Once Again, on the Music of Laurie Anderson's "O Superman (for Massenet)"
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Back in 1991, Susan McClary argued that Laurie Anderson's music deserves analytical attention.[1] Aside from McClary's own remarks on the subject, to which I will return below, her call to action remains unanswered. Typically, academic writing on Anderson's performative electronic storytelling has not explicitly addressed musical characteristics. Instead, her pieces are generally viewed as postmodern performance, video, or multimedia art, and analyses have focused on (hyper)mediation, the technological fragmentation of the subject, politicized language games and multiplicities of textual meaning, Anderson's androgynous/cyborg performance personæ, and the ability of her production to transgress institutionalized high/low cultural and genre boundaries.[2] Jon

McKenzie posits Anderson's œuvre as an "idiosyncratic collection of words, sounds, gestures, and images downloaded from various social archives, especially that of the United States."[3] Noting that the reception and production of Anderson's works move within and between the territories of popular culture and experimental art, McKenzie argues that Anderson's mediated evocations of "everyday life and its electronic ghost" are able to "cut across three terrains of performance: cultural, technological, and bureaucratic."[4] In terms of the bureaucratic arena—the economic realm of bottom lines, synergy, and optimization—McKenzie understands Anderson's popular culture associations not as indicating a sell-out, but as enacting a quintessentially postmodern gesture of unfolding new performative language games that are "not only games of knowledge and power, of big science and little men, but also of adaptors, resistors, No Bodies."[5]

Laurie Anderson
Courtesy of Warner Bros
Photo by Annie Leiboviz

Philip Auslander, too, defends Anderson against the slanderous accusation of selling out, arguing that her postmodern performance art problematizes its own means of technologized representation by fully accepting the pervasive sense of alterity arising from acts of disembodied communication, which are prevalent in mass-mediated society.[6] Discussing Spalding Grey and Anderson—two "downtown" artists who were able to "'crossover' from vanguard to mass cultural status" in the 1980s—Auslander maintains that this crossover does not indicate a mainstreaming or watering down of the vanguard.[7] Instead, he suggests that for these performance artists, "mass culture itself has emerged as a site of possible resistance to the mainstream."[8]

The reception history of "O Superman" is certainly implicated in the ideological concern over selling out evident in the articles by McKenzie and Auslander. Anderson's eight-and-a-half-minute song was initially part of her large-scale live performance art opus *United States*, and the music video for the song—which is now on permanent exhibition at MOMA—closely follows its staged presentation.[9] The track was recorded in 1981 under a contract with the major corporate label Warner Brothers and subsequently released both as a single and on

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Anderson's 1982 album *Big Science*. While reception in the United States was aligned with Anderson's position as an avant-garde performance artist, "O Superman" spent six weeks on the UK Singles Chart, reaching a peak position of number two in October 1981.[10] As RoseLee Goldberg states in her biography of Anderson, "such a leap into the mainstream was unimaginable before that time, and for an avant-garde artist it was considered something of a contradiction."[11] Following McKenzie and Auslander, I want to investigate what is productive in this contradiction, considering especially how Anderson traces lines of flight away from the dominant discourses of both popular/mainstream and experimental/new/avant composition by becoming a technologically masterful female composer/performer. While the computerization of popular music in the 1980s is generally seen as excluding women, Anderson's work consistently challenges the alignment of masculinity with technological expertise and the cinematic place of women as objects of the male gaze.[12] Further, I want to stop worrying about selling out, which is a concept so indebted to that illusive notion of (white, male) authenticity that it is hardly worth debating whether or not mainstreamed recording artists have sold out.[13]

Investigations of Anderson's music can be invigorated by hearing musical characteristics that facilitate this deterritorializing genre crossover and by determining analytical approaches that may provide insight into perceivers' experiences of Anderson's performative musical idiolect. In an attempt to reopen the discussion McClary started over twenty years ago, this essay provides some analytical remarks on the music of "O Superman (for Massenet)." Though Anderson's music is central in this discussion, I maintain that analysts should keep in mind that "when the same object is available in several mediated forms"—in the case of "O Superman," as live performance art piece, music video, video installation, single, and track on *Big Science* and *United States Live* (also on Warner Brothers, 1983)—"the meaning of each one as an experience is likely to derive from its relation to another."[14] The interaction of these multiple versions has continuously referred me back to the musical aspects I address here, which include melodic content and issues surrounding rhythm and meter.

McClary's chapter on Anderson illustrates that analytical methods centered on tonality—namely Roman numeral analysis and its Schenkerian companion—offer little insight into the harmonic or melodic operations of "O Superman." Viewing this non-compliance with hegemonic methods of Western music theory as deconstructive, McClary aptly notes that "O Superman" "is in some ways like a performed-out analytical reduction" because it offers us "only the binaries that underlie and inform the more [harmonically] complex narratives of the tonal repertory."[15] The harmonic attribute to which McClary refers is the synthesized chordal content of Anderson's single, which consists of the alternation between first-inversion A-flat major and root position C minor triads (Example 1). For McClary, the triadic structure of "O Superman" suggests that a tonal analysis of the piece could prove fitting, but "even though we are given only two closely related triads, it is difficult to ascertain which is structural and which ornamental;" we are unable to establish a hierarchy of keys.[16] Moving forward from these observations, the parsimonious voice leading engendered by this juxtaposition of chords can be seen as a compositional device that facilitates the song's ambivalent melodic and rhythmic propulsion. Furthermore, given the scarcity of clearly voiced and articulated chords in "O Superman," an investigation of *melodic* pitch content and contour seems appropriate.
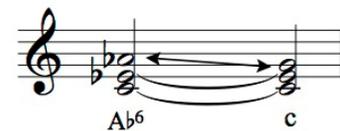
Example 1: Parsimonious voice leading in chordal content

The texture of "O Superman" is generally sparse. A looped recording of Anderson vocalizing the syllable "ha" on middle C provides an unwavering rhythmic pulse; this loop is both the first and last thing we hear, and it continues throughout. Other musical elements—which include synthesized ostinati and droning chords, *musique concrète* chirping birds, and Anderson singing/speaking into a vocoder— unfold in relation to this background pulse. After nineteen beats on "ha," Anderson enters with the melody in Example 2.[17] This melody includes two motives that recur in other contexts throughout the song: the octave leap up on A-flat and the rhyth-

Anderson's "O Superman (for Massenet)" (cont.)

Example 2: Opening melody (0:08-0:35)

mically disorienting move from G to A-flat, which occur in the third system of Example 2. Notably, both of these motives play into an ambiguity of key, dwelling on the single pitch difference between C minor and A-flat major triads. The lack of D or D-flat in this melody further prevents a designation of key.

Interplay between A-flat/G is also evident in an ostinato pattern that occurs twice, the first time monophonically (as in Example 3) and the second time looped in canon with itself and in varying octaves. This ostinato also evidences Anderson's use of an additive (/subtractive) musical process, a device characteristic of downtown minimalist music.[18] By altering the number of alternations between E-flat and G in each repetition of this figure, Anderson maintains "the same general melodic configuration," but through the addition or subtraction of two notes, its "rhythmic shape" is differentiated.[19] This differentiation metrically works itself out with the last repetition, but the expansion/contraction in mm. 2–3 momentarily throws off the placement of the downbeat by having the third repetition begin on a weak beat (marked with * in Example 3). This would be true even if the meter were understood as 2/4 rather than 4/4. A similar play on metric assumptions occurs in the last phrase of the melody in Example 2, where the final repeated G, which falls on an upbeat in either 2/4 or 4/4, is prominently accented. The subsequent A-flat downbeat is contrastingly deemphasized, as the slur into this pitch occludes the looped "ha" pulse and also denies the sung downbeat a pronounced articulation. This is likely an example of what McClary refers to when she notes that the looped pulse changes only contextually, "when it is thrown temporarily out of kilter through phrasing."[20]

Example 3: Additive process in first ostinato (2:40-2:49)

These metrically destabilizing motives are just one reason why it is uncannily difficult to entrain to a metric scheme in "O Superman" despite its rhythmic regularity. Another factor is the looped "ha," which does not provide any agogic accents that indicate meter. Additionally, the extended pauses between melodic phrases (as seen in Example 2) stifle their ability to project a meter, as it is easy to get lost in the metronomic repetition of a single syllable. This ambiguity is compounded by the fact that even when melodies are repeated—as the melody in Example 2 is directly following its exposition—the lengths of the pauses between phrases are not consistent. Extending the question of meter to "O Superman" as performed in *United States* (and recorded on *United States Live*) provides yet another complication. The piece directly before it, "Beginning French," ends with twenty seconds of only the looped beating of a gavel. Crucially, this pulse is the same tempo as the opening solo "ha" loop of "O Superman." As the latter loop is faded in, it is initially configured as a backbeat to the gavel's pulse. Gradually, though, as the two pulses trade dynamic levels and the gavel is faded out, the remaining pulse is eventually reinterpreted as primary. So, in live performance (and its recorded ghost), even the rhythmic beginnings

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of "O Superman" are in flux. With all these meter-indicating factors being obscured, the entrances, rhythmic content, phrasing, and lengths of melodies and other sonic events become the main avenues through which meter can become perceptible.

The always-emergent process of constructing meter in "O Superman" bears similarities to what Mark Butler describes in relation to rhythm and meter in electronic dance music (EDM). Butler argues that "an ongoing dialectic between fully formed 'meter' and pure, unadorned 'beats'" is characteristic of EDM.[21] Positing this feature as a reason why listeners find EDM interesting despite its repetitive structures and rhythms, Butler argues that in EDM, the "construction of meter is foregrounded as a *process*. Often just one or two layers are present, especially at the beginning of tracks."[22] When two rhythmic layers are present, they are typically "the first interpretive layer and the pulse layer."[23] This formulation can be neatly traced onto what occurs in "O Superman": the solo pulse layer initiates the song and is then joined by the melody in Example 2, the "first interpretive layer." Given these analytic parallels, it is plausible that in "O Superman," as well as in EDM, listener interest arises in part from an inclination towards metric entrainment. In other words, we get interested in the unfolding of underdetermined metric streams.[24] Future investigations might consider more fully extending Butler's discussion of EDM—which draws on Hasty's theory of projection—into the analysis of metric ambiguity, the potential of melodic and rhythmic phrases to project meter, and listeners' experiences of metric entrainment in Anderson's music.

As I have shown above, the diatonic and triadic pitch content of "O Superman" evokes functional tonality but categorically resists establishing a tonic, and the song's meter is emergent and underdetermined. While I have focused here on musical features in an effort to promote interest in and suggest approaches to the subject, I do not mean to advocate a conception of Anderson's music as an autonomous, hermetically sealed dimension of her cultural production. Rather, her music is always in dialogue with other features, including Anderson's politicized lyrical language games; her (dis)embodied and technologized voice, which allows her to uncannily move between different personæ and engage multiple discourses simultaneously; and the visualization of her performative gestures both live and on video, which could be integrated into discussions of rhythm in particular. Musical analyses should therefore not disregard these elements, but instead investigate how they establish connections with the musical dimension in constructing meaning. By following this line of inquiry, we may come to more fully understand the ways in which Anderson's music continues to negotiate the social and political terrains of contemporary American life.

Notes

[1] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 135.

[2] See, for instance, Philip Auslander, "Going with the Flow: Performance Art and Mass Culture," *The Drama Review* 33:2 (Summer 1989): 119–136; Eu Jin Chua, "Laurie Anderson's Telepresence," *Postmodern Culture* 16:2 (January 2006); RoseLee Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000); Jon McKenzie, "Laurie Anderson for Dummies," *The Drama Review* 41:2 (Summer 1997): 30–50; Tony Mitchell, "Performance and the Postmodern in Pop Music," *Theatre Journal* 41:3 (October 1989): 273–293; and Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2," *October* 3 (Summer 1980): 58–80. Goldberg's book includes an in-depth discussion of Anderson's arsenal of electronic instruments but not the music made with them.

[3] McKenzie, "Laurie Anderson for Dummies," 31.

[4] Ibid., 30, 31.

[5] McKenzie defines selling out as "becoming a corporate puppet, a dummy of bureaucratic performance." Ibid., 48, 47.

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[6] Auslander, "Going with the Flow," 132.

[7] Ibid., 125.

[8] Ibid., 123.

[9] Based on the description of the staged version in Mel Gordon, "Laurie Anderson's *United States Part II*," *The Drama Review* 24:4 (December 1980): 112–113.

[10] In the U.S., the track did not make the charts, but was more predictably aired on *RadioVisions*, a nationally broadcasted NPR program that aimed to introduce listeners to experimental new music. Louise Chernosky, "Voices of New Music on National Public Radio: *Radio Net, RadioVisions,* and *Maritime Rites*" (Unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 2012), 116, <http://academic-commons.columbia.edu/item/ac:147608>.

[11] Goldberg, Laurie Anderson, 13.

[12] McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 137–138; Barbara Bradby, "Sampling Sexuality: Gender, Technology and the Body in Dance Music," *Popular Music* 12:2 (May 1993): 156–157.

[13] Or, as Theodore Gracyk has argued in the context of rock, which is "a system of music making and distribution that has been commercial since its inception, the line between authentic and unauthentic music is hardly useful." *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 179.

[14] Auslander, "Going with the Flow," 128.

[15] McClary, 143.

[16] Ibid., 142. Multiple factors support this conclusion: though the C minor chord is in root position and therefore more stable, the A-flat chord is heard first, and A-flat as a pitch class is highlighted through repetition, register, and placement in melodic phrasing. On the other hand, the looped pulsation on the syllable "ha" that continues throughout the entire song is on C.

[17] I have only indicated the fundamental vocal frequency, not the added harmonic layers provided by the vocoder. The key signature is used here only for convenience. My use of 4/4 is also not intended to be a definitive designation, but is used primarily to facilitate concise notation of the pulses that separate each melodic statement. I will discuss this further below. Transcriptions made from recording of "O Superman" on *Big Science*.

[18] For example, additive processes are fundamental to the music of Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* and Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*.

[19] Philip Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, ed. Robert T. Jones (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 58.

[20] McClary, 141.

[21] Mark J. Butler, *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 115.

[22] Ibid., 111. Emphasis in original.

[23] Ibid., 112.

[24] Ibid., 111.