

Narrative Timbres: An Overview and Analysis of Salvatore Sciarrino's *Hermes*

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Introduction

"Never in my life have I assembled pitches, but rather I have thought in terms of sonic figures."¹ Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino makes this statement in an essay from 2004 on his personal compositional philosophy. By rejecting pitch and shunning traditional methods of analysis, Sciarrino clarifies what is important to his music: "a shifting continuum, of timbre – or better – the sound in the inseparability of its components."² By illuminating his musical priorities, Sciarrino offers a window into his work and, therefore, a way to analyze it on his own terms. These priorities are multifaceted and span a wide range of musical parameters, from timbre and dynamics to form and development. A myriad of Sciarrino's compositional principles have been analyzed by various scholars (and by Sciarrino himself): time as a "consciously modified feature of musical form;"³ sounds at the perceptual edge of audibility, incorporating both figurative and literal silence;⁴ spatiality as a psychological consequence of musical temporality⁵ and organization derived from other characteristics of visual art;⁶ the sound figure, which may be identified by its characteristic timbre and "figural articulation";⁷ repetition and persistence;⁸ simultaneously parametric

¹ Sciarrino, "Conoscere e riconoscere," 54. All translations generated by ChatGPT and edited by the author.

² Sciarrino, "Conoscere e riconoscere," 54.

³ Utz, "Reimagining Formal Functions," 1.2.

⁴ Lanz, "Silence," 4-18; Thomas, "The Poetics of Extremity."

⁵ Sciarrino, *La figura della musica*, 61.

⁶ Leopoldina L. C. Onofre and Orlando Alves, "As técnicas estendidas," 39-41.

⁷ Sciarrino, "Conoscere e riconoscere," 54; Vinay, "Vue sur l'atelier," 15; Sciarrino, *La figura della musica*.

⁸ Rotaru, "The Hypnotic Garden," 326-329.

and organic formal organization;⁹ reference to and inspiration derived from nature;¹⁰ and a highly specific control of timbre.¹¹

Timbre is a crucial perceptual feature in essentially all of Sciarrino's work. Thanks to his intensive, innovative and nearly exclusive use of extended techniques, the sonic materials he uses are unlike those utilized by his contemporaries, such as Giacinto Scelsi and Gérard Grisey.¹² His timbres serve many purposes. Structure, spatiality, and reference are just a few frequently seen examples.¹³ One of the most interesting and underappreciated functions that Sciarrino's timbres may serve, however, is narrative. To exemplify this possibility, I will be discussing the second composition from *L'opera per flauto, Hermes*, which, following its title, takes inspiration from mythology. The three distinct timbres in *Hermes* each represent a different feature of a Greek mythological setting, implying a narrative arc in their placement, characteristics and interactions.

Born in 1947 in Palermo, Sicily, Salvatore Sciarrino "boasts of being born free and not in a music school."¹⁴ His staunch rejection of avant-garde ideals led simultaneously to his music being misunderstood and to his fame as a composer of silences and extended techniques. He utilizes a wide variety of instruments in his substantial oeuvre, but the flute is one of the most common.¹⁵ The twelve works in *L'opera per flauto* were written between 1978 and 2001 and are divided into two volumes with seven in the first and five in the

⁹ Sciarrino, "Conoscere e riconoscere," 54; Li, "Reimagining Organicism."

¹⁰ Lanz, "Silence," 23-25.

¹¹ Sciarrino, *L'opera per flauto*, "Performance Notes."

¹² Hasegawa, "Introduction," 2.

¹³ Leopoldina L. C. Onofre and Orlando Alves, "Aspectos analíticos," 204; Sciarrino, "Conoscere e riconoscere," 53; Sciarrino, *La figura della musica*, 61; Thomas, "The Poetics of Extremity," 194.

¹⁴ Bole, "Biography."

¹⁵ Rotaru, "The Hypnotic Garden," 323.

second.¹⁶ While each of the dozen pieces is a rich source of musical ingenuity and interest, for the sake of specificity, this paper will delve into just one of them. *Hermes*, the second work in the collection, was commissioned by the town of Chiusi, in Tuscany, and dedicated to Roberto Fabbriciani,¹⁷ with whom Sciarrino collaborated to develop many extended techniques for flute.¹⁸ Completed in 1984, *Hermes* is the longest work in the collection.¹⁹ With its substantial duration combined with limited timbral variation, *Hermes* is characteristic of many of Sciarrino's compositional inclinations.

Analytical Principles: Musical Figures

To analyze a work by Sciarrino first requires an understanding of his theoretical method. In his book, *Le figure della musica: da Beethoven a oggi* (The figures of music: from Beethoven to today),²⁰ Sciarrino establishes five fundamental musical figures that may be used to analyze a wide variety of music. In Sciarrino's writing, a musical figure refers to a sound that is guided by "the figural articulation and the sound quality that expresses it, combined."²¹ Practically, this tends to refer to what Pierre Schaeffer calls a sound object: a sound identifiable by a particular set of characteristics as perceived by a person, distinguishable from other concurrent or adjacent distinct sounds.²² Importantly,

¹⁶ Volume 1: *All'aure in una lontananza* [Far-Away Breezes]; *Hermes*; *Come vengono prodotti gli incantesimi?* [How Are Spells Made?]; *Canzona di ringraziamento* [Songs of Gratitude]; *Venere che le grazie la fioriscono* [Venus, May the Graces Adorn Her with Flowers]; *L'orizzonte Luminoso di Aton* [The Luminous Horizon of Aton]; and *Fra i testi dedicati alle nubi* [Among the Texts Dedicated to Clouds]. Volume 2: *Addio case del vento* [Goodbye Houses of the Wind]; *L'orologio di Bergson* [Bergson's Clock]; *Morte tamburo* [The Death of the Drum]; *Immagine Fenicia* [Phoenician Image]; and *Lettera degli antipode portata dal vento* [Letter from the Antipodes Carried by the Wind]. Translations by Diana Rotaru.

¹⁷ Sciarrino, *L'opera per flauto*, 1:7-8.

¹⁸ Castello Branco and Queiroz, "Creativity and Cognitive Niche," 25-27

¹⁹ In albums by Roberto Fabbriciani (2011), Mario Caroli (2001), and Matteo Cesari (2021), it consistently has the longest duration of any work in the first volume.

²⁰ Translation generated by ChatGPT.

²¹ Sciarrino, "Conoscere e riconoscere," 54.

²² Schaeffer, "Reduction to the Object," 206-208, 210-211.

Sciarrino's musical figures encompass consecutive similar sounds (and, in one case, consecutive dissimilar sounds), such that a series of rapid tongue rams, for example, would count as a single figure. The five figures given in *Le figure della musica* are accumulation, multiplication, "little bang," genetic transformation, and window form.

Accumulation and multiplication are both processes of growth, wherein accumulation features heterogenous elements and a perceived contraction of time and multiplication, inversely, consists of homogenous elements and a dilation of time.²³ "While processes of accumulation are based upon the diversity of the accumulated elements, processes of multiplication are based more upon their similarity."²⁴ According to James Bunch, accumulation is chaotic and unbalanced, whereas multiplication is orderly and almost static in its development.²⁵

The "little bang" is a burst of energy with an abrupt beginning and ending. Referencing the big bang that is generally believed to have begun the known universe, it requires there to be some sound after it to be compared to the little bang. "The initial event tends to contract: it can even be instantaneous, a single chord, and it returns more energy, while the trailing-event tends to distend itself, to fray itself."²⁶ The critical result of the little bang is the perceptual reconfiguration of the following event, which would under other circumstances be heard differently than in the aftermath of the little (or big) bang. The little bang may take any of three distinct functions: causality, "acting as generative energy from

²³ Leopoldina L. C. Onofre and Orlando Alves, "Aspectos analíticos," 207-208.

²⁴ Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, 27, translated by and quoted in James Bunch, "A Polyphony of the Mind," 179.

²⁵ Bunch, "A Polyphony of the Mind," 179.

²⁶ Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, 68, translated by and quoted in James Bunch, "A Polyphony of the Mind," 192.

which other musical events are triggered;” punctuality, inserting itself into otherwise static sound states; and return, demarcating a change or repetition.²⁷

Genetic transformation represents what in traditional music theory may be called development. Its sound objects change over time in some kind of process—linear or otherwise—and achieve an eventual state different to how they began. According to James Bunch, “. . . the prototype of genetic transformation is the theme and variations cycle.”²⁸

Finally, presented in two different chapters in his book, the last of Sciarrino’s musical figures is the window form. Derived from visual art and spatiality, the window form “involves the passage from one dimension to another, from one place to another, from one moment to another.”²⁹ This figure bridges time and space and emphasizes Sciarrino’s belief in the “discontinuity of the temporal dimension.”³⁰ By interrupting a flow of sound with a completely different segment, the composer transports the listener to a different place in the progression of time, equivalent to changing one’s view in a multidimensional space.

In order to compose with these figures, Sciarrino always starts with a diagram. Drawing from his childhood exploration of visual art, he illustrates his intentions for a piece in physical space, supporting his frequent re-emphasis of music as a spatial phenomenon.³¹ This seemingly strict organizational process, however, does not lead to a fully parametric method of composition. “The diagram,” he writes, “ensures for the composer’s will a maximum rendering of every instant and every aspect of the work.”³² In an interview with James Bunch, he says, “Diagrams are the projection, not the control. . . . What occurs, what

²⁷ Leopoldina L. C. Onofre and Orlando Alves, “Aspectos analíticos,” 208-209.

²⁸ Bunch, “A Polyphony of the Mind,” 204.

²⁹ Leopoldina L. C. Onofre and Orlando Alves, “Aspectos analíticos,” 209.

³⁰ Sciarrino, *Le figure della musica*, 97.

³¹ Bunch, “A Polyphony of the Mind,” 446-448.

³² Sciarrino, “Conoscere e riconoscere,” 54.

can be transformed, must be transformed, what returns. This is what more seriously occupies my mind.”³³ Sciarrino’s music lies at a paradoxical intersection of abstraction and organicism on one side and structure and specific reference on the other.

Musical Material: Extended Techniques

With an understanding of the processes and figures that constitute Sciarrino’s work, we can now return to the discussion of timbre as it relates to *Hermes*. Before considering the implications of the timbres, however, it must be established what those timbres are.

The phrase ‘extended techniques,’ in my writing and in common usage, refers to all sounds and techniques performed on an instrument (or voice) that are not part of the traditional repertory. Defining the traditional repertory is not an easy task. What some may call an extended technique, others may think of as standard practice. This conflict is exemplified by the introduction of flutter tonguing in Jennifer Borkowski’s *Modernizing Practice Paradigms for New Music*, which refers to it as “the oldest extended technique, now considered a classical technique.”³⁴ Problematically, this type of description suggests a kind of superiority of the classical technique over the extended technique, as though flutter tonguing has managed to prove itself enough to be admitted into the echelon of the classical. It should be noted that the book is intended to advocate for the use and practice of extended techniques among modern flutists.³⁵ While some writers attempt to reverse the diminishment of extended techniques by referring to them simply as techniques,³⁶ even more continue to use the phrase ‘extended techniques.’ In this paper, I will primarily call

³³ Bunch, “A Polyphony of the Mind,” 448.

³⁴ Borkowski, *Modernizing Practice Paradigms*, 80.

³⁵ Borkowski, *Modernizing Practice Paradigms*, 15.

³⁶ Miller, RJ, *Contemporary Orchestration*; Levine and Mitropoulos-Bott, *The Techniques of Flute Playing*.

them techniques, occasionally clarifying by using the phrase ‘extended techniques’ as necessary.

As analyzed by Marta Castello Branco and João Queiroz, each of the pieces in the first volume of *L’opera per flauto* focuses on one or more primary extended techniques.³⁷ In *Hermes*, the fundamental technique is harmonics, which takes three separate forms: harmonics, harmonic multiphonics, and bisbigliando. Structurally, each is highlighted for approximately one page of the three-page score, although all three are present to some degree throughout the piece. Also present in the composition are four additional techniques that serve more ornamental roles. These are embouchure glissandi, tongue rams, jet whistles, and air noises.

Harmonics are one of the most common extended techniques for the flute. Easily produced by amateur flutists, they are commonly recommended to be practiced for tone improvement and control.³⁸ To produce a harmonic, the flutist fingers a regular pitch, usually in the lowest register, then overblows in order to create a pitch at one of the overtones of the natural harmonic series of that fingered fundamental. Harmonics tend to be less focused, flatter in intonation, and much harder to control than their counterparts with standard fingerings, and at the upper edge of the flute’s register, they can be very difficult to produce. Carin Levine and Christina Mitropoulos-Bott call the timbre “glassier” than that of regular notes.³⁹ These aural differences can be identified in a spectrogram. Figure 1 shows three instances of the note C6, played at a similar dynamic and without

³⁷ Castello Branco and Queiroz, “Creativity and Cognitive Niche,” 16-24.

³⁸ Wye, *Tone*, 6; Brokaw, “Performance of Extended Flute Techniques,” 10.

³⁹ Levine and Mitropoulos-Bott, *The Techniques of Flute Playing*, 14.

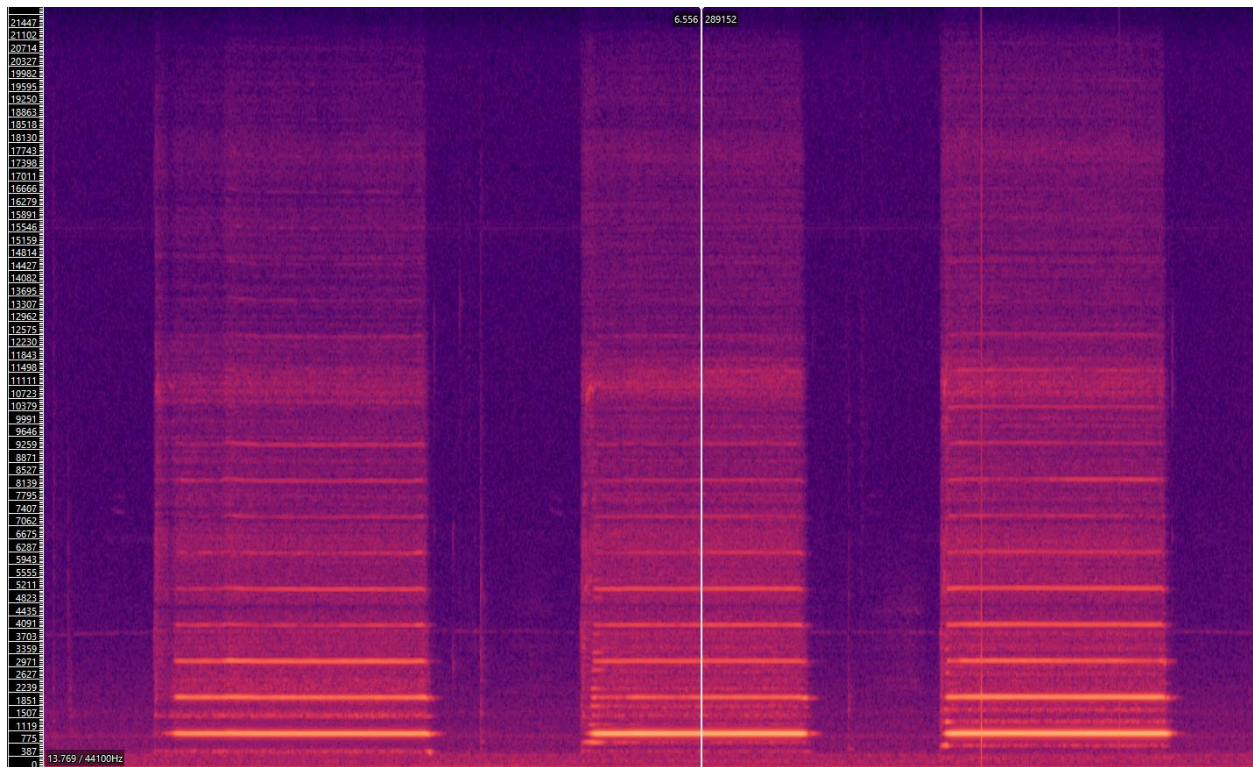


Figure 1

vibrato.⁴⁰ The first is played normally, the second as the third overtone above C4, and the third as the second overtone above F4. Both of the latter notes display more spectral noise between their overtones than the former, showing evidence of a greater number of partials. These partials are also at different frequencies. In particular, the subharmonic present below the three notes is at different pitches (C5, F5 and G5, respectively), giving each a different tonal inclination and colour.

The second important timbre in *Hermes* is the harmonic multiphonic. Typical multiphonics require elaborate fingering charts and consultations with one's performer in order to ensure their technical possibility. Although multiphonic fingering charts are numerous, differences in flute construction and performer physiology can render many

⁴⁰ In my writing, C4 refers to 'middle C,' or the lowest note on C-foot flutes. The note just below it is B3. C6 is therefore the C two octaves higher.

theoretical multiphonics impossible or impractical.⁴¹ As a simpler alternative, a composer may request a multiphonic to be played on any standard fingering using harmonics. A flutist may, with great care, create two pitches by generating an airstream in between what would be required for two different harmonics on the same fingering, such as an octave between C4 and C5 using the fingering for C4. In *Hermes*, Sciarrino does use harmonics as the basis for his multiphonics, but they are anything but simple. By asking for clusters of three notes in the third and fourth register on low-note fingerings, Sciarrino writes “one of the most physically demanding elements in flute literature. The length of the phrases and difficulty of the pitches makes this work virtuosic beyond what had been previously imagined.”⁴² Unlike the harmonics and bisbigliando, the harmonic multiphonics are always played at a minimum of forte, usually fortissimo, necessitated the extreme diaphragmatic pressure required to produce the stratospheric pitches. Timbrally, this technique is sharp, hollow, and intense.

The third extended technique that Sciarrino explores in *Hermes* is the bisbigliando. Called bariolage in some texts,⁴³ the technique is derived from harp and string instrument practices, in which the instrumentalist can create the same pitch on two different strings and switch back and forth between them. On flute, this takes the form of switching between two possible fingerings for the same note, which could be a harmonic and the regular fingering, the regular fingering and an alternate non-harmonic fingering, or two different

⁴¹ Levine and Mitropoulos-Bott, *The Techniques of Flute Playing*, 75-138. This chart has over 1000 given fingerings and incorporates the stability and dynamic requirements for each.

⁴² Borkowski, *Modernizing Practice Paradigms*, 75.

⁴³ Brokaw, “Performance of Extended Flute Techniques,” 19; Leopoldina L. C. Onofre and Orlando Alves, “As técnicas estendidas,” 42. Timbral trill is another valid name for this technique, although it may also refer more generally to the alternation of two different non-harmonic fingerings on any woodwind instrument, whereas bisbigliando (between harmonics) is only relevant on flute. See also Gould, *Behind Bars*, 256-257.

harmonics.⁴⁴ The latter is Sciarrino's choice. This effect creates a delicate, fluttering texture in the sustained pitches on the third page of *Hermes*. The bisbigliando is sometimes also decorated with an embouchure glissando. This is produced by changing the direction of the airstream in order to either lower or raise the pitch, which weakens and destabilizes the tone depending on the size of the written interval.⁴⁵ In combination with bisbigliando, the embouchure glissandi in *Hermes* create a captivating, almost magical effect.

The three other extended techniques utilized by Sciarrino in *Hermes* are primarily decorative. Tongue rams are percussive effects, most commonly created by thrusting the tongue into the fully-covered embouchure hole of the flute, which generates a pitch a seventh lower than what is fingered.⁴⁶ In a similar physical position and therefore with the same seventh-lower resultant pitch, the jet whistle consists of a "violent glissando as if warming up the instrument."⁴⁷ Finally, used just one time in the piece, air sounds are produced by blowing through the instrument with the embouchure hole covered.

In working with Roberto Fabbriciani, Sciarrino developed not just techniques, but also notations. Table 1 shows his notations for all seven techniques in *Hermes*.

There are essentially no standardizations for extended technique notations, causing many different composers to this day to come up with their own notations or blend concepts from various historical sources, but Sciarrino is one of the most influential of those sources. His notations for whistle tones (not used in *Hermes*) and jet whistles are both given as the primary examples in Carin Levine and Christina Mitropoulos-Bott's book

⁴⁴ Levine and Mitropoulos-Bott, *The Techniques of Flute Playing*, 41-42 (description), 58-64 (fingering chart).

⁴⁵ Borkowski, *Modernizing Practice Paradigms*, 65.

⁴⁶ Levine and Mitropoulos-Bott, *The Techniques of Flute Playing*, 28-29. The pitch is a major seventh for flutes with a B-foot and a minor seventh for flutes with a C-foot.

⁴⁷ Sciarrino, *L'opera per flauto*, 1:7.

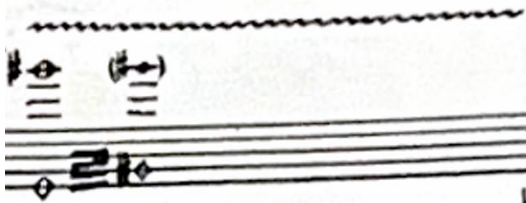
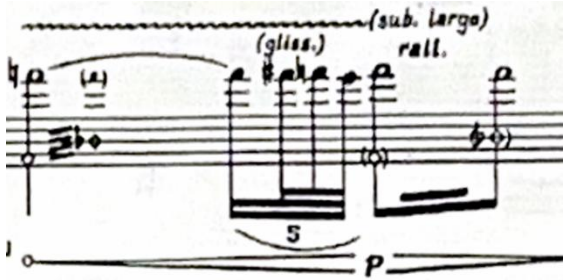
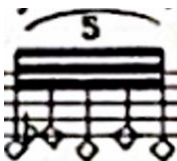
Harmonics	
Harmonic Multiphonics	
Bisbigliando	
Embouchure Glissandi	
Tongue Rams	
Jet Whistles	
Air Sounds	

Table 1

on flute techniques.⁴⁸ According to Megan Lanz, he also invented the niente circle notation that has become increasingly common in modern music.⁴⁹ Sciarrino's influence on other notations is less clear, but there is no doubt that his innovation continues to influence today's flute writing.⁵⁰

The contradiction between structure and organicism has already been mentioned, but with the discussion of extended techniques, another paradox is revealed. Sciarrino's music juxtaposes technical complexity with sonic simplicity. As difficult as it is to perform, every struggle from the flutist should be hidden from her audience. This is in direct opposition to works of new complexity such as Brian Ferneyhough's *Unity Capsule*.⁵¹ The challenge is not incidental; Sciarrino acknowledges the difficulty of *Hermes* in the performance instructions, saying, "A literal execution presupposes either continuous or circular breathing."⁵² One of the most challenging requests on any wind instrument, circular breathing on flute is very nearly impossible, especially taking into consideration the sheer volume of air required to obtain the harmonic multiphonics. This diaphragmatic pressure is so great that several flutists have claimed that performing the piece is nauseating.⁵³ Despite this extreme performative challenge, Sciarrino's music is also designed to be communicable to the listener, who is forced to listen closely in order to hear the sounds that are nearly imperceptible. "As much work as possible must be given to the listener," Sciarrino says.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Levine and Mitropoulos-Bott, *The Techniques of Flute Playing*, 17-18.

⁴⁹ Lanz, "Silence," 9.

⁵⁰ As an example, I offer my own flute solo from 2024, *The Wendigo*, which uses niente circles and a similar notation for tongue rams.

⁵¹ Lanz, "Silence," 28-31.

⁵² Sciarrino, *L'opera per flauto*, 1:7.

⁵³ Borkowski, *Modernizing Practice Paradigms*, 76.

⁵⁴ Sciarrino, "Entretien avec Salvatore Sciarrino," quoted in Lanz, "Silence," 31.

Much of this work is just to perceive the details of the whispering sounds, but for the dedicated audience member, there is also the work of interpretation.

Paradoxical Silence

The third paradox in Sciarrino's music is one of silence and sound. He refers to the "intense osmotic relationship between sound and silence," saying: "Silence becomes more sonorous due to the lowering of the perceptual threshold, and the sound itself emerges transformed. It may in fact seem more silent, enigmatic."⁵⁵ The importance of silence is emphasized in much of the literature on Sciarrino's music. Maria Leopoldina L. C. Onofre and J. Orlando Alves establish its importance before analyzing *All'aure in una lontananza*, the first piece in *L'opera per flauto*.⁵⁶ Gavin Thomas mentions silence throughout his short article.⁵⁷ A dissertation by Megan R. Lanz and a thesis by Kyle G. Snow explicitly focus on Sciarrino's use of it.⁵⁸

There are two possible forms of silence. One does not exist. Sciarrino admits: "For in absolute terms silence does not exist. Even in an empty room there are still heartbeats."⁵⁹ Still, having one's performer make no sound in the style of John Cage's *4'33"* is as close as a composer can get to actual silence. Sciarrino does not just explore a lack of sound by the performer, but also "perceived silence," as Megan Lanz refers to it. The placement of extremely soft sounds in the wake of loud ones can produce the effect of silence, even when music is still being played. These sounds tend to mimic silence through their very low dynamics, but also through a sense of stillness or fragility, achieved using specific rhythmic

⁵⁵ Sciarrino, "Conoscere e risonoscere," 54.

⁵⁶ Leopoldina L. C. Onofre and Orlando Alves, "Aspectos analíticos," 204-205.

⁵⁷ Thomas, "The Poetics of Extremity."

⁵⁸ Lanz, "Silence," 4-18; Snow, "Music on the Edge of Silence," 2-18.

⁵⁹ Sciarrino, "Entretien avec Salvatore Sciarrino," quoted in Thomas, "The Poetics of Extremity," 193.

or timbral choices.⁶⁰ Perceived silence may easily exist in the aftermath of a little bang or in window form with significant dynamic contrast. The attempt to mimic absolute silence, which Sciarrino accepts does not exist, is an intrinsic contradiction in this music, but floating in the delicate balance between two antithetical concepts is exactly what Sciarrino's music continues to do.

Textual Analysis

The most important introduction to my interpretation of the narrative timbres of *Hermes* is provided by Sciarrino at the beginning of the score. The text, titled "Psicopompo," is quoted below in full.

With me, music inhabits a threshold region. Like dreams, where something both exists and does not exist, and exists as something else as well. And where these sensations, the most fleeting of them, cross the threshold of unconsciousness with the blink of an eye: outside, they are prolonged, sharp and clear, having survived the passage from drowsiness.

These are the sounds found close to the horizon of the senses, those, surely which, come from the purgatory of the infrauterine, magnified by ancient silence, through some submerged collapse of memory. They fluctuate, and you stand in the center, and an intact space soon pulsates in the dark.

Impenetrable white city of Hades – before flinging oneself into the heart of my labour, measuring the circumference of its walls, wearing oneself out at a gate where there are no gates, and yet, here they stand before us.

To me, translating such suspended echoes, nothing more is granted but to contemplate, pausing endlessly, the moment of challenge which creation generates.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Lanz, "Silence," 4, 7-9.

⁶¹ Sciarrino, *L'opera per flauto*, 1:7.

This text, placed just before the program notes for *Hermes*, discusses the process of creation for the work. While comparing the sonic material of the piece to dreams, it repeatedly emphasizes the border between consciousness and unconsciousness in phrases like “the threshold of unconsciousness,” “the horizon of the senses,” and “the passage from drowsiness.” This is a crucial creative inspiration for Sciarrino.

The dichotomy of sleeping and wakefulness is more subtly connected to another duality of consciousness and unconsciousness: life and death. The title of the text is “Psicopompo,” which in English translates to ‘psychopomp.’ The role of a psychopomp is to guide souls to the afterlife. They appear in many cultures and religions; examples include Anubis from Egyptian mythology, the Zoroastrian Daena, the Norse Valkyries, and, from Greek mythology, the god Hermes.⁶² To emphasize the relevance of the titular god’s role as conductor of souls, an additional reference to the ancient Greek afterlife is made in the text. While the reasons for the inaccessibility and colour of the “impenetrable white city of Hades” are not immediately obvious, the mention of Hades is a blatant connection to death. Hades refers not only to the god that rules over the underworld, but also to the underworld as a whole.⁶³ This double mention of ancient Greek deities with explicit links to death implies a strong metaphorical setting for the music.

Sciarrino has not hidden his proclivity for dealing with the states of consciousness and unconsciousness, as life and death as well as dreams and waking, in his music. His essay “Conoscere e riconoscere,” written over twenty years after “Psicopompo” and *Hermes*, opens with a discussion of recognition, perception, and the “irreconcilable and surprising

⁶² Wikipedia, “Psychopomp,” last modified March 9, 2025, 3:49 (UTC), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychopomp>.

⁶³ Homer, *The Odyssey* 3.410.

dualism between lived experience and the unknown.”⁶⁴ Similarly, in a set of quotes gathered by Ricordi, he says, “My interpretations of music are ethical messages, I try to scale things down to the purely essential, to reflect the extreme experiences of human reality (life and death).”⁶⁵

A concrete link between this dichotomy and the content of his music may be found in his use of silence and sound. The metaphorical representations of the two axes are straightforward. “In a literal sense silence can be interpreted as the death of music,” Megan Lanz states at the beginning of her dissertation.⁶⁶ It can reasonably be assumed that the inverse is also true. If silence represents death, unconsciousness, and being asleep and sound represents life, consciousness, and being awake, Sciarrino’s use of perceived silence and nearly inaudible sounds—which contribute to the paradox of aural simplicity and are facilitated by his sound figures, such as the little bang—represent the “threshold of unconsciousness” he discusses in “Psicopompo.”

Narrative Implications

The compositional impulses, metaphorical topic, and utilized timbres of *Hermes* have now all been established. What still remains is to determine the specifics of the narrative, and to demonstrate how the musical language contributes to it.

In an interview from 2017, Sciarrino says about his music, “I would say that it has something ancestral that usually classical music doesn’t have.”⁶⁷ The mention of his work containing or addressing something far older than the Classical era encourages the

⁶⁴ Sciarrino, “Conoscere e riconoscere,” 53.

⁶⁵ Ricordi, “Reflections.”

⁶⁶ Lanz, “Silence,” 4.

⁶⁷ Sciarrino, “Interview,” 1:07-1:13.

potential subject matter suggested by the title of *Hermes*. As established by his role as a psychopomp, the Greek god Hermes is known to guide recently deceased souls into Hades.

One commonly cited example is a passage from book 24 of Homer's *The Odyssey*:

Hermēs, god of Kyllēnē, now summoned forth the ghosts
of the men who'd been suitors: he held the staff in his hands—
exquisite, golden—with which he bemuses the eyes
of those he wishes, while others he conjures out of their sleep.
This he used to herd and to lead them: they followed him, squeaking.
As in the furthest recesses of some vast cave the bats
flit about squeaking when one of them falls down the rock face
from the chain they form, clinging closely one to another,
so these went along with him, squeaking. Hermēs the healer
conducted them down dank and moldering pathways:
by the streams of Ocean they went, and the White Rock,
they went by the gates of the sun and the region of dreams,
and quickly they now arrived at the meadow of asphodels,
where ghosts dwell, the shades of those whose toils are over.⁶⁸

This excerpt has been quoted in full thanks to its notable similarities with Sciarrino's "Psicopompo." Table 2 points out common language and motifs between the two passages. There is a surprising number of repeated, important words between the two short texts. "Gates," for example, appears twice in one of Sciarrino's most cryptic and memorable sentences, which comprises the third paragraph.⁶⁹ In *The Odyssey*, thanks to several semantic connections, the gates of the sun are equivalent to the gates of the underworld.⁷⁰ This already clarifies Sciarrino's description of the "impenetrable white city of Hades," especially considering that, in the *Iliad*, "Hades himself is the *pulártes*, 'gate closer'."⁷¹

⁶⁸ Homer, *The Odyssey* 24.1-14.

⁶⁹ "Impenetrable white city of Hades – before flinging oneself into the heart of my labour, measuring the circumference of its walls, wearing oneself out at a gate where there are no gates, and yet, here they stand before us." Sciarrino, *L'opera per flauto*, 1:7.

⁷⁰ Nagy, "Phaethon," 37.

⁷¹ Nagy, "Phaethon," 37.

Sciarrino, “Psicopompo”	Homer, <i>The Odyssey</i> 24.1-14
“the passage from drowsiness”	“conjures out of their sleep”
“wearing oneself out at a gate where there are no gates, and yet, here they stand before us”	“the gates of the sun”
“like dreams, where something both exists . . .”	“the region of dreams”
“to contemplate, pausing endlessly, the moment of challenge which creation generates”	“the shades of those whose toils are over”
“impenetrable white city of Hades”	“the White Rock”

Table 2

The description of the city as white is visually connected to the “White Rock” mentioned in the passage from *The Odyssey*. In a book chapter by Gregory Nagy analyzing the white rock from this Homeric passage in comparison to those that Greek mythological figures often leap from, the following passage appears:

. . . another solar theme associated with Phaon is his plunge from a white rock, an act that is parallel to the solar plunge of Phaethon into the Eridanos. The Eridanos is an analogue of the Okeanos, the boundary delimiting light and darkness, life and death, wakefulness and sleep, consciousness and unconsciousness. We have also seen that the White Rock is another mythical landmark delimiting the same opposites . . .⁷²

Whether Sciarrino was aware of the deathly connotations of the White Rock and chose the colour white to emphasize the connection of his writing to this passage from *The Odyssey* or not, the similarities are striking.

⁷² Nagy, “Phaethon,” 53.

The third important word that joins the two passages is ‘dreams.’ It is only mentioned briefly in *The Odyssey*, but another quotation from Nagy will illuminate its importance and strengthen the metaphor between dreams and death:

After a person dies, his *psukhe* (spirit) flies off ἥύτ' ὄνειρος, "like a dream". Hermes, who is conducting the *psukhaí* of the dead suitors, is also the conductor of dreams, ἡγήτορ ὄνειρων. Since it is Hermes who leads the *psukhaí* of the suitors past the Gates of the Sun, it is significant that another of his inherited epithets is *puledókos*, to be interpreted as "he who receives [the *psukhaí*] at the Gates." These are the Gates of Hades, or we may call them the Gates of the Sun. But there is also another name available. Since Hermes conducts dreams as well as the ghosts of the dead, and since dreams move like ghosts, it is not surprising that dreams, too, have gates.⁷³

The critical link between sleep and death (and their opposites) is intensified by the knowledge that Hermes, the composition's eponym, guides dreams as well as souls. Gates, dreams, and the colour white are all noteworthy inclusions in the excerpt from Homer's *Odyssey*, and they also contribute to some of the most significant sentences from Sciarrino's "Psicopompo." Coincidental or not, the connections between the Greek psychopomp and the text presented before *Hermes* are striking. They support, and are supported by, the narrative use of timbre in the work.

Timbre as Narrative

Figures 2-4 (pages 1-3 of *Hermes*) demonstrate the organization of all of the different timbres in *Hermes*, using colour to highlight the presence of various timbres. Harmonics are shown in cyan; harmonic multiphonics are in red; bisbigliando is in purple (the embouchure glissandi are not marked separately); tongue rams are in green; jet

⁷³ Nagy, "Phaethon," 38.

whistles are in orange; and the single instance of breath sounds is in yellow. The three main timbres in *Hermes* each represent a different element of the previously discussed scene from *The Odyssey*. As evidence of this linear correlation, however, we will first study one of the lesser-used techniques.

The jet whistle appears as a less-pitched alternative to the harmonic multiphonics throughout the score. It occurs a total of fourteen times, about half of which are little bangs substituting for the much more common harmonic multiphonics and the rest of which are inserted into passages of harmonic multiphonics for potential timbral variation. They seem to serve a purely decorative role, like the tongue rams and air sounds, until the last page. In the fifth and sixth systems on the third page of the piece (see Figure 4), the jet whistles are given the label “la civetta.”⁷⁴ In English, this translates as “the owl.” The owl, famously, is the main symbol of a well-known Greek goddess, Athena.⁷⁵ By labelling these two jet whistles as ‘the owl,’ Sciarrino assigns the technique to a specific Greek mythological symbol. Athena herself has very little connection to death or dreams except, adjacently, as a war goddess,⁷⁶ but as one of the most important deities in ancient Greek religion, her presence in *Hermes* is not inexplicable. The timbral representation of a bird’s call is also supported by Sciarrino’s mimetic tendency to suggest natural sounds, as noted by Megan Lanz⁷⁷ and Gavin Thomas, who says that “the boundaries between real and invented sounds are continually blurred.”⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Sciarrino, *L’opera per flauto*, 1:10.

⁷⁵ The reader may also be interested to know that in early Rome, an owl portended death. Various superstitions surrounded the inauspicious bird. I have omitted this information from the body of my paper because there is no evidence that Sciarrino took any specific inspiration from ancient Rome. For more information on the owl in Roman beliefs, see Lewis, Deane, “Owls in Mythology & Culture,” The Owl Pages, last updated April 2021, <https://www.owlpages.com/owls/articles.php?a=62>.

⁷⁶ Chou, “Dearest to be Man’s Companion,” 1.

⁷⁷ Lanz, “Silence,” 23-25.

⁷⁸ Thomas, “The Poetics of Extremity,” 194.



The fact that the clarification of the jet whistle as an owl's call occurs in the last quarter or so of the piece is an example of this blurred line.

One might envision the scene from *The Odyssey* as a painting: a background of simple darkness, with open spaces and endless ceilings; Hermes, gentle yet unmissable in his divinity; and the souls, bright and foregrounded in the centre of the work. There is perhaps even an owl in one corner. Sciarrino's childhood interest in painting⁷⁹ and overt reference to spatialization in music⁸⁰ provide rationale for this consideration of visual art as a link between the texts and music. Each of the three main timbres in *Hermes* represent one of the three central aforementioned visuals in the hypothetical painting, and are used in a similar way as they might be in visual art.

The main subjects of the narrative in the excerpt from *The Odyssey* and "Psicopompo" are the dead and dreams, which, as has been established, are functionally synonymous in the context of *Hermes*. They are represented by the most memorable and striking sound in the work, the harmonic multiphonics. This technique tends to be placed between the others, both on a small and large scale. It comprises the centre page of the work. The timbres on either side, filling pages 1 and 3, symmetrically frame the most intense part of the composition. When the harmonic multiphonics are present in the softer sections of the work, their function as a little bang draws the attention and recontextualizes both the preceding and following sounds. Structurally, the organization of the harmonic multiphonics work with their perceptual intensity and to represent the core metaphorical subject of the piece.

⁷⁹ Bunch, "A Polyphony of the Mind," 446-447.

⁸⁰ Sciarrino, "Conoscere e riconoscere," 53.

The timbral and musical characteristics of the harmonic multiphonics also contribute to their function as the souls in the excerpt from *The Odyssey*. Sciarrino explicitly focuses on extremely high pitches for this technique. The clusters of notes in and above the top octave of the flute's range result in tonally dissonant but mostly pitched sounds. This use of register also results in an unfocused, somewhat airy sound, indicating a significant number of high inharmonic partials in the timbre. In the quoted excerpt from *The Odyssey*, the souls being guided to the underworld are described as 'squeaking' a total of three times.⁸¹ This is a significant use of repetition in a short excerpt of poetry. Semantically, a 'squeak' implies a high-pitched sound with an impure timbre, probably containing multiple dominant pitches. One might imagine the squeak of a metal joint that needs oiling or the sound a mouse makes. In the case of the passage from *The Odyssey*, it is not a mouse's cry that represents the squeaking, but that of bats "in the furthest recesses of some vast cave."⁸² Not only does the timbre of the harmonic multiphonics give a strong impression of squeakiness, but the consequence of its necessary dynamic level also encourages the connection to these squeaking souls. At the top of the first page of the score, there is an instruction that the piece is "to be performed in the most resonant places."⁸³ Can there be a more resonant space than the furthest recesses of some vast cave? As by far the loudest sound in the composition, the harmonic multiphonics have the most resonance. Like the bats chattering and echoing at the back of a cave, the harmonic multiphonics have a high-

⁸¹ Homer, *The Odyssey* 24.5-9. This translation is from 2018, but texts from before 1984 (the date of publication for *Hermes*) exist that also use the word 'squeaking.' See Finley, "Homer's Odyssey," 201.

⁸² Homer, *The Odyssey* 24.6.

⁸³ Sciarrino, *L'opera per flauto*, 1:8. "Da eseguire nei luoghi più echeggianti."

pitched squeakiness that resonates in the performance space more than any other sound in the composition.

In addition to the organizational and timbral connections of the harmonic multiphonics to the souls in the excerpt from *The Odyssey*, there is also a subtle emotional link. The souls, recently deceased, are confused, lost, and clinging to each other for support.⁸⁴ Having been the suitors of Penelope who have just been slaughtered by Odysseus,⁸⁵ they may also be angry or fearful. While none of those emotions are quite what the harmonic multiphonics imply, their rapidly repeating attacks and intense dynamic level—not to mention the technical difficulty of performing them, which tends to come across even though it is meant to be hidden—gives them a sense of urgency, stress, or panic, all of which are emotions that could reasonably be attributed to souls being led into the underworld. This emotionality contributes to the overall effect of narrative in the composition.

In contrast, the physical setting of the scene is represented by harmonics. As some of the first and last sounds heard in the piece, they set the stage and provide a soft backdrop for the more dramatic sounds throughout the composition. Thanks to the consistency of these sustained sounds, which reduces their aural significance, the harmonics serve the purpose of perceived silence in this piece. This is achieved by juxtaposing them with the harmonic multiphonics, which frequently act as the little bang figure. Every time the harmonics are presented in the wake of a harmonic multiphonic, they are overshadowed by the dynamic, register and timbre of the little bang, and are therefore comparatively silent.

⁸⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey* 24.8.

⁸⁵ Homer, *The Odyssey* 22.

This affords the harmonics a strong sense of being in the background. They are less perceptually prominent than the tongue rams and jet whistles due to the strong attack and fast decay in the sound envelopes of those two techniques, and they even exist on a plane further from one's attention than the bisbigliando due to the latter's fluttering texture. The fact that the technique with the least noticeable sound qualities is the most consistently present in the composition strongly suggests its role as the setting.

What sound qualities the harmonics do have also point to a sense of space. Though pitch has been established as an unimportant parameter in Sciarrino's compositional process,⁸⁶ it is worth noting its role in the harmonics. Due to the physics of the production of the harmonics, each fingering can only generate a maximum of seven harmonics (within the flute's standard range, which Sciarrino does not move past for this specific technique). The fundamental (fingering) does not change until the third system of the second page (see Figure 3), at which point the harmonics are no longer the most temporally prominent technique. For all of the first page, more than a third of the piece (see Figure 1), the harmonics use C4 as their fundamental. They also never extend above E6 for this entire section, meaning that they are limited to exactly four notes: C5, G5, C6 and E6. Harmonically and intervallically, the sonic result of this limited set of pitches is that of space. This is aided by the timbre of the harmonics, which is hollow, impure and barren thanks to the strong presence of the subharmonic (see Figure 1). The impurity is to be emphasized, according to the performance notes: "Try, ever searching for an impure sound—that is, for a richer timbre, as from an ancient instrument—rotating the flute a bit."⁸⁷ The emptiness created by

⁸⁶ See note 1.

⁸⁷ Sciarrino, *L'opera per flauto*, 1:7.

the intervallic space of the harmonics and the equivalency of impurity with ancientness confirms the representation of the physical passage to the underworld by the harmonics. Although it is not explicitly stated that the journey takes place underground, the reference to bats as well as the description of “dank and moldering pathways”⁸⁸ implies a cave system that is dark, empty and primordial.

The third important technique used in *Hermes* is the bisbigliando. It represents the titular god himself. One explanation for this conclusion is, again, the form of the piece. As has been established, each major timbre is emphasized for about one page. The first page is devoted to harmonics, the second to harmonic multiphonics, and the third to bisbigliando. The sonic and technical intensity of the harmonic multiphonics make the second page the emotional climax of the composition. One might imagine the group of souls, squeaking and surrounded by unknown darkness, reacting to each other’s fear and growing more and more panicked. The entrances of the bisbigliando in the eighth system of the second page and the first system of the third page (see Figures 3 and 4) are in striking contrast to the increasingly agitated souls. These are examples of window form; with the shift from harmonic multiphonics to bisbigliando, the listener seems to step through a portal from one sound world to another. As a return to the dynamic levels and phrasing of the first page of the piece, these two instances of window form act as an emotional resolution or relaxation. Narratively, such an instantaneous shift in the behaviour of the souls would only be caused by the appearance of their guide. Hermes’ timbre has been present since the fourth system of the work, but only in short segments, as though to demonstrate that he is present, but not yet guiding the souls. Alternatively, taking into account Sciarrino’s views on non-linear

⁸⁸ Homer, *The Odyssey* 24.10.

temporality,⁸⁹ the earlier windows of bisbigliando may be extracted from a later point in the linear narrative. Either way, it is Hermes who calms the souls. This continues through the third page of the piece. Every time the souls squeak, Hermes' bisbigliando enters shortly after, soothing and captivating.

Bisbigliando may also be connected to Hermes with timbral imagery. Symbolically, Hermes is often represented by and depicted with his caduceus, the "exquisite, golden"⁹⁰ staff with wings and two snakes wound around it. He also famously wears winged sandals, the *talaria*.⁹¹ With this repeated wing imagery, the fluttering texture of the bisbigliando is an appropriate timbral representation of the psychopomp. His timbre is also decorated with occasional embouchure glissandi. On a wind instrument with no easy ability to move smoothly between notes, portamenti stand out. This technique, defying the usual capabilities of the instrument and including a small amount of microtonality, carries a sense of otherworldliness. For the symbolically inclined reader, I also suggest that the curving shape of the embouchure glissandi, above and below the main note, might be seen as representative of the snakes around Hermes' caduceus.

It may seem more fitting for a god to be represented by a loud, all-encompassing sound, but in the role of the psychopomp, calmness is more appropriate. As quiet as the bisbigliando is, it is not easily ignored. As the gently wavering texture fades in and out of silence, it forces the listener to concentrate and maintains just enough timbral motion to draw the attention. All of the other timbres in the piece are static, whether short or sustained, in both timbre and pitch. By going against both of these tendencies, the

⁸⁹ Utz, "Reimagining Formal Functions," 1.3-1.5.

⁹⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey* 24.3.

⁹¹ "To Mercury," 4.

bisbigliando stands out as the secondary subject of the narrative: the god for whom the piece takes its name, and the psychopomp who resolves the emotional turmoil of the dead by guiding them across the threshold of unconsciousness.

My analysis has not accounted for the tongue rams that decorate the sonic landscape throughout *Hermes*. With a largely ornamental function, indicated by their limited presence, their absence from my examination does not detract from my analysis.⁹² Like the jet whistles representing Athena, the tongue rams may symbolize another deity or image from Greek mythology. With their hollow, cavernous timbre, suggesting something dark and mysterious, I propose for the reader's consideration that the tongue rams represent the god Hades.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have observed the continuous presence of oppositions in Salvatore Sciarrino's compositional impetus: his usage of simultaneous organic and parametric form, visual complexity and aural straightforwardness, and life and death as a metaphor for sound and silence. *Hermes*, from his collection *L'opera per flauto*, represents many of Sciarrino's compositional inclinations. It incorporates intuitive yet highly intentional structure; repetitive sound figures, such as little bang and window form; and spatially-inspired organization. Most importantly, it demonstrates a highly specific and intentional control of timbre.

Hermes uses timbre as a narrative tool. Of the seven utilized extended techniques in the piece, the three most important timbres each represent a different element of a scene

⁹² The same may be said for the air sounds, which appear just one time and do not play a significant role in the narrative.

from Greek mythology and Homer's *The Odyssey*: Hermes guiding a group of souls to the underworld. The god, the dead, and the physical space between the realms of consciousness and unconsciousness are suggested by bisbigliando, harmonic multiphonics, and harmonics, respectively. Supported by "Psicopompo," Sciarrino's writing from the front of the score, the composition philosophically addresses the space between consciousness and unconsciousness, between being awake and sleeping, and between life and death. Silence, death and sleep are not so far apart, the music suggests, just like sound, life, and consciousness. This realm between the two opposing axes is a space of reinvented perception, of dreams, of "suspended echoes"⁹³ and creativity. This neutral plane, illustrated through the passage from life to the underworld using images from Greek mythology, is the fundamental metaphorical inspiration for the piece. *Hermes* may not actually be based on the examined passage from *The Odyssey*, but viewing the work through a narrative lens heightens one's experience and appreciation of the delicate form and sounds that Sciarrino crafts the music out of and opens the mind to similar methods of analysis and composition for other works of the past and future.

Finally, the inaccessibility of the "white city of Hades" is revealed. If the sounds that survive the passage from drowsiness offer the most creative potential, surely entering absolute silence—the kind where there are no heartbeats—would generate the best music. But the realm of the dead is impenetrable to those who are alive. As much as one paces the circumference of its walls, no gate will appear. Fortunately, there is no need to access the

⁹³ Sciarrino, *L'opera per flauto*, 1:7.

inaccessible in order to experience art. In Sciarrino's own words: "As long as one is human there is no silence; and when there is perception, there is music."⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Sciarrino, "Entretien avec Salvatore Sciarrino," quoted in Thomas, "The Poetics of Extremity," 193.

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