

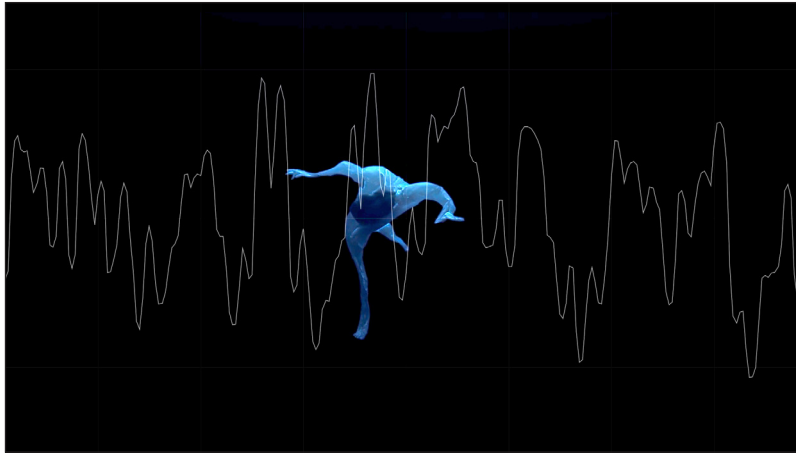


The Body in the Soundtrack

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This video essay examines materiality in horror soundtracks, employing what I term “the musical body” into the discourse on horror film and its bodily agenda. The video essay analyzes specific musical techniques in the soundtracks with a view toward the films’ broader goals of signification and affect.





Creator's Statement

The body is a potent site of signification and affect in horror film. The body in horror is both a metaphor and acutely corporeal; it is a center of vulnerability and violence. The body of victims and the body of monsters are both central to horror and its agenda. But as audio-viewers of film, what is our awareness of the body in the soundtrack? In this project, I use the term “musical body” to accentuate and expose the unseen materiality of music making in horror film soundtracks.

When we hear the rhythmic slap of a bow on cello strings in the soundtrack (a technique called *col legno battuto*), an awareness of the musical body asks us to recognize the materials and actions of this sound. *Col legno battuto* translates literally as “with wood hitting”: the curved wooden backside of the cello bow meeting tensioned metal strings, produced with an arm raised and a blow reigning down on the instrument. A material and an action. This is the musical body. But the musical body is not a seen body and thus too often non-existent in a critical discourse on film. This project asks us to consider what exposing the musical body might bring to critical analyses and to our embodied experience of film.

I ground this project in existing scholarship on film sound and its materiality. Roland Barthes (1977) famously recognizes the role of the body in music in his essay “The Grain of the Voice,” and I begin my video essay with Barthes. Michel Chion also highlights music’s tangible materiality with his theory of “materializing sound indices,” which he names as those material aspects of music that exist from “zero to infinity, [and] whose relative abundance or scarcity always influences the perception of the scene and its meaning” (2017: 112). For both Barthes and Chion, music’s power to move us emanates from its source, in the bodies and materials that produce sound. Lastly, I am indebted to Miguel Mera’s (2016) recent work on materiality in the film scores of Johnny Greenwood.

I begin my study outside film and its soundtrack, noting the use of the musical body in the avant-garde concert music of Helmut Lachenmann. A stalwart experimentalist, Lachenmann has since the 1960s placed an acute focus on the body in a musical tradition that has long attempted to conceal it. One need only consider the homogenized, pristine technique of the symphony orchestra, or the conformity of all black clothing on the concert stage to recognize an attempt to hide the body. The pianist Glen Gould's breathing and humming is famously audible in his recordings of the music of J.S. Bach. This "intrusion" of materiality, of Gould's musical body, into these recordings is something many in the classical music world have never been able to accept.

Helmut Lachenmann and other postwar experimentalists moved in a new direction with their relationship to concert music and the body, attempting to liberate it, inserting the body into their music, notably through extreme instrumental techniques. The violin was no longer a vessel for soaring melodies, but a tool to be struck, scraped, hit, and manipulated by the player in all manner of new ways. Abigail Heathcote (2003), in her study on the body in Lachenmann's music notes:

It is important to realize that for a player some of the actions in themselves constitute a form of transgression of the instrument's essential 'nature.' [...] [T]his sense of violation can best be sensed either by a player himself or by an audience *watching* a performance of a Lachenmann piece where the player's physical engagement with the instrument [...] is immediately apparent. (Heathcote 2003: 40)

Heathcote, in using words like "transgression" and "violation" to describe the body in Lachenmann's music, begins to move the conversation into the realm of horror film and its agenda. The violation and vulnerability of the body on screen in *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013) is apparent. But that violation and vulnerability is also present in the soundtrack, where the sawing and hacking of the violin bow, the paper-thin melodies played in a dead dry space are, to quote Heathcote, a "transgression of the instrument's essential 'nature'" (2003: 40). And as anyone who has played an instrument knows, the physical connection to the object—playing it either idiomatically, or against its "essential nature"—is real and visceral. There is a genuine vulnerability involved when a musician is asked to wield their instrument in the manner that Levi's or Lachenmann's music requires.

But of course, in the context of film, we cannot embody this physicality as the person *doing* the musical action, or as an audience *watching* these musical actions on stage. As such, this study asks us to listen deeply for the body in film music. When music plays in this video essay over a black screen or intertext it is intended for active listening, and not as background. As well, I use music visualizations in my video essay, aligning the

appearance of descriptive words (scrape, rasp, breath, etc.) with those bodily actions in the music, and also overlay soundwave analysis from an oscilloscope on screen. Again, my goal is to foreground film music, to remind us to *see* and *feel* the soundtrack, even when it might sit in the background of more dominant visual and narrative information.

I use three films to explore these ideas, each of which represent compelling uses of the musical body in the soundtrack: *Under the Skin* (2013, music composed by Mica Levi), *The Witch* (2015, Mark Korven, composer), and *Hereditary* (2018, music by Colin Stetson). In the video essay I maintain an emphasis on tracing the musical body, from the bodies making the soundtrack, into the screen and the filmic world, and ultimately off the screen, residing in each of our individualized embodied experiences of film. My video essay ends by asking: At each point along this path, how do we hear these bodies? What can they tell us?

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Biography

Steven S. Sehman is assistant professor of Audio Technology, Music, and Society at Western Washington University. His teaching areas in sound studies, music production, sound synthesis, and sound in film. Recent publications include work on nationalism in Irish film music (*Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*). Sehman's video essay on sonic repetition and temporality in Mark Jenkin's *Enys Men* (16:9 *Filmtidsskrift*) was nominated in *Sight and Sound's* 2024 Video Essays of the Year poll.

Review by Lucy Fife Donaldson, University of St. Andrews

In a genre crowded with bodies, this video essay brings in another for consideration: the musical body. The musical body brings with it appreciation of labor—the many bodies involved in the making of music, from composer to musician to technician—as well as opportunities to nuance understanding of the spectator's bodily responsiveness to horror. Or, to put it another way, the musical body offers a figure through which to comprehend

in further detail different ways horror films can invite or even impose response from their spectators' bodies. This is alluded to throughout, but highlighted in the video essay's conclusion, which invites us to think more explicitly about the interconnections and overlaps between the musical, filmic and spectator body. The body of horror is thus layered in its materiality, potentially thickened and intensified through an alignment between all three, or made more complicated in contrasts between them.

Bringing in the musical body creates another way of thinking through horror's corporeality that is not just fixed to the bodies onscreen, but rather considers other forms of materiality that create and construct horror. Although the significance of sound to horror has been noted elsewhere, with examples such as Helen Hanson's (2010) beautiful short essay on the sound design of *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942), Ben Winter's (2008) work on the use of heartbeat rhythms in horror scores and Lyndsay Townsend's (2023) chapter on the sensory qualities of drums in folk horror, providing examples of how the material qualities of sound can induce fear through sonic materiality, this video essay further expands our critical palette for thinking about the relation of sound to body horror. This is most effectively achieved videographically through the dynamic compositions of text and image which accompany attention to musical composition, as when textual expressions of the musical body surround a figure from *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013). The precision of text placement in such moments does indeed ask us to listen deeply, to listen with our bodies, directing and intensifying our awareness of the material complexity of the bodies we hear and see.

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Review by Cormac Donnelly, Liverpool John Moores University

Steven S. Sehman's "The Body in the Soundtrack" accepts the challenge implicit in making a videographic work focused on sound and rises to that challenge. And in this video essay, it is not only the invisible soundtrack that Sehman asks his "audio-viewer" to take account of, but also the "musical body" responsible for its creation. Using

examples from three horror films from A24 Films, *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013), *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015), and *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), Sehman crafts a sonically compelling manifesto in favor of the implicit value of the musical body to our appreciation of the film soundtrack and entreats us to develop an awareness of it.

Sehman's video essay opens with a recommendation to use headphones, and this is no idle suggestion. The opening textual tour of Helmut Lachenmann's piece 'Mouvement (—vor der Erstarrung)' is a syncretic joy (to paraphrase Chion 2019: 63–65) where carefully chosen and timed text on screen melds with the music, helping us, the audio viewer, to access the musical body at the moment of the soundtrack's creation, the de facto focus of this video essay. Sehman's use of text on screen is carefully considered, with timing, placement, and color all working to the advantage of this piece. And the language itself is carefully chosen (onomatopoeic perhaps?), but in a way reminiscent of Marinetti's missive to Russolo as recorded in the latter's futurist manifesto (1913). And the addition of waveform visualizations, bringing the otherwise invisible soundtrack to the fore, leverages the videographic to serve the sonic intent of this video essay.

As Sehman notes in the opening of his supporting statement, the body is a significant site for tangible affect in the horror film. To use these examples from horror to evoke (summon almost) the invisible musical body to our attention is an effective use of the videographic (and in this case sonographic) form. Sehman's video essay asks us to consider what happens to us as spectators when we actively seek out the musical body in the soundtrack. How are we implicated as receptors of this sonic body? And more specifically here, what additional affect might we as embodied spectators extract from this multi-body, multi-sensory experience?

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

