin’ (‘Hypertrophie’, l. 4, *OC*, I: 353). Thus music and poetry, song and dance, are condemned to go round and round in circles, only confirming their own inherent futility.

Why, then, continue to churn out metrical verse, like an organ-grinder mindlessly turning a handle? Why persevere with a pointless enterprise which serves only to recycle fragments of other texts, the same old rhythms: ‘Bah! des phrases! des vers! des souvenirs de livre!...’ (‘L'Oubli’, l. 81, *OC*, I: 365)? Why perpetuate the tedious, identical productions of the ‘pauvre orgue monotone’ (‘Incurablement’, l. 1, *OC*, I: 377), the ‘refrains automnaux d'un vieil orgue éreinté’ (‘Hue, carcan!’, l. 5, *OC*, I: 301), when, in Laforgue's early short story ‘Stéphane Vassiliew’ (1881), such an

exercise in empty repetition sends a whole classroom to sleep: ‘la classe entière et le professeur lui-même s’assoupissaient, au ron-ron monotone d’un mot-à-mot du *De Viris*’ (*OC*, I: 459)? And yet the poet of the *Sanglot* cannot do otherwise:

Je m’en vais par les bois solennels et déserts,
Chantant des vers d’adieu d’une voix monotone.
(‘Désolations’, ll. 3-4, *OC*, I: 353)

Similarly, in the few pages which scholars have devoted to the volume, the notion of monotonous regularity prevails. Of the predominance of regular 6/6 alexandrines, Grojnowski suggests, ‘Ils donnent au recueil son temps qui, à de rares exceptions près, est celui du métronome ou du martèlement, selon que prédomine la méditation sentencieuse ou le lyrisme en gros sabots’ (1988: 80). These ‘rare exceptions’ have not proved salient enough to sustain the interest of critics such as Henri Scepi, who writes, ‘Absents ou presque, les décrochages et glissements de la mesure métrique par rapport au moule syntaxique, quand ils se produisent [...] ne mettent jamais en péril la stabilité ou l’harmonie de l’ensemble’ (2008: 161). Proportionally perhaps, the metrically problematic lines of the *Sanglot* hardly break the overall sense of monotony. Yet they provide localised evidence of significant disruption which enacts the poet’s frustration with the hollow, mechanical regularity of verse, an instrument which he longs to break:

Mais qui m’aime? Seul, seul. O psaumes de rafales,
Prenez-le donc mon cœur! et, plus haut que l’écho,
Brisez ce violon du terrestre sanglot
Dans vos déchaînements de clameurs triomphales!
(‘Désolations’, ll. 17-20, *OC*, I: 354)

In addition to this broken violin, the early short prose text ‘Les Drames de province’ features an organ-grinder who is run over by a carriage, ‘renversé avec son orgue défoncé, au milieu de deux ou trois cris et jurons’, and taken to hospital ‘avec son orgue en pièces’ (*OC*, III: 899). In the *Sanglot*, we may see this violence as directed

towards the metrical integrity of the alexandrine, since in a letter to Charles Henry of 30 December 1881, Laforgue recalls the iconoclastic experiments of his early verse technique, marking the caesura himself in a broken line:

La fiancée de mes quatorze ans, en province, s'appelait Marguerite. Je lui
faisais des vers d'une facture très audacieuse pour mon âge:

Marguerite! si tu / savais combien je t'aime!

(OC, I: 733)

Such attention to the expressive potential of formally disruptive lines so early in his writing career suggests it would be worth examining the *Sanglot* in greater detail, since such cases illustrate the poet's earliest attempts, if not to smash the violin and barrel organ to smithereens, at least to inflict some tentative damage.

Metrical disruption in the *Sanglot* poems

The method of *métricométrie* proposed by Benoît de Cornulier to classify various kinds of metrical disruption (1982: 134-43) reveals only six P6 lines – unaccentuable monosyllabic preposition before the caesura – among the *Sanglot* poems and the 35 contemporaneous poems not intended for inclusion. Two of these can be recuperated in the *trimètre romantique* with its 4/4/4 scansion, a *mètre de substitution* which by the 1880s was perfectly familiar, but four lines remain metrically problematic, with unaccentuable elements at fourth or eighth position:

Maman! Maman! oh! *comme* / à présent, loin de tous

(‘Les Après-midi d’automne’, l. 11, OC, I: 285)

En bas la rue où *dans* / une brume de suie

(‘Spleen’, l. 3, OC, I: 374)

Qui me bercerait *comme* / un pauvre enfant vidé

(‘Les Spleens exceptionnels’, l. 14, OC, I: 381)

Ne croit plus d'ailleurs *aux* / ‘Sœur Anne, où êtes-vous?’

(‘Mœurs’, l. 10, OC, I: 435)

The second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1861) featured ‘comme’ before the caesura six times, and so these lines hardly represent, twenty years later, radical sabotage of the alexandrine; but a variant of the third example features the regular 6/6 form – ‘Et qui m’aurait bercé / comme un enfant vidé’ (*OC*, I: 381) – away from which the line moves towards a rhythm at odds with that of tiresome mechanical repetition.

The metrical machine is also undermined by twelve C6 lines – monosyllabic clitic before the caesura – of which eight resist a substitute 4/4/4 scansion with unaccentuable syllables such as the *e atone* at fourth or eighth position:

Et c’est la Terre. Ah! *nous* / **sommes** bien vieux, nous autres!
(‘Le Sanglot universel’, l. 21, *OC*, I: 406)

Et promène sur *mes* / lèvres sa chevelure
(‘Sieste éternel’, l. 6, *OC*, I: 417)

Puis, rien ainsi que *des* / **folles**, vers les étoiles.
(‘Spleen des nuits de juillet’, l. 12, *OC*, I: 432)

Finally, we find just one M6 line, with caesura mid-word, and one Em6 line, with a masculine ‘e’ in sixth position, both in poems not intended for the *Sanglot*:

Poussez, du bout / de *l’es//carpin* / verni vainqueur,
(‘Mœurs’, l. 17, *OC*, I: 435)

Des Vierges dorment, *se* / baignent, défont leurs tresses,
(‘Spleen des nuits de juillet’, l. 7, *OC*, I: 432)

While the disruptive effect of ‘escarpin’ is tempered by the *mètre de substitution*, the pre-caesural ‘se’ provides the most emphatic anti-metrical jolt of Laforgue’s verse so far, in a line which, fittingly, describes the braids of hair coming apart.

Elsewhere in the *Sanglot* poems we find other forms of sabotage in addition to Cornulier’s categories, such as the sixteen lines demanding to be read as 7/5 thanks to indivisible syntactic units over the caesura, often brought up sharp by a monosyllable at seventh position, followed by punctuation. While not strictly anti-metrical – the word at sixth position is not unaccentuable in itself – such lines either create a clash

between metrical accent at sixth position and syntactic accent at seventh position, or simply erase the former in favour of the latter:

Je sens que j'ai perdu / *l'Art*, ma dernière Idole,
(‘Éponge pourrie’, l. 1, *OC*, I: 271)

Tu ne peux pas ne pas / *être*, Témoin des choses!
(‘L’Angoisse sincère’, l. 13, *OC*, I: 288)

Dégonfle-toi, dis-moi / *tout*; gémis-moi tes cris,
(‘Incurablement’, l. 10, *OC*, I: 377)

Sursum corda! et tout / *bas*: Ah! oui, *haut-le-cœur!*
(‘Mœurs’, l. 20, *OC*, I: 435)

Similarly, a few lines demand a 5/7 scansion which makes of the sixth syllable the unaccentuable starting-point of the next phrase:

Je tords mon vieux cœur *qui* / suinte des rimes d’or.
(‘Veillée d’avril’, l. 4, *OC*, I: 273)

Le Songeur, pour qui *c’est* / à jamais aujourd’hui!
(‘L’Angoisse sincère’, l. 28, *OC*, I: 289)

Such rhythmic details deserve to be read as an integral part of the line’s expressive capacities, since Laforgue’s correspondence reveals a poet extremely sensitive to their symbolic potential. Thanking Henry for complimenting his poems, he admits in June 1882, ‘je ne suis pas encore bien raffiné en fait de facture; j’entrevois toute une symbolique des coupes, mais hélas!’ (*OC*, I: 786). While Laforgue does not elaborate on this ‘symbolique des coupes’, Holmes’s reading of *Les Complaintes* – ‘experimental rhyming and syllabic combinations formed part of Laforgue’s attempt to make details of technique relate to meaning’ (1993: 48) – applies equally well to metrical irregularities in the *Sanglot* poems which express frustration with the futile monotony of mechanical regularity.

Examples of disruptive *enjambement* may be read as part of the same strategy, with Laforgue exploiting two techniques which he employs with increasing frequency

over the next few years: firstly, retrospective *enjambement*, where the sense of the first line feels reasonably complete, only for the reader to discover that the sense unit finishes abruptly at the start of the next line, with punctuation after the *rejet* marking a pause which makes more syntactic sense than that offered by the *entrevers*:

J'irai vivre, là-bas, seul, dans *quelque forêt*
→ *D'Afrique*, brute épaisse, et la chair assouvie,
(‘Étonnement’, ll. 38-39, *OC*, I: 298)

La plupart vit et meurt sans soupçonner *l'histoire*
→ *Du globe*, sa misère en l'éternelle gloire,
(‘Médiocrité’, ll. 9-10, *OC*, I: 333)

And secondly, foreseeable *enjambement*, where the last word of the first line, the *contre-rejet*, is clearly unaccentuable on first reading:

Qu'il faut professer envers *ces*
→ *Empêcheurs* de danser en rond.
(‘Pauvre petit cœur sur la main’, ll. 19-20, *OC*, I: 434)

Indeed, these two lines encapsulate perfectly the nascent formal strategies of the *Sanglot* poems, in which infrequent but nonetheless significant rhythmic jolts disrupt the metrical mechanism. Similarly, in the following example from *Les Complaintes*, the machine-like universe does not fall cleanly within verse metre, but rather occupies the indeterminate zone of the *entrevers*, dramatising an irresolvable tension between order and disorder:

Des chaotiques hécatombes, *l'automate*
→ *Universel* où pas une loi ne se hâte.
(‘Complainte du temps et de sa commère l'espace’, ll. 41-44, *OC*, I: 608)

The effect is that of a damaged barrel organ which suddenly jars or, to adopt the metaphors the poet offers us, *empêche de danser en rond*, *dénoue les cheveux*, *défait les tresses*, or *brise le violon*. While most Laforgue scholars find ample evidence of this campaign in later volumes, it is clear from these examples that Grojnowski's description of *Derniers vers* could, to a lesser extent, apply to the *Sanglot*: ‘Le lecteur

se trouve en présence de vers dont la mesure lui est tantôt familière, tantôt déroutante, dont la structure rythmique tantôt se conforme à un schéma établi, tantôt oblige à en discerner le fondement' (1984: 405).

Laforgue is not necessarily an innovator in using these techniques in the early 1880s. Once the seeds are sown with a handful of CP6 lines in the second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1861), Verlaine includes thirty CP6 lines in *Poèmes saturniens* (1866), while both Mallarmé in the mid-1860s and Rimbaud in the early 1870s produce FMCP6 lines which, although they are not published until the 1880s, would certainly have been known to the literary *cognoscenti*. The frequency of such lines increases dramatically during the 1870s, and by the time Paul Bourget, of whose poetry Laforgue was an ardent admirer, includes twenty-three CP6 lines in *Les Aveux* (1882), and one irrecuperable F6 line – ‘O toi qui veux, lasse / de ton âme ulcérée’ (‘Révolte’, l. 13, 1887: 192) – the sense of a sustained dismantling of the alexandrine’s metrical mechanism is uncontroversial. While the phenomenon has its roots in a wide range of social, political and cultural factors (see Whidden, 2014), for Laforgue, metrical sabotage appears as a rejection of what Sainte-Beuve in 1839 labels ‘la littérature industrielle’: the use of repetitive formulae to produce low-quality, disposable art for the masses. In an article of February 1886 on an exhibition of sculpture in Berlin, Laforgue scorns the aesthetic tastes of the bourgeoisie precisely for their satisfaction with cheap mass production: ‘On n’imagine pas les entrepôts que ce public achalandé: meubles fabriqués à la grosse, bronzes et bibelots passés au rifloir de la banalité mécanique [...] toute une industrie de copies’ (OC, III: 301). He also uses industrial vocabulary when appraising his own poems, referring to them in self-deprecating fashion as ‘ces petites machines’ in a letter to Henry of 5 August 1882 (OC, I: 795) and lamenting, in the margins of ‘Triste, triste’ from the *Sanglot*:

‘Toujours le même moule mes sonnets: dans les deux quatrains le décor, puis l’idée dans les deux tercets et le vers final’ (*OC*, I: 387). The formal intricacies of the *Sanglot* poems, therefore, highlight the verse poet’s paradoxical, self-conscious relationship with the mechanical, expressing a typically Laforguian – and self-parodic – dissatisfaction with structures which are nonetheless vital to his writing, and cannot yet simply be dispensed with.

As Tibi observes, the barrel organ with which the poet so closely identifies is ‘l’instrument par excellence du ressassement’ (2003: 446), and Laforgue often relies on the classic *cheville* technique of pure repetition, using it to fill whole hemistichs:

Tu te tais, tu te tais /	(‘Justice’, l. 49, <i>OC</i> , I: 283)
Car tu es! Car tu es! /	(‘L’Angoisse sincère’, l. 9, <i>OC</i> , I: 288)
/ Désespoir, désespoir!	(‘Pataugement’, l. 119, <i>OC</i> , I: 306)
/ En avant, en avant	(<i>brouillon</i> , l. 3, <i>OC</i> , I: 448)

While one might cite the protocol of Romantic exclamation as potential justification for such unimaginative writing, Laforgue’s early verse comedy *Tessa* (1877), written at the age of 16 or 17, – and which itself contains 15 CP6 alexandrines – shows he was well aware of the compositional difficulties facing poets, and of the unsatisfactory solutions to which they sometimes resorted. Here we see Filippo, a bohemian poet, finding inspiration hard to come by:

FILIPPO, *entrant par la droite avec toutes les allures d’un poète qui compose.*

Il fuyait par la plaine...
Il fuyait...

Non. Je ne vis jamais plus rude accouchement.
(*OC*, I: 105)

He eventually gives up, stuck after the first three syllables which, as he repeats them in an effort to prod his imagination, conveniently fill up one hemistich:

Il fuyait par la plaine...
Tout à-coup... tout à-coup...

Non... ça ne viendra pas, c'est fini... ma romance
En reste à 'tout-à coup' du moins pour aujourd'hui.
(*OC*, I: 109)

Therefore, when Laforgue himself resorts to *chevilles* such as 'L'infini, l'infini!' ('L'Espace, le temps', l. 6, *OC*, I: 321), the reader might raise a sceptical eyebrow; the poet, too, expresses frustration in a line, used in two different poems, which features the same word three times while he despairs at the emptiness of everything:

Vanité, vanité, tout n'est que vanité!
(*'Soir de carnaval'*, l. 23, *OC*, I: 349, *'Berceuse'*, l. 14, *OC*, I: 384)

Such repetition provides a textual performance of the relentless, meaningless swirl of the empty cosmos, and since the line itself is recycled verbatim from Ecclesiastes via Hugo's *Hernani* (IV, i), the intertextual dimension only serves to intensify the sense that the search for originality may be futile, everything having already been said, to no avail. The production of mechanically faulty alexandrines, then, may be seen to express the poet's frustration with the automatic processes of a godless universe, the harmful effects of industrial manufacturing on aesthetic value, and the monotonous tone of his own attempts at verse, written in the sterile instrument bequeathed to him by centuries of tradition.

New instruments, new forms, new music: from *Les Complaintes* to John Cage

Following these tentative attempts to break his barrel organ and violin, the poet of *Les Complaintes* goes much further, starting with a *poème-dédicace* in which he plays a simple folk pipe made from his own nerve fibres:

Qui, du chalumeau de ses nerfs,
Se souffle gravement des vers,
(*'A Paul Bourget'*, ll. 9-10, *OC*, I: 545)

This pipe cannot produce the same tonal range as, for example, the piano, whose expressive variety Laforgue admires in a letter to Gustave Kahn of 23 April 1885: 'Et

pour ma part j'adore ça. – Tout autre instrument devient insupportable. [...] le piano n'est pas monocorde – c'est tout un orchestre' (*OC*, II: 757). Thus *Les Complaintes* opens with a self-deprecating suggestion of expressive limitations and imperfections which frustrate the eponymous hero of 'Pan et la syrinx', written in late 1886 for the *Moralités légendaires* (1887). Pan plays tunes 'sur son imparfait et monotone pipeau-galoubet, sur son galoubet de deux sous [...] qui n'a que quatre notes' (*OC*, II: 451), and to Syrinx's compliments on his playing, he can only exclaim, 'Si j'avais une flûte plus compliquée! J'en ferais, des choses! Je ne douterais plus de rien!...' (*OC*, II: 454). Yet in a self-written advertisement-review of *Les Complaintes* which parodies the eager promotional language of the marketplace, Laforgue claims that he has created a poetic instrument capable of new heights of expressive subtlety:

L'orgue de Barbarie des complaintes que voici n'a de populaire que le tour rythmique et quelquefois de vieux refrains empruntés, et demeure un instrument très-raffiné capable de subtiles nuances psychologiques comme des derniers effets dans le métier du vers. (*OC*, III: 153)

As we shall see, Laforgue's descriptions of this new poetry, both in content and form, bear striking similarities to the musical avant-garde of the twentieth century. Indeed, the aesthetic conundrum which so preoccupies him – how to locate aesthetic value in the absence of a stable framework – is one of the nineteenth century's most challenging legacies to subsequent generations of artists in any medium.

In 'Pan et la syrinx', Pan creates a new instrument using seven reeds of different lengths, corresponding, perhaps, to the transgressive seventh syllable which allows poetic discourse to break beyond the expressive constraints of the hemistich. The music produced is nothing short of miraculous: 'ce qu'il tire de cette flûte, c'est une miraculeuse gamme d'ère nouvelle disant naïvement son bonheur de flûte, son

bonheur de venir au monde par cette belle soirée de l'Âge Pastoral!...' (OC, II: 464). Yet the music is curiously self-sufficient – rather than Pan's love for Syrinx, or the divine harmonies of the spheres, the flute expresses nothing more than its own state, 'son bonheur de flûte, son bonheur de venir au monde'. In a remarkable passage, the music is described not in terms of the message it might express, but in strictly formal terms, in a succession of startling images:

Et c'est d'abord des trilles funambules, lancinants, spasmodiques, dévergondés, qui jappent, puis s'épuisent et expirent en un pieux rosaire de guéri.

Alors s'élève une note isolée et tenue, calme comme un aérostat au-dessus de la foule des badauds.

Et c'est le chant, en kilomètres, pâle comme une romance de relevailles, soudain interrompu d'une lourde gamme comme une cloche dégringolant d'échafaudages trop hâtifs, puis démaillotté et se développant en guirlande autour d'un piédestal attendant sa statue qui ne viendra heureusement jamais, au grand jamais.

Et, alors, pêle-mêle: introïts remontant au déluge, kyriés en caravanes sans eau, offertoires dans le marasme, oraisons morfondues et tombées bien bas, litanies trop faciles, magnificats entrant dans des détails, misérérés écumants, et stabat autour d'une crèche, autour d'une citerne où se mire Diane-la-Lune.

(OC, II: 464-65)

After the spasmodic opening trills and long held note, which seem to prefigure Debussy's 'Syrinx' (1913) for solo flute, Pan's song appears constantly on the verge of falling apart like some radical form of free jazz. Rather than calling the faithful to worship from the top of the bell tower – 'O culte d'un Dieu qui n'est pas / Quand feras-tu taire tes cloches!...' exclaims the poet of 'Complainte des crépuscules célibataires' (ll. 19-20, *Des Fleurs de bonne volonté*, OC, II: 244) – this music sounds like a bell tumbling down a hastily assembled, unstable scaffold, while the jumbled components of the Catholic mass celebrate not the Christian God, but a reflection of the moon which Laforgue's Pierrots worship for its silence and sterility in *L'Imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune* (1885). Moreover, the music's self-sufficiency, its refusal of the referentiality productive of stable meaning, is seen as a strength, as if it were a

garland adorning a pedestal which must necessarily remain free of a statue. This complex, futuristic music seems to express nothing more than its own existence as sound, just as the poetry of the godless universe is a primarily formal phenomenon expressing nothing beyond it, revelling in its infinite, and potentially meaningless, variety.

Indeed, it is significant that, in a letter to Kahn of 5 November 1883, Laforgue writes of his new volume of *Complaintes*: ‘Il est tout flambant neuf et très éteint. Des harpes dont les cordes auraient subi des averses (ce qui ne veut rien dire)’ (OC, I: 841). This apparently throwaway remark is important for two reasons. Firstly, these harps anticipate by several decades the prepared pianos of John Cage, suggesting either a wilful act of vandalism or a lack of care, and an openness towards the dissonances – the broader, if unconventional, tonal palette – which such a modified, dilapidated instrument would produce. Secondly, the parenthesis (‘ce qui ne veut rien dire’) performs an equivalent in language of Pan’s spasmodic flute solo, short-circuiting the words’ referential capacity. This, too, offer a striking parallel with Cage who, in his essay ‘Experimental Music’ (1958), calls for ‘New music: new listening. Not an attempt to understand something that is being said, for, if something were being said, the sounds would be given the shapes of words. Just an attention to the activity of sounds’ (2004: 10). Cage does not limit such an agenda to his sound art alone; throughout his writing, he locates the artistic value of words in forms rather than any abstract level of meaning beyond them, as in his ‘Lecture on Nothing’ (1959): ‘I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry. [...] What I am calling poetry is often called content: I myself have called it form’ (2004: 109-11). Indeed, this echoes Laforgue’s famous statement made in a letter of 18 July 1882 to Madame Mülzer: ‘Moi je rêve de la poésie qui ne dise rien, mais soit des bouts de

rêverie sans suite. Quand on veut dire, exposer, démontrer quelque chose, il y a la prose' (I:792). Thus it is in the form of a rain-damaged harp, a modern, neglected version of the lyre expressing nothing more stable than disorientating images of absence and collapse, that *Les Complaintes* take the formally disruptive techniques of the *Sanglot* poems to bold new lengths which anticipate the questions with which avant-garde poetry and music will grapple in the twentieth century.

In the opening 'Préludes autobiographiques', the poet parodies the portentous philosophising of his former self who had wished that his own body, vibrating like lyre strings, might dissolve into a primordial formlessness:

'Lyres des nerfs, filles des Harpes d'Idéal
 Qui vibriez, aux soirs d'exil, sans songer à mal
 Redevenez Plasma! Ni Témoin, ni spectacle!'
 (ll. 45-47, *OC*, I: 547)

On a formal level, these lines enact the rain damage, with one F6 (pre-caesural feminine 'e', 'filles /') and one M6 ('e/xil'), and the whole poem represents by far Laforgue's most concerted attempt to break the metrical mechanism, with the 6/6 structure submerged in 52 out of 122 lines (*OC*, I: 546-49), including three F6, eight F7, eight C6, five P6 and twenty M6. Whereas such disturbances, in the *Sanglot* poems, were isolated cases amid countless regular alexandrines which they never threatened to disrupt completely, the 'Préludes' open with six lines in which that 6/6 rhythm is never allowed to assert itself as the dominant measure:

En voulant mettre <i>un peu</i> / <i>d'ordre</i> dans ce tiroir	7/5
Je me suis perdu <i>par</i> / mes grands vingts ans, ce soir	P6
→ De Noël gras. /	
Ah! <i>dé//risoir/e</i> créature!	M6
Fleuve à reflets, où <i>les</i> / deuils d'Unique ne durent	C6
→ Pas plus que d'autres! L'ai- <i>/je</i> rêvé, ce Noël	Em7
Où je brûlais de <i>pleurs</i> / <i>noirs</i> un mouchoir réel	7/5

Furthermore, only one line (l. 3) can be recuperated in a 4/4/4 rhythm, and the Em7 represents a new weapon – post-caesural masculine 'e' – in Laforgue's arsenal of

disruptive techniques. The only precedents for such sustained pressure on the alexandrine in consecutive lines are Mallarmé's 'Hérodiade' and 'Faune', or certain poems of Rimbaud (whom Laforgue did not read until 1886), but this poem goes much further in terms of the sheer concentration of ametrical lines, fittingly enough for a poet whose opening statement of desire to 'mettre un peu d'ordre' in his manuscripts is itself dislocated over the caesura. Since the poem is not a *complainte* proper, Kahn suggested it be cut from the volume, but Laforgue insists in a letter of 18 January 1885, 'Elle est faite avec des vers d'antan, elle est bruyante et compatissable' (*OC*, II: 729) – as if this noise were precisely the quality he wanted to preserve: the noise of a broken violin, a worn-out barrel organ or a rain-damaged harp...

How, then, should we attempt to read these lines? With the 6/6 structure obliterated in the first six lines, we might be tempted simply to treat each one as a dodecasyllable with no regular internal pattern, yet familiar metrical regularity returns to tempt us, clearly marked in the next four lines:

Parce que, débordant / des chagrins de la Terre
Et des frères Soleils, / et ne pouvant me faire
Aux monstruosités / sans but et sans témoin
Du cher Tout, et bien las / de me meurtrir les poings
(ll. 7-10)

The reader's dilemma over maintaining two competing rhythmic imperatives finds a curious parallel in the climax to Laforgue's short story 'Mésaventure berlinoise', published in *L'Illustration* in May 1887. It tells of the rivalry between Jean l'Estrelle, a renowned Parisian concert pianist intending to conclude his triumphant performance in Berlin with a *morceau inédit* by Liszt, 'Soir à Bayreuth', and Bertha de Tackt, a young court pianist hoping to launch her career with an exclusive performance of the same piece. L'Estrelle refuses to give way, but as he plays the piece during his sold-

out concert, and nears the ‘passage fugué, d’une mesure si compliquée dans sa délicatesse’, he makes the mistake of glancing at his rival, among the select group of audience members seated on the stage, telling himself, ‘Mes doigts sauront garder le mouvement machinalement’. However, to his horror, ‘la dame [...] se mit à battre de l’éventail, à battre en mesure compliquée, lentement, à battre de l’éventail juste à contre-temps du passage fugué qui se développait!’ (OC, III: 998), producing a complex counter-rhythm which completely confuses him, ruining his performance of the rest of the piece and destroying his reputation:

Sa main gauche s’embrouilla, l’autre voulut la rattraper et aggrava le sauve-qui-peut! Il lui sembla que tout tournait autour de lui. Et le passage franchi, il continua à bredouiller encore. [...] Il alla jusqu’au bout, stupidement, follement, sentant le fatidique éventail qui battait toujours. (OC, III: 998-99)

Such a catastrophic performance is not unlike the experience of attempting to read the ‘Préludes autobiographiques’ metrically, as the reader struggles to adapt to the uncomfortable experience of veering between the familiar and the unpredictable.

These lines are real ‘empêcheurs de danser en rond’, since it is practically impossible to feel any rhythmical equivalence between them. Cornulier has argued that, in isometrical verse, ‘la rime n’est pas une marque de fin de vers’ (1981: 47), since the feeling of metrical equivalence between adjacent lines (6/6, 4/6, 5/5) performs that function perfectly well, but in this poem, without the rhyme to announce the end of each line, we would lose any sense of verse structure. Yet emphatic *enjambement* obscures that signpost too, further complicating our reading: ‘toutes / → Les citernes’ (ll. 12-13), ‘ses / → Cris trop poignants’ (ll. 21-22), ‘nuits / → Anonymes’ (ll. 61-62), ‘engrais / → Anonyme!’ (ll. 73-74), ‘concurrence / → Vitale’ (ll. 87-88), ‘mille / → Siècles?’ (ll. 90-91). Moreover, in alexandrines with a clear metrical outline, it is easy to work out when to apply diaeresis to certain vowel combinations, as in these lines from *Le Sanglot*:

Un *pi-ano* voisin / joue un air monotone;
(‘Les Après-midi d’automne’, l. 3, *OC*, I: 284)

La désillusi-*on* / en sublimes concerts?
(‘Pataugement’, l. 6, *OC*, I: 303)

In the ametrical lines of ‘Préludes’, however, while the palpable 6/6 balance is destroyed, the dodecasyllable is maintained, which demands awareness of diaeresis from the reader without offering the necessary metrical signposts, as in these F7 lines:

Ah! – Le long des calvair/*es* de la Consci-*ence* (l. 51)
La Passi-*on* des mon/*des* studi-*eux* t’encense (l. 52)
Et tout, sans que mon Ang/*e* Gardi-*en* me réponde (l. 104)

The effect is carefully crafted, since syllable counting was central to the way Laforgue wrote, and read, poetry; responding to Kahn’s verse in a letter of 16 December 1884, he asks, ‘faites-vous *familier* de 4 syllabes? Non sans doute? – est-ce volontairement qu’il vous manque 2 syllabes dans la 2e strophe de la Ier?’ (*OC*, II: 720, original emphasis). Amid the confusion, Laforgue allows metrical regularity to reassert itself in further sets of consecutive lines – ll. 32-39, 81-85, 105-8 – and includes reassuring patterns, such as the 3/3/3/3 alexandrine, with which we might try to find our bearings:

Battre un cœur! / un cœur simple; // ou veiller / un Regard! (l. 34)
Que ce Temps, / déraillant, // tomberait / en syncope (l. 76)

Other poems in alexandrines maintain the high ratio of ametrical to metrical lines – especially ‘Complainte du temps et de sa commère l’espace’ (28/48) and ‘Complainte du sage de Paris’ (32/86) – and so the disorientating effect on the reader is rather like that of a radio dial being turned, with recognisable fragments disappearing in a blast of white noise and static before re-emerging in constantly altered form.

The undisciplined symphony of the world: towards noise music

The comparison with noise is not an idle one, nor is it a mere anachronism. Rather, the parallels between Laforgue's iconoclastic verse, his close attention to the soundscape around him, and developments in the experimental music of the twentieth century – namely *musique concrète* and so-called noise music – are both remarkable, and perfectly natural, since as Paul Hegarty argues: 'Any account of noise is a history of disruptions and disturbances. This means that the history of noise is like a history of the avant-garde' (2007: ix). Hegarty suggests that the term 'noise' in musical discourse has traditionally signified two distinct phenomena: the use of unfamiliar dissonance in orchestral or chamber works which is eventually accepted into a wider understanding of tonality; and, with the advent of recording technology, the use of sounds other than the notes produced by musical instruments (2007: 12). We have already seen how frequently the vocabulary of dissonance has been applied to Laforgue's ametrical verse, but the second kind of noise is also found throughout his writing, suggesting a remarkable sensitivity to the soundworld of the city – industry, transport, street performers, hawkers, crowds (see Boutin, 2015) – in which Luigi Russolo found inspiration for *The Art of Noises* (1916) and Pierre Schaeffer for the experimental techniques of *musique concrète* which first featured in his piece *Étude aux chemins de fer* (1948).

In Laforgue's article for *La Guêpe* in June 1879, for example, songs at the open air *café-concert* are only half-heard through the ambient noise of commerce and consumerism:

Des bouquets d'arbres qui les entourent monte un bruit de verres et de cuillers choqués, d'éclats de rires, de cris de garçons interpellés, d'éclats de cuivre de l'orchestre, et, lancés d'un coup de gosier canaille dans la fumée des cigares, les refrains idiots des chansonnettes à la mode. (*OC*, I: 173)

Similarly, in a notebook of 1880, Laforgue describes the din of street noise which drowns out the music coming from the Théâtre des Variétés:

On n'entend pas la musique dans le grand bruit qui monte de la chaussée grouillante de piétons et de fiacres avec les passages qui dévorent et vomissent sans cesse du monde et la criée du programme devant le péristyle des Variétés.
(*OC*, I: 651)

And in the short story 'Clara la Cigale' (1879-1880) the young street singer's song, accompanied by the barrel organ with its 'glapissantes mélancolies amoureuses des échos des carrefours', must compete with 'les bruits de vaisselle, les fessées aux tapis poussiéreux et le clin-clin-clin diligent des machines à coudre' (*OC*, III: 867). These examples show music and song in various states of competition with other noises, some exclamatory, some rhythmical, such that the tunes, like the metrical lines of 'Préludes autobiographiques', are only perceivable as fragments through the constant interference. Similarly, as Cage observes in 'Lecture on Something':

At my house, you hear the boat sounds, the traffic sounds, the neighbours quarreling, the children playing and screaming in the hall, and on top of it all the pedals on the piano squeak. There is no getting away from life. (2004: 135)

And as he provocatively demonstrates in his infamous piece 4'33, no ivory tower exists for the isolation of music from increasingly intrusive ambient sound.

Elsewhere, Laforgue describes collages of natural sounds set against the noise of human activity, as in his notes for the unfinished novel 'Saison' (1885):

Le bruit? les oiseaux s'appelant mystérieusement dans les futaies du parc – des appels, des ébats, des querelles, voilà que les chauves-souris commençaient.
Le bruit? des roucoulements lointains, de lointains claquements de fouet devinés, des cloches, un sifflet cru de locomotive – des pas sonnans creux, les hallo! des rameurs d'un radeau tout en poutres. 2 coups de canon de remorqueur avertissant le pont de bateaux, des voitures sonnans plus creux sur le pont à trois arches tout en cage de fauves. (*OC*, III: 962)

This soundscape anticipates a remarkable passage from *The Art of Noises*, in which Russolo, like Laforgue's Pan, declares his frustration with the limitations of existing orchestral instruments – '*We must break out of this limited circle of sounds and*

conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds' (1986: 25, original emphasis) – and turns instead to the real sound environment:

[...] the rumbling of thunder, the whistling of the wind, the roaring of a waterfall, the gurgling of a brook, the rustling of leaves, the trotting of a horse into the distance, the rattling jolt of a cart on the road [...]. We will delight in distinguishing the eddying of water, of air or gas in metal pipes, the muttering of motors that breathe and pulse with an indisputable animality, the throbbing of valves, the bustle of pistons, the shrieks of mechanical saws, the starting of trams on the tracks, the cracking of whips, the flapping of awnings and flags. We will amuse ourselves by orchestrating together in our imagination the din of rolling shop shutters, the varied hubbub of train stations, iron works, thread mills, printing presses, electrical plants, and subways. (1986: 25-26)

This passage highlights two important notions which recur throughout avant-garde thinking on art from Laforgue, via Russolo and Schaeffer, to Cage, namely pleasure ('delight') and a readiness to perceive new structures ('orchestrating together in our imagination'). Just as Russolo suggests that noise musicians, 'by selecting, coordinating, and controlling all the noises, [...] will enrich mankind with a new and unexpected pleasure of the senses' (1986: 27), Cage declares in 'The Future of Music: Credo', an early lecture of 1937: 'The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments' (2004: 3). Yet by the time of 'Where Are We Going? and What Are We Doing?' (1961) – a formally radical lecture with four separate recordings of different texts played at once – Cage had moved away from notions of capture and control towards an acceptance of serendipity which transfers responsibility for assembling the aesthetic experience from the composer to the listener: 'Now structure is not put into a work, but comes up in the person who perceives it in himself. There is therefore no problem of understanding but the possibility of awareness' (2004: 259), a principle with which the confused, and irate, first reviewers of *Les Complaintes* would have had great difficulty agreeing.

While Laforgue demonstrates an acute sensitivity to ambient sounds, he never formulates explicitly what would be an avant-garde, proto-Dadaist poetics of sound collage. Despite his attention to the broad sound palette of the modern world, and his bold formal innovations, he cannot ignore the fundamental problem of how to locate aesthetic value in the face of the chaotic, infinite whirl of possibilities first explored in the *Sanglot*, observing in his essay on Bourget, ‘la poésie devient peu à peu tout, et une fois tout, elle ne sera plus’ (*OC*, III: 131). For the very notion of art to continue to exist, it is necessary to be able to identify non-art; Laforgue cannot, or will not, blithely state, as Cage does in ‘Lecture on Something’, that ‘There is no end to the number of somethings and all of them (without exception) are acceptable’ (2004: 132). Thus, although post-Romantic aesthetics can no longer rely on a divine, absolute guarantee to corroborate its value, the idea of art still requires some kind of hierarchy since it is indissociable from an unshakeable yet inexpressible sense of an ideal. Laforgue maintains in his notes on ‘L’Art moderne en Allemagne’, with a tantalisingly Mallarmean adverb, that ‘se développe éperdument une unique aspiration à l’idéal’ (*OC*, III: 340), and that this ideal is not incompatible with the constant evolution of artistic practice:

Nous sentons donc au-dessus de nous un Idéal. Cet Idéal va à la découverte inconscient et changeant. Il s’objective dynamiquement tâtonnant en gaspillages de genres et d’œuvres contradictoires d’un excès à l’autre: ses désillusions et ses lueurs nouvelles font naître des génies. L’Idéal va fatalement faisant ses expériences selon une loi obscure qui lui dit: tu t’es trompé au siècle passé, prenons une autre voie. (*OC*, III: 353)

In his notes from the same period refuting the fixed, classical hierarchies of Taine and Renan, Laforgue states quite simply, ‘on arrive à voir qu’il n’est pas d’idéal absolu mais relatif’ (*OC*, III: 360), and he repeats this conviction in notes from 1885 with an important qualification:

Dès que j'eus sondé l'abîme de ce principe – *Tout est relatif* – c'est là une vie, une foi – tout (par opp[osition] à l'absolu du dernier siècle) relativité indéterminable des *phénomènes*, le multiple de la vie – (mélodie – étalon, symphonie sans discipline) – la vie sans ponctuation et la vie en 3 points.

(*OC*, III: 1012, original emphasis)

This 'symphonie sans discipline' holds the key to an aesthetic theory which manages to balance idealism and relativism, and paves the way for a kind of symphonic listening close to Cage's insistence on alert receptiveness to 'le multiple de la vie': 'Listening one takes as a springboard the first sound that comes along; [...] But if you avoid it, that's a pity, because it resembles life very closely & life and it are essentially a cause for joy' ('45' for a Speaker', 2004: 173). Whereas Laforgue the pessimist philosopher had told Charles Ephrussi in a letter of 5 December 1881 that 'la vie est une chose bruyante et inutile' (*OC*, I: 719), this notion of noise as something intrusive, unwanted and thereby anti-artistic evolves by 1885 into the notion of the external world as a symphony, via some unpublished notes on impressionist painting from 1883: 'le monde extérieur est une symphonie perpétuellement changeante' (*OC*, III: 333). The symphony was widely seen as the most prestigious form of musical art in nineteenth-century Europe, and the term became shorthand for formal complexity and artistic achievement across the arts. In the case of Laforgue and the noise composers, however, the external world as symphony allows them to negotiate the problem of how to identify genuine art from an infinite number of potential forms: responsibility for locating aesthetic value passes from the *génie* of the omnipotent artist to the open, unprejudiced, curious and searching eye – or ear – of a beholder who is predisposed, to a greater or lesser extent, to be receptive to the potential beauty of new forms.

Thus Russolo too perceives 'the grandiose symphony that the sea produces in all its agitations, of the surf, of the violent and terrible squalls' (1986: 42), and the

‘marvellous and tragic symphony of the noises of war!’ (1986: 50). For Laforgue, the crucial difference between the undisciplined symphony of the world and the Beethovenian or Wagnerian *Meisterwerk* comes from his engagement with Darwinian theory, competition and the survival of the fittest. In ‘L’Art moderne en Allemagne’, he writes of this new, mobile ideal that ‘Le sens esthétique est donc tourbillonnant et changeant comme la vie [...] à l’état de phénomènes en concurrence’ (OC, III: 338), and that therefore ‘son principe est l’anarchie même de la vie’ (OC, III: 342), which anticipates Cage’s claim in ‘Where Are We Going’: ‘what we are doing is in our ways of art to breathe again in our lives anarchistically’ (2004: 253). It is this struggle for life which allows the randomly swirling atoms described in the *Sanglot* poems to produce ‘la symphonie des mille concurrences vitales entre les moindres idées, les moindres atomes, pour la Gde mélodie Inconsciente’ (OC, III: 385). For Laforgue, however, the external world is not always already art – Russolo and Schaeffer too insist on this point, refuting any accusation that they are simply indulging in the imitation of life. For them, even with an infinite number of possibilities, art cannot already be everywhere. Despairing of his struggle to identify the musical from the non-musical within a potentially infinite sound palette, Schaeffer observes, ‘me voici en pleine matière, pataugeant dans l’informe’ (1952: 197), conceding fourteen years later that ‘ce vide réclame ses règles’ (1966: 16). Avant-garde artworks may be challenging and unfamiliar, therefore, but for him they must still obey some kind of structure, otherwise, ‘En déchaînant un chaos de sons concrets [...] on effraie, on suscite l’angoisse’ (1952: 177). And while Cage situates his activities beyond this breaking point – ‘Nothing needs to be connected to anything else since they are not separated irrevocably to begin with’ (‘Where Are We Going?’, 2004: 228) – both

Laforgue and Schaeffer operate in the belief that it is possible, indeed necessary, somehow to distinguish art from non-art.

Schaeffer, insisting on ‘l’effort fait pour abstraire le bruit de son contexte dramatique et l’élever à la dignité de matériau musical’ (1952: 32), acknowledges that there are ‘des zones de transition entre son musical et bruit, mais cette zone ne présente aucun caractère objectif, au contraire’, leaving him facing the difficult question: ‘Où donc serait l’objet musical?’ (1952: 145). He claims to embrace the potential of an infinite number of sound sources, writing in his *Traité*, ‘nous ne refusons *a priori* aucune sorte d’objets sonores’ (1966: 478, original emphasis). Yet he maintains that, ‘Tous les objets sonores ne sont pas également convenables à une écoute musicale’ (1966: 673), since not all of them are ‘des sons intéressants, suffisamment complexes pour être musicaux’ (1966: 677). After almost 700 pages of theorising, therefore, he admits, ‘je comprends l’embarras du lecteur: il n’est pas toujours facile de situer la distinction objet sonore / objet musical’ (1966: 670). While Schaeffer may be at a loss to express in words what distinguishes sound from music – tellingly, he opens *A la recherche d’une musique concrète* with the claim, ‘Écrire, c’est toujours expliciter aux dépens d’autre chose. Le mystère est sacrifié’ (1952: 11) – he, Russolo and Laforgue are convinced that the difference, while inexplicable, is clear to certain privileged listeners, falling back on the sort of elitism which one might have expected to vanish along with the notion of a fixed aesthetic hierarchy. Russolo expresses his disdain for ‘the bestiality of the public that does not want to hear’ (1986: 84), and when he talks of new music’s power to move the soul, he clarifies, ‘I am not alluding to the soul of a seamstress or a hairdresser but to that of an artist, or at least to that of an evolved and truly modern man’ (1986: 86). Similarly, Schaeffer insists, ‘il suffit de savoir écouter, [...] tout l’art est d’entendre

[...] à condition d'être parvenu à cet état d'esprit où je suis à présent' (1952: 20), recommending *musique concrète* not for the general public, but for 'un public expérimental, lui aussi' (1952: 199). Laforgue, too, tells Henry in July 1882, 'Aujourd'hui les vers ne sont plus que pour être lus en petit comité, de-ci de-là, pour les seuls initiés' (*OC*, I: 789), as if embracing elitism as self-defence against the lack of wider public interest. Are we to conclude, therefore, that while it is impossible to describe aesthetic value satisfactorily, a small, privileged band of aesthetes know it when they see or hear it?

Not quite, since it is fascinating to note that, with the notable exception of Cage, even these radical experimentalists cannot escape the troubling suspicion that certain regular patterns are simply more pleasurable, more attractive, more artistic than others. In an interview of 1986, Schaeffer concedes:

Musique concrète in its work of assembling sound, produces sound-works, sound-structures, but not music. We have to not call music things which are simply sound-structures. [...] Unfortunately it took me forty years to conclude that nothing is possible outside DoReMi. (1986, n.p.)

While Laforgue's poetry performs a kind of aural defamiliarisation in sync with his experience of the modern world and belief in the mysterious integrity of art, his sustained sabotage of the metrical mechanism forces the reader to confront the disorientating search for aesthetic value, and to question the relief we feel when the dial moves momentarily back to familiar, regular patterns. Such relief is understandable, Schaeffer acknowledges, since experimentation is a painful process: 'Si, sortant harassé d'une séance au studio, je vais au concert, ou si je me mets au piano, la "vraie" musique m'apparaît comme le repos des bienheureux après les grimaces de la damnation' (1952: 99). It is little wonder, then, that so much of the scholarship devoted to the free verse of the *Derniers vers* concerns the search for recognisable patterns. Indeed, the only prose poem in *Les Complaintes*, the 'Grande

Complainte de la ville de Paris' (*OC*, I: 608-10), dramatises this process particularly well, since within the jumble of street noise it contains several fragments which might strike an alert ear with rhythms reminiscent of alexandrines:

Bonne gens qui m'écout(es), c'est Paris, Charenton	(6/6, coupe épique?)
Bail immortel. Chantiers en gros et en détail	(6/6, 4/4/4)
Fournisseurs brevetés d'un tas de majestés.	(6/6)
Prévient la chute des cheveux. En loteries!	(C6, 4/4/4)
Pas de morte-saison. Abonnements. Dépôt	(6/6)
Que tristes, sous la pluie, les trains de marchandise!	(6/6, 2/4/2/4)
le culte est au troisième, clientèle ineffable!	(6/6)
ô Bilan, va quelconque! ô Bilan, va quelconque...	(6/6, 3/3/3/3)

Sure enough, in his letter of 28 September 1885 thanking Laforgue for his copy of *Les Complaintes*, the phrase which Huysmans identifies as most haunting – in a prose text – is one of these, as if the ear were naturally drawn to the reassuringly familiar: 'le véritable impressionnisme du poème en prose, – plein de trouvailles – et dans laquelle se tient cette mélancolique phrase qu'on se répète: que tristes sous la pluie, les trains de marchandise!' (*OC*, II: 790). Similarly, in a letter of 13 August 1886, Laforgue tells Kahn of his admiration for 'nombre de vers aimés qu'on retient (non pas qu'on les détache, mais ils viennent à vous les premiers)', and the lines he singles out for praise from 'Voix au parc', which features hendecasyllables alongside regular and irregular alexandrines, are the regular ones:

Voici venir en moi tout le fané des temps...
... Et solitude éparse au fréquent de ma voix.
(*OC*, II: 866)

Much of *Les Complaintes*, therefore, where Laforgue's dodecasyllables are extremely disorientating and rhythmically resistant to memorising even after careful study, is designed to subvert the comfortable reading habits towards which even staunch *avant-gardistes*, in their unguarded moments, gravitate and to challenge us to deconstruct our aesthetic prejudices in the face of the shock of the new.

The compelling parallels between both the theories and practice of Laforge, Russolo, Schaeffer and Cage demonstrate how avant-garde poetry and music, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, force artists and their audience alike to confront that indeterminate zone in which, as Marie Thompson argues, stable values collapse: ‘Noise music in general may be understood to be, quite literally, the musicalization of indiscernability [...]; it lies on the fault line between music and non-music, wanted and unwanted, the pleasurable and the grotesque’ (2012: 215). As Laforge suggests in his notes on the visual arts, notions such as pleasure and pain cannot be relied upon to guide us, since aesthetic experience is to be found precisely in the frustrations of the search: ‘Dans l’émotion artistique il ne faut jamais s’en référer à l’agréable, au pénible, etc. – La lutte, l’hésitation, les conflits, la déception, la soif – tout ce qui constitue la vie doit constituer la vibration esthétique’ (*OC*, III: 379). Cage argues in ‘Experimental Music’ (1958) that this openness towards ‘tout ce qui constitue la vie’ requires us to abandon any sense of aesthetic prejudice: ‘It goes without saying that dissonances and noises are welcome in this new music. But so is the dominant seventh chord if it happens to put in an appearance’ (2004: 11). Poetry too, for Laforge, is not exclusively synonymous with either the traditional forms of metrical verse, or with disruption for its own sake; rather, as he notes in 1885-1886, aesthetic value is to be sought in constant movement, ‘la vertu d’incarnation incessante (agrégation et désagrégation rythmique) de l’Idéal’ (*OC*, III: 1146), producing new artworks which require the constant re-examination of our prejudices and assumptions. Thus Laforge emerges from his years of experiment, formal sabotage and aesthetic soul-searching with an understanding of the conflicts and tensions between form and formlessness, the machine and the glitch, between the undisciplined symphony and cacophony, pleasure and pain, which define the territory

on which the battle for music and poetry will be fought in the twentieth century and beyond.

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