Eruptions: heavy metal appropriations of classical virtuosity

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We have now heard him, the strange wonder, whom the superstition of past ages, possessed by the delusion that such things could never be done without the help of the Evil One, would undoubtedly have condemned to the stake – we have heard him, and seen him too, which, of course, makes a part of the affair. Just look at the pale, slender youth in his clothes that signal the nonconformist; the long, sleek, drooping hair . . . those features so strongly stamped and full of meaning, in this respect reminding one of Paganini, who, indeed, has been his model of hitherto undreamt-of virtuosity and technical brilliance from the very first moment he heard him and was swept away.¹

In the liner notes for his 1988 album, Odyssey, heavy metal guitarist Yngwie J. Malmsteen claimed a musical genealogy that confounds the stability of conventional categorisations of music into classical and popular spheres. In his list of acknowledgments, along with the usual cast of agents and producers, suppliers of musical equipment, and relatives and friends, Malmsteen expressed gratitude to J. S. Bach, Nicolo Paganini, Antonio Vivaldi, Ludwig van Beethoven, Jimi Hendrix and Ritchie Blackmore.² From the very beginnings of heavy metal in the late 1960s, guitar players had experimented with the musical materials of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European composers. But the trend came to full fruition around the time of Malmsteen’s debut in the early 1980s; a writer for the leading professional guitar magazine says flatly that the single most important development in rock guitar in the 1980s has been ‘the turn to classical music for inspiration and form’ (Stix 1986, p. 59).

Heavy metal, like all forms of rock and soul, owes its biggest debt to African-American blues.³ The harmonic progressions, vocal lines and guitar improvisations of metal all rely heavily on the pentatonic scales derived from blues music. The moans and screams of metal guitar playing, now performed with whammy bars and overdriven amplifiers, derive from the bottleneck playing of the Delta blues musicians, and ultimately from earlier African-American vocal styles. Angus Young, guitarist with AC/DC, recalls, ‘I started out listening to a lot of early blues people, like B. B. King, Buddy Guy, and Muddy Waters’ (Szatmary 1987, p. 154). Such statements are not uncommon, and heavy metal guitarists who did not study the blues directly learned second-hand, from the British cover versions by Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page, or from the most conspicuous link between heavy metal and black blues and R&B, Jimi Hendrix.⁴

But from the very beginning of heavy metal there has been another important influence: that assemblage of disparate musical styles known in the twentieth
century as ‘classical music’. Throughout heavy metal’s twenty-year history, its most influential musicians have been guitar players who have also studied classical music. Their appropriation and adaptation of classical models sparked the development of a new kind of guitar virtuosity, changes in the harmonic and melodic language of heavy metal, and new modes of musical pedagogy and analysis.

Classical prestige and popular meanings

The classical influence on heavy metal marks a merger of what are generally regarded as the most and least prestigious musical discourses of our time. This influence thus seems an unlikely one, and we must wonder why metal musicians and fans have found such a discursive fusion useful and compelling. Musicologists have frequently characterised adaptive encounters among musical practices as ‘natural’ expansions of musical resources, as musicians find in foreign music new means with which to assert their innovative creativity. Yet such explanations merely reiterate, covertly, a characteristically Western faith in progress, expansion and colonisation. They do little to account for the appearance of specific fusions at particular historical moments, or to probe the power relations implicit in all such encounters. We will need more cogent explanations than those with which musicology has traditionally explained classical exoticism, fusions of national styles and elite dabblings in jazz.

I should emphasise too that my discussion of the relationship of heavy metal and classical music is not simply a bid to elevate the former’s cultural prestige. Attempts to legitimate popular culture by applying the standards of ‘high’ culture are not uncommon, and they are rightly condemned as wrongheaded and counter-productive by those who see such friends of ‘low’ culture as too willing to cede the high ground. That is, such projects leave untouched the assumptions that underpin cultural value judgments, and the dice remain loaded against popular culture. An attempt to legitimate heavy metal in terms of the criteria of classical music, like prior treatments of the Beatles’ and other rock music, could easily miss the point, for heavy metal is in some ways antithetical to today’s classical music. Such a project would disperse the differences between metal and other musics, accomplishing a kind of musicological colonisation that musicians, fans and cultural historians alike would find alienating and pointless.

But in the case of heavy metal, the relationship to classical modes of thought and music-making is not merely in the eye of the beholder. To compare it with culturally more prestigious music is entirely appropriate, for the musicians who compose, perform and teach this music have tapped the classical canon for musical techniques and procedures which they have then fused with their blues-based rock sensibility. Their instrumental virtuosity, theoretical self-consciousness and studious devotion to the works of the classical canon means that their work could be valorised in the more ‘legitimate’ terms of classical excellence. But more importantly, metal guitarists’ appropriations of classical music provide a vital opportunity for examining criteria for musical significance as they function in cultural contestation.

The history of American popular music is replete with examples of appropriation ‘from below’ – popular adaptations of classical music. As I discuss examples drawn from heavy metal, I will be describing a number of ways in which classical
music is being used, all of which have antecedents in other twentieth-century popular music. The sorts of value popular appropriators find in classical music can be grouped around these topics: semiotics, virtuosity, theory and prestige. I will explore these topics as I discuss the work of several of the most influential and successful heavy metal guitarists. But before examining the classical influence upon metal, I must clarify my understanding of the term ‘classical music’, particularly my attribution to it of prestige and semiotic significance.

The prestige of classical music encompasses both its constructed aura of transcendent profundity and its affiliation with powerful social groups. Although the potency of its aura and the usefulness of its class status depend upon the widespread assumption that classical music is somehow timeless and universal, we know that ‘classical music’ is a relatively recent cultural construct. The canon of the music now known as ‘the great works of the classical tradition’ began to form early in the nineteenth century, with revivals of ‘ancient’ music (Bach and Mozart) and series publications of composers’ collected works. Lawrence W. Levine has carefully detailed the process of elevation and ‘sacralisation’, begun midway through the nineteenth century, whereby European composed music was wrenching away from a variety of popular contexts and made to serve the social agenda of a powerful minority of Americans. Along with the popular plays of Shakespeare, German music was elevated by an elite that was attempting to impose a singular ‘moral order’, repudiating the plurality of cultural life (Levine 1988). By the twentieth century, institutional and interpretive structures came to shape musical reception so completely that what we know today as ‘classical music’ is less a useful label for a historical tradition than for a genre of twentieth-century music.

The most forceful critique of the institution of modern concert music is that of Christopher Small, who argues that this process of sacralisation has almost completely effaced original social and political meanings (Small 1980, 1987). Musical works which were created for courts, churches, public concerts, salons of connoisseurs, and which had modelled and enacted the social relationships important to those specific audiences, have become a set of interchangeable great pieces. All the vast range of meanings produced by these disparate musics are reduced to singularity in the present. That single meaning, Small maintains, is one of defence specifically, defence of the social relationships and ideologies that underpin the modern industrial state. Cultural hierarchy is used to legitimate social hierarchy, and to marginalise the voices of all musicians who stand outside of the canon, representing those who stand at the margins of social power. Small’s critique is important because it is essential to realise that classical music is not just ‘great’ music; it is a constructed category that reflects the priorities of a historical moment, and that serves certain social interests at the expense of others. Classical music is the sort of thing Eric Hobsbawm calls an ‘invented tradition’, whereby present interests construct a cohesive past to establish or legitimise present-day institutions or social relations (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The hodgepodge of the classical canon aristocratic and bourgeois music; academic, sacred and secular; music for public concerts, private soirees and dancing – achieves its coherence through its function as the most prestigious musical culture of the twentieth century.

Once established, though, classical music can be negotiated; it has been both a bulwark of class privilege and a means whereby other social barriers could be overcome. African-American performers and composers have long worked to defeat racist essentialism by proving their ability to write and perform European
concert music. The chamber jazz of the Modern Jazz Quartet, with its cool fusions of swing and classical forms, was an important statement of black pride, however conservative it seemed amidst the turmoil of the 1960s. Duke Ellington was a crucial figure in the struggle to achieve widespread respect for African-American music, in large measure because his skills as composer, orchestrator and leader made him, of all jazz musicians, most closely match the prestigious model of the classical composer.

Rock fusions with classical styles are most often associated with ‘progressive’ or ‘art rock’ in the late 1960s. With *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the Beatles kicked off an era of self-conscious experimentation with the instrumentation and stylistic features of classical music. Producer George Martin’s training as a classical oboist exposed him to many of the peculiarities that appeared on the Beatles’ recordings: the piccolo trumpet (a modern instrument now associated with Baroque music), classical string quartets, odd metric patterns perhaps inspired by Stravinsky or Bartók (or more directly by the non-Western music that had inspired them). The Moody Blues collaborated with the London Festival Orchestra for *Days of Future Passed* in 1968, and groups as different as The Who, Yes, The Kinks, and Emerson, Lake and Palmer composed classically-influenced rock songs, rock concertos and rock operas. Deep Purple, eventually recognised as one of the founding bands of heavy metal, began to develop in that direction only after guitarist Ritchie Blackmore grew dissatisfied with fusions such as keyboardist Jon Lord’s ambitious *Concerto for Group and Orchestra* (1969) and reoriented the band:

I felt that the whole orchestra thing was a bit tame. I mean, you’re playing in the Royal Albert Hall, and the audience sits there with folded arms, and you’re standing there playing next to a violinist who holds his ears everytime you take a solo. It doesn’t make you feel particularly inspired. (Kleidermacher 1991, p. 62)

Blackmore realised that the institutions and audience expectations that frame classical music would always control the reception of any music performed within that context; while he was attracted to classical musical resources, he found that he would have to work with them on his own turf.

Discussions of ‘art rock’ rarely move beyond sketching influences to address the question of why classical music was used by these groups (see, for example, Rockwell 1980). Certainly one of the most important reasons is prestige. Rock critics’ own preoccupation with art rock reflects their acceptance of the premises of the classical model. Performers who have not composed their own material – ‘girl groups’, Motown, soul singers – have rarely won critical respect comparable to those granted artists who better fit the model of the auteur, the solitary composing genius. Sometimes performers stake their claims to classical prestige explicitly. Emerson, Lake and Palmer’s neoclassical extravaganzas, such as their rendering of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1972), were intended as elevations of public taste and expressions of advanced musicianship. Keith Emerson’s attraction to classical resources was unabashedly elitist; he considered ordinary popular music degraded, and took on the mission of raising the artistic level of rock. In such art rock, classical references and quotations were intended to be recognised as such; their function was, in large measure, to invoke classical music, and to confer some of its prestigious status, its seriousness.

Other popular musicians have been attracted to classical resources for reasons of signification beyond prestige. At least since 1932, when a classical string section
was featured on Bing Crosby’s hit recording, ‘Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?’, classical means have been used in order to expand the rhetorical palette – and social meanings – of popular music. In Crosby’s Depression-era lament, the strings invoke a particular tradition of representing feelings; they underscore the sincerity of Crosby’s voice, and magnify the poignancy of his character’s plight. The recorders on Led Zeppelin’s ‘Stairway to Heaven’ (1971) similarly contribute to the song’s musical semiotics. They sound archaic and bittersweet; their tranquil contrapuntal motion is at once soothing and mysterious.7

Of all the stylistic or historical subdivisions of classical music, rock music has borrowed most from the Baroque. Richard Middleton has tried to account for this by arguing that there is a ‘relatively high syntactic correlation’ between Baroque and rock musical codes. Like rock music, Baroque music generally uses conventional harmonic progressions, melodic patterns and structural frameworks, and operates through imaginative combinations, elaborations and variations of these, rather than developing extended, through-composed forms. It also tends to have a regular, strongly marked beat; indeed, its continuo section could be regarded as analogous to the rhythm section of jazz and rock. (Middleton 1990, p. 30)

Middleton suggests, for example, that Procul Harum’s ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’ (1967), by fusing harmonic and melodic material taken from a Bach cantata with the soul ballad vocal style of Ray Charles and Sam Cooke, presented the counter-culture with an image of itself as ‘sensuously spiritual’ and ‘immanently oppositional’ (p. 31).

Here the usefulness of Baroque materials depends on both their aura as ‘classical’ and their present semiotic value, to the extent these meanings are separable. For although this music was composed long ago, it is still circulating, producing meanings in contemporary culture. Metal musicians generally acquire their knowledge and facility with classical music through intense study, but they owe their attraction to the music and their audiences’ ability to decode it not to the pickled rituals of the concert hall, but to the pervasive recycling of all available musical discourses by the composers of television and movie music. Classical musics, despite the best efforts of proponents of cultural apartheid – and in part due to their own missionary efforts – are alive and omnipresent in mass culture. Mass mediation ensures that there can be no absolute separation of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture in the modern world; classically-trained composers write film scores that draw upon their conservatory studies but succeed or fail on their intelligibility for mass audiences. Classical music surely no longer signifies as it did originally, but neither are its meanings ahistorical or arbitrary. It is available to culturally competitive groups who claim and use its history, its prestige and its signifying powers in different ways.

Heavy metal appropriations of classical music are in fact very specific and consistent: Bach not Mozart, Paganini rather than Liszt, Vivaldi and Albinoni instead of Telemann or Monteverdi. This selectivity is remarkable at a time when the historical and semiotic specificity of classical music, on its own turf, has all but vanished, when the classical canon is defined and marketed as a reliable set of equally great and ineffable collectables. By finding new uses for old music, recycling the rhetoric of Bach and Vivaldi for their own purposes, metal musicians have reopened issues of signification in classical music. Their appropriation suggests that despite the homogenisation of that music in the literatures of ‘music appreciation’ and commercial promotion, many listeners perceive and respond to dif-
ferences, to the musical specificity that reflects historical and social specificity. Thus the reasons behind heavy metal's classical turn can reveal a great deal not only about heavy metal, but also about classical music. We must ask: if we do not understand why his influence shows up in the music of Ozzy Osbourne or Bon Jovi, do we really understand Bach as well as we thought we did?

Ritchie Blackmore and the classical roots of metal

That many rock guitarists of the late 1960s experimented with classical influences in their playing can be seen as part of a widespread interest in musical exploration – itself part of the search for social and conceptual options that distinguished the decade. Jimmy Page listened to a great range of music to acquire the means to create the varied moods of Led Zeppelin, which ranged from heavy blues to ethereal ballads, Celtic mysticism, Orientalist fantasies and folkish ballads. Mountain's Leslie West inflected his heavy blues sensibility with classical and jazz licks, and many other early examples could be cited. But the most important musician of the emerging metal/classical fusion was Ritchie Blackmore. As lead guitarist for Deep Purple, Blackmore was one of the most influential guitar players of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Though hardly the first hard rock guitarist to employ classical features, he greatly affected other players; for many of them, Blackmore's was the first really impressive, compelling fusion of rock and classical music.

Born in 1945, Ritchie Blackmore began playing at age eleven; six years later he was working as a studio session guitarist in London. Blackmore greatly admired Jimi Hendrix's guitar sound, and like Hendrix, he became a pioneer of flashy virtuosity (see Marshall 1986b). While young, Blackmore took classical guitar lessons for a year, which affected his fingering technique: unlike most rock guitarists of his generation, he made full use of the little finger on his left hand. But the classical influence shows up most, Blackmore himself maintains, in the music he wrote: 'For example, the chord progression in the 'Highway Star' solo on Machine Head . . . is a Bach progression' (Webb 1984, p. 54). And the solo is 'just arpeggios based on Bach' (Rosen 1984, p. 62). Recorded in 1971 (released in 1972), Machine Head contained not only the hits 'Highway Star' and 'Space Truckin'', but also the heavy metal anthem 'Smoke on the Water'. The album came to be regarded by fans as one of the 'classic' albums of heavy metal, and it helped create great enthusiasm for classical/metal fusions.

'Highway Star' is a relatively long and complex song; it winds its way among several keys, and both Blackmore and the keyboard player, Jon Lord, take extended solos. The organ solo begins over a descending chromatic bassline, reminiscent of the ground bass patterns favoured by seventeenth-century composers such as Henry Purcell. Much of the soloing is made up of series of arpeggios, in the style of Vivaldi (or Bach, after he absorbed Vivaldi's influence). The members of Deep Purple abstracted and adapted a particular set of classical features: repetitious melodic patterns (such as arpeggios), square phrase structures, virtuosic soloing and characteristic harmonic progressions, such as descending through a tetrachord by half-steps, or cycling through the circle of fifths. The harmonic progressions, as Blackmore asserted, are typically Baroque, as are the rapid, flashy sixteenth-note patterns organised symmetrically through repetition and phrase balance. In Deep Purple, guitarist and organist alike drew
upon these materials in order to construct a new and effective style of rock virtuosity.

In his ‘Highway Star’ solo, Blackmore begins with blues-derived licks, bringing in Baroque materials climactically at the end, where he overdubs a matching harmony part in thirds, with figuration that recalls Vivaldi’s energetic articulation of harmonic progressions in his violin concerti (see Examples 1 and 2). As in Vivaldi, a regular and predictable (though dynamic) harmonic sequence provides the backdrop for exhilarating figuration. The harmonic cycles set up rational articulation of time and direction, enabling us to predict what will come next, and the guitar solo energises these patterns with virtuosic exhibitionism. As in the concerto grosso, the soloist provides the dynamic individual element, in contrast to the stable collectivity of the rhythm section. Vivaldi’s social model transfers well to the context of the guitar hero.


Example 2. Antonio Vivaldi, Violin Concerto in D minor (F. 1, no. 21 in the Collected Works, ed. Malipiero, Edizioni Ricordi, 1949), first movement, mm. 87-97.

Throughout the 1970s, guitarists continued their experimentation with fusions of heavy metal and classical music. Just as jazz musicians had done in the late 1940s, some rock guitarists turned to classical music theory for new musical resources. The Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns by musicologist Nicolas Slonimsky (1947) introduced both jazz and rock musicians to harmonic and melodic possibilities such as harmonic minor scales, modal scales and diminished arpeggios. Ulrich Roth of the German band Scorpions advanced virtuosic standards with his fast scales and dramatic diminished chords. Jazz/rock fusion
guitarist Al DiMeola had an important influence on many rock guitarists; his music was by no means heavy metal, but he used a similar distorted, highly sustained guitar tone, and his melodic and harmonic language was close enough to that of metal that his modal explorations influenced heavy metal musicians.

Other major metal guitarists of this period did not pursue the classical influence directly. Michael Schenker, who was perhaps the most influential metal guitarist of continental Europe during the 1970s, had no formal training, and no exposure to academic music theory. He taught himself to play, learning Beatles songs and Clapton solos by ear, and his virtuosity has always been primarily blues-based, grounded in the pentatonicism and timbral nuance of the blues guitar. The musical roots of Angus and Malcolm Young of AC/DC are in early rock 'n' roll and R&B, and they have stuck doggedly to them. Glenn Tipton and K. K. Downing, the guitar players of Judas Priest, also had little formal training, and it was only in the late 1980s that the classical influence became pronounced in their playing. But in spite of these exceptions, appropriations of classical music were increasingly important throughout the history of heavy metal.

After leaving Deep Purple to pursue a solo career, Ritchie Blackmore continued his study and adaptation of classical music. The liner notes for his first album with his new band, Rainbow (1975), include the acknowledgment: ‘Inspiration: J. S. Bach’. A few years later Blackmore even took up study of the cello, and Rainbow’s 1981 release featured a very direct use of classical music in its title cut, ‘Difficult to Cure’, an instrumental built around the ‘Ode to Joy’ from the last movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Blackmore begins with a distorted version of Beethoven’s instrumental recitative, which he transforms into a sitar-like modal flurry over a pedal; the band then moves into the theme of the Ode itself. Initially, Blackmore simply repeats the melody without developing or embellishing it, while the band modulates to different keys in order to freshen the repetitions. The musicians eventually alter the progression for the solos, which are a blend of a boogie blues rhythmic feel with the Orientalist modality of the beginning. In ‘Difficult to Cure’, classical material is quoted literally, so that it is sure to be recognised; in fact, the song is self-consciously parodic. The classical model is spoofed by a bouncy 12/8 beat, an incongruous introduction and the finishing touch: as the song ends, we hear candid laughter in the recording studio. If Blackmore had drawn on Bach for inspiration, Beethoven was merely quoted, with a funny accent. For the major mode of Beethoven’s tune is rarely used in heavy metal, and when it is combined with a similarly inappropriate bouncy rhythm, Blackmore’s distorted guitar and heavy drums end up sounding frivolous and silly. ‘Difficult to Cure’ is a comic anomaly, and it reminds us that heavy metal musicians are in fact very selective in their appropriations of the various styles that are usually lumped together as ‘classical music’, and that fusions signify quite precisely.

In an interview published in 1985, Blackmore was asked about his current musical tastes: ‘I still listen to a great deal of classical music . . . That’s the type of music that moves me because I find it very dramatic. Singers, violinists and organists are generally the musicians I enjoy listening to most of all. I can’t stand guitarists!’ (Gett 1985, p. 68). Twelve years earlier, Blackmore had recommended to the readers of Guitar Player that, above all, they study guitarists. He had complained: ‘Jimmy Page says he listens to piano solos. But I don’t see how that helps, because a pianist can play about ten times the speed of a guitarist’ (Webb 1984, p. 57). In 1973, such technical limitations had been accepted; Blackmore’s change
of heart may reflect the fact that in 1978, guitarist Edward Van Halen redefined virtuosity on the electric guitar.

Edward Van Halen and the new virtuosity

Alex and Edward Van Halen were born in the Netherlands (Alex in 1955, Edward in 1957), but moved with their family to California while still in grade school. Their father was a professional musician (on saxophone and clarinet) whose gigging included live radio shows; he was ‘constantly practicing, working and going on the road’, according to Alex (Edrei 1984, p. 27). Jan Van Halen encouraged his sons to become classical musicians, and both boys started piano lessons while very young, dutifully practising Mozart until their interests in guitar and drums prevailed. After a brief period during which Edward played drums, and Alex guitar, they switched instruments and grew increasingly serious about music, playing in a series of bands that culminated in their tremendous success with Van Halen. Throughout his teens, Edward was completely absorbed in the guitar, practising ‘all day, every day. I used to cut school to come home and play, I was so into it’ (Obrecht 1984c, pp. 148–9).

Like most rock guitarists, Van Halen was heavily influenced by the dialogic ‘question-and-answer’ of the blues, which for him was represented mainly by the guitar playing of Eric Clapton. ‘I started out playing blues’, Van Halen recalls:

I can play real good blues – that’s the feeling I was after. But actually I’ve turned it into a much more aggressive thing. Blues is a real tasty, feel type of thing; so I copped that in the beginning. But then when I started to use a wang [vibrato] bar, I still used that feeling, but rowdier, more aggressive, more attack. But still, I end a lot of phrasing with a bluesy feeling. (Obrecht 1984c, p. 155).

But along with the influence of the blues, Van Halen’s classical piano training taught him music theory that would later prove useful, and his continuing exposure to classical repertoires helped him to transform the electric guitar and forge a new virtuosity for it. Even after he became a rock star, Van Halen still played piano and violin, and continued to listen to classical music, especially Bach and Debussy (Obrecht 1984c, p. 159).

Edward Van Halen’s impact on rock guitar playing was enormous. The readership of Guitar Player elected him ‘Best New Talent’ in a 1978 poll, and Van Halen went on to win ‘Best Rock Guitarist’ for an unprecedented five straight years, 1979–83. Yngwie Malmsteen, who himself won ‘Best New Talent’ in 1984 and ‘Best Rock Guitarist’ in 1985, credits Van Halen with revolutionising rock guitar: ‘When I heard the first Van Halen album, I couldn’t believe how great the guitar playing was . . . I mean, he totally changed the whole guitar field’. And even a decade after Van Halen’s debut, Billy Gibbons (of ZZ Top) asserted that ‘If you had a guitar poll, I’d put Edward Van Halen in the first five slots and then the next five slots would start opening up’ (Guitar World, July 1990, pp. 51, 74).

The solo that transformed rock guitar was called, appropriately enough, ‘Eruption’. Released in 1978 on Van Halen’s first album, ‘Eruption’ is one minute and twenty-seven seconds of exuberant and playful virtuosity, a violinist’s precise and showy technique inflected by the vocal rhetoric of the blues and rock ‘n’ roll irreverence. Here and elsewhere, Van Halen’s guitar playing displays an unprecedented fluidity, due to his skilful use of string bending, two-handed tapping and his deft touch on the vibrato (or ‘whammy’) bar.
Van Halen's fluid style and innovative technique depend upon the capabilities of amplification equipment that can produce very high electronic 'gain' and indefinite sustain. The electrification of the guitar, begun in the 1920s, and subsequent developments in equipment and playing techniques, particularly the production of sophisticated distortion circuitry in the 1970s, helped make it possible for Baroque music to be newly relevant to guitar players. The electric guitar acquired the capabilities of the premier virtuosic instruments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the power and speed of the organ, the flexibility and nuance of the violin. Technological increases in sustain and volume made possible the conceptual and technical shifts that led players to explore Baroque models. Of course, the attraction of guitar players to those models helped spur particular technological developments, as when puzzled engineers reluctantly produced distortion-inducing devices for the first time in the late mid 1960s, in response to guitarists' demands. Van Halen himself helped develop the sounds upon which his techniques depend, experimenting with a Variac voltage control (risking electrocution and blown-up amplifiers) that made his amps sound 'hotter'. Van Halen also built some of his guitars himself, and this knowledge of guitar construction and modification affected his performing, just as his musical imagination drove the technological experiments.

An initial power chord establishes A as the tonal point of departure for 'Eruption' (see Example 3). Van Halen moves the first section from blues-based pentatonic licks in A, through a couple of flashy patterns of less clear provenance to collapse finally back to a low A, which he 'wows' with the whammy bar. The opening sounds startlingly effortless, the easy flow of hammer-ons and pull-offs (articulation with the fretting fingers alone, without picking) interrupted by a few confident pauses and precisely picked harmonics. Three power chords introduce the next phrase, ostensibly moving the tonal centre to D, although what follows is still mostly based in the A blues mode. Van Halen quickly moves through some Chuck Berry-inspired bends to an exuberant series of bends and wows in a swung rhythm. This section moves directly into a quotation of the best-known cliché of violin pedagogy, an etude by Rodolphe Kreutzer (see Examples 4 and 5). Rather than simply playing it straight, though, Van Halen picks each note three or four times in a tremolo style. He is toying with this primer of classical technique, and after two repetitions he spins down and out of it in the same style, pointedly introducing an F natural – which transforms the mode from Kreutzer's major to a darker Phrygian – on his way to the midway resting point of 'Eruption'.

After a second's silence, the piece is reattacked with a flurry of fast picking and hammering. First centred on A, then on E, Van Halen plays a phrase that is rhythmically very complex but rhetorically clear, the accented interruptions of a line of repeated notes suggesting both resolution and mobility. Each time this motive is played, a disorienting scramble with harmonically remote pitches (deftly played by pulling off to open strings) ends up on a trill of the fifth scale degree, which conventionally requires resolution, thus setting up the repeat. A series of fast trills follows a recapitulation of the entrance on A, leading into the most celebrated section of this solo, the lengthy tapping section in which it culminates.

The audacious virtuosity of the entire solo was certainly impressive enough, but it was the tapping that astonished guitarists and fans. Reaching over to strike against the frets with his right hand, Van Halen hammers and pulls with his left, relying on the enhanced gain of his amplifier to sustain a stream of notes. Although
Example 3, continued:
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*Tap open low E at 12 fr. producing 5 harmonic.

Fade out

Feedback from harm.
Robert Walser

Example 4. Rodolphe Kreutzer, ‘Caprice Study #2’ for violin, mm, 1-2.


a few other guitarists had used tapping to a limited extent, nothing like this had ever been heard before, and ‘Eruption’ spurred guitarists and historians to hyperbole: ‘Edward Van Halen practically reinvented the art of electric guitar with his incendiary “Eruption” solo’ (Marshall 1988, p. 102). Rock guitarists hailed tapping as not merely a fad or gimmick, but a genuine expansion of the instrument’s capabilities, the most important technical innovation since Jimi Hendrix. Their enthusiasm for the potentials of the tapping technique increased throughout the 1980s; since 1988 Guitar for the Practicing Musician has published a monthly column by Jennifer Batten, ‘On Tap’, solely devoted to exploring this technique.15 Edward Van Halen’s development of two-handed techniques for the guitar might be compared to J. S. Bach’s innovations in keyboard fingering. C. P. E. Bach recalled of his father: ‘He had devised for himself so convenient a system of fingering that it was not hard for him to conquer the greatest difficulties with the most flowing facility. Before him, the most famous clavier players in Germany and other lands had used the thumb but little’.16 Tapping similarly enabled Van Halen and the players who came after to conquer great difficulties, and it particularly encouraged a ‘flowing facility’.

The final section of ‘Eruption’ is wholly tapped. Here the pitches are formed into arpeggios outlining triads. Van Halen’s rhythmic torrent of sextuplets energises a relatively slow rate of harmonic change, a strategy anticipated by Vivaldi (see Example 6; compare Example 3). In ‘Eruption’, C# minor is changed to A major by moving one finger up one fret; a diminished triad then pushes through B major to land on E, which is made to feel like a point of arrival. This sense is quickly dispersed, though, when a subtle adjustment transforms the chord to C major. With the help of a couple of passing tones, C moves through D back up to E, in the familiar heavy metal progression of bVI-bVII-I. Chromatic slides confirm E, but then sink to establish D and then C in the same way. An abrupt move to B confirms E minor as the new tonic, and increasingly frantic alternation between them (reminiscent of Beethoven’s use of similar patterns to increase tension before
a final cadence; see the end of his Ninth Symphony) leads to a noisy breakdown on E.

Tapping directs musical interest toward harmony, the succession of chords through time. It produces an utterly regular rhythmic pattern to articulate the motion, just as in, for example, J. S. Bach’s famous ‘Prelude in C major’, from the Well Tempered Clavier (see Example 7). As in Bach’s prelude, and so much of Vivaldi’s music, the harmonic progressions of ‘Eruption’ lead the listener along an aural adventure. Van Halen continually sets up implied harmonic goals, and then achieves, modifies, extends or subverts them. At the end of the solo, he increases the harmonic tension to the breaking point with frenetic alternation of tonic and dominant. Finally, he abandons purposeful motion; the piece undergoes a meltdown. It comes to rest finally on the tonic, but echo effects, ringing harmonics and a gradual fade make this an ambiguous closure. Engaging the listener with the social conventions of tonal progress, and then wilfully manipulating his audience’s expectations, Van Halen reiterates Vivaldi’s celebration of individuality; such rhetorical power is the prerogative of the virtuoso.

Though it certainly exists elsewhere, this kind of individual virtuosity is a conceptual model of musical excellence derived from classical music-making. The word ‘virtuoso’ is derived from the Italian ‘virtù’, an important term in the
hierarchical courts of northern Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Virtù designated a type of individual excellence; as used by Machiavelli, it can denote ‘talented will’, ingenuity, skill, efficacy, strength, power or virtue. As applied to art, it reflected the relationship of art to power, as larger-than-life images and performances celebrated the wealth and power of an elite. Though it existed earlier in European music, virtuosity came to be especially celebrated in the Renaissance; by the middle of the sixteenth century, a well-developed virtuosic solo repertoire existed, particularly for lutenists. Francesco da Milano, on the lute, and the ‘three ladies of Ferrara’, as vocalists, are reported to have astonished and transported listeners with their extraordinary technique and the expressiveness it enabled. Virtuosity attained broader social relevance in the nineteenth century, along with the popularity of public concerts for middle-class audiences. Franz Liszt invented the solo recital in 1839, and the piano – ‘newly reinforced by metal parts; newly responsive to every impulse of hand, foot, and brain – became music’s central vehicle for heroic individualism’ (Horowitz 1990, p. 61).

Virtuosity – ultimately derived from the Latin root vir (man) – has always been concerned with demonstrating and enacting a particular kind of power and freedom that might be called ‘potency’. Both words carry gendered meanings, of course; heavy metal shares with most other Western music a patriarchal context wherein power itself is construed as essentially male. At least until the mid-1980s, heavy metal was made almost exclusively by male musicians for male fans, and ‘Eruption’ could be regarded as a metaphorical ejaculation – a demonstration of physical and rhetorical potency. But it can also signify a more general sort of social capability. It is for this reason that some women are able to identify with even the most macho culture (Judas Priest, Beethoven), mapping its experiences of transcendence and empowerment onto their own social positions and needs. Like all musical techniques, virtuosity functions socially. Some might find virtuosity inherently distancing or elitist, since it is a sensational display of exceptional individual power. But for many others, virtuosi are the most effective articulators of a variety of social fantasies and musical pleasures.

Classical music certainly does not provide the only model for virtuosity, but the prestige of that repertoire has made its particular model very influential. Like the great blues guitarists, the classical virtuoso not only possesses unusual technical facility, but through music is able to command extraordinary, almost supernatural rhetorical powers. Robert Schumann reported this of a performance by Liszt:

The demon began to flex his muscles. He first played along with them, as if to feel them out, and then gave them a taste of something more substantial until, with his magic, he had ensnared each and every one and could move them this way or that as he chose. It is unlikely that any other artist, excepting only Paganini, has the power to lift, carry and deposit an audience in such high degree . . . In listening to Liszt are we overwhelmed by an onslaught of sounds and sensations. In a matter of seconds we have been exposed to tenderness, daring, fragrance and madness . . . It simply has to be heard – and seen. If Liszt were to play behind the scenes a considerable portion of the poetry would be lost.

Schumann’s account points to the importance of spectacle in virtuosic music, and to the mystery that surrounds virtuosic performers. Compare Jay Jay French’s account of his experiences performing with the heavy metal band Twisted Sister:

You walk on stage some nights and you feel more muscular, you just all of a sudden feel like the power is pouring out of you, the tune is just ripping itself through your body, out of the speakers, out of the PA, blowing people away, and you haven’t even broken a sweat yet.
The night's just beginning and they're already going crazy, and you're just cruisin' in first gear. Then you move it up a notch . . . And you lay it out, and then put it into third, and then it's one of those nights, and the audience goes even crazier, and you're just blowing away, and you're just lookin' at yourself and you go 'Gee, I am God!' And then you kick it into fourth, and the whole night's amazing. (Pollock 1989, p. 12)

The first truly virtuosic hard rock guitarist was Jimi Hendrix. Pete Townshend of The Who is usually credited with being the first to exploit power chords and feedback for musical purposes, but it was Hendrix more than anyone else who made these techniques – along with whammy bar dives, pick slides and a bag of other tricks – part of a virtuoso's vocabulary of extravagance and transgression. As Billy Gibbons, ZZ Top's guitarist, put it, Hendrix 'took the guitar into Martianland' (Guitar World, July 1990, p. 74). Virtuosity can signify in many different ways, though. Charles Shaar Murray writes of Jimi Hendrix's famous version of the 'Star Spangled Banner':

Hendrix's 'out' playing was not necessarily always an expression of pain, rage or grief: the brief exercise in pure crash-and-burn pyrotechnica with which he opened up 'Wild Thing' at the climax of his Monterey Pop Festival US début was Hendrix playing in the most literal sense of the word. It was playful, mischievous, exuberant, euphoric, extrovert; an ex-underdog's high-spirited slapstick display of hey-look-what-I-can-do. But as the mood of the times darkened, so did Hendrix's music; when he moved into his trick-bag, it was increasingly to express that which simply could not be communicated in any other way. (Murray 1989, p. 194)

Murray's explication of Hendrix is illuminating; it highlights the fact that virtuosity can have many different sorts of social meanings. But throughout his book, Murray persistently indulges in a sort of gratuitous and unsupported bashing of heavy metal that is fashionable among rock critics: 'Eddie Van Halen, by far the most influential hard and heavy guitarist of the eighties, has borrowed the Hendrix vocabulary - tremolo tricks and all - in order to say very little' (Murray 1989, p. 216). What Van Halen 'said' had much in common with the exuberance and struggle of Hendrix's playing; but he became the most influential player of his generation by achieving a particular kind of rational control over all of these risky, noisy techniques. The oral virtuosity of the blues, nuanced and dialogic, had become in Hendrix a psychedelic wail of transgression and transcendence. With Van Halen, this virtuosity is differently managed; his precision and consistency became new benchmarks for a rock guitar virtuosity more closely tied to classical ideals. For (as I will discuss below) metal guitarists absorbed not only licks and harmonic progressions, but ways of making and valuing music derived from classical music.

Many heavy metal musicians link themselves with the classical model of virtuosity quite explicitly. Wolf Marshall, in an excellent article on 'The Classical Influence' in the leading professional guitarists' magazine (Guitar for the Practicing Musician), compares today's metal guitarists to Liszt and Paganini, in their virtuosity, bravura manner, mystique, attractiveness for women, and experimentation with flashy, crowd-pleasing tricks (Marshall 1988). These parallels seem very apt when we recall that women swooned and threw flowers to Liszt during his performances, that fans followed Frescobaldi's tours through Italy, congregating in crowds as large as 30,000 for the chance to hear him sing or improvise toccatas on the organ. The contemporary description of Franz Liszt with which I began could just as well refer to Ritchie Blackmore or Eddie Van Halen ('the strange wonder . . .
the pale slender youth in his clothes that signal the nonconformist; the long, sleek, drooping hair . . . undreamt-of virtuosity and technical brilliance . . .').

As I have suggested, the classical influence on heavy metal appears in part due to the influence of many guitarists' early training. Moreover, this concept of virtuosity is easy to reinvent in a culture which glorifies competitive individualism in so many other ways. But beginning in the early 1980s, metal musicians turned increasingly to direct study and emulation of modern and historical classical performers. Not only the musical discourse of metal, but its conceptions of musicianship and pedagogy were transformed by increasingly vigorous pursuit of classical models. One of the leading players of this moment, hero to thousands of budding metal neo-classicists, was Randy Rhoads.

**Randy Rhoads: metal gets serious**

Like Edward Van Halen, Randy Rhoads grew up in a musical household. The son of two music teachers, Rhoads was born in 1956, in Santa Monica, CA. He enrolled as a student at his mother’s music school at age six, studying guitar, piano and music theory, and a few years later he began classical guitar lessons, which he would continue throughout his career. In the late 1970s, Rhoads built a regional reputation playing with Quiet Riot, but his big break came in 1980, when he landed the guitar chair in a new band fronted by ex-Black Sabbath vocalist Ozzy Osbourne, perhaps the single most durable and successful performer in heavy metal. During his brief tenure with Osbourne’s band (ending with his death at age twenty-five in a plane crash), Rhoads became famous as the first guitar player of the 1980s to expand the classical influence, further adapting and integrating a harmonic and melodic vocabulary derived from classical music.

Among his early musical influences, Rhoads cited the dark moods and drama of Alice Cooper, Ritchie Blackmore’s fusion of rock and classical music, Van Halen’s tapping technique and his favourite classical composers, Vivaldi and Pachelbel (see Marshall 1985, p. 57). His musical experiences were unusual in their close focus on hard rock and classical music because Rhoads supported himself, until he joined Osbourne, by teaching rather than playing. Unlike many guitar players, he was not out hustling gigs indiscriminately in order to pay the rent; instead of playing blues, disco, R&B, country or any of the multitude of styles with which most working musicians must cope, Rhoads concentrated on his chosen interests and learned by teaching:

The way I started to get a style was by teaching ... I taught eight hours a day, six days a week, every half hour a different student. I had little kids, teenagers, and even some older people ... When you sit there and play all day long, you’re going to develop a lot of speed ... . I started combining what they wanted to learn with a bit of technique. Every day with every student I’d learn something. (Obrecht 1984b, p. 174)

Rhoads had a life-long attraction to the technical challenges, the theoretical rigour, and the dramatic syntax of classical music. According to his friend and collaborator Ozzy Osbourne:

Randy’s heart was in the classics, to be honest; he wanted to be a classical guitar player. In fact, with the first record royalties he received, he went out and bought himself a very, very expensive classical guitar. He sat there for days and nights working on his music theories ... On days off I’d get in the bar. He wouldn’t: he’d practice all day, every day. (Obrecht 1984b, p. 182)
The classical influence is pervasive in the music Rhoads recorded with Osbourne. Rhoads adapted the harmonic progression of the famous Pachelbel canon for ‘Goodbye to Romance’ (on Blizzard of Ozz, 1981) and many songs rely on the gothic overtones evoked by much Baroque music in the twentieth century. The best example of this, J. S. Bach’s Toccata in D minor for organ (1705), has been recycled in movies, television and advertising as a highly effective aural signifier of mystery, doom and gloom. A bit of this toccata was used to introduce Bon Jovi’s tremendously successful Slippery When Wet album (1987); the power and sustain of the organ are matched only by the electric guitar, and Bach’s virtuosic style and rhetorical flair is perfectly suited to heavy metal. On Bon Jovi’s recording, distorted guitar and sampled pipe organ are melded together, with reverberation added to evoke the aural space of a cathedral and impute similar mystery and weight to the album which follows. Baroque music is most often employed to these ends by metal musicians, but Osbourne also used the artificial archaism of Carl Orff’s Carmina Burana to open the show on his 1986 concert tour.

Rhoads and Osbourne’s ‘Mr. Crowley’ (1981) also begins with synthesised organ, playing a cyclical harmonic progression modelled on Vivaldi. The minor mode, the ominous organ and the fateful cyclicism, culminating in a suspension, set up an affect of mystery and doom. The sung verses and first guitar solo of ‘Mr. Crowley’ are supported by a metal-inflected Baroque harmonic progression: Dm | B♭ | C | Dm | B♭ | Em7b5 | A sus4 | A. The move from B♭ back up through C (bVI-bVII-I) is uncharacteristic of Baroque music (where bVI usually resolves to V), but it frequently occurs in metal, where it normally functions in an aggressive and dark Aeolian mood. The progression that underpins Rhoads’ ‘outro’ (the opposite of ‘intro’) solo at the end of the song is similar, but it is a more straightforward Vivaldian circle of fifths progression: Dm | Gm7 | C | F | B♭ | Em7b5 | A sus4 | A. Until classically-influenced heavy metal, such cyclical progressions were very unusual in rock and soul music, which had been fundamentally blues-based. The classical influence contributed to a greater reliance on the power of harmonic progression to organise desire and narrative, as well as the turn towards virtuosic soloing. The circle of fifths progression was picked up by metal because it sounds archaic, directional and thus fateful. Rhoads’ first solo in ‘Mr. Crowley’ is a frantic scramble against the inevitability of the harmonic pattern. The second rides the wave of harmonic teleology with more virtuosic aplomb (see Example 8); Rhoads uses arpeggios, tremolo picking, trills and fast scales to keep up with the drive of the progression.

Rhoads displays similar technical devices on a live recording of ‘Suicide Solution’ (released in 1987), during the course of a lengthy virtuosic cadenza. The crowd’s reactions are clearly audible as counterpoint to Rhoads’ phrases, confirming that the purpose of virtuosic technique is to facilitate fantastic rhetoric; the virtuoso strives to manipulate the audience by means of skilful deployment of shared musical codes of signification. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, music was theorised in these terms very openly, in treatises on the Affektenlehre, before the rise of aesthetics led to circumlocutions and mystifications of music’s power. Moreover, contemporary accounts show that until late in the nineteenth century, the behaviour of concert audiences was far from today’s ‘classical’ norms of silence and passivity. Musical audiences were ‘tamed’ around the turn of this century, as part of the cultural segregation of private emotions and public behaviour so well analysed by Lawrence W. Levine. Until the twentieth

Ending Guitar Solo "Outro"

Rhy. Fig. 2

Gm7

C

F

Bb

Em7b5

Asus4

A

Root note only

Repeat Rhy. Fig. 2
Example 8, continued:
century, it seems that large audiences for opera and public concerts behaved very much like today’s audiences for heavy metal and other popular music. Listeners reacted to musical rhetoric with ‘spontaneous expressions of pleasure and disapproval in the form of cheers, yells, gesticulations, hisses, boos, stamping of feet, whistling, crying for encores, and applause’ (Levine 1988, p. 192).

In the studio recording of ‘Suicide Solution’, which appeared on Blizzard of Ozz (1981), there is no guitar solo at all, an unusual departure from the formal norms of heavy metal, but an appropriate one, given the song’s musical delineation of powerlessness. But in concert, Osbourne used the song as an opportunity for Rhoads to display his prowess as a soloist. Where the song would normally end, it is suspended inconclusively instead, and Rhoads begins a virtuosic cadenza made up of carefully paced statements and flourishes, divided by charged gaps which seem to demand replies from the audience (see Example 9). Rhoads uses speedy patterns and fast runs to build excitement, and he manages the rhythmic impulses of his lines so as to create and then suspend metric expectations. Tried and true harmonic devices, such as diminished arpeggios and chromatic ‘meltdowns’, are borrowed from classical musical semiotics in order to manipulate desire, by suggesting, deflecting, achieving or making ambiguous a variety of tonal goals.

Rhetorically, Rhoads’ cadenza follows Baroque models. Susan McClary has written about the narrative organisation of desire in J. S. Bach’s extraordinary harpsichord cadenza for the first movement of his Brandenburg Concerto No. 5. McClary contrasts the manipulative strategies of this unusually lengthy solo with the pressure of generic norms towards closure (see Example 10).

Most cadenzas at the time would have been a very few measures long – a slightly elaborate prolongation and preparation before capitulation to the ritornello and the final resolution . . . Thus in order to maintain necessary energy the harpsichord part must resort to increasingly deviant strategies – chromatic inflections, faster and faster note values – resulting in what sounds like a willful, flamboyant seventeenth-century toccata: in its opposition to the ensemble’s order, it unleashes elements of chaos, irrationality, and noise until finally it blurs almost entirely the sense of key, meter, and form upon which eighteenth-century style depends. (McClary 1987, pp. 32-6)

Like Bach’s cadenza, Rhoads’ invokes the toccata, a virtuoso solo instrumental genre of the late sixteenth through mid-eighteenth centuries, mainly performed on fretted and keyboard instruments (guitar, lute, organ, harpsichord). Heavy metal guitarists rely on precisely those musical tactics that characterised the toccata: ‘quasi-improvisatory disjunct harmonies, sweeping scales, broken-chord figuration, and roulades that often range over the entire instrument . . . [N]othing is more inappropriate than order and constraint’ (Randel 1986, p. 859).

The formal plan of Rhoads’ cadenza is similar, in some respects, to that of Bach’s. In both, an impressive array of virtuosic figuration is explored, until a disorienting harmonic meltdown leads to a long drive towards cadence. In Rhoads’ solo, the harmonic confusion precedes a lengthy tapped section, which itself melts down. Initially, the tapped arpeggios circumscribe, with only some ambiguity, the closely related harmonic areas of E minor and A minor. But a succession of more distant chords – G | Am | F | F aug | A | C#m – leads to a complete breakdown, embellished by whammy bar wows and a wailing high harmonic. After pausing to let the audience voice its approval of his transgressions, Rhoads begins again with a fast picked figure which he slides chromatically up the neck with increasing
Example 9, continued:

*Flick pickup switch in specified rhythm.*
Example 9, continued:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(E)} & \\
\text{(Am)} & \\
\text{(E)} & \\
\text{(Am)} & \\
\end{align*}
\]
Example 9, continued:

(Em) (B7) (Em) (B)


12 8 0 12 80 2 8-O I 8O 0 7-0 10oTb 0 7 0 10 7' 80T 0 o 6 0 8 S 0

(Em) (E)

g

I

H

J--^

UP^jj

P H P

rH

tr

0

T i

-r

r r

o

r

rr^r

I

T P P H T P P H T P P H TP P H TP H P H TPH P H

12 7 4 7 12 7 4 7 12 8 5 12 8 5 6 1 2 8 S 6 12 5 77 17 9 12 9 12 179 12 0 12

(Am) (G)

PH P PH PP HPH HP H P H P jP JLPH

50 4^7 12 7 4 "7 2 7 4 7

(Am) (F) (F+) (A) (C m)

PH P H PH P H H P PH


20 15 12 15 20 12 5 12 "S'2 3 7 1 '17 213 7 1317 1 18 O 1 22 18 I i 22 17 14 17 21 17 14 17

N.C.

Harm -')-PP

H

P

N

.C. Va H-- (8a) V

f^s^^a

X~Ira

f trem. bar (slow dive)

T P H T P P H Harm. 2 I 4 H

21 17 14 17 21 17 14 (l7) -

N C.

N C.

N.C.

N.C.
Example 9, continued:

frenzy. This sequence winds up with another high wail, and some low growls; at this point, he allows the framing ‘ritornello’ to return, and the band joins in a short reprise of ‘Suicide Solution’.21

Not only the classical allusions in his playing, but also Rhoads’ study of music theory influenced many guitarists in the early 1980s. Throughout the decade, years after his death, Rhoads’ picture appeared on the covers of guitar magazines, advertising articles that discussed his practising and teaching methods and analysed his music. The inner sleeve of the Tribute album (1987) reproduces a few pages from Rhoads’ personal guitar notebook. One sheet is titled ‘Key of C#’; on it, for each of the seven modes (Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, etc.) based on C#, Rhoads wrote out the diatonic chords for each scale degree, followed by secondary and substitute seventh chords.22 On another page, he composed exercises based on arpeggiated seventh and ninth chords. Rhoads’ interest in music theory was symptomatic of the increasing classical influence on heavy metal, but his success also helped promote classical study among metal guitarists. Winner of Guitar Player’s ‘Best New Talent’ award in 1981, Rhoads brought to heavy metal guitar a new level of discipline and consistency, derived from classical models. Besides his classical allusions, and his methods of study and teaching, Rhoads’ skill at double-tracking solos (recording them exactly the same way more than once, so that they could be layered on the record to add a sense of depth and space) was extremely influential on subsequent production techniques (see Marshall 1986a, p. 51). Rhoads’ accomplishments also contributed to the growing tendency among guitarists to regard their virtuosic solos in terms of a division of labour long accepted in classical music, as opportunities for thoughtful composition and skilful execution rather than spontaneous improvisation.

The model of classically-influenced players such as Van Halen and Rhoads contributed to a shift among guitar players towards a new kind of professionalism, with theory, analysis, pedagogy and technical rigour acquiring new importance. Guitar for the Practicing Musician, now the most widely read guitarists’ magazine, began publication in 1983, attracting readers with transcriptions and analyses of guitar-based popular music. Its professional guitarist-transcribers developed a sophisticated set of special notations for representing the nuances of performance, rather like the elaborate ornament tables of Baroque music (see Example 11). Their transcriptions are usually accompanied by analysis, both modal – e.g., ‘The next section alternates between the modalities of Eb Lydian and F Mixolydian . . .’ – and stylistic, relating new pieces to the history of discursive options available to guitar players.

Other guitar magazines increased their coverage of metal in time with the early 1980s metal boom, not only in order to keep up with musical trends, but also because many of their readers valued technique, and heavy metal was the main site of technical innovation and expansion.23 The magazines became increasingly informed by academic music theory, with columns on modes, harmony and chord substitution, and analyses of classical music. The first instalment of a new column called ‘Guitar in the 80s’ was titled ‘The Bach Influence’.24 Guitar’s columnist discussed two excerpts from J. S. Bach’s music for unaccompanied violin, transcribed them into guitar tablature, and suggested playing techniques. The article argued that the point of studying such music is to rise to its technical challenge, to learn from examples of clear voice-leading, and to understand its relevance to the music of Malmsteen and other metal guitarists.
Definitions for Special Guitar Notation (For both traditional and tablature guitar lines)

1.

BEND: Strike the note and bend up ½ step (one fret).

2.

F.9
F.
BEND: Strike the note and bend up a whole step (two frets).

3.

LEGATO BEND AND RELEASE: Strike the note and then release the bend back to the original note. All three notes are tied, only the first note is struck.

4.

SLIDE: The first note is struck and then the same finger of the fret hand moves up the string to the location of the second note. The second note is not struck.

5.

SLIDE: Same as above, except the second note is struck.

6.

SLIDE: Slide up to the note indicated from a few frets below.

7.

SLIDE: Strike the note and slide up an indefinite number of frets, releasing finger pressure at the end of the slide.

8.

PICK SLIDE: The edge of the pick is rubbed down the length of the string. A scratchy sound is produced.

9.

HAMMER-ON: Strike the first (lower) note, then sound the higher note with another finger by tapping it without picking.

10.

PULL-OFF: Both fingers are initially placed on the notes to be sounded. Strike the first (higher) note, then sound the lower note by pulling the finger off the higher note while keeping the lower note fretted.

11.

FRETBOARD TAPPING: Hammer ("tap") onto the fretboard with the index or middle finger of the pick hand and pull off to the note fretted by the fret hand. (T" indicates "tapped" notes).

12.

SHAKE OR EXAGGERATED VIBRATO: The pitch is varied to a greater degree by vibrating with the fret hand or tremolo bar.

13.

VIBRATO: The string is vibrated by rapidly bending and releasing a note with the fret hand or tremolo bar.

14.

TREMOLO BAR: The pitch of a note or chord is dropped a specified number of steps, then returned to the original pitch.

15.

Palm Mute (PM): The note is partially muted by the pick hand lightly touching the stringnow before the bridge.

16.

MUFFLED STRINGS: A percussive sound is produced by laying the fret hand across the strings without depressing them to the fretboard and striking them with the pick hand.
Institutional support for such technical study grew as well. Classical guitar teachers had begun to appear on college faculties around the time heavy metal emerged as a genre in the early 1970s. The classical influence owed something to the fact that virtually all of these teachers had started by playing some kind of popular music, turning later to the budding field of classical guitar, which had been almost single-handedly chartered by Andrés Segovia. Other institutions flourished outside the ivory tower, offering their students a much broader professional training. Some of the best-known schools for guitarists have been around since the 1960s, such as the Musicians’ Institute in Los Angeles, which incorporates the Guitar Institute of Technology. The recordings of Van Halen and Rhoads, among others, signalled a rise in the technical standards of rock guitar playing that prompted many new players to seek out organised musical study. Music Tech in Minneapolis, founded in 1985, was by 1990 a fully accredited music school with a faculty of thirty and a full-time student body of 195. Their professional programmes in guitar, bass, drums, keyboard and recording engineering include required courses in music theory, history, composition, performance practice and improvisation in a variety of popular styles. Moreover, all rock guitarists are required to study classical guitar. The success of schools such as GIT and Music Tech demonstrates the incomplete hegemony of classically-oriented music schools; since colleges and university music departments have been very slow to broaden their focus to include the musics that matter most in contemporary culture, popular musicians have built their own institutions.

The fluidity of musical discourses enables guitarists to draw upon many influences, and even the guitar magazines cater simultaneously to very different groups of guitarists, contributing to the interchange of styles. Of Def Leppard’s guitarists, for example, Steve Clark was classically trained; Clark’s father had given him a guitar on the condition he take lessons, so he learned Bach and Vivaldi along with Led Zeppelin and Thin Lizzy. Phil Collen, on the other hand, studied mostly jazz; Collen says that both influences show up in Def Leppard’s music. Dave Mustaine of Megadeth claims as influences the Supremes, Marvin Gaye and Pink Floyd. Dan Spitz of Anthrax took lessons in jazz while he privately studied the recordings of Iron Maiden, Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, Jimi Hendrix – and, lately, rap music. Guitarist Vinnie Vincent was impressed by the speed of classical violinists and attempted to imitate their technical facility with scales and arpeggios, but he also integrated the steel-guitar style he heard his father using in country music.

Guitarists do vary greatly in the degree to which they have adopted the classical model of rigorous practice and theoretical study. Danny Spitz of Anthrax practises guitar five hours each day, more than most classical musicians. Izzy Stradlin’ of Guns N’ Roses doesn’t really practise in the same sense at all; having no technical or theoretical knowledge of music, he ‘screws around’, playing with sounds. Eddie Van Halen seldom practises guitar in any formal way, preferring instead to ‘play when I feel like it . . . Sometimes I play it for a minute, sometimes half an hour, and sometimes all day . . . But I am always thinking music. Some people think I’m spacing off, but really I’m not. I am always thinking of riffs and melodies’. One of the most highly respected heavy metal guitarists of the late 1980s, George Lynch, learned to play entirely without reading music or studying music theory:
What I mean when I refer to myself as being non-technical is that I don’t know what I’m doing. It’s all up here [points to head]. To be completely honest, I don’t even know a major scale. I don’t know what one is, if you can believe that. But somehow I get away with it. And sometimes I think I’m afraid to learn because I might spoil a good thing. (Resnicoff 1990b, p. 92)

Lynch is an extraordinary musician, with impeccable technique and awesome rhetorical skills. He certainly does know what he is doing, even if he lacks a technical vocabulary for describing it. Yet he feels keenly the contemporary pressure to theorise, and his fame makes him turn to the new crop of mass mediated private study aids to help him redress this lack: ‘It’s hard to be in the position I’m in and to walk somewhere to get a guitar lesson, so I learn from tapes – home study courses, video tapes . . . I don’t know if I should be admitting any of this’ (Resnicoff 1990b, p. 92).

Such confessions point to the coexistence in heavy metal of completely different ways of understanding musicality and musical creation. But the classical model, stressing rationalisation and technical rigour, was ascendant throughout the 1980s. The most influential metal guitarist after Van Halen clarified the issues, both expanding the classical influence and convincing many that the trend toward systematisation did not represent unambiguous progress.

Yngwie Malmsteen: metal augmented and diminished

Swedish guitar virtuoso Yngwie J. Malmsteen continued many of the trends explored by Blackmore, Van Halen and Rhoads, and took some of them to unprecedented, and perhaps unsurpassable, extremes. Born in 1963, Malmsteen was exposed to classical music since he was five years old. But he says, ‘I played the blues before I played anything’ (Lalaina 1989, p. 125). In fact, he relates a pair of musical epiphanies that, taken together, started him on the path to becoming the most influential rock guitarist since Van Halen.

Malmsteen’s mother gave him a guitar on his fifth birthday, but he expressed little interest in it at first. She wanted him to be a musician, and made sure he received piano lessons, ballet lessons, vocal lessons, flute lessons, trumpet lessons – all in vain. None of it interested him, and he claims to have hated music until: ‘On the 18th of September, 1970, I saw a show on television with Jimi Hendrix, and I said, “Wow!” I took the guitar off the wall, and I haven’t stopped since’ (Resnicoff 1990a, p. 76). Malmsteen’s first fruitful encounter with classical music – his exposure to the music of Paganini, the nineteenth-century violin virtuoso – also took place through the mediation of television:

I first heard his music when I was 13 years old. I saw a Russian violinist playing some Paganini stuff on TV, and freaked . . . Paganini’s intensity blew my socks off. He was so clean, dramatic and fast; his vibrato, broken chords and arpeggios were amazing. That’s how I wanted to play guitar . . . (Lalaina 1989, p. 15)

Upon the release of his U.S. debut album in 1984, which won him Guitar Player’s ‘Best New Talent’ award that year, and ‘Best Rock Guitarist’ in 1985, Malmsteen quickly gained a reputation as the foremost of metal’s neo-classicists. Malmsteen adapted classical music with more thoroughness and intensity than any previous guitarist, and he expanded the melodic and harmonic language of metal while setting even higher standards of virtuosic precision:
Robert Walser

With the coronation of King Yngwie, there isn’t one aspiring guitarist who isn’t now familiar with diminished seventh chords, harmonic minor scales and phrygian and lydian modes. His advent has been accepted by guitar teachers as well, because he brought discipline into a world where study used to be considered sacrilegious [sic]. (FabioTesta 1987b, p. 33)

Not only do Malmsteen’s solos recreate the rhetoric of his virtuosic heroes, Bach and Paganini, but he introduced further harmonic resources, advanced techniques such as sweep-picking, and achieved the best impression yet of the nuance and agility of a virtuoso violinist (see his solo on ‘Black Star’, Example 12).

Moreover, Malmsteen embraced the premises of classical music more openly than anyone before. His fetishisation of instrumental technique complemented his move towards ‘absolute’ music. Only two of the songs on his first album have vocals; in the other six, the norms of songwriting are completely subordinated to the imperative of virtuosic display. Melodies are presented by multi-layered guitar tracks, interrupted by multiple guitar solos. Later albums, such as Odyssey (1988), include more vocals, but it seems clear that Malmsteen regards them as a capitulation to the requirements of commercial success. With titles evoking myth (‘Icarus’ Dream Suite’, Odyssey), mysticism (‘Crystal Ball’, ‘Deja Vu’, ‘Evil Eye’, ‘As Above, So Below’), and power (‘Riot in the Dungeon’, ‘Bite the Bullet’, ‘Faster Than the Speed of Light’, ‘Far Beyond the Sun’), Malmsteen signals the reliance of his music on the gothic aura of classical music previously exploited by musicians such as Ritchie Blackmore and Randy Rhoads. But these evocations are fleshed out not by means of lyrics so much as through Malmsteen’s virtuosic rhetoric.

_Guitar for the Practicing Musician_ published a detailed analysis of Malmsteen’s ‘Black Star’, from his first U.S. album, _Yngwie J. Malmsteen’s Rising Force_ (1984). Such analytical pieces are intended as guides to the music of important guitarists, facilitating the study and emulation practised by the magazine’s readers. The following excerpts from Wolf Marshall’s commentary can serve both as a summary of some technical features of Malmsteen’s music, and as a sample of the critical discourse of the writers who theorise and analyse heavy metal in professional guitarists’ magazines:

*Black Star* shows off the many facets of Yngwie’s singular style. Whether he is playing subdued acoustic guitar or blazing pyrotechnics, he is unmistakably Yngwie – the newest and perhaps the most striking proponent of the Teutonic-Slavic Weltschmerz (as in Bach/Beethoven/Brahms Germanic brooding minor modality) School of Heavy Rock ... The opening guitar piece is a classical prelude (as one might expect) to the larger work. It is vaguely reminiscent of Bach’s _Bourree_ in Em, with its 3/4 rhythm and use of secondary dominant chords ... The passage at the close of the guitar’s exposition is similar to the effect ... [of the] spiccato (‘bouncing bow’) classical violin technique. It is the first of many references to classical violin mannerisms ... This is a diminished chord sequence, based on the classical relationship of C diminished: C D# F# A (chord) to B major in a Harmonic minor mode: E F# G A B C D# ... The feeling of this is like some of Paganini’s violin passages ... While these speedy arpeggio flurries are somewhat reminiscent of Blackmore’s frenzied wide raking, they are actually quite measured and exact and require a tremendous amount of hand shifting and stretching as well as precision to accomplish. The concept is more related to virtuoso violin etudes than standard guitar vocabulary ... Notice the use of Harmonic minor (Mixolydian mode) in the B major sections and the Baroque Concerto Grosso (Handel/Bach/Vivaldi) style running bass line counterpoint as well. (Marshall 1990, pp. 26–7)

Marshall’s analysis is quite musicological in tone and content; he deliberately compares Malmsteen’s recorded performance to classical techniques, contextualises it through style analysis, and translates certain features into the technical
Example 12, continued:

*Wide tap finger down 3rd sting to 15 ft. before pull-off.

Solo guitar

*Gtr. I downstemmed, Gtr. II upstemmed in parentheses.
vocabulary of music theory. The style analysis situates ‘Black Star’ with respect to two musical traditions: classical music (Bach, Paganini, Beethoven, etc.) and rock guitar (Blackmore). Marshall simultaneously presents a detailed description of the music and links it to the classical tradition by employing the language of academic music theory: chords, modes, counterpoint, form. As rock guitarists have become increasingly interested in studying the history and theory of classical music, Marshall can safely assume that his audience is able to follow such analysis.29

Moreover, Marshall’s analysis shows that metal guitarists and their pedagogues have not only adopted the trappings of academic discourse about music, but they have also internalised many of the values that underpin that discourse. Even as he carefully contextualises Malmsteen’s music, Marshall insists on its originality and uniqueness (‘Yngwie’s singular style’, ‘unmistakably Yngwie’).30 The commentary emphasises Malmsteen’s precision of execution as well (‘measured and exact’, ‘tremendous . . . precision’). Most tellingly, Marshall implicitly accepts the categories and conceptions of academic music analysis, along with its terms. For apart from the comment about ‘arpeggio flurries’, Marshall deals exclusively with pitch and form, the traditional concerns of musicological analysis. And just as the discipline of musicology has drawn fire from within and without for ignoring or marginalising musical rhythm, timbre, gesture and other possible categories of analysis, metal guitarists’ own theorists and pedagogues could be criticised for the same restricted analytical vision. If they are to become effective musicians, metal guitarists must in fact learn to manoeuvre within musical parameters beyond pitch and form, just as their counterparts within conservatories and music schools must learn much that is not written down. In the academy, such learning is referred to as ‘musicality’, and it is often the focal point of mystification. In both classical music and metal, virtually the same aspects of music are far less theorised, codified and written; music students must learn by listening, emulating and watching the rhythm and gesture of bodily motion. Theorists of metal seem no more able than their academic counterparts to deal with musical rhetoric and social meanings; one analysis of ‘Eruption’ merely named the modes employed (E Phrygian, A and E Aeolian) and summed up Van Halen’s solo with the blandness of a music appreciation text: ‘a well-balanced, thought-out guitar solo, which features a variety of techniques’ (Aledort 1990, p. 6).

Yngwie Malmsteen exemplifies the wholesale importation of classical music into heavy metal, the adoption of not only classical musical style and vocabulary, models of virtuosic rhetoric, and modes of practice, pedagogy and analysis, but also the social values that underpin these activities. These values are a modern mixture of those that accompanied music-making of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, with more recent cultural imperatives. Along with the model of virtuosity I have described above, the reigning values of metal guitar include a valorisation of balance, planning, and originality, a conservatory-style fetishisation of technique, and even a kind of cultural conservatism – Malmsteen bemoans the lack of musicianship in today’s popular music, and looks back on the ‘good old days’ of the seventeenth century, when, he imagines, standards were much higher (Stix 1986, p. 59).31 Malmsteen is particularly noted for his elitism, another value he derives from classical music, and which he justifies by emphasising his connections with its greater prestige. In interviews, he constantly insists on his own genius, his links to the geniuses of the classical past, and his distance from virtually all contemporary popular musicians, whose music he regards as simple,
trite and inept. He denounces the genre he is usually thought to inhabit, insisting ‘I do NOT play heavy metal!’ (Fabio Testa 1987b, p. 35).

While he has been known to claim that, as a genius, he never had to practise, Malmsteen also presents himself as one who has suffered for his art. A joint interview with bassist Billy Sheehan preserves an account of his early devotion to music, and its costs:

Yngwie: I was extremely self-critical. I was possessed. For many years I wouldn’t do anything else but play the guitar.

Billy: I missed a lot of my youth. I missed the whole girl trip. I didn’t start driving until I was 25.

Yngwie: I also sacrificed a lot of the social thing. I didn’t care about my peers. To me, nothing else was even close in importance.32

Such statements undoubtedly reflect the tendency towards self-aggrandisement and self-pity that have made Malmsteen unloved by his peers in the guitar world. But they also further reflect his virtually total acceptance of the model of music-making promulgated in classical music. Malmsteen, along with many other musicians, sees a need for music to evolve towards greater complexity and ‘sophistication’. The pursuit of virtuosic technique usually requires many thousands of hours of patient, private repetition of exercises. To this end, many young players pursue a fanatical practice regime, a pursuit of individual excellence that often leaves little room for communal experiences of music-making, just as is the case in the training of classical musicians.33

Like most classical musicians, rock musicians usually acquire their skills through total dedication during their youth. Jeff Loven, a professional rock guitar player and teacher, explained how he learned to play: ‘I taught myself, actually. I sat in my room when other guys were playing baseball and stuff and I just sat and learned solos and songs, note for note: Hendrix songs, a lot of Van Halen, and then Ozzy came out with Randy Rhoads’ (Interview 9 February, 1989). And one of the guitar magazines recently printed this letter from a young musician:

I am a 16 year old guitarist who’s been playing since I was six years old. I switched from playing country to rock music when I was 10 and decided that one day I would be among the masters. I started pushing myself with eight hours a day, then slowly but steadily it increased. I now usually practice 16 hours daily, all day and sometimes all night. Recently, I was expelled from school due to my continuous absences when I was practicing. I have become a skilled player, but I am losing sleep and my social life is hurting. My philosophy is practice makes perfect, but my friends, my school, and my parents say I have blown my life out of proportion with it. I could cut my practicing down, but with the excellence among today’s players, I fear I will not stay in the game.34

The extreme result of this set of ideological values is the complete withdrawal of the musician from his or her public, in pursuit of complexity and private meanings. This strategy, which had earlier been championed by academic composers such as Milton Babbitt, can now be recognised in some virtuosic guitar players. In a recent cover story for Musician, Steve Vai boasts of his most recent album:

What I did with Passion and Warfare is the ultimate statement: I locked myself into a room and said, ‘To hell with everything – I’m doing this and it’s a complete expression of what I am. I’m not concerned about singles, I’m not concerned about megaplatinum success, I’m not concerned about record companies’. It was a real special time. All too often kids and musicians and artists just have to conform to make a living. I’m one of the lucky few and believe me, I don’t take it for granted. (Resnicoff 1990c, p. 60)

Vai is trying to claim ‘authenticity’ here, trying to prove his autonomy as an artist.
who is free of the corrupting influences of the very social context that makes his artistic statements possible and meaningful. When he goes on to describe his fasting, his visions, his bleeding on the guitar – and his compositional process of painstaking and technologically sophisticated multitrack recording – he presents himself as an updated self-torturing Romantic artist, reaching beyond the known world for inspiration. This individualism and self-centredness unites classical music and heavy metal, and stands in stark contrast to many other kinds of music. A bit later in the same issue of Musician, B. B. King says:

What I’m trying to get over to you is this: . . . when I’m on the stage, I am trying to entertain. I’m not just trying to amuse B. B. King. I’m trying to entertain the people that came to see me . . . I think that’s one of the things that’s kind of kept me out here, trying to keep pleasing the audience. I think that’s one of the mistakes that’s happened in music as a whole: A lot of people forget that they got an audience. (Musician, September 1990, p. 112)

The success of the classical ideologies of complexity, virtuosity and individuality is most obvious in the recent emergence of ‘guitar for guitarists’ metal. Hyper-virtuosic players like Vai, Joe Satriani, Tony MacAlpine, Paul Gilbert, Jason Becker, Greg Howe, The Great Kat and Vinny Moore record their albums on speciality labels (such as Shrapnel Records) that sell mainly to the legions of semi-professional and would-be metal guitarists. Their records tend to follow the template of Malmsteen’s early work: few (if any) vocals, heavy classical influences, virtuosic speed and rhetoric, and song titles evocative of intensity and transgression. Most of these ‘mail-order’ guitarists rarely tour, and little of this music is known outside its devoted circle of fans, although a few players, notably Vai and Satriani, have achieved some amount of popular success. It is a kind of avant-garde, wherein originality, technique and innovation are highly prized. MacAlpine and Moore, for example, draw upon nineteenth- and twentieth-century classical music for their metallic fusions: Chopin, Brahms, Liszt, Messiaen. Few find these fusions convincing – I would argue that these musical discourses are less compatible (rhetorically and ideologically) with metal than the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music that comprises the bulk of the classical influence on heavy metal. But classical music, from any period, provides prestigious materials that can be reworked in a demonstration of musical creativity and sophistication. Paul Gilbert of Racer X (1986), for example, quotes Paganini’s ‘Moto Perpetuo’ literally, and then goes on to outdo it in speed and complexity. Gilbert’s quotation is meant to be recognised, and it suggests a kind of seriousness, of meeting the technical standards of ‘high art’, in contrast to Van Halen’s more irreverent citations.35

Although some of these players have developed a virtuosic technique that is, in some respects, beyond the pioneering achievements of Eddie Van Halen, few are able to deploy their skills with comparable rhetorical success. As Van Halen himself remarked, when prodded to comment on the challenge of his imitators, ‘Maybe they cop the speed because they can’t cop my feel. Maybe they shouldn’t think so much’.36 Yngwie Malmsteen claims to be aware of the dangers of speedy, purposeless patterns – ‘You can do a diminished scale up and down till the fuckin’ cows come home, but the cows won’t come home’ (Resnicoff 1990a, p. 126) – but it is for precisely this that he has drawn critical fire – and yawns. Many metal guitarists and critics understandably feel that if listening to one Malmsteen song is an amazing experience, listening to a whole album gets a bit tiresome, and each new album sounds like the last one, only more so. Malmsteen’s work has convinced some that the classical influence is played out, even as it has been the
leading inspiration for the eager experimentation of the avant-garde. He has helped turn many players to a fruitful engagement with the classical tradition, even as he has helped lead them towards the impoverishing regimes of practice and analysis that now dominate that tradition. And Malmsteen's abrasive elitism contrasts with his attempt to forge links with the musical past and reinvigorate reified discourses for contemporary audiences. His music brings to light contradictions that can add to our understanding of both heavy metal and classical music.

Conclusion: popular music as cultural dialogue

There are different ways to view the encounter of classical music and heavy metal, in part because there are, as I have suggested above, two different 'classical musics': the twentieth-century genre of classical music, which comprises 'great' pieces that are marketed and promoted (in part via 'Music Appreciation') as largely interchangeable; and the collection of disparate historical practices – occupying vastly different social positions, employing incompatible musical discourses to varied cultural ends – that now are called by that name. On the one hand, heavy metal and classical music exist in the same social context: they are subject to similar structures of marketing and mediation, and they 'belong to', and serve the needs of, competing social groups whose power is linked to the prestige of their culture. The immense social and cultural distance that is normally assumed to separate classical music and heavy metal is in fact not a gap of musicality. Since heavy metal and classical music are markers of social difference and enactments of social experience, their intersection affects the complex relations among those who depend on these musics to legitimate their values. Their discursive fusion may well provoke insights about the social interests that are powerfully served by invisible patterns of sound.

On the other hand, there is a sense in which this sort of fusion marks an encounter among different cultures, and affords an opportunity for cross-cultural critique. In their influential book, Anthropology as Cultural Critique, Marcus and Fischer (1986) called for new critical projects which would simultaneously explore multiple cultural moments. Besides the usual 'objective' studies of individual cultural practices, ethnographic work, they argued, can become cultural criticism by reciprocally probing different 'ways of knowing', by encouraging defamiliarisation and the location of alternatives, breaking through patterns of thought that serve to keep meanings singular and stable in the face of multiplicity and flux. Marcus and Fischer were primarily concerned with encounters between Western and non-Western cultures; we can see an example of such comparison within a culture in the work of John Berger (Berger et al. 1972). Through analysis and juxtaposition of the multiple possibilities contained within the same cultural tradition, Berger's Ways of Seeing empowered thousands of scholars, students and critics of culture by giving them a language for discussing the relationships of visual representation to social contestation. But scholars are not the only ones who undertake such critical juxtapositions – heavy metal musicians, by engaging directly with seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century composers and performers, by claiming them as heroes and forebears despite contemporary categories that would keep them separate, have already done something similar; I have tried here to explain the results of their project.

For historians and critics of popular music have so far failed to take seriously
the musical accomplishments of heavy metal musicians. The prevailing stereotype portrays metal guitarists as primitive and noisy; virtuosity, if it is noticed at all, is usually dismissed as ‘pyrotechnics’. One of the standard histories of rock grudgingly admitted that Edward Van Halen was an impressive guitarist, but maintained doggedly that ‘the most popular 1980s heavy metal acts broke little new ground musically’ (Ward et al. 1986, p. 608). In the academy, heavy metal (along with rap) remains the dark ‘Other’ of classical preserves of sweetness and light.

Nor are metal’s musical accomplishments acknowledged in the reports of the general press, where the performances of heavy metal musicians are invariably reduced to spectacle, their musical aspects represented as technically crude and devoid of musical interest. Life’s sensationalising dismissal of Judas Priest is typical: ‘The two lead guitarists do not so much play as attack their instruments’ (Fadiman 1984, p. 106). Given the intensity and aggressiveness of Judas Priest’s music, the characterisation is not unfair; indeed, such a sentence, if printed in Hit Parader or Metal Mania, would be understood as a complimentary metaphor, praising the musicians’ vigour. But in Life the image of attack takes the place of understanding; the magazine plays to class and generational prejudices by mocking the musical skills and imagination of the group.

In fact, heavy metal guitarists, like all other innovative musicians, create new sounds by drawing on the power of the old, and by fusing together their semiotic resources into compelling new combinations. Heavy metal musicians recognise affinities between their work and the tonal sequences of Vivaldi, the melodic imagination of Bach, the virtuosity of Liszt and Paganini. Metal musicians have revitalised eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music for their mass audience in a striking demonstration of the ingenuity of popular culture. Although their audience’s ability to decode such musical referents owes much to the effects of the ongoing appropriations of classical music by TV and movie composers, heavy metal musicians have accomplished their own adaptation of what has become the sombre music of America’s cultural aristocracy, reworking it to speak for a different group’s claims to power and artistry.

In one of his most incisive essays, Theodor Adorno criticised twentieth-century ‘devotees’ of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music for flattening out the specific signification of that music, making composers such as Bach into ‘neutralized cultural monuments’ (Adorno 1981, p. 136). In Adorno’s view, the prestigious position of Bach in contemporary culture seems to demand that his music be tamed, that it be made to affirm the inevitability of present social power relationships, at the top of which are the sources of the subsidies that sustain classical music. Metal musicians have appropriated the more prestigious discourses of classical music and reworked them into noisy articulations of pride, fear, longing, alienation, aggression and community. Their adaptations of classical music, though they might be seen as travesties by modern devotees of that music, are close in spirit to the eclectic fusions of J. S. Bach and other idols of that tradition. While a few musicologists have tried to delineate strategies for performing and interpreting Bach’s music that reclaim its cultural politics (see, for example, McClary 1987), it may be that only heavy metal musicians have achieved this to a significant degree. To alter slightly the closing of Adorno’s essay, ‘Perhaps the traditional Bach can indeed no longer be interpreted. If this is true, his heritage has passed on to [heavy metal] composition, which is loyal to him in being disloyal; it calls his music by name in producing it anew’ (p. 146).
For we should have learned long ago from Adorno that social relations and struggles are enacted within music itself. This is especially visible when musical discourses that belong to one group, whose histories have been told according to that group's interests, are made to serve other social interests. Metal appropriations are rarely parody or pastiche; they are usually a reanimation, a reclamation of signs that can be turned to new uses. Unlike art rock, the point is typically not to refer to a prestigious discourse and thus to bask in reflected glory. Rather, metal musicians adapt classical signs for their own purposes, to signify to their audience, to have real meanings in the present. This is the sort of process to which V. N. Voloshinov referred when he wrote that the sign can become an arena of class struggle. Voloshinov and the rest of the Bakhtin circle were interested in how signs not only reflect the interests of the social groups that use them, but are also 'refracted' when the same signs are used by different groups to different ends. Thus heavy metal musicians and 'legitimate' musicians use Bach in drastically different ways. As Voloshinov wrote:

Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e., with the community which is the totality of users of the same set of signs for ideological communication. Thus various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of the class struggle.

This social *multiaccentuality* of the ideological sign is a very crucial aspect. By and large, it is thanks to this intersecting of accents that a sign maintains its vitality and dynamism and the capacity for further development. A sign that has been withdrawn from the pressures of the social struggle – which, so to speak, crosses beyond the pale of the class struggle – inevitably loses force, degenerating into allegory and becoming the object not of live social intelligibility but of philological comprehension. The historical memory of mankind is full of such worn out ideological signs incapable of serving as arenas for the clash of live social accents. However, inasmuch as they are remembered by the philologist and the historian, they may be said to retain the last glimmers of life. (Voloshinov 1986, p. 23)

The discourse of signs which make up 'Baroque music' certainly survives in the present; since its revival in the middle of the nineteenth century, Bach's music has occupied an important place in the concert and Protestant liturgical repertoires. Moreover, as with all 'serious' music, Baroque signs appear in the music of television and film, where visual clues depend upon and reinvest the music with its affective power. While the music of the pre-canonic Dufay or Philippe de Vitry may have become largely the concern of musical 'philologists', mass mediation has made the musical discourses of all times and places available to today's composer, and the semiotic vocabulary and rhetoric of the European classical canon still forms the backbone of Hollywood's prodigious musical output.

Heavy metal musicians too draw upon the resources of the past that have been made available to them through mass mediation, along with their own historical study. But it is precisely such predations that the musical academy is supposed to prevent. Bach's contemporary meanings are produced in tandem by musicologists and the marketing departments of record companies and symphony orchestras, and the interpretation of Bach they construct has little to do with the dramatic, noisy meanings found by metal musicians and fans, and everything to do with aesthetics, order and cultural hegemony. The classical music world polices contemporary readings of the 'masterworks'; the adaptations of Randy Rhoads and Bon Jovi are ignored, while the acceptability of Stokowski's orchestral transcriptions is debated. Malmsteen's inauthentic performances fall outside the ideological boundaries that manage to contain Maurice André and Glenn Gould, whose per-
formances are arguably more distant from eighteenth-century practices than his. The drive to enforce preferred ideological meanings is, as Bakhtin put it, ‘nondialo-
gic’. It is oppressive, authoritative and absolute.

The very same thing that makes the ideological sign vital and mutable is also, however, that which makes it a refracting and distorting medium. The ruling class strives to impart a supra- class, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgements which occurs in it, to make the sign uniaccentual. (Volosinov 1986, p. 23)

But since the world of language – or music – pre-exists its inhabitants, and since cultural hegemony is never absolute, such appropriations constantly appear on the field of social contestation we call ‘popular culture’ (see Hall 1981). Such disruptions are rarely even acknowledged by academics. In the histories they write and the syllabi they teach, musicologists and critics continue to define ‘music’ implicitly in terms of the European concert tradition, ignoring popular music and treating contemporary academic composers such as Milton Babbitt as the heirs to the canon of great classical ‘masters’. But Babbitt’s claim to inherit the mantle of Bach is perhaps more tenuous than that of Randy Rhoads. The institutional environment within which Babbitt works (and which he has vigorously championed) rewards abstract complexity, regarding listeners and their reactions with indifference or hostility, whereas both Bach and Rhoads composed and performed for particular audiences, gauging their success by their rhetorical effectiveness. Babbitt’s music demonstrates his braininess; Bach’s and Rhoads’ offer powerful, nuanced experiences of transcendence and communality.

Many heavy metal musicians are acutely aware of their complicated relationship to the prestigious music of the classical past. Theorists like Wolf Marshall necessarily refer to that canon in their efforts to account for the musical choices displayed in particular pieces, and other musicians recurrently articulate the similarities they perceive in the values and practices of these two musics, which are usually assumed to be worlds apart. Vocalist Rob Halford earnestly emphasises the discipline and skill needed to succeed in either style:

This might sound like a bizarre statement, but I don’t think playing heavy metal is that far removed from classical music. To do either, you have to spend many years developing your style and your art; whether you’re a violinist or a guitarist, it still takes the same belief in your form of music to achieve and create. It is very much a matter of dedication . . . You get narrow-minded critics reviewing the shows, and all they think about heavy metal is that it is just total ear-splitting, blood-curdling noise without any definition or point. This is a very, very professional style of music. It means a great deal to many millions of people. We treat heavy metal with respect. (Considine 1984, pp. 46, 48)

Metal musicians’ appropriations have already profoundly changed not only their music, but their modes of theorisation, pedagogy and conceptualisation. Their fusions may even come to affect the reception and performance of classical music as well. We should welcome such revitalisation: contrast today’s pious, sterile reiterations of the ‘Pachelbel Canon’ with Vinnie Moore’s furious soloing over that piece in concert. Compare most classical musicians’ timid ornamentation of Italian sonatas with Yngwie Malmsteen’s free and virtuosic improvisations over the chord progressions of Albinoni, more faithful to the practices of the early eighteenth century, despite his non-classical instrument.

Heavy metal musicians erupted across the Great Divide between ‘serious’ and
'popular' music, between 'art' and 'entertainment', and found that the gap was not as wide as we have been led to believe. As Christopher Small put it,

The barrier between classical and vernacular music is opaque only when viewed from the point of view of the dominant group; when viewed from the other side it is often transparent, and to the vernacular musician there are not two musics but only one... Bach and Beethoven and other 'great composers' are not dead heroes but colleagues, ancestor figures even, who are alive in the present. (Small 1987, p. 126)

It should come as no surprise that such an eruption, propelled by the social tensions of patriarchy and capitalism, reinscribes familiar constructions of masculinity and individuality, even as the meritocracy of guitar technique opens doors to female and African-American musicians. And we should not be dismayed to find that classically-influenced heavy metal can creatively reinterpret the past even as it is itself co-opted into the world of advertising and soundtracks. For that is how popular culture works: through ingenuity and contradiction, towards revisions of meaning and prestige. Heavy metal musicians' appropriations from classical music have already changed popular music; they may yet change classical music, and perhaps even our understanding of how the cultural labour of popular musicians can blur the distance between the two, defying the division that has been such a crucial determinant of musical life in the twentieth century.

Endnotes
1 A contemporary description of Franz Liszt, from the Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung of May 1838, quoted in Weiss and Taruskin 1984, p. 363.
3 'Rock and soul' is Dave Marsh's term; by eliding 'rock 'n' roll' and 'soul', he underscores the fundamental connectedness of these musics, which are normally kept separate by historians who have too readily accepted the racist marketing categories of record companies. In particular, Marsh uses the term to insist on the enormous debt owed by white rockers to black 'R&B' and gospel artists. My favourite moment in Marsh's polemic on this point is when he dryly refers to 'the British Invasion' of the 1960s (the Beatles, Gerry and the Pacemakers, the Rolling Stones, etc.) as 'the Chuck Berry Revival' (see Marsh 1989, p. 3).
4 Glenn Tipton, guitarist with Judas Priest, once offered a live demonstration of the blues origins of heavy metal licks during an interview (see Considine 1984).
5 For a recent example of such colonisation, see Van der Merwe (1989); see also my review of Van der Merwe's book, Walser (1992).
6 See also McClary (1991); McClary generally works to reconstruct the lost signification and politics of classical music, instead of directly critiquing modern institutions as Small does. But for a pointed criticism of academic modernism, see McClary (1989).
7 Note on semiotics: how can one prove that a word, or a musical sign, has a particular meaning? If there is no essential meaning possible for a sign, then there are only two possibilities (which are actually the same) for grounding meaning: 1. Culturally-accepted repositories of definitions, such as dictionaries. The musical equivalent would be Affektenlehre treatises or Hollywood composers' handbooks. 2. Evidence that people use a word in ways which imply a particular meaning; such evidence can be collected through ethnography, textual analysis and discursive analysis. If signs must mean something (and there is ample evidence that they do), then we must be willing to argue over what they mean, at the same time accepting the fact that no analysis can be definitive.

My arguments about heavy metal are grounded in my study of the musical and other discourses of metal: listening to recordings, attending concerts, reading fan magazines and musicians' magazines, interviewing musicians and fans, playing in a band, taking lessons from a metal guitar teacher. The credibility of my statements about musical meaning depends upon their explanatory power, the extent to which they help make sense of the evidence of cultural practices. To think that musical meanings can be pinned more
securely is to accept a foundationalist epistemology and to refuse to see meanings as socially constituted.

For analysis of heavy metal as a relatively bounded musical discourse, and as a genre, the product of metadiscursive discourse, see my forthcoming Running With The Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music (Walser 1993).

8 Webb apparently misunderstood Blackmore's explanation, for what I have rendered as an ellipsis he transcribed as 'Bm to a Db to a C to a G', a harmonic progression which is neither characteristic of Bach nor to be found anywhere in 'Highway Star'. Blackmore was probably referring to the progression that underpins the latter part of his solo: Dm I G I C I A.

9 For a discussion of the social significance of Vivaldi's concerto grosso procedures, see McClary (1987).

10 On Slonimsky's influence on metal guitarists, see Aledort (1989). Alex Skolnick, guitarist in Testament, has called Walter Piston's textbook Harmony 'brilliant'; he has also studied jazz improvisation texts by Jerry Coker and Jamie Aebersold (Tolinski 1991).

11 Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck, all white and British, became the most influential guitarists of the 1960s by playing cover versions of the music of African-American blues guitarists like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Buddy Guy, Albert King and Blind Willie Johnson.

12 This is described, among other places, in Obrecht 1984c, p. 156.

13 Rodolphe Kreutzer was a contemporary of Beethoven, slightly older than Paganini. He was best known as a violinist and pedagogue, although he composed forty-three operas and many other works. His 40 Études ou Caprices has been published in countless editions.

14 I have made a similar argument for the semiotics of the main theme of J. S. Bach's Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen (see Walser 1988).

15 See also Andy Aledort's inaugural 'Guitar in the 80s' column on tapping, 'The Bach Influence' (Aledort 1985).


17 See Peter Bondanella's introduction to Machiavelli (1984, p. xviii). Compare also this excerpt from the letter of a patron to a sixteenth-century artist: 'I recognize that in this magnificent work you have tried to express both the love which you cherish for me and your own excellence. These two things have enabled you to produce this incomparable figure' (Martines 1988, p. 228).

18 This passage is taken from an article Schumann wrote in 1840 for his Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, and reprinted in Schumann (1965, pp. 157-8). My thanks to Susan McClary for calling my attention to this passage.

19 On Liszt, see Weiss and Taruskin (1984, pp. 363-7). On Frescobaldi, see MacClintock (1979, pp. 132-6).

20 On Baroque affect, see Wessel (1955) and Donington (1982); see Eagleton (1990) for a thorough critique of the concept of 'the aesthetic'.

21 The first (interior) solo in this recording of Suicide Solution also plays with the semiotics of irrationality by violating the norms of tonal and rhythmic syntax: Rhoads uses feedback, pickup interruptions, an ascending sequence of tritones, a descending chromatic sequence, groans and wailing with the whammy bar.

22 Although some journalists regard any discussion of the Greek modes as academic obfuscation, many heavy metal musicians understand the affective significance of the different modes, and know that their audience responds differently to each. They also find it useful to theorise their practice using modal theory. On my first day of heavy metal guitar lessons, my teacher Jeff Loven gave me a mimeographed handout he had devised, called 'Those Crazy Modes'. It spelled out the seven Medieval modes and, more importantly, gave examples of specific songs and typical chord progressions for each mode. For a discussion of the relationship of music theory and popular music scholarship, see McClary and Walser (1990).

23 Many heavy metal fans are amateur players themselves; one such fan told me that he respected heavy metal more than other kinds of music because it has the most 'advanced' guitar playing. Interview with Scott, 30 June 1989.

24 Guitar for the Practicing Musician, May 1985. The following month's topic was modes.

25 My thanks to Christopher Kachian, Professor of Guitar at the College of St Thomas, for discussing these issues and metal recordings with me.

26 Doug Smith, Educational Director, Music Tech, Minneapolis; telephone interview, 12 December, 1990.


29 In fact, in my experience, many heavy metal
guitarists (some of whom, like Bach and Mozart, may never have attended college) have a much better grasp of harmonic theory and modal analysis than most university graduate students in music.

30 Compare Janet Levy’s cautious but valuable exposé of the values implicit in the writings of academic musicologists (Levy 1987).

31 Stix (1986, p. 59). On the other side of his lineage, Malmsteen cites early Deep Purple as another moment of high musicianship, adding ‘I think what people are doing today is far worse than early heavy metal. If you consider today’s music involves two or three chords and players in some bands do even less. They could just as well be plumbers’ (p. 64).

32 Heavy metal bass players have, for the most part, simply contributed a solid foundation for the music. Bassists had not attempted to transform their instrument into a vehicle for virtuosic soloing, until the recent success of Sheehan, who has been hailed variously as the ‘Eddie Van Halen of the bass’ and the ‘Jaco Pastorious of heavy metal’. Like Malmsteen, Sheehan cites among his main influences Bach, Paganini and Hendrix.

33 Guitar players who are members of bands, however, are often the leading composers of their groups, and the collaborative experience of working out songs and arrangements in a rock band is a type of musical creativity seldom enjoyed by classical musicians.

34 Guitar for the Practicing Musician, February 1989, p. 162. This description may sound exaggerated to some, but as someone who has known young practising fanatics in both classical and popular styles, I find it quite credible.

35 The opposite trajectory was followed by Mark Wood, the first heavy metal violinist, who tells of having to unlearn the rigidity fostered by his classical training, before going on to modify his instrument, imitate blues singers and guitarists, and experiment with distortion and power chords (see Brown 1991).

36 Guitar World, July 1990, p. 51. As Chris Kachian pointed out to me, Van Halen always keeps his virtuosity lyrical, while Malmsteen inserts lyricism parenthetically among the virtuosic licks. Some of the new speed demons dispense with lyricism entirely.

37 Other histories discuss heavy metal briefly, and musical virtuosity not at all. See Szatmary (1987, pp. 204–5); Pielke (1986, p. 202); see also the relevant entries in Pareles and Romanowski (1983), and Clarke (1989). Pareles (1986) mentions only Edward Van Halen’s virtuosity, and that in passing.

38 I refer to Jennifer Batten, guitarist (with Michael Jackson and others) and columnist for Guitar for the Practicing Musician, and to Vernon Reid of Living Colour, who has been featured on the cover and in the analyses of the same magazine. I discuss issues of gender and race more fully, along with many other aspects of heavy metal, in my forthcoming book (Walser 1993).

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**Discography**


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