

Performance and/or Shame: A Mosaic of Gay (and Other) Perceptions

Paul Attinello

In 1993, I gave a paper at the American Musicological Society national conference, which was a rather hasty, loosely connected tangle of questions and provisional answers related to my dissertation. My excuse for such a “drafty” presentation was that I had just begun my first research in Europe and had discovered that, in essence, everything I had learned about the postwar avant-garde was wrong. When I entered the room to meet the other readers, all of whom had been sent copies of the draft, I was overcome with worry at the flimsiness of the paper—especially that awful footnote on the first page that just said: “Remember to look this up.” But the earth did not open beneath my feet, so I presented the paper. And it wasn’t so bad: trying to get away from the paper as object, I improvised, amused, and frankly charmed as much as I could. People were pleased and involved in the discussion, and no one said a word about footnotes. Later that afternoon, when I was sitting outside, Mitchell Morris came up and asked me how the presentation had been. “It went well,” I said, “but—I was faggier than I wanted to be.”

Mitchell then asked me if I would be willing to give a presentation the following year on “Performance and Shame,” a topic of his devising, to be considered in terms of music on the

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one hand and gay and lesbian studies on the other. Wow, that's an interesting combination; we joked around about some of the possibilities. Finally, something occurred to me and, fixing him with an acid look, I asked sharply: "Why do you want *me* to talk about this?"

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As it turns out, I am a plausible candidate to speak about the intersection of the subjects of performance and shame. But not because of any specific incident: instead, because of the tangle of partially independent networks of my experiences, the way I am gay, the way I am male, the way I am a musician—rhizomes of encounters, things that connect to each other in complex underground ways.... So how can I map these roots, these intertwined non-systems? It may be possible to experiment with the format of the accretive treatise to contain the surge of memory, intuition, and reflection, though the result is more a collection of tangents than a field of inquiry. (But does this merely recreate the experience of riffling through an encyclopedia—or, more unfortunately, a book of opera anecdotes, which one consumes one after another, like chocolates?)

Signposts are perhaps appropriate.

- i represents personal experiences,
- ii views of other performers, and
- iii is theorizing.

- m indicates music,
- p, performance other than music.

- g identifies gay or lesbian situations, and
- s, shame—which is *not* about being gay.

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(i/m/s) My singing career was largely a matter of vivid potential talent overlaid with sheer nerve. I got to experience the musician's world without much of its normalizing discipline—I never really did practice, although that lack engendered an endless, intense guilt for nearly twenty years. For me, performance and shame were deeply bound together: I had enough voice and presence to get an audience's attention, but never worked out the problems of the baritone's "money note," that crucial high G, nor did I diligently repeat the exercises that would enable me to survive long chains of rest-less phrases without gasping. I suppose that, given these limitations, choosing to sing Purcell's *Evening Hymn* with its lengthy "Hallelujahs" at my sister's wedding represents an extreme in self-delusion.

(ii/m) Seeing, and hearing, Gwyneth Jones on a bad day, when she is trying to carry off outrageous wobbling and bad pitches with the dignity of a real Brünnhilde. A friend apologetically explains that she's often really quite good, but sometimes it appears as though she has survived her career simply by her amazing ability to ignore boos and terrible reviews, to get back up on that stage and sing.

(iii/p/s) The primary link between shame and performance is that performance is in its essence *exposure*, self-transformation into a sign for public examination and judgment. This self-exposure is almost arrogant in comparison with the circumstances normally associated with shame, wherein public judgment is received though not asked for—thus the difference between shames of commission and of omission. When that self-exposure becomes problematic (and there is insufficient separation between the sign and one's identity), the process of humiliation may lead with startling speed to shame.

And, considering that speed, we see that *time* is another aspect of performance which brings it so close to shame: I am aware that my writing, and your reading, can pause or end at

any moment when a memory becomes unbearable to me, or when the ideas invoked recall some moment of distress and confusion for you. But in performance, on a stage, nothing can be stopped: even if the music grinds to a halt, the scenery is knocked over, the curtain falls hastily, even then the watching eyes of the audience remain to perceive and remember each detail of the pathetic collapse of the aesthetic vehicle, of the stage illusion, of the poise of the performers. The ground never opens up beneath anyone's feet, and the process always continues to its dismal end.

(i/m/s) The panic of the ill, or exhausted, performer: Judy Garland getting visibly drunker during a television special, Phyllis Bryn-Julson singing a Boulez premiere through a cold. Or me, in a large suburban church on Sunday morning, having once again attempted to combine different aspects of being an urban gay man: out late Saturday night, as seemed my right, then up to sing an aria in church, much too early. The organist looks askance at me, wondering if the Monteverdi (which covers two octaves) is a poor idea. I cough the beer-impelled gunk out of my throat and bravely signal to begin.

(ii/m) Consider Bobby McFerrin singing his pseudopolyphonic ensembles: exploding from a centered point on the stage, an impression of many voices, as vectors from a point. An image of utterly happy confidence: obvious ego, presented so obviously as to be without problems. Is the secret here the splintering of ego into many dazzling masks, thus preventing the audience from mistaking them for the performer her- or himself? This recalls R. D. Laing's assertion that schizophrenia is a purposeful strategy of protecting the self behind multiple masks,¹ suggesting that performance is a way of avoiding, or

1. R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Tavistock Books, 1959).

more accurately, overshooting social relations which could result in shame.

(iii/s) The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *shame* (and its corollaries, especially the verb form, which one seldom hears now) in nearly ten columns of small print. It is a deeply felt British, indeed Victorian, sort of definition—more so than the simpler definitions in modern American dictionaries:

1.1 The painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonoring, ridiculous, or indecorous in one's own conduct or circumstances (or in those of others whose honor or disgrace one regards as one's own), or of being in a situation which offends one's sense of modesty or decency.... d. *Past shame, dead to shame*, no longer capable of feeling shame, grown callous to shame.... 3. Disgrace, ignominy, loss of esteem or reputation.... 4. What is morally disgraceful or dishonorable; baseness in conduct or behavior. *To do shame*, to do something disgraceful or wicked.... 5.... A fact or circumstance which brings disgrace or discredit (*to* a person, etc.); matter for severe reproach or reprobation.²

This language echoes a rhetoric that hovers like an accusation behind the historical experience of being gay, like the pathos that drives many novels and plays before Stonewall. And it seems as though there might be a stronger instinctive acceptance of a shame-full stance in the relatively conservative social contexts of classical music and musicology than in other sectors of postmodern society. Incidentally, the etymology is almost exclusively from the Teutonic—in fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* states that “outside Teut. no root of corresponding form and sense has been found.” Like musicology, shame descends from German roots.

(i/m/g) It was during rehearsals for the new historical-San Francisco musical³—a short-lived show where the director spent most of his time trying to get the set really moving in the

2. *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “shame.”

earthquake scene—that I realized there was a problem with the way I was always being cast. At that time, directors tended to make me the romantic lead, the noble, heterosexual baritone in love with the ingénue. Unfortunately, my ability to create a believable naturalistic character was always weak, and having to act straight was adding insult to injury. When the director, who was Swiss (and had obviously not been in San Francisco for long), found out I was gay some weeks into rehearsal, his astonishment and indignation knew no bounds. He kept exhorting me in rehearsal to be a *Mensch*; with my German, poor at the time, I thought he meant *Mann*, which made me feel even more insulted. I sang my ballad prettily enough (and it was a good song, too), as long as I didn't have to pretend to stare at that woman, and he did get the set moving heavily enough for us to worry about getting injured; but, for some reason, we never got past previews.

(ii/g/s) Shame and being gay are so deeply bound together in our culture that they are synonymous in some contexts. When that happens, every word is drenched with the panic of avoiding painful memory, and discussion becomes unbearably fraught:

Do you ever catch the eye of another man, and he looks scared? When I started [writing about Oscar Wilde], I thought Wilde was a comic writer, but now I know better. All of his characters are in terror of being discovered. Their elegance of diction is only a front for anything rather than speak the truth. They sweat, they talk with revealing hysteria about the *secret of life*.... The stories themselves may give spurious fictional shape to the source of their terror...but we all know now that the dominant theme of this fiction is the necessity of concealment and the fear of revelation. A single word would be enough to call them out of hiding.... In the course of [Dorian Gray's] evil career he is proved guilty of adultery, debauchery, luxury, greed, vanity, murder and

3. Edouard Müller, *Fountain of Youth* (unpublished manuscript, 1983), with music by David Murphy.

opium addiction. Only one of his vices is hidden, only one sin cannot be named. Every word that Oscar Wilde wrote is about *it*.⁴

(iii/p/s) Performance is also linked to shame by the crossing of a series of highly differentiated boundaries, changing one's position in a given distinction and thus one's total identity: performing as a student (or, as one, not yet being allowed to perform), performing as a professional (or not yet), performing as a star (or not ever). And the public presentation of identities, which can be even riskier: performing, or appearing in public, as an individual, as a lesbian, as a gay man, as a person with AIDS.... Many academics in this era of gay and lesbian studies have, implicitly or explicitly, admitted their sexual identities in public arenas—one experiences a panicky vertigo while looking out on vast crowds of colleagues, preparing to read the damning title of the presentation.

Unavoidably, crossing each of these boundaries induces an experience of shame: one saws away at the notes, or declaims the words, full of hope and panic, aiming towards a success which is dazzling partially because of its contrast with a background of possible shame; or one blunders, is somehow forced to retreat from a boundary, to remain in a previous condition like a Velveteen Rabbit that never attains the Real.

(ii/p/g) An ex-boyfriend, his current flame, and the flame's friend from work have dropped by in an intrusive but friendly manner to interrupt my work and smoke. They are looking through my old edition of Wilde in the front room, but I have escaped to the back room to note their interesting behavior, like a secret anthropologist. Most remarkable are their jokes, which are very specifically about performance, about presentation, as though the persona is the crucial operating machine in

4. Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988), 93-4. Numerous statements about shame and being gay can also be found in Leigh Rutledge, *Unnatural Quotations* (Boston: Alyson, 1988).

gay social life: "Hey, you should be on stage—the first one out of town!" and "You oughta go to Hollywood—the walk would do you good!" Jealousy, camaraderie, and narcissism: life in a gay ghetto can feel amazingly similar to life backstage. But—backstage to what?

(iii/s) Consider a selection of synonyms for shame. It is worth noting the grand tone and formal Latinate roots of many of these words, which are organized around the idea of shame in a public place:

shame, *n.* 1. disgrace, dishonor, reproach, degradation, ill repute, bad repute, scandal; baseness, turpitude, debasement, vitiation, ingloriousness; ignominy, infamy, odium, opprobrium, condemnation; slur, imputation, aspersion, defamation, denigration, slander, libel, calumny, vilification, smear, smirch, blot, blot on the escutcheon; stain, taint, tarnish, black spot *or* mark, blemish, smudge, brand, stigma, *Inf.* skeleton in the closet.

A later section of the same entry shifts tone somewhat, angling inward towards the personal reaction of shame:

3. humiliation, mortification, humble pie, humbled pride; (*all of oneself*) guilt, remorse, shamefacedness, feeling of unfitness or unworthiness, disgust, hate, abomination, abasement; embarrassment, disconcertment, discomposure, discomfort, confusion, perplexity, abashment, bewilderment; chagrin, pique, vexation, displeasure, dissatisfaction, dislike, disappointment, discontentment.⁵

(ii/m/s) There is an eternal camp following, on radio stations and in record stores, of certain kinds of bad performance. I am thinking of several singers in this context, such as Florence Foster Jenkins, sincere, rich, and addled, or Mrs. Miller, the suburban housewife who was always out of tune. The zenith of such a "bad" style was achieved by Jo Stafford and her husband

5. J. I. Rodale, *Synonym Finder* (New York: Warner Books, 1986), s.v. "shame."

Paul Weston: when these skilled musicians discovered that when she sang sharp or flat and he blundered through his piano licks, people would scream with laughter, their alter egos Jonathan and Darlene Edwards were born. And one should also consider celebrities with terrible voices such as Marlene Dietrich; brilliant vocalists with no musical taste like Yma Sumac, and the imitation of such atrocious taste by Al Yankovic; and even staged parodies of incompetent musicians, such as Wagner's Beckmesser, Pfitzner's Silla, and Henze's Luise. These performers, whether intentionally or accidentally, mine a peculiar vein of shame and exposure. Most of the innocently bad musicians avoid making statements to the press, but the parodists have no fear of publicity, offering neatly constructed imitations of deluded arrogance:

Some people have had the nerve to point out that some of my notes don't actually belong to the chord which I'm building the arpeggio around, but I'm simply much more imaginative than the average pianist, and I put a lot more into my arpeggios.⁶

(iii/s) The anthropological contribution to this discussion has been to distinguish between "shame cultures" and "guilt cultures." These cultures are separated through the process encountered by anyone who has in some way behaved badly:

A framework is provided by what anthropologists call a "shame-culture." The distinguishing mark of such a culture, and that which makes it different from a so-called "guilt-culture," is that here public esteem is the greatest good, and to be ill spoken of the greatest evil.⁷

Guilt cultures, on the contrary, are focused on an internal reaction to behavior which is seen as bad, which may not be publicly known at all. This is like the difference between manners

6. Program booklet, *Jonathan and Darlene's Greatest Hits* (Corinthian compact disk 101, 1987).

7. Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 54.

and morals—in manners it doesn't matter what you do if you don't get caught. Despite the importance of this distinction (much of my colleagues' input on this paper hinged on shame and guilt cultures), it seems beside the point in performance: on stage, is not every gesture visible? A flat note transforms guilt over not practicing into a visible accusation, into pure shame.

(ii/p/s) As an adolescent bassoonist at a summer school for the arts, I remember the meeting held on the first day in the auditorium—luckily a large one, for the different groups mixed like oil and water. I sat towards the front with the musicians, an awkward bunch in short-sleeved shirts and glasses; behind us were rows of dancers in tights, stalking with angular and self-conscious grace, nearly silent, staring over people rather than looking in their eyes. And between, above, around everyone flounced theater people in conspicuous dress, shrieking over the Dean's address and across rows of chairs, "Oh, *look*, there's *To-ny!*"

I would remember the contrasts of this scene in later years when, in operas and musicals, I watched the groups collide: musicians, dancers, actors—not to mention technicians and designers. These are groups that really have very little in common, certainly not value systems; musicians and dancers can be allies on the ideal of Technique, but actors seem to have no sense of this—they want to feel what they create, to burn like torches on the stage. In fact, the disjunction between groups is a source of the tangled aesthetics of staged music, the overlapping but disparate goals that characterize the components of opera and music theater.

Disdain for Method approaches is easy for a musician, but when I had to laugh, or cry, or fall apart on stage, I discovered that I simply could not do those things in front of other people: that formal diction, or even intense projection, of a line was easy for me, but slurring words like a drunk was something I could not (or would not) do in a believable manner. It was

simply too embarrassing not to be in control, to abandon Technique for Method. Certainly, as musicians, we are taught to control each movement—so as to avoid the shame of being messy, of making mistakes.

(iii/s) The philosophical consideration of shame tends to focus on the preexistent beliefs and situational logics that lead to the experience of shame or to the related experiences of guilt, pride, humility, and remorse, what Taylor calls “emotions of self-assessment”:

In each case of shame...there is the notion of the audience.... The notion of the audience is...itself complex. It consists of two distinguishable points of view. The first point of view audience sees the agent under some description, which may or may not entail some assessment of the agent.... The attitude of the audience is therefore not to be identified with the agent's own attitude to herself, which in a case of shame can only be unfavorable.... The second point of view audience...concerns itself with the relation between the agent and the first audience. It views the different forms of seeing, and always views them critically: to be so seen is to be exposed, for the agent should not be seen this way.⁸

My concern with this approach to parsing shame is that we are speaking of emotions—which are admittedly not immune to conceptual logic, but which are not always produced logically. A crucial ingredient in shame, as in all emotions, is its *emotional logic*: that is, the fact that emotions often function in relation to past experiences which have no conceptual or logical similarity to a present experience. Thus, it is quite normal (and emotionally logical, though not “logical”) to experience emotions (including shame) because of linkages which are nothing more than sympathetic magic—a sequence of events that become a metaphor for a set of earlier events, a remembered but illogical internal process, or any cue which brings up

8. Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt*, 64-5. It is impossible to do justice to this intelligent monograph in short quotations.

the past on the screen of the present, blinding one to the moment at hand.

(ii/p/g) There is the tale of the ex-lover of a lesbian friend, an actress who played the lead in her own production of Judy Grahn's verse play *Queen of Swords*. Although on stage she was the aggressively butch Goddess of the Underworld, after two weeks of sold-out performances she began to dither backstage in a very ungoddesslike way. First she said she couldn't afford to produce the entire run, and it would have to be cut short; then she claimed to be sick for two days running, cancelling the performances. Finally, the other players visited her at home and saw that she was evidently not sick; only a group confrontation finally revealed what was wrong. The woman was not out as a lesbian at work, and the play had been much too successful—there were reviews in all the weekly papers—and she panicked about becoming a Known Lesbian. She complained, full of anger and indignation, that the director “had the nerve to fax me at work—it's a good thing I was standing next to the machine when it came in!”

(iii/s) Ultimately, the anthropological and philosophical approaches to shame seem inadequate for my purposes. As a middle-class intellectual in an era of international capitalism, I operate in such atomized social spaces that public judgment of the value of my behavior or identity cannot be reduced to any common denominator. What wins me respect in certain musical circles is viewed with distaste in more conservative spheres; what is regarded as proof of achievement in avant-garde circles is regarded with (at best) polite incomprehension by the rest of the world. And, of course, what is regarded as admirable behavior in gay social contexts would be marked as (at least) overdramatic or suggestive in other parts of American society. Thus, consensual agreement on the social beliefs that could create shame simply does not exist in my world.

What I do find useful are the psychological approaches to shame, which focus on narcissism, anomie, and problems of fragmented, unstable identity. An interesting aspect of the psychological definition of shame is that it has not changed but *shifted its weight* over the past century in a telling way. Freud's patients were generally people with solid identities, who through some specific trauma developed a neurotic condition which made life difficult for them. It is no coincidence that these patients, like most Western bourgeois before the First World War, had relatively clear positions in life: possibly oppressed, possibly rigid, but clear. One's identity as gentleman, servant, wife, or laborer was not in question.

Modern patients, on the other hand, are not given clear identities by their society. They don't often have clear-cut neuroses; they more often have cloudy, linked personality disorders, especially narcissistic and borderline personality disorders. Basically, modern personalities in trouble don't know who they are: they are uncertain of their positions, their desires, their needs and goals.⁹ Shame was once defined in terms of public disgrace over one's actions, as in the *Oxford English Dictionary* quotation above. But modern shame is often tied to one's identity: it is the haze of insecurity and distaste felt about one's *self*, without necessary or specific cause. It is probably true that both disgrace and insecurity were always integral to shame, but the second has become much more important, in patient after patient after patient.

(i/m) Though I had difficulty acting as a heterosexual romantic hero, I acquitted myself acceptably in some roles. The best was given to me the summer I performed in the musical *Cabaret*, in

9. Robert Karen, "Shame," *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1992, 40-70. I strongly recommend this article. For basic definitions, see Arthur Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (New York: Penguin, 1985) and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd ed., rev.) (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1987).

what you undoubtedly think of as the Joel Grey role—the eerie Emcee, the horrid little man who operates as a puppetlike symbol, floating in and out of scenes as though free from the restraints of narrative or characterization. The artificial complexity of the role turned out to be the perfect vehicle for my stage persona. This can be compared with the subtle projection of the self, with its feelings and emotions, through any highly formalized art form, such as Noël Coward's plays, or for that matter classical music. Unreal makeup also helped; and that reminds me of what dancer Rael Lamb told me—always do a little makeup, even if it's going to be you and a piano, because then it's not just *you* performing. From behind that makeup, the performer presents the collection of masks, of skills, that she or he has learned—which may be a very large collection indeed, and is certain to be more interesting, or at least less dangerously intimate, than the normal persona.

(ii/m/s) William Christie has suggested a different kind of shame. He said there is a *collective* shame that can be felt by the conductor: that, when a performance does not go well, one must take on a collective burden of responsibility. This is especially true when the ensemble is trained by the director, when the stage personas and techniques of young performers have been shaped by a director's vision, as in Christie's ensemble Les Arts Florissants. All eyes turn to you, the icon of authority, awaiting whatever comfort or criticism you can invent in that highly pressured instant....

(iii/m/g) In a telephone conversation with Mitchell Morris about this paper, he pointed out that “the performance of music has so *much* to do with subjectivity that literature pales by comparison.” This is plausible, especially in light of the immediacy of musical performance mentioned above—on stage, one is forced to express one's subjectivity from moment to moment, whether that involves skill or panic. But that subjectivity is measured from the outside: in the narcissistic vistas of

the inner world, anything can be turned into a stage, with the self's self-image as star. How else could gym bunnies, disco bunnies, opera queens, drag queens, voguers, and the rest of the great ranks of the perpetually performing coexist in the same spaces, without tearing each other to shreds?

(ii/m) An elderly man in polyester pants, baseball cap, and tennis shoes is whistling loudly as he wanders around a midtown bus stop. This whistling, which inanely and obsessively repeats a three-note phrase ($b\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}$, sometimes moving on to $\hat{1}$ or $\hat{4}$, sometimes not) with various tags and high notes, succeeds in infuriating the waiting public-transit patrons. I (and others) glare at him, but he continues serenely on, shameless in his private amusement. In the postmodern city, in the late capitalist culture of passive entertainment and virtual experience—of simulacra, in Baudrillard's term—the personal relation to performance is increasingly attenuated. The sense that we perform in relation to others, that a player is tied to a listener, begins to fall apart. Think of the audience members who seem unaware that they are at a public performance and not watching television as they talk, eat, and crumple paper wrappers at a concert.

The natural objection to this is that talking over and ignoring a stage performance has a long history, but those habits operated in a context of performance as social space, where the audient saw himself as rival in importance to the performer:

Reginald waited for a couple of minutes before replying, while the [actor] temporarily monopolized the acoustic possibilities of the theater. "That is the worst of a tragedy," he observed, "one can't always hear oneself talk."¹⁰

Doesn't the era of simulacra have a different context, because the members of the audience never remove their gaze from the stage? Their conversation is an endless voice-over to a

10. H. H. Munro, *The Complete Works of Saki* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 13.

phenomenon that they perceive as a recording, which will continue and repeat whether anyone pays attention to it or not.

(iii/p) As musicologists, we often speak of (often should speak of, often come close to speaking of) performance, or its corollary, performativity. The trick to this—or perhaps the part that makes it interesting—is that we cannot ever get away from performing: standing to read a paper is a performance, and texts are often critiqued as though they are scores for performance. I often hear people saying they like or dislike papers that are performed, but that’s an impossible distinction—some musicologists or writers simply foreground their positions as performers. The cruel truth is that all this public stuff is innately performance: it’s merely that, when you are confronted with a half-inaudible text based on a badly printed chart, you’re watching a *poor* performance.

(i/m/s) In my teens, as a student bassoonist, I organized and managed a woodwind quintet. For our final concert, we put together a program at the local public library that ended with a piece by a modern American composer. It wasn’t a very good piece, but was bizarre enough to program when I wanted to do something more “avant” than Hindemith or Barber. Constructed in a circle of graphic “mobiles” à la Haubenstock-Ramati, it resulted in overlapping gesture/silence/gesture/silence textures that were as tedious as such things usually are. At the otherwise unheralded end of the piece, in a gesture that was designed to be surprising but that probably looked like a high school joke instead, we suddenly abandoned the stage, knocking over our stands and fleeing the room.

Now, what did this activity imply? Well, clearly, there was an aspect of *épater le bourgeois* about it—the desire to do something shocking and bizarre in front of a suburban audience, to restage that Oedipal defiance whereby young people show that they are cooler than their parents ever imagined. But there is also an aspect of performative shame, of embarrassment at the

pretension of much avant-garde work (and of this piece in particular). Plausibly, of course, the reaction to this embarrassment is the generating force behind any gesture of flabbergasting the bourgeoisie. And I can't imagine what that audience, most of whom were alarmed by Stravinsky, would think of the music I listen to today....

(iii/p) Music and sexuality: how do sexual acts compare with ways of creating and listening to music? They are, after all, performances, and certainly shame is often involved, whether it is overcome or subsumed into eroticism. Aside from mechanical comparisons, which are familiar from feminist literature— invasion, abandonment, etc.—I would point out the way in which one encounters barriers of uncertainty or revulsion in the discussion or presentation of different sexual acts or behaviors. These are comparable with the barriers mentioned above, but here involve higher levels of intimacy and, thus, comfort versus discomfort, excitement versus boredom, and/or pleasure versus disgust.

(i/p) At the orientation for Fulbright fellows in Germany, they tell us a secret: when you have problems at the bank, at the bakery, with the police officer who insists on taking your passport, use that amazing American talent, charm. Charm, of course, is really performative affection, or more accurately performative seduction. And they are right: the woman at the German bank waives the six-month wait on my bank card, the officer lets me take my permit letter back out of my file—and these things happen only after I have been merciless with the wide-eyed, friendly *Amerikaner* act, smiling and looking disappointed by turns. In a culture where performative coldness, stern distance-making, is the norm, performative seduction is devastatingly effective. What would be particularly effective in a culture where performative friendship is the norm—such as ours?

(iii/p/g) From a dictionary of gay slang:

perform (–royally) 1. see *blow*. 2. to make a big production of everything; to call attention to oneself. 3. to flirt, extended to mean coitus itself: “You should see Henry the Hawk *perform* when there’s young stuff around.”¹¹

(ii/p/g) There are certain new kinds of performance in the gay community in the age of AIDS, and they are involuntarily powerful ones: I am thinking of the experience, now familiar in literary readings, of watching a KS-lesion-covered author, standing carefully with his cane before the audience, pausing, gasping for a moment, then forcing himself to go on—a performative illness, previewing a performative death. But we see very little of this in academic musicology—dare I suggest a connection with the legendary shyness of musicians, like Brahms in the brothel?

(i/m/g) I have written elsewhere about the gay choruses, especially winning and losing in the battle between director and chorus.¹² The divas of the Los Angeles Gay Men’s Chorus—I was one, and Dwayne was another—operated on another level of winning and losing. However, this had nothing to do with value systems or control, but purely with the egoistic wish to be The One to sing a solo—with an ancillary vision of popularity, infamy, and perhaps, as a complex result of all this, the acquisition of an adoring circle of admirers. I remember being scheduled to sing “Move On,” a sophisticated pseudominimalist song from *Sunday in the Park with George*, with the chorus as backup; and discovering, to my irritation, that Dwayne had

11. Bruce Rodgers, *The Queens’ Vernacular: A Gay Lexicon* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972), 147.

12. Paul Attinello, “Authority and Freedom: Toward a Sociology of the Gay Choruses,” in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary Thomas, eds., *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 315-346.

somehow manipulated the director into putting him on the same program, singing "Broadway Baby." But I consoled myself: even if both songs were by Stephen Sondheim, they were clearly differentiated in terms of high and low culture—I was serious, and besides I had all those backup boys and he just had a feather boa. My dignity, at least, was not in question.

(iii/m) Perhaps it would be useful to categorize different kinds of musical performance in terms of self-construction: the ego-centered soloist, as in the solo vocalist, who puts the body, the self, straight into the line of fire, the line of judgment; as distinct from the self-effacing channeller, the orchestral player who gives up the self in an ecstasy of composer worship, or who loses self-expression as a cog in an exchange-value machine. Much twentieth-century ensemble music, with its complex musical gestures fragmented among separate instruments, turns composer-worship into conductor-worship through a network of atomized connections between each single player and the conductor; all lines are connected to the same central point but nevertheless isolated from each other. (Adorno would, of course, say: welcome to the administered society.)

Then there is the (possibly happier) performer who is embedded in a ceremony or group activity, a distinction that is important for ethnomusicologists. Among the situations in Western culture where this becomes part of the context are garage bands, church choirs, and, interestingly enough, the lesbian and gay choruses. And there is the creative performing self, such as the popular music artist, writing and presenting a persona which is structurally presented *as* the self. One category that seems difficult to analyze is very important to the construction of Western classical music—the solo keyboard player, whether before a large, expectant audience, or alone in a darkened room at three in the morning: before that keyboard, how many mirrorings take place? And: at their conclusion, is the ego presented or subsumed?

(ii/m/g) What about when gay composers perform as themselves? Among the Darmstadt crowd, gay men included Fortner, Henze, Leibowitz, Cage, Metzger, Bussotti, and of course Boulez. Of these, the last two are particularly interesting: Bussotti was so out and outrageous, and he won little respect in the *Mitteleuropäische* music community; Boulez, on the other hand, so closeted, so controlled, so silent on certain subjects,¹³ and so very, very successful... Although, from another angle, Bussotti's flamboyance may have actually won him respect in Italian avant-garde circles; this is suggested by the reception of his bizarre final season as director of the musical portion of the Venice Biennale, where he went out with a gaudy, campy bang.¹⁴

(i/m/s) That summer in the early 1980s, the morning after Mary Jo and I had finally sung our duo cabaret show at what was then the pinnacle of San Francisco cabaret venues, the appropriately named Plush Room. "God, aren't you awake yet? Have you seen the review?" "What review—did the *Chronicle*, did Ulrich—?" "No, just the *Bay Area Reporter*—Karr reviewed us—but it's, well, it's good—he says: you're cute and I can sing." "I'm *cute*? And *you* can sing?" I still remember our shared outrage in the face of being judged with such deadly accuracy, the shame of my underpracticed voice revealed in a portrait of attractive inanity, and that of her rough complexion implicitly mocked behind the praise of her nearly Wagnerian dramatic soprano. It was the classic gay inversion of gender roles, one that functions so strongly in American musical theater, between the belting, gutsy female lead and the chorus boy.

13. A telling passage from Joan Peyser's *Boulez: Composer, Conductor, Enigma* (New York: Schirmer, 1976) is the end, and punch line, to a chapter in which Peyser quotes a journalist quizzing her about her book in progress: "[Boulez's] not answering was unbelievable.... He is so noncommittal. Did you ever find out anything about his sex life?" (216).

14. *Sestina musicale novantuno* (Venice: Fabbri, 1991).

(ii/m) A group of string players in Darmstadt are about to play a Richard Barrett work that is unusually intimidating in its difficulty and aggression. “New Complexity” music resembles the high C of an opera aria, in that it reinscribes the binarism of ability and impossibility into the performance. These excellent players are remarkably nervous; they saw away with a fierceness that is amazing to watch, but most of their efforts are drowned out by the explosive, breathless trombone solo. It is a dumb-show, but a fascinating one: we interpret their commitment, their virtuosity, from their frantic movements more than from the scratchy fragments of sound we catch.

Actually, part of the underlying effect of much music is its sheer difficulty, the barriers it places before its own execution, not to mention its perception. I always felt that the best performances of Boulez’s *Le marteau sans maître* exhibited the extreme difficulty of the piece: the tension of counting, of time flickering by a little faster than you can easily grasp it, the precise intensity of accents, the controlled violence of the entire product—which, of course, weakened and became less interesting when people simply got too good at playing the rhythms and intervals of serialism.

(ii/p/g) To what extent can shame, or its converse, audacity, be an ongoing context for performance rather than an immediate reaction to a given moment? An interview from an underground gay fanzine begins:

“So, Ryan Block, porn star extraordinaire turned director, let’s start with where you’re from.”

“I’m an Angeleno, grew up in LA, born and raised here. I watched a lot of porno movies as a kid and someone said, ‘If you like it so much why don’t you do it?’ So I ended up here.”

Later, the interviewer toys with the illusory privacy of the interview. In forcing open the door to a blurred, complex shame, he provokes a flickering cloud of masking strategies:

"I know what I'm doin' after this interview. We're gettin' smutty here."
 "Well, we do have two porn stars talkin'. What else you gonna get?"

...

"Wanna say 'hi' to your mama or anything?"

"Hopefully she's not gonna be readin' this magazine."

"Does your parents know what you do, child?"

"No! Only my younger brother who is sixteen knows. I'm twenty-four."

"In hooker years."

"No, I'm twenty-nine really."¹⁵

(i/m/s) There is something peculiarly intricate about the network of awareness that is required in playing the piano that makes it especially prey to self-doubt (at least in my experience, but then I am no pianist). A friend who claims he "cannot" play the piano in front of other people recalls his father shouting comments from other parts of the house whenever he hit a wrong note. I remember a composition class where we were required to play, analyze, and interpret a Scarlatti sonata. Although I chose the slowest one that I found interesting, I was so shaken (and shaking) at the piano that even the usually cold, demanding professor became gentle and supportive: "Now, just try to keep going, you'll be fine." Of course, there are many ways to be arrogant about the performances of others or pathologically insecure about one's own, but at the piano the broad network of simultaneous actions is such that, if doubt creeps in, the entire fabric falls to bits and one can only repair one moment at a time, one hand, one note among the dense chords; that is never enough to maintain the musical illusion.¹⁶

After my friend who "cannot" play in front of others details more things he cannot bear to do—his unwillingness to speak

15. *Planet Homo* (Los Angeles), September 1994.

16. Fred Maus mentioned that, although he could not perform on the violin publicly because of shaky hands, he had no trouble on the viola, and never had any on the piano. My experience of the keyboard, as opposed to other instruments, may be as a result of my more monophonic training.

publicly, his writer's block—I point out that one of the major tasks in performance study is to get past the host of fears, reticences, or shames carried around by everyone. An actors' dictum states, "The way out is the way in." This implies that the main *point* of learning to perform anything is to work through, to get past shame—and, possibly, that the main point of performance is to get past shame. Or, alternatively, that the whole point of shame is to *prevent* performance, in its broadest sense—which suggests a postmodern liberal discourse of subtle prohibitions in endless battle with individual freedoms.

(ii/m/g) The shame of watching someone being publicly gay, having publicly gay desires: one of the bizarre scenes in Fellini's film *Casanova* (1976) is set in Parma, at the Duke's residence. The unattractive, lascivious Duke has written a cantata for two solo voices which he performs with a beautiful young man. The Duke takes the part of a devouring insect, in a costume of green lamé (which he himself has embroidered) and an extraordinary metal headpiece; the young man is his prey, wearing a jeweled vest, briefs, and little else. The performance of the cantata is musically lovely but, visually, appallingly lewd; the screen audience becomes more and more restless until a courtier sitting in the back says bluntly, "It's a metaphor!" The gay patrons filling the Castro Theater, who have become tense and embarrassed despite themselves, erupt into laughter.

(i/p/g) I remember reading my paper on the gay choruses in 1986 in a graduate seminar at UCLA and having a classmate (a known Christian fundamentalist) turn red and leave the room. I continued reading, as triumphant as I was embarrassed. This is, I suppose, the essence of queer politics: self-identification modelled on self-embarrassment, the presentation of identity in terms that cannot possibly be mistaken for acceptable ones.

(ii/p/s) A classic modernist move is the inversion of certain relationships between the artwork and its cultural resonance. But

that means that any inverted relationship between performance and shame may be mistaken for radical modernism since, instead of a dadaist arranging embarrassing accidents, an embarrassing accident can become dada:

In Germany... Gunther Burpus remained wedged in his front-door cat flap for two days because passers-by thought he was a piece of installation art. Mr. Burpus, 41, of Bremen, was using the flap because he had mislaid his keys. Unfortunately he was spotted by a group of student pranksters who removed his trousers and underpants, painted his bottom bright blue, stuck a daffodil between his buttocks and erected a sign saying "Germany Resurgent, An Essay in Street Art. Please Give Generously." Passers-by assumed Mr. Burpus' screams were part of the act and it was only when an old woman complained to the police that he was finally freed. "I kept calling for help," he said, "but people just said 'Very good! Very clever!' and threw coins at me."¹⁷

(ii/m/s) A vocal ensemble of which I was a member ran into trouble in the early 1980s when our brilliant, demanding conductor started to develop a cocaine problem. A moment's thought about tempi, temper, and stage poise will suggest just how big this problem could become. The nadir of that experience came when, on the stage of Berkeley's Hertz Hall, we attempted to follow his increasingly demented beat and sing Debussy's *Trois chansons* at an incredible speed: "Yver, vous n'estes qu'un villain...." On moving back to the Bay Area last year I contacted him, curious as to how he was doing; it turns out that he burned all his music books, became a public transit driver, and now reads the Tibetan *Book of the Dead* late at night by candlelight. Perfectionism is, perhaps, the most dangerous drug....

(iii/m) Is it possible to say that Hildegard of Bingen was *performing* the image of the wise visionary—a position that gave her power in several areas of responsibility and supported her when she worked to reorganize the politics of her disastrous

17. Thanks to Jennifer Rycenga for forwarding me this news item.

time? But she was so close to the limit of allowable power: only a little further, and she might have been seen as performing witchery, which would have given her very different results. Certainly her brilliant career, simultaneously creative, worldly, and spiritual, seems almost a matter of overachievement, of supplementing some perceived social lack.

As with being gay, being a woman has been considered an innately shameful position in several periods of Western culture, notably in medieval times. A common modern problem experienced by successful women is the “impostor” syndrome¹⁸—the nervous, insecure sense that, despite all achievements, one is an impostor in a position of authority, that someone will come along and unmask one as uncertain or incompetent, and that the illusion of strength and security will collapse. The writings of many modern women (Sylvia Plath, Shirley Jackson, and Anne Sexton, to name the first to come to mind) focus intently on this vein of identity-contained shame.

(ii/m) Yehudi Menuhin once played the Brahms Violin Concerto with me accompanying him—or, more truthfully, with me as second bassoonist in a youth orchestra at Wolf Trap Farm Park. To me he sounded awful, scratchy, out of tune—but that couldn't be, because he's a great violinist, and he was so kind to us, so courteous and supportive. My only explanation was that I must not like the sound of a solo violin. This approach conflicted irritatingly with my love of a recording of the Berg Violin Concerto, which certainly seemed to have a lot of solo violin in it. A transcendently great performer couldn't simply sound bad, could he?

(ii/m/g) Why have certain performing traditions developed such a strong relationship with certain strata of gay society and camp aesthetics? Consider the audiences in a late-night cabaret, watching a bleached blonde singing familiar words:

18. Thanks to Melissa Bloom for advice on this point.

Now Captain Smith and Pocahontas
 Had a very mad affair;
 When her daddy tried to kill him, she said:
 Daddy oh don't you dare, he gives me fever¹⁹

What does that audience look like? What are the genders represented? Are the individuals alone or together? And: how much are they drinking?

In such a case, clichés—the clichés of the song itself, the singer, and the members of the audience, raucous or withdrawn—seem merely a mask for situational disgrace. It might be that the lewd, overdramatic idiom of the torch song is entirely constructed around the ongoing acknowledgment, both defiant and despairing, of shame.

(i/m/g) When, in the early 1980s, people spoke of a Gay Pride Center in San Francisco, I joked of a Gay Shame Center whose colors would be pink and black. Around that time, I was hired as a singer/dancer (but *not* a contestant) in the Mr. Castro Contest, a beauty contest whose male participants appeared in bathing suit, leather, personality, and talent competitions. As you might expect, this called out all the complexities of gay narcissism, as with the malicious contestant who, pausing from sniping at his rivals, told me: “Your hair’s too long, of course, but it’ll be okay—hair always looks shorter on stage.”

But my sharpest experience was on the vast, acoustically dead film stage of the Castro Theater. While the contestants changed from one thing to another, I was to sing “A Good Man is Hard to Find”²⁰ in full (borrowed) leather, waving a whip around my head. (A photograph taken at the time shows me barefoot, which indicates a certain cluelessness; the whip made me nervous at first, but I finally arranged it as a kind of featherless boa, and aimed an occasional nasty crack at the audience.) The entire campy procedure should have left me

19. “Fever,” words and music by John Davenport and Eddie Cooley (1956).

20. Words and music by Eddie Green (1918).

embarrassed but proud, mockingly but affectionately lauded by friends who would, at least, admire my courage in getting up there. But something went wrong: my lavalier microphone wasn't turned on by the technician, and I sang and danced my heart out in something difficult to distinguish from dead silence. In effect, I was erased from the stage during my big solo. A silly episode, a minor accident (as a friend quipped, "a working microphone is hard to find"), but it felt much worse than that: rage, embarrassment, disappointment, the loss of my Big Break—as though I were, also, one of the losers in the contest.

(ii/m) The passionate nobility of the cellist, the obsessive peculiarity of the oboist, and the bassoonists playing cards during rests. Violinists, always rather distant from the other players, projecting their odd combination of arrogance and shyness. And why are the trumpeters always abrasively all-American, and the trombones identical with them, but a bit—*slower*? But not as slow as the tuba players. These personalities are familiar, bound to each instrument in traditional jokes and stories. But how reflexive is the relationship between performance technique and personal style? Do you play that instrument, that passage, because you chose it, or did *it* choose *you*?²¹

(i/m/s) The excruciating disappointments that can happen in ensembles when one is depending on others. For the last cabaret show that Mary Jo and I sang during that long summer, we decided to go out with a bang by performing something that had us both deeply excited, the trio from Sondheim's *A Little Night Music*. Unfortunately, the tenor we brought in turned

21. Fred Maus has pointed out that Daniel Putnam's assertion of the impossibility of expressing shame in textless music (Daniel A. Putnam, "Why Instrumental Music Has No Shame," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 27 [1987], 55-61) suggests that there is a wide gulf between the music itself and its performing context, wherein a potential for shame does appear.

out to be a dreadful mistake, one with, as they say, resonance where his brain ought to be, and no interest in the complex melodic overlays of the music. It was like a performance of the final trio of *Der Rosenkavalier* by sopranos who have never heard the word “ensemble.” And afterwards, of course, the friends who said, who would always say, “It was great: no, really”—and I remember the times that I have said that, holding my face together, avoiding expressions of disappointment, boredom, the wish not to witness someone else’s embarrassment. Mary Jo and I didn’t perform again together; that autumn I applied to graduate school, leaving behind dressing rooms, cover charges, and staring into spotlights, wondering nervously: how many people are out there?...And no doubt, for the rest of my life, whenever I meet professional singers at parties, my conversation with them will be faintly tinged with both envy and relief.

(ii/m/g) In Neil Bartlett’s *Night after Night*, the gay chorus boys speak to the gay men in the audience about the musical they’re going to perform, and implicitly of exclusion and its attendant shame:

The Boy Meets Girl scene is where all the married couples in the audience have the opportunity to tenderly recall the scenes of their courtship, and the Comedy Boy Meets Comedy Girl, well, I think it’s a very encouraging little scene, because it shows you how this sort of thing can happen even to people like you. Oh, I’m sorry, not to people like you. Like...the couple sitting just behind you.²²

(iii/m) I speak a lot about the voice, because that’s my background. So, may I ask, without excluding the instrumentalists: why does the voice seem different from other ways of making music? One of the interesting innovations in singing and acting pedagogy is the use of cassettes and videotapes to show students how they sound and look. As teachers rapidly learn,

22. Neil Bartlett, *Night after Night* (London: Methuen Drama, 1993), 17.

one must be very careful with this recording process—most people who have never heard or seen themselves go into intense image shock at finding themselves so much less than or different from their expectations. Sometimes a student cancels lessons for months, or forever, and many people admit to not wanting to go out in public after seeing their image on screen. “Do I really slouch like that, walk like that? Did I really sing that note flat? Do I really sound like *that*?” Perhaps vocal performance exhibits shame, or its complement pride, more obviously than other kinds of performance. Perhaps, as singers, we put more of ourselves, our bodies, in the line of fire every time we sing. Or perhaps even: every time we speak.

(ii/p) Or the pleasures of performing with others, the nearly erotic quality of ensembles, of complex networks of relations....

During the early 1980s, I worked for the modern dance company San Francisco Dance Spectrum. Managing dancers can be a melancholy business, because of the ephemeral aspect of their art, and because of their youth (an aging dancer of thirty-five years explained that “dancers don’t have time to grow up until their careers are over”).²³ The company was finally closing its doors, as the imagination of its formerly successful choreographer had eventually faded in a haze of marijuana and self-doubt. The final performance of the company was a matinee which involved a number of alumni brought back as if for a gala performance; it ended with *Golden Rain*, an extended tapestry of exquisite scenes intended to evoke Balinese dance and life. The final movement overlapped various solos, duets, trios, and mixed ensembles in an immense net of movement that, with the final bong of the gamelan,

23. See also Ronald Federico, “The Decision to End a Performing Career in Ballet,” in Jack Kamerman and Rosanne Martorella, eds., *Performers and Performances: The Social Organization of Artistic Work* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1983), 57-69.

froze into a perfect, and perfectly unexpected, tableau: a balanced structure extraordinary in its purity, women lifted to the men's shoulders, everyone frozen into an ideal, hieratic pose. I remember gasping, dazzled by this vision of the ultimate perfectibility of bodies, of gestures, of persons.... And after helping to clear the stage, exchanging tearful good-byes with the dancers, and cleaning up the dressing rooms, I walked home through sidewalk crowds in the foggy San Francisco twilight, feeling alive but absolutely distant from everything around me: engaged with a mesh of supreme perfection, that powerful "art" which draws us away from mere worldly experience.

(ii/m/g) Queer in-your-face demonstrations create an intricate tangle of actions that reenact a dialectic relation between shame and pride (as does the word "queer" itself). Sometimes that tangle inadvertently mocks its own complexity:

Same-sex wedding extravaganza in Germany: Swedish pop group Army Of Lovers will undertake a tour of Germany in October conducting public mass weddings as a political action. The aim of the tour is to kick off a serious debate in German media regarding the introduction of same-sex marriages to German law in a fashion similar to what has already been instated in Norway, Denmark and Sweden.... The wedding ceremony will be conducted by band member Dominika Peczynski acting the role of high priestess of love. Dominika will wed straight couples, gay and lesbian couples and polygamous relationships, all alike. Band members Jean-Pierre and Alexander will marry a poodle and a cow respectively.²⁴

(i/m/s) An article which was central to the original impetus of this paper, Eve Sedgwick talks of how her early poetry reflected her later academic projects and conceptual direction.²⁵ This untitled poem of mine was written in Los Angeles in 1992.

24. Thanks to Jennifer Rycenga for forwarding me this press release.

25. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "A Poem is Being Written," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University, 1993), 177-214.

Ravel glides through my fingers into air.

My touch is shaky, robe falling loose, aches span
my ribs, so tired. Not tired of thinking of you:
dark, broad chords spin out past the lamp's circle.

Conjuring you into the room behind me:
would you turn away if I made a mistake,
would you leave the room, or stay and listen?

Would you come put strong hands lightly
on my shoulders, lean your hips, thighs
into my back, gently, not disturb my arms,

stand within the reverberant web of notes,
read with me the fine net of lines and figures,
silently share what only musicians know?

I play slowly, trying to never reach the last chords,
wanting to freeze this forward-spinning time, falling
that great distance, afraid to have to turn

and face the empty room.

(i/p/g) I think an important drive at the root of camp is narcissistic shame, the identity oscillating between distaste for and adoration of itself. Although Sontag's famous formulation defines camp in positive terms, its underside shows through:

There is a sense in which it is correct to say: "It's too good to be Camp." Or "too important," not marginal enough.... Thus, the personality and many of the works of Jean Cocteau are Camp, but not those of André Gide; the operas of Richard Strauss, but not those of Wagner; concoctions of Tin Pan Alley and Liverpool, but not jazz. Many examples of Camp are things which, from a "serious" point of view, are

either bad art or kitsch.... The ultimate Camp statement: it's good because it's awful.²⁶

It is, however, possible to transcend these definitions, as has occurred in recent gay theater—Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and Terrence McNally's *Love! Valor! Compassion!*, to name two famous examples. Both include a great deal of camp, but surpass it, and its implicit shamefulness, with a larger acceptance, and even love.

I am looking at a 1980 photograph of eight men walking across a sandy stretch of ground, naked to the waist and barefoot, wearing brightly colored swatches of cloth as long *lavas*. They are all very beautiful, and seem remarkably unself-conscious. The place was a rehearsal retreat for the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, which had the "theme" (commonly understood as a camp joke) of "Tropical Islands." We had arrived that morning, flustered and laughing, to sort ourselves into our cabins; one of my cabin-mates was Bill Graham, a wise, gentle man whose maternal relation to those around him won him the name of Reverend Mother as one of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Bill had a surprise for us: he unpacked a large suitcase and brought out eight gorgeous bands of cloth. After he convinced us to wear them, he selected colors and instructed us in wrapping and tying the fabric. And that noon, at the first rehearsal, as everyone else walked down in silly wigs and Hawaiian shirts, we came out like jewels, performing a grace that put camp to shame: Dennis's spare muscles and platinum hair set off by white and gold, Michael's bronze skin flashing above red fabric, and the midnight blue figured with black that was chosen for me, showing me something about my white skin and dark hair that I had not known before. It felt, and still feels, like a transformative performance to me, especially coming as it did in the last days before AIDS

26. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell, 1966), 278, 292.

blasted the gay community and implicitly justified centuries of shame. Especially as, of those eight, Bill and Dennis and at least three others are no longer living, and can no longer resolve the vertiginous conundrum of the image of the self.

(i/m) Histories of performance and shame can resolve in unexpected and kindly ways. I recently came to know a local bassoonist; when I admitted that I had also played bassoon when I was young, we suddenly became soulmates. I gave him some of my old music that I knew I'd never look at again: the Weissenborn exercise book, solos by Wellesz and Perle.... He already had most of them, but I told him to take them for his students. Later that week, he called to tell me he'd read some exercises and instructions I had carefully noted in the back of the Weissenborn. He told me he thought they were brilliant, that they showed that I'd really understood how to play (or, at least, that I'd had a teacher who understood how to play). It felt like the kind of validation that erases past shame, that suggests that the narrative of one's career might not be a chain of disasters—that, ultimately, something was learned.

...

Have I said too much? Feeling I should censor myself on all sides: aspects of being gay, aspects of my performance experiences, and even aspects of writing—that infamous subjectivity, or possible accusations of self-indulgence, esotericism, poetry.... But it is too late: the curtain has already gone up, the words are out of my mouth, or on the page, or in your eyes.

Look sideways to determine where the light is, it's pretty good, angle your face in quarter-turn, make sure you're looking beyond the audience, over the rostrum, can see colleagues who will comment later, don't take time to try to imagine comments now, because you're caught in the moment, the performing moment where, by definition, things go faster than you can hear them, faster than you can hold on to them, okay, so, make this good, this is after all the last paragraph, the last line, so try to say it, using your voice which, although you feel it tiring, is still interesting, an interesting object, a vivid speaking voice, a vehicle for whatever words choose to emerge, a voice which can always find the breath, the strength, to ask:

“Why, exactly, do you want *me* to talk about this?”