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# Musically Trained Torture: Violence and Pleasure in Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Klavierspielerin*

Anwita Ghosh

Jadavpur University, India

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## Abstract

This paper will examine Elfriede Jelinek's (1946-) celebrated novel, *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983), as a narrative that deploys the close link between music and violence as a precursor to pleasure and sadomasochistic fantasies in its protagonist. The overt connection between violence and music goes well beyond their affinity on a performative level and the functional role of music in the aestheticization of violence. This transmedial topos often becomes, for instance, a mean of perverse validation against meaning. Music in *Die Klavierspielerin*, far from being transcendental, is located as an experience within the body and allows Jelinek to systematically dismantle the male fantasy of the female masochist.

**Keywords:** Elfriede Jelinek, Music, Psychoanalysis, Perversion, Masochism.

In his essay on Michaelangelo's sculpture of Moses, Freud claimed that although "works of art do exercise a powerful effect on me...I am almost incapable of obtaining any pleasure [from music]. Some rationalistic, or perhaps analytic, turn of mind in me rebels against being moved by a thing without knowing why I am thus affected and what it is that affects me" (Freud, 1955). Freud's resistance to music can be a formidable point of entry to the brilliant labyrinth of music that has continually evaded the comprehensive grasp of psychoanalysis. Strangely enough, despite his aversion to music, Freud analyzed Sarah Bernhardt's voice, praised Yvette Guilbert's songs, and reported on the performance of *Carmen* in Italy (a fact that makes it quite obvious that Freud knew the opera by heart). Indeed much has been written in recent years that have repeatedly probed into the psychoanalytic nature of music and enquired whether the fields of affect in both the realms are compatible to each other or not.<sup>1</sup> This paper does not exclusively try to unravel the concealed meaning of music but hopes to concentrate on a particular aspect of music that claims close relations to violence, pleasure and masochism. Such a reading will not remain confined to mere philosophical and psychoanalytic source locators as I would try to read these observations vis-à-vis Elfriede Jelinek's controversial novel *Die Klavierspielerin* (1986, *The Piano Teacher*). A pseudo-realistic narrative, *Die Klavierspielerin*, repeatedly exploits the close link between psychosexual identity formations and the organization of the socioeconomic interests. On the one hand, as Fiddler (1994) has suggested, it invites the reader to understand the sadomasochistic relationship as an exaggerated microcosm of "normal" sexual relations, while on the other it attacks the values of the Viennese bourgeoisie and specifically its sacrosanct musical culture, which the author presents as competitive and beset by social hierarchies. The novel juxtaposes the high culture of musical activities with lower pursuits, particularly the protagonist's penchant for pornography and sadomasochism. *Die Klavierspielerin*, therefore, can be read as unique in the way it attempts to construe masochism as a phenomenon that can best be comprehended through the techniques of reading and interpretation (especially in the letter scene), techniques one readily associates with music.

The piano teacher of the title, Erika Kohut, makes a living by teaching at the Vienna Conservatory and spends her life striving hopelessly for the heights of musical excellence. She is driven and continually disciplined by her domineering mother who regards Erika, the “genius”, as her own - if failed - creation and exploits her as the provider of material goods generated by her unfortunate but necessary teaching job. This outrageous and deliberately shocking narrative, the tale of a spinsterish woman who lives with her elderly mother progressively unfolds into a story of sexual violence and masochistic fantasy with the arrival of the student named Walter Klemmer. Erika tries to take the initiative with Klemmer, writing him a letter with strict instructions and a gruesome list of her sadomasochistic fantasies. Klemmer is disgusted, but more importantly, his masculinity is threatened as Erika tries to dictate to him how he should behave. Klemmer fails to recognize that Erika is not serious about her demands, in fact “[I]nstead of torturing her, she wants him to practise love with her according to Austrian standards” (Jelinek, 1999). The novel moves towards its close with a series of scenes in which Erika is finally and utterly humiliated; first reduced to begging on her knees for Klemmer’s affection, subsequently violently beaten and raped by him, on his terms now, not hers, and lastly seeing him among a group of friends of his own age, apparently in a new liaison with a young female fellow student. The novel ends with Erika leaving the house armed with a knife, intent on exacting revenge, but ultimately turning the knife against herself in a failed attempt at suicide.

The key to Erika’s disturbed attitude to sex has, understandably enough, been sought by a number of commentators on the novel, especially in the presentation of her relationship to her over-ambitious mother. Although a hurried first glance at the fact that she is a pianist seems to be unrelated to her position as a perverse, this essay argues that Erika’s training as a pianist is central to the development of her perversity, which manifests itself in many ways, including voyeurism, fetishism, and masochism. I have used the term ‘perversion’ here as a clinical structure rather than a form of behaviour. In Lacan’s view, perversion is akin to desire per se. For him, as for Freud, human desire itself is perverse, insofar as it defies (as the Latin source of *perversion* has harped on a notion of a deflection from a right or true course) the laws of adaptation and survival of the living world. Perversion, therefore (like other clinical structures, viz., hysteria and obsessional neurosis) has logic of its own.

From the very beginning, Erika Kohut’s musical propensities make it quite evident that she is anything but an artist. Andrea Bandhauer pithily sums up the argument when she observes:

“Erika functions merely as an artistic labourer, caught between the extremes of desperate pretension and self-adulation and a total lack of confidence and self awareness. Erika’s artistic existence does by no means reflect the cliché of the artist’s freedom and the bourgeois myth of the “artist as genius” generating by the industry propagating the city of music, Vienna.” (Bandhauer, 2005)

This particular observation immediately directs our attention to the novel’s title as well. The original title of *Die Klavierspielerin* can most literally be translated into English as “The Piano Player” and not as “The Piano Teacher.” However, Joachim Neugroschel’s translation tries to put forth an important aspect about Erika’s musical disposition. She is not an artist in any sense, but merely a teacher. In fact, a major part of the mother-daughter tension derives from the fact that Erika could never make it as a concert pianist. Yet Erika is not even a failed artist. She is but an employee of the high culture of music industry. The French title of the film (based on the novel) by Michael Haneke, *La Pianiste*, on the other hand, is an ironic reminder of Erika’s failure, for she has not succeeded in becoming the professional pianist implied by the title. While the title of the German novel and the dubbed version of the film, *Die Klavierspielerin* (“The Piano Player”) is non-

committal, arousing curiosity, the English title, *The Piano Teacher*, takes up the opposite position from that implied by the French original, yet still ironically understates the complexity of Erika's position. The French title itself has, furthermore, an alienating effect, since the feminine article, though grammatically acceptable, is still felt by many French speakers to be a neologism or a little too contrived. The distancing effect is further aggravated by the higher register of much of the French dialogue. To return to our discussion, music and especially piano playing has for the Kohut ladies a very specific class and gender-specific connotation. Teaching and making music appears in the novel to have uncanny similarities to a sadomasochistic power game. Both Erika and her mother view music as a vehicle for achieving bourgeois ideal of the self-sufficient individual and separating themselves from the masses. Jelinek writes:

“Mother points out that Erika is not just a face in the crowd: She's one in a million...For Erika is an individual... Erika is a sharply defined individual, a personality. She stands alone against the broad mass of her students, one against all, and she turns the wheel of the ship of art.” (Jelinek, 1999)

While Erika's mother accepts wholeheartedly the notion of piano-playing as a mean of demonstrating class superiority, she rejects one of the most important motives the otherwise would drive parents to have their daughters learn piano, namely, the acquisition of a skill that would prove useful in attracting a husband. Rather, her mother uses Erika's training as a pianist as a mean of keeping her away from men. The mother also views this discipline of piano practice as a way to keep her daughter from achieving sexual attractiveness. Despite these attempts, it is music and piano-playing that brings Erika into contact with male-musicians and awakens sexual desire in her:

“The future men and present music pupils with whom she performs chamber music and is forced to play in orchestras arouse an ache in her, a yearning which has always seemed to lurk in her.” (Jelinek, 1999)

Indeed, Erika understands that piano playing can be used as a successful way of displaying her femininity in the hope of attracting men. However, like her failed stint as a concert pianist, Erika's relationship with Klemmer is doomed because of her inability to achieve a stable sexual position. This is how music, violence and pleasure inter-twine, as music appears in the novel as a force of discipline used to control the (female) body.

### **Perversion of Musical Signification**

Psychoanalysis, since Freud, has established certain theoretical affinities between music, the unconscious and the feminine. Absence of a stable meaning in music, since it lacks an analogous code of a linguistic type, has often been theorized in terms of a general lack, in a negative or surplus relation to language. Carol Flinn, in an essay entitled “The ‘Problem’ of Femininity in Theories of Film Music”, equates such a lack with a metaphorically feminine position and states that this has allowed feminist writers, such as Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous, to celebrate music as a potentially subversive force which reclaims the realm of female desire (Flinn, 1986). She writes: “In its so-called failure to produce concrete meaning, in its inability to conduct the listener to fixed references, its irrationality and emotionalism, its very invisibility, music challenges some of dominant representation's most cherished axioms, such as its impulse towards rationalism and the epistemological privilege awarded vision” (Flinn, 1986). For Kristeva, moreover, music is heterogeneous to meaning and signification and is synonymous with what she calls “poetic language,” which she says is constructed on the basis of two opposing modalities, the *symbolic*

and the *semiotic*. The semiotic precedes and transcends signification; anterior to any social formation; it is both pre and extra-linguistic; both prior to and necessary to the acquisition of language but not identical to language. The semiotic is generally located within and in relation to the pre-oedipal (pre-predicative) subject. On the other hand, the symbolic is the place of language and social organization; sign, syntax and the paternal function; position and judgment. It involves the *thetic* phase, the identification of the subject and her/his distinction from objects, and the establishment of a sign system. Kristeva says that poetic language is the result of a particular articulation between the semiotic and the symbolic. Even non verbal signifying systems, such as music, that are based primarily on the semiotic, have recourse to the symbolic. They function in a dialectical movement involving both modalities because the listening subject is ultimately constituted by both semiotic and symbolic organizations. According to Kristeva music operates according to two distinct modes of the signifying process; the *phenotext* (communication and logic) and the *genotext* (semiotic rhythm) (Kristeva, 1982). For Levi-Strauss as well, music is determined by a system composed of two grids; one physiological, of natural organic rhythms; the other cultural, involving hierarchical relations between tones and the culturally accepted meanings attached to certain combinations of notes and temporal relationships. According to him, music has the "power to act simultaneously on the mind and the senses, stimulating both ideas and emotions and blending them in a common flow" (Levi-Strauss, 1969). So it can be inferred that while the place of music, in its "pure" state, is largely that of the semiotic, it does, however, operate according to a cultural logic that rests within the symbolic.

This typically ambiguous position of music makes it suitable for the production of *jouissance*, which belongs to the register of perversion whose polymorphously oscillating willfulness refuses to let itself be bound to the imaginary destination of univocal meaning. The concept of perversion refers to a use of the signifier, which sublimated to a greater or lesser degree, leads into praxis of pleasure.<sup>ii</sup> Therefore, conceiving of music as perversion enables one to avoid the danger of assigning to it a meaning it does not possess.

Elfriede Jelinek herself is a trained musician and the musical allusions in her novel strongly anticipate a psychoanalytic reading. A piece of music which recurs throughout the film is Schubert's song cycle, *Die Winterreise* ('Winter's Journey'). The music thereby becomes a literary intertextual allusion and has implications for the way we interpret Erika's psychological make-up in particular. In the film, the impact of music is more direct, as it accompanies the action. It affects the way the spectator interprets the film, as well as providing an external reflection of Erika's own thought process. From the first music lesson, where Erika is seen and heard drumming it into her pupil, we repeatedly hear snatches of the song "Im Dorf" ('The Village'). Despite its attractive quality, its constant repetition eventually perhaps reflects the attitude of the piano teacher, who is no doubt sick to death of hearing her students' incessant practices in less than perfect renditions. Certain lines are heard repeatedly: "The dogs are barking, their chains are rattling / Villagers are asleep in their beds" (Feil, 1986). The simplicity of Wilhelm Müller's lyrics begins to sound banal through repetition. Nevertheless, this song cycle, which is a favourite of Erika's, is loaded with meaning. The words sung by the tenor whom the unfortunate Anna (another student of Erika's) is supposed to accompany have previously been heard spoken by Erika at the end of the scene where she first meets Walter Klemmer: "they dream of many things they lack / indulge their longings for good and bad."<sup>iii</sup> The final words of this piece, "I've abandoned all my dreaming,"<sup>iv</sup> first heard at the end of the scene in the sex shop, suggest Erika's longing and lack of fulfilment. The song cycle itself concerns a journey undertaken in sorrow and expressing a sense of loss. In relation to the novel, Annegret Mahler-Bungers has interpreted the references to these musical passages as a reflection of Erika's psychological inadequacy relating to

the loss of her father and her subsequent dependence on her mother, with whom she is forced to act out the role of the absent father (Mahler-Bungers, 1988).

The clash between the pretentiously aesthetic situations and Erika's perverse inclinations becomes starker as the relationship between Erika and Walter develops. Music, which originally brings the two together and expresses higher aspirations, gives way to increasingly intense scenes in which sex and violence come together, and music is heard less. As Erika insists on subtle renderings of classical piano music from her pupils and derives a certain satisfaction from their incompetence, her predilection for sadomasochism becomes increasingly evident. In Jelinek's novel the form and rigour of the classical tradition appears to be in direct conjunction with Erika's sadomasochistic fantasies. Only within the frame of total rigor (bondage) and control, that the S/M-game implies, is Erika able to feel lust. On the other hand, music is described as a violent pleasure as well. Musical counterpoint appears to be as intricately patterned as needlework, and as violent as whiplashes (Jelinek, 1999). Not only is the musician dominated by music, even the audience appears trapped by it. Erika expresses her contempt for her listeners, for she perceives within them the same yearning to yield to domination, to be gagged and subdued in order to be touched by the sublimity of music:

“One has to tyrannize them, one has to suppress and oppress them, just to get through to them! One should use clubs on them! They want thrashings and a pile of passions.”  
(Jelinek, 1999)

For Erika, the pleasure of musical perfection is intricately linked to strictness, chastisement and the fettering of the body, and she transfers this pattern to her attitude towards sexuality as well.

### **Schumann's *Zwielicht*: Beyond the Pleasure Principle**

During a critical moment in the novel, Erika begins to let Klemmer see her damage by making visible to him her father's illness through discussing the significance of Schumann. She quotes Adorno and hinges on the notion of the “twilight of the mind” as she says:

“Have you read Adorno on Schumann's *Fantasia in C Major*? ... Not the Schumann whose thoughts have all fled him, but the Schumann just before that! A hair's breadth before that! He already has an inkling that his mind will flee, he suffers from his inkling, down to his finest veins, he takes leave of his conscious life as he enters the choirs of angels and demons, yet he clutches that conscious life one final time, even though he is no longer fully conscious of himself. He yearningly tries to catch the fading echoes; he mourns the loss of the most precious thing: himself. This is the phase in which one knows how great the loss of oneself is before one is utterly abandoned.” (Jelinek, 1999).

This zone of indistinction replicates itself on Erika's unstable sexual position as well. Erika's inability to attain a stable sexual position must not be confused with her biological gender. In Lacanian terms, a sexual position as “male” or “female” is not related to biology or identification with the mother or father (as it was for Freud); rather, it is the “relationship with the phallus which determines sexual position” (Evans, 1996). Developing a stable sexual identity is difficult for both the sexes, but especially so for women, since, as Lacan notes, women face a “detour” (identification with the father) in their path through the Oedipal complex (see Lacan's *Seminar III*, especially chapters XII and XIII on the hysteric's question). And the novel dramatizes this problematic nature of Erika's sexual position as the story progresses with a dead and deranged father at the heart of it. Moreover the fact that Erika, like the piano, is ambiguously gendered is

made clear on the very first page of the novel, when the reader is informed that Erika serves her mother as a replacement for the father. Powell and Bethman writes: “By replacing the father, Erika fulfills two roles for her mother, that of child and husband. In Lacanian terms she both *is* the phallus for the mother (as child) and *has* the phallus (as her father)” (Powell & Bethman, 2008). And it is primarily through piano playing that Erika attempts to replace the missing phallus of the father for her mother. The training ultimately becomes violent when Erika’s dream of becoming a concert player is shattered. One might conclude that if piano training is meant to assign women a place in the symbolic order and institute the law of sexual difference, Erika’s failure to achieve a female sexual position and her propensity for sadomasochistic fantasies can be related to her failure as a pianist. She serves the high-browed Austrian society of musical aspiration only to turn herself into a masochistic slave and unleash the “obscene core” of the culture industry.

Theodor Adorno’s discussion about the implicit violence of music in “Fragment über Musik und Sprache” (“Music and Language: A Fragment”) is concerned with music’s implicit intentionality. The process of disambiguation, which, in language, is achieved by connecting an ambiguous word to one of its meanings, is, according to Adorno, achieved in music “by virtue of the sheer power of the context”: Music, unlike literature, appears to be something that is beyond discussion or reasoning; it asserts “this is how it is.” As in Doblin’s aesthetic reflections on music, the musical form appears as violent force, a “gesture of decision,” a gesture that might be compared to an “assault from the dominating impulse of logic” (Schirrmacher, 2014). The politics of music that Adorno applies to modern collective experience can be transformed into the individual politics of gender as it applies to Erika and her unhappy relations, be it with her parents or with Klemmer. Gender as a coding process corresponds to the subversive aspects of Erika’s musical endeavors, since performing art and deconstructing womanhood are central to the novels intention. Indeed, the politics of gendering becomes a critical issue when mother and daughter adopt a lifestyle that is an unstable mimesis of the patriarchal structures found in modern capitalist societies (Solibakke, 2007).

However, the close link between music and violence is one that extensively shapes Erika’s sexual performance. According to Lacan, the pleasure achieved by the pervert (through his or her perversions) and the artist (through sublimation) are structurally similar. Both the artist and the pervert desire in a similar fashion, insofar as both wish to go beyond the pleasure principle. Jelinek constantly unmasks this linkage between music and sexuality as the dirty secret of German culture. For instance, while watching the peep show, Erika mentally compares the work of the actors to the work of musicians:

“Erika is geared to watching people who work hard because they want results. In this respect, the normally large difference between music and sexual pleasure is quite tiny.” (Jelinek, 1999).

To conclude, music in *Die Klavierspielerin*, far from being transcendental, is located as an experience within the body and allows Jelinek to systematically dismantle the male fantasy of the female masochist. Musical inscription invests not only the body of the protagonist but that of the reader as well if one considers Jelinek’s text to be a musical composition that depends on a series of trained readings of its deceptive univocality.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> David Schwarz's engagement with psychoanalysis in *Listening Subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture* is an important achievement in this regard. Others like Carolyn Abbate and Lawrence Kramer have also written extensively on this overt connection. For these theorists, psychoanalysis can help us accumulate knowledge about music, about how music might activate desire and identification for composers, performers, or listeners.

<sup>ii</sup> In his "Seminar on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis" (1959-60) Jacques Lacan points out that perversion and sublimation are identical insofar as both go beyond the pleasure principle's relationship to the object.

<sup>iii</sup> "träumen sich manches, was sie nicht haben, tun sich im Guten und Argen erlaben". Quoted in the screenplay. See: Michael Haneke: *La Pianiste*. Scene 5, 28.

<sup>iv</sup> "ich bin zu Ende mit allen Träumen". See: Michael Haneke: *La Pianiste*, 28.

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Anwita Ghosh received her B.A. (English) degree from University of Calcutta and completed her M.A. (English) at Jadavpur University in 2015. Currently she is engaged in writing her MPhil. thesis on Elfriede Jelinek at the Department of English, Jadavpur University. She takes an academic interest in French and German language and literature. Her areas of interest are: street culture and modernity, works of Walter Benjamin, Lacanian psychoanalysis, post-war German literature.

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