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The Birth of kd lang’s *Hallelujah* out of the ‘Spirit of Music’:

Performing Desire and ‘Recording Consciousness’ on Facebook and YouTube

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The Birth of kd lang’s *Hallelujah* out of the ‘Spirit of Music’

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Babette Babich

The Hallelujah Effect on the Internet

The initial focus of this essay, apart from important preliminary references to Leonard Cohen is on kd lang, not as composer (although she is one) but musical performer and not as guitarist (although she is one) but as a singer and although her live performances have to make all the difference, very specifically, for the sake of any analysis, specifically as her singing is available in video format on YouTube. Of course there are many readings of kd lang and popular music, and of course most of them focus on the way she dresses, others look at her sexuality,¹ and here, just for a bit, I also consider her musicality.

On Radio Physiognomy, Facebook Contexts, and YouTube Poker

I first heard Leonard Cohen’s *Hallelujah* rather improbably, given the sheer number of recording artists who have interpreted his song as sung by Cohen himself, not in person of course, but and this will be the point and the heart of what follows especially as it bears on musical practice: on the radio. And with referring to radio, as we shall see, I

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am already referring to Adorno’s notion of radio physiognomics as indeed to the sociology of music practice as well as philosophical aesthetics, just because hearing anything on the radio is always a matter of acoustic reproduction (and often the reproduction of a reproduction), that is, of listening to a recording. Thus radio transmits music and we ‘consume’ music today in the age of mechanical, electronic, virtual reproduction, all as so many species of digital dissemination.

Given the sheer coverage of the song, Leonard Cohen’s *Hallelujah* manifestly captivates singers but it’s fair to say that I couldn’t have guessed that from that first acquaintance and not being too much of a fan of Cohen or much pop music in general (apart that is from listening to the radio), I could, as we say, take it or leave it.

That was until what I call dueling video-posts on Facebook.

Now the thing about Facebook is the chance to pretend to be in contact with people with whom one is (no longer) in actual contact (friends from one’s youth, colleagues from various past acquaintances, and in what is perhaps the largest category of Facebook ‘friends’ that would also be people one has never met but whom one supposes one ought to have met or whom one would like to meet or just because this would be the

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California or whatever kind of friend as well as family members and such). Facebook achieves this, as its name suggests, by including pictures of the same, along with the aforementioned videoposts, most of which are borrowed from YouTube, and because this is a virtual rather than a real book also by a wall like nothing so much as a public bathroom wall: one is often alone when writing on said wall, on one's own wall or those of others, and one writes precisely with the expectation that others simply passing through or vaguely loitering will chance to read it, and, like such scribblings, Facebook posts often have a kind of high or distant humor: provocative or conceived just to get a rise out of people: it is not for nothing that Facebook has an odd category of the poke which I have never used but propose to understand as of a piece with this character of provocative instigation. And this matters for the video post.

Facebook denizens craft their posts to ensure a response and even if they do not admit this it is clear that they are frustrated if this is not successful. For my own part, I post mostly informative, i.e., didactic posts and friends so I believe, counter or filter these by simply tuning them out. Thus the experience of Facebook tends to be more rather than less autistic and, in a wired age, this autism may be its most subversive quality. Nevertheless and within the safe space of friendly faces and sympathetic voices and modulated in accord with what Derrida once called a higher tone, that is language elevated to a public level and therefore raised to a lighter, more gracious, and occasionally ironic tone, there are also inspiring occasions.

Thus when Claire Katz, my friend and philosophical colleague at Texas A&M, posted the Shrek Hallelujah, expressing enthusiasm for the same, I was moved to a bit of what I call

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2 This immediate responsiveness is perhaps the most important aspect of the subjective experience of computer culture, qua computer culture, which I observed already as a student working with computers in college in the mid- to late 1970s and early 1980s in grad school. I realized then that the reason my peers at MIT (I knew students at MIT note because all students in Boston know one another but because I preferred to use the gym there when I was at Boston College) were fascinated by their computers was that literally everything they did was reinforced: touch a key and the response is a direct echo, no countering word, no dissonance, no unpredictability. The computer is a poster child for what psychologists call mirroring. The then popular Eliza program was only a variant on the same and so it continues to this day. See for a sophisticated discussion focusing on the effects of this technology on pre-adolescents, adolescents and, indeed, the elderly, Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
Youtube poker, an exchange very common on Facebook. Thus I saw her Rufus Wainwright post and raised it by a kd lang.

Not any kd version either but her live 2005 Juno version, which I found among many other singers and several other versions. And Andrew Benjamin (it mattered to me that this came from Australia) returned with an absolute hands down yay-saying. Now, and this is also a peculiar advantage of Facebook, it is significant that Andrew is a practical aesthetics person: architectural theory, philosophy and so on, are his thing. Thus, sheerly theoretically, Andrew’s comment brought me to think on what had moved me to join the poker game in the first place and indeed to what that seemingly idle gesture had brought me.

Not this many sound as if I am cooler than your average professor or Nietzsche scholar, as if I - like Andrew - know my kd lang but, looking for Leonard Cohen, which is to say (and this is what I mean about didacticism) looking for the original (conventionally understood), I had found this version instead and instantly and spontaneously added a link.

In fact: I fell off the floor in response to the song I heard which was indeed the song, the YouTube post, I saw. The piano, almost enough for the absolutist (musically speaking) in me had taken me from the start, but kd lang’s poise was also a living embodiment of the song as well. Indeed: everything was dynamic poise, possession, lived expression. Now the camera person who filmed the live Juno 2005 performance had a lot, perhaps everything to do with it - this is the point of video: this is movie-magic. Thus although I usually emphasize the difference it makes to be physically, really, really present, in performance, in person, in real space, just and in order to speak about music at all and to

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3 This idiom is native to my New York and needs as idioms often do, an explanation. Falling off the floor is not ordinarily a possibility, even when you fall to the floor, as kd lang does in her performances/covers of Joanie Sommer’s “Johnnie Get Angry,” on the floor, one is still on the floor; whereby falling off the floor is a superlative.
The Birth of kd lang’s Hallelujah out of the ‘spirit of music’

begin with,⁴ there can be no doubt that most of us today experience music in the hard wired way, often with earbuds: recorded, often digital music.⁵

But the digital character of today’s music (and I encourage the reader to search out the reference footnoted above as there is a world to unpack in this digital character) turns out to be one thing. The whole package of the YouTube experience, like the closed world of Facebook, is another.

Here, it is the full production, theatrical light-set of the Juno performance that turns out to be important, if and initially, subliminally so. For kd lang’s performance is set against the crucial backdrop of a light show: a shifting and subtle series of slides, blue light cut-outs in religious frames, stained glass, including a blue rose window, crosses and high gothic rectangles of light. And as she sings, and imperceptibly, the framed illuminations change with the music: piano, contrabass, single guitar thus comprising what one might call an orchestra band: all cellos and strings, including a conductor, the setting clearly delineated from verse to verse, chorus to chorus, shifting from religious forms to a blue starry-night expanse at the climax.


Nor does it turn out to be any kind of accident that lang speaks of the ‘cinematic’ quality of Cohen’s *Hallelujah* as making the song, for her she is always careful to qualify this an easy one. Then, too, there is the age-old question of content and musical style important for Nietzsche who always wondered about the fate of music where the words themselves demanded to be understood (this would be in the context of European opera) while at the same time emphasizing when it came to antiquity that the ancient Greeks went to the theatre to hear beautiful speech, the beauty of the spoken word, where as he recalls for us, there would be no difference between speech and song.

It is for this reason that I found myself led to pose the question of kd lang’s performance practice seeking thereby a better understanding of what Nietzsche called *the spirit of music.* That spirit is very literally, very exactly sounded in the case of the Greek’s own voicing of their own language, especially poetically, because as Nietzsche had discovered, one could not perform the tragedies without singing them, not ever, and not because he argued for missing musical scores, and not because of the lyre or cithera accompaniment but because, and again, to speak was to sing.6

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On kd lang and the Idea of Masculine Beauty or Male Desire and Music

With kd lang what struck me was the lyrics themselves and note that because Leonard Cohen doesn't sing, it is not exactly as if it is difficult to understand the words: his is not that kind of music. Because lang can sing, indeed and because whatever about her abilities as an actor, because she knows how to act with her voice, to borrow Michael Chanan words from another context, the words sung in lang's singing of Cohen's Hallelujah began, and for the first time, to make all the difference. In my own case, when I heard Cohen sing his Hallelujah, I found myself seeing through his poem, its artifice (or call it artfulness), for me the words were short on their own religious content or context, not at all advanced by a calculatedly vulgar, overtly and self-consciously masculine (did it matter that Cohen's Toronto compositions could only be written in the wake of the enormous success of Serge Gainsborough's je vais et je viens in his breathless, as sung with Jane Birkin, Je t'aime, moi non plus), that is: self-indulgence qua eroticism.

This did not mean that I could not acknowledge that this would for many be the theological heart of the song itself. It would seem that there is nothing like mentioning the holy dove where the church itself has banned talk of the ghost in favor of the spirit, and doing so in the same context that inspired Gainsborough.

kd lang's version offers an entire world, cinematic as she says, but one that as she walks into that world, opens the meaning of the song, the verses, each word. Now the problem here is that I am not myself a lesbian.

I am is one of those rare (they really are rare) women who actually likes men as erotic objects. Thus I do not mean to say that I necessarily and automatically in a stand-by-your-man or anything-to-have-a-man kind of way, like men. Far from it, my fondness for men is aesthetic meaning by which I do not mean mean that I love male personal style, that is to say: men as they happen to be in the world, the male “da-sein,” we might say in

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7 Here it is important to note that critics have divided views on this matter and when I spoke recently with Percy Adlon about her film acting debut in Salmonberries, he emphasized the impression left upon him by kd lang's aptness for whatever she was exposed to. Nor would Adlon be the only one to have been left with the impression that lang is in many respects the incarnation of a quick study works well here.
a Heideggerian modality, that is, men in their ways as men or in terms of their character as men, just to the extent as this way of being is often not so very nice at all, especially when it comes to the way they treat the women in their lives, from their mothers to the women they love, but and much, much rather and very exactly a liking that has to do with their bodies, with the male body and as such, including aesthetic estimations about various erotic aspects of men’s bodies, as indeed about clothing. From a female and heterosexual perspective I eroticize men, or, better said, so I would be inclined, if heterosexuality as expressed in this world, given male heterosexuality tolerated that sort of eroticization.

I include a few images here to illustrate, first objectly as an illustration of performance per se, in Barbara Morgan’s iconic image, ‘El Penitente,’ Flagellante, staged still more iconically by Martha Graham herself, who also married the artist, at least for as long as marriages based on beauty can last.

Note, as I will return to this below in discussing the differences between objectification of men qua subjects and women qua objects that Hawkins here, in a patent inversion of the usual clothed depictions of men vis-à-vis unclothed women, in both paintings and movies, including very significantly porn movies, is more or less unclothed, and the contrast is evident in the photograph below also staged and taken with Graham herself.

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8 See, for the context, Michael Chanan’s *Musica Practica: The Social Practice of Western Music from Gregorian Chant to Postmodernism* (London: Verso, 1994), and here, p. 190.
More iconically still would be a statue of a sleeping fawn, the so-called Barberini Faun as I argue that this may be the inspiration for Nietzsche’s own remonstration on bodily beauty and its ideal disposition in his reflection, *On those Who are Sublime* in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Or, to keep it musical, Jim Morrison or Elvis Presley, with whom, and this is no accident, kdlang is often compared.
I say that this is no accident, and I mean by that not as is reputed to have been said by
Madonna,\(^9\) Elvis is alive and well in kd lang but that Nashville itself wanted exactly this
parallel and they set it up as such as is evident enough in a comparison of the cover of
Lang’s Shadowland album and a standard, maybe the standard image of Elvis. I also
note that the striking androgyny of both images is also still to be heard in kd lang’s recent
(11/08/11) quip regarding Justin Bieber as looking “just like a lesbian and ergo hot as
shit.”

There is a good deal that has been written about Morrison in particular and sexuality and,
although vastly tamer in comparison, Elvis himself was celebrated from the start for just
this sensual and sexual appeal. I include the above images as illustrations to point to or
highlight the challenge, and it is a challenge, of objectifying men, just to illustrate my
own subjective approach to the theme of the difference between subjective desire,
homosexual and heterosexual. For in both instances the subject is male and even for
women desiring, or otherwise assuming the position of the subject of desire, what is
desired is not the male as object. For a female in the place of the desiring subject, the
object of desire most often, not always, but most often remains female. And this is the

\(^9\) As cited by Ariel Levy, “Return of the Ingénue: k.d. lang Plays Coy About Her Own Iconography,” New
case with the well-known Vanity Fair photo shoot by Herb Ritts, the alchemist of bodies
and fetish objects, here, a barber's chair, depicting kd lang with Cindy Crawford.

For my part, I like men the way, fairly, so I would suppose (and there are obvious
limitations to this claim), in the way that a homosexual man might say that he likes men,
that is: aesthetically speaking, and it is for the sake of the latter that for most of my life, I
have put up with the men I have loved. I mourn the loss of the first boy I ever loved all
because of his lost beauty. He died young, everything inconsummate, pure potential,
unsullied and unsulliable perfection: all John Keats's destiny and undying power for my
soul. Conversely, personally, I am not an admirer of female beauty as both men and
women and kd lang love female beauty but and much rather male beauty: face, body,
every erotic aspect. But and in fact or real life, for me beauty alone still falls short when it
comes to love affairs and I remember wishing that one particularly beautiful lover would
simply not speak, so unbearably boring was he. This was never said it but it surely sped
the end of the relationship.

Relating to men in this fashion, i.e., as an admirer of male beauty and if one is interested,
as I was always interested, in erotic encounters, is difficult I would say: impossible.

I echo Lacan, speaking as a woman desiring men and with respect to men, there is no
sexual relation there, none at all, no possibility, not a chance. Which is hardly to say, and
it would be false and silly to say that it is difficult to find an opportunity to sleep with
men. There are always ways to do that, easy ones.\(^\text{10}\) My point here is merely a reflection

\(^{10}\) Thus there is effectively no need for anyone to develop a cell-phone app, as one reviewer in the popular
press noted, to let heterosexual women looking for a hook-up know where, say, in their immediate vicinity,
similarly inclined men might be found; an immediate marriage-proposal app, nota bene, would be whole
other story.
on the real-world fact that men are not about being desired for their beauty as such, and if it comes to light that they are so desired, it disarms but even more often unmans them, literally so. And there is nothing erotic in that.

It is an exact corollary that men are also disturbed (and this is a subtle issue that needs its own analysis) by women who do not desire them and who make their lack of desire clear. The reason that being desired/not being desired has this contradictory efficacy is that men themselves are themselves the subjects. Tout court.

As a result and as the ruling gender (and which gender did you think had hegemony in this world?), men happen to be, when it comes to erotic encounters, exceedingly advanced at having those encounters only and precisely on the very specific terms they themselves set. Hence there is an erotic object in every heterosexual erotic encounter and the guys themselves are not that object. Of course I am not saying that women do not and in general enjoy the beauty of their lovers’ bodies, in all possible ways, and I am also sure that this varies from person to person, but women are inevitably limited in bringing this out in any but the most oblique ways.

And as I write this I realize that men reading this and women reading this will protest that this does not apply to them: I simply beg to differ.

If it is women who are the objects of desire (n.b.: for heterosexual men but not less for women, and by this I mean both homosexual and heterosexual women), such that I note that the case of lesbian desire is affectively because from the point of view of the subject more complex, which is why men and women find it so fascinating the desire of the heterosexual woman is, as Nietzsche put it, rather more flatly than Hegel, to be desired rather than to desire (tho Nietzsche used the language of will or command). By contrast with such a thing as the desire to be desired, men are subjects all the way down. They want to be affirmed, supported, admired, acknowledged but not objectified. As Robert de Niro’s Travis Bickle put it now a long time ago in the 1976 film, Taxi Driver: Are you looking at me?, the point being that we had better look away.
It is not that men do not desire to be desired, it is rather that they take their appeal as self-evident, a given, an appeal that is not for the other. They need not and they do not desire to be desired.

Men, in a word, are not there for women. Hence even the word beauty as applied to men already bothers them and just because it objectifies them. Thus the so-called metrosexual trend works only because it bounces off, glances off, men dressing not for women but for men. And heterosexual men do that too, GQ, corporate style, the sky's the limit, but only for one another, that is to say, for the sake of other men. Heterosexual or homosexual.

Perhaps the reader has heard of Seville Row? Hong Kong tailoring? And so on.

Indeed, these are the same signifiers along with the same reference to the male gaze is at work in a fashion show, even when, as the image below can show, one adds a long vest, or what amounts in the end to a skirt, a jumper jumper, as it were, although the designer made sure to keep it plaid.


12 They prefer, indeed as kd lang herself prefers, to be called handsome as opposed to pretty and we've already mentioned the limitations that come with speaking of their beauty in cases where one is not, say, Plato or Socrates.
You don’t really care for music, do ya?

Indeed and during the heyday of the sexual revolution which also for good measure included women’s liberation (if we may speak of that failed undertaking in that way), when it was popularly protested that women ought not perhaps be regarded as sex objects, men were fond of countering with the assertion that they would love to be sex objects. And they claimed this not because it was true but because they were keen on what they called free love or sex without strings (and s&m, until kd lang’s singing of Cohen’s Hallelujah was not part of what Cohen’s reference to the real anxiety, the unmanning threat consequent to being tied to a kitchen chair as in the circumstance that that was for Samson himself).

In fact, that is, in practice or real life, men do not like women who come on to them (ladies at the bar, please take note). And women know this and this is why they dress, and act, and walk the way they do. But even suborned as objects to the subject who gets to desire in the first place, women do not get close to loving men for their beauty (unless arranged in such a way that men do not notice, just take care not to give yourself away). At best one might adjust a tie, choose a shirt, mend a shaving scar, etc. But woman, as such, remains the sexual, the erotic object for both heterosexual men as for both

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heterosexual and lesbian women, though one can take a shot at changing that if one wishes to stage some kind of performance-inspired drama, not a full on erotic encounter. Not really.

Although it is the erotic encounter that matters here, it is music that is in question in Cohen’s song: *You don’t really care for music, do ya?* Set up by the inside talk of a secret chord, *that David had and it pleased the Lord,* it was, I have said, lang’s rendering of Cohen’s exposed illustration of the verse: *it goes like this: the fourth, the fifth, the minor fall, the major lift,* that caught me, utterly, and I needed to see her do it for it to have the effect that it did. Not only acoustic, but visual, not only visual, but dramatic and add to that the resonance with life, the body, god, and time, the intellect, and sex: a minor riff on the 19th century ideal of the Gesammtkunstwerk.

Is kd lang’s version different from other versions? How so? How does she do what she does? Indeed, how does she manage to do it again and again though professional singers do this all the time: *c’est son métier, quand même,* but this is also why they lip synch their songs from time to time, singing back up, as it were, with themselves.

I have already noted that part of kd lang’s appeal apparently derives for her following from what some call her cross-dressing.14 For my part, I find her clothes unremarkable15 and I have never understood why only a man might be permitted to wear a comfortable jacket, covering most of his body with decent tailoring (ah bespoke!), and be thought to look well-dressed but women were seemingly required to uncover theirs. This exactly double standard holds when it comes to song and dance shows, think Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, and only Gene Kelly or more recently Patrick Swayze (and both had good, muscular reasons to do so) take a care to opt for form fitting dance clothes I will not mention Dean Martin or kd lang’s Tony Bennett because they, of course, exemplify the point.

14 There is, and for this reason I will refrain from citing it here, a well-known and massive literature on this topic.
15 Personally speaking, I am quite keen on the very idea of performing in bare feet, as kd lang occasionally does and this may well be because while I notice shoes (mostly men’s shoes), I usually find women’s shoes both unattractive and uncomfortable. See for a discussion of Alexander Nehamas’s shoes in particular, Babich, Women and Status in Philosophy.
The form-fitting clothes rule is hard on middle-aged women singers and these days and for some time now, Madonna has struggled to match the bodies of her more youthful competitors and then too there is the always debated issue of damaging one’s voice by starving oneself. But kd lang’s own sexuality made the difference here, perhaps it made all the difference. Although it also means that the comment, she looks like a man, often referring only to her style of dress or relative shapelessness of her jackets meaning, in effect, her lack of undress. A lack of undress she manages to pull off to great success in video performances of her song Sexuality, where what makes the erotic difference is not her skirt nor the quasi-Greek choral group of Rottweilers at the end of the video, the same Rottweilers that seemingly ascend the staircase with kd lang, exactly not nude, at the start of the video but her own bodily comportment, with chairs, pools, jello, milk, refrigerator tv (I mean sitting in front of an open refrigerator as if something might be going on in there) all and quite apart from her own body.

If the venue (or their label) permitted other singers who have covered Cohen’s song to take the risk of offending so-called family values (though one wonders how families innocent of sex became families in the first place, just to echo Nietzsche’s complaint about Wagner’s Parsifal), these same other (male) singers did not fail to repeat Cohen’s weaker Gainsborough lyrics (though Gainsborough himself could not have been more heterosexually overt if he tried) where Cohen writes a very crucial verse—this it is the one male singers cannot wait to get to, perhaps because men tend to blame their partners for what changes in love between them, perhaps because it is the most explicit:

There was a time you let me know
What’s really going on below
But now you never show it to me, do you?
And remember when I moved in you
The holy dove was moving too
And every breath we drew was Hallelujah

Lang cuts this utterly but what is astonishing is that and at the same time, she keeps every bit of erotic tension on hand and from the start, with Cohen’s reference to David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11), You saw her bathing on the roof / her beauty and the moonlight overthrew ya, which some male singers, like Buckley, to continue the above subject’s point of view, opt to sing as “her beauty in the moonlight.”

Lang keeps the conjunction clear and her phrasing separates it: this is the whole of eros, already in place. Overcome, overwhelmed: we are talking about the way eros works on us, from without, ready or not, it comes upon us, and this is desire. By keeping this on the level of desire we are also able, this is the mystery that is also already present from the start, to find that we are talking about God, and lang does this without Cohen’s But now you never show it to me, do you? /And remember when I moved in you /The holy dove was moving too.

Thus and in the middle of another YouTube post including a number of other songs, kd lang, preternaturally conscious (this makes her both a very good and a very bad subject for television interviews) says “Welcome to church,” a double joke at a concert in a church, to introduce a rendition of Hallelujah.

As a songwriter, Cohen’s own words work as poetry and it matters in this that Cohen gives us rhymes to hear. The incipit I heard there was a secret chord, and the second line that David sang and it pleased the Lord takes us in. The rhyme between heard/chord/Lord secured with an echoing assonance between heard there. These are the mystery cults the rites, the esoteric circles of both religion and music and it pleased the Lord. This chord, this secret accords with those same rites: this chord pleases, which should very well entail that this chord would ah, if one only knew it, ah, but it is a secret work for us too: if only we might learn it. We are taken in, we are captivated and it would seem that this is precisely what the songwriter wishes of us, as he promotes himself, not hesitating to advertise his technique, here borrowing the words from

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17 Anne Carson, Eros the Bittersweet (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1998 [1986]).
musicologist friend of mine, Ernest McClain, who emphasizes that the proclamation is
direct enough.¹⁸

Indeed, McClain’s musicological analysis, just informal, just in personal correspondence,
confirms what Cohen says when he tells us (this telling us so would be the postmodern
move) that he is telling us what he is doing: it goes like this: the fourth, the fifth, the
minor fall, the major lift and it is exactly here that I am undone: for this is also the
way lang sings it. Now one might be inclined to say that, sure, everyone sings it this way,
Cohen sings it this way, Wainwright and Buckley and any number of singers sing it this
way, four Norwegian tenors sing it this way, in a round, trading verses. Yes and again
no. Everyone does not sing it this way because Lang sings the song itself and her gestures
are crucial. She builds and moves into the song. Thus, in the YouTube video of the live
performance that I am talking about here (a performance which qua YouTube video is
not live, which is why we can analyze it), it is as if she were directing herself, directing
the song itself, directing her own verse, her own chorus. Thus she plays with open fingers
the fourth, the fifth, and with a downturned hand smoothly traces the minor fall,
recovering with an upturned hand, the major lift, and, powerfully, a baffled king
composing Halleluja.

Because, and then, there is the walking. Beginning by standing by the piano, in
contemplative reflection, poised in time, that is the time of the singer’s musical silence,
the time of the piano introduction, kd lang begins by singing and walks into and through
the song, and it seems as if the song takes her through the whole of time and space.
Musical time, musical space.

¹⁸ Email from Ernest McClain to the author: Friday, April 29, 2011 02:31PM and Saturday, April 30, 2011
07:02AM. This would be almost like the immensely popular 1955 song by Alex North, with lyrics by Hy
Zaret, Unchained Melody, composed (and who else pays for compositions?) for film in the version sung by
Bobby Hatfield, recorded by the Righteous Brothers (as a B-side) in 1965. Note that the ‘unchained’ in the
title does not refer to the melody although there are commonalities in what can be done with the song.
As songwriter, as both musician and lyricist Cohen is able to things with his music and his words. This is his
‘cleverness’ as McClain puts it: sticking to basics in a genre that invites performers to vary his melody at
their pleasure, shifting to higher tones in the same harmony, singing the text either with or AGAINST the
background of the accompaniment, as if the musical discipline is as relaxed as the morals. Ibid.
Well, your faith was strong but you needed proof and here it helps to be either Leonard Cohen singing of David and Bathsheba or kd lang singing exactly the same lines, with the same sympathy: You saw her bathing on the roof, her beauty and the moonlight overthrew ya. Again, as lang sings it, every word, every sentiment comes clear.

The dissonance that follows, mixing David and Samson and every manchild: Well she tied you to a kitchen chair, she broke your throne, and cut your hair. The whole of trauma is here, this is what shatters a lifetime, it is this pent up and waiting that brings down a temple.

It will be Lang’s gestures, it will be her eyes, the turn of her head to speak of the moonlight and its rapture, winding the cord of her microphone to illustrate being tied to the kitchen chair but also looking straight at the audience as she does so, that make it plain that this is a sexual come on, she, of course it was she who did this: broke your throne, and cutting with her fingers to illustrate, and cut your hair. Here after all this, is nothing more than the space of the musical phrase and the listener knows, this gets under your skin, that the one addressed is you yourself, a different you, some other you, son of man: and from your lips, she drew and here there are disputes between the need to add an article, Wainwright and most men name it determinate Hallelujah.

What is it, what would be, to, as Nietzsche says, praise the demon who speaks thus? What kind of belief do you have to have, what kind of abased, abashedly awful love do you have to have, to still say, as Abraham, Job, David Your faith was strong, but you needed proof Hallelujah? Any one who has felt at all, and what is the reference here? It is to you and to the appeal of the senses, sensuality. Her beauty in the moonlight

On the matter of affirmation, Nietzsche reflects that if there is just one thing to which you would say Yes, then you also and inevitably affirm every other thing, because everything is inextricably intertwined, interknotted. Tied, broken, cut and from your lips she drew, what? a groan? of ecstasy? suffering? Hallelujah.

The four hallelujahs that follow are small miracles of understatement and perfectly articulated power, one after another.
If the composer’s confidence is that he can tell us what he is doing with his chord, the composer/singer brings it home, and brings us back to the present as s/he does so, referring to the song itself, sung as the singer sings it: *Baby, I’ve been here before/I’ve seen this room and I’ve walked the floor*, eroticized, consummately so in the Juno performance where kd cocks her head and puts her had on her hip, the classic instantiation of eros, I need you, I don’t need you: *I used to live alone before I knew ya* Doing this, exerting distance, one is brought to the extraordinary pathos of Cohen’s song: *But I’ve seen your flag on the marble arch,* and this is kd, this pathos she takes home, this point of desolation, abasement, sorrow, wounding reproof: *our love is not a victory march, it’s a cold and it’s a broken hallelujah.* This is all we are given, all we have, this is all there is. This is a deity whose only redemption, whose only blessing for us, whose only grace is emptiness, indigence, frailty.

This is also what Nietzsche named the “becoming human of dissonance,” this is what I once named elsewhere in a reflection on eros, love coolly and mightily wrong, not the redemption of love, not the saving love, the kind that works out in the end, the love that ends well, finding glory and secured joy, but a shattered love, wrong from the start, all the way down, a *cold and broken hallelujah*.

Cascade, crescendo, hallelujahs in chorus, ascending again and again.

*Maybe there’s a god above.* Maybe indeed. But this god is already close enough to the Jewish and close enough to the Christian that Cohen like Nietzsche turns to reflect on what it might mean to be a god at all, and to be implicated in love.

Here, and this is the Liberty Valance moment as kd plays it perfectly: all mimesis, given away: *All I’ve ever learned from love, she confesses, is how to shoot somebody who outdrew ya.* Shaking her head, we know that this is no achievement, that this shows nothing but the abjection, the inadequacy of love: what we are moved to do, and what we ultimately do, anyway. And this is brought all the way to the top, to what it is to love god, to praise god, pleasing/displeasing and the vast distance between what that is and

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19 See again, Babich, *Nietzsche and Eros Between the Devil and God’s Deep Blue Sea.*
20 See my discussion of this *knowledge about love,* Babich, *Words in Blood, Like Flowers,* pp. 162ff.
what we commonly take it to be. *It’s not a cry you hear at night, it’s not someone who’s seen the light: it’s a cold and broken hallelujah.* And it is what lang does with the hallelujahs to follow, punctuated and powerfully sung, and in contrast with the visceral as she crouches into the pain of these hallelujahs, finally unutterably, impossibly sustained, eyes closed, an extraordinary peace out from the center of being, her being, to open and raise her eyes and our thoughts.

The song affects everyone who hears it,\(^{21}\) and because kd lang’s great secret is that she listens to the space around her, even to the extent of feeling it bodily — she even does this in 2010 at her live performance at the Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver — but this listening also means that she is affected as well and in 2005 the smile she gives the audience in response to their response after the song ends, is a striking contrast to the composed professionalism of the song in its pace and delivery. Indeed when kd lang sings this to Leonard Cohen’s own approbation on the occasion of his 2006 induction into the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame, she knows at every instant exactly where she is and in whose presence she sings. And she also knows whose song it is, giving utter and moving homage to Cohen: running down from the stage to greet him as suppliant, touching her head to his solar plexus, all deference, concession, gratitude.

**On the Halleluja Technique: Post-Script**

Every bit of what I have described above is deliberate, controlled, contrived, packaged, performed. To say this takes no part of the achievement away from either kd lang or Leonard Cohen. We are watching a consummate artist at work. And as Nietzsche said, speaking of Wagner, we might do well to ignore issues of technique, questions concerning the conditions/motivations/practices of the artist where, as Nietzsche supposed, what matters is the work, the *working* of the work of art on us, as music.

\(^{21}\) As one comment on her 2006 performance for Cohen’s Songwriter Hall of Fame induction puts it: *If you told me that God brought the universe into existence 15 billion years ago because he wanted to hear K.D. Lang sing Hallelujah, I just might believe you...* signed by Waltham1892, 1 year ago 29.
Nietzsche himself suggests that he would be both drawn in and made anxious at the same time by what he in *The Gay Science* described as *Women who Master the Masters.* As Nietzsche reflects and his observation touches on the voice quite apart from gender and apart from music, but not apart from the stage:

A deep and powerful alto voice of the kind one sometimes hears in the theater can suddenly raise the curtain upon possibilities in which we usually do not believe. All at once we believe that somewhere in the world there could be women with lofty, heroic, and royal souls, capable of and ready for rule over men because in them the best elements of man apart from his sex have become an incarnate ideal. (GS §70)

The problem for Nietzsche is that this ideality is usually then read back into men and that the entire project still falls short of what real human beings do, or better said what they do not do. If Nietzsche had learned one thing from his Faust it was to see through love and its vanities.

But where Nietzsche challenged that the theatrical bet placed on the efficacy of such voices, female, or as he pointed out, mostly male (as in *the* ideal male lover such as Romeo [ibid.]) tended not succeed, McClain reminds us that Cohen’s achievement is a real or working one, a practiced one, attuned to musical efficacy, for us, today.

Thus when I asked about the chord in question, about what secret might be meant McClain explained that there is no secret at all, everything is overt, announced. The song elaborates a musical joke, a tease:

The jest in the words is exactly what they describe. He mainly oscillates on the mild colors of major tonic and relative minor, with two tones in common, as I described. His first *very strong* *progression* is a truncated cadence (*You don’t care for music, do ya?*) (meaning MOVEMENT, a whole tone upward from Subdominant to Dominant) but he is late getting to the latter and *throws it away*.

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22 McClain, email to the author: Saturday, April 30, 2011 06:58PM . McClain further and astonishingly fluent *musicological analysis of Cohen’s* music repays citation here at some length: But the 16 measure traditional *bar-form* has a jest in the harmony for the king approaches his own Hallelujah by arcing over the upper octave and then veering off to a *deceptive cadence* (the G sharp seventh chord in measure 14 is the dominant of the tonic relative minor, and the only *chromaticism* [repeated in each verse]). This harmonic *dislocation* motivates the string of muttered hallelujahs that
For McClain all this is calculated artistry, not only brilliantly plain but consummately effective and that is to say: on musical terms. It is Cohen’s song that allows kd lang to do what she does. And this is also why it is quite believable, whether true or not (I do not know), that Cohen wrote some 80 verses to it. What is certain is that where when he accepted his induction in 2006, after listening to kd lang’s performance, Cohen was moved to reclaim, that is to recite just one more verse.

But this too is the heart of Cohen’s Hallelujah, according to McClain’s analysis as he puts it, already reflected in his original design:

After the 3rd verse Cohen extends these responses by six measures, and after the last he writes an extended coda of 2 measures (longer than his song of only 26).

In this way, Cohen loses not a thing by telling us what he does, in a never-mind, why-not-be-postmodern kind of way:

The composer is whimsically describing his effort by “embodying it.” AND HE HASN’T ANYTHING MORE TO SAY! THE ALLELUJAH’S THAT FOLLOW ARE ANYTHING BUT. It doesn’t matter who says them, they are ironic nothings where you might expect a real answer from the chorus. This is a burst bubble. Subsequent verses introduce slight rhythmic variations that are not really motivic but inspired by his which needs the words pronounced with proper stress. This man’s (wo-man’s: bubble bursts four times in a row (four strophic verses to the same melody and harmony), and all the halleluyahs are “sour grapes” (milking the audience for sympathy, that it gladly gives).

There is a lot said here and I leave the claims that McClain makes to one side for the moment to note the audience’s sympathy, here, and this is common for popular music, as a kind of singing with or what I have, and this may be what drew me to this analysis, have elsewhere called concinnity, that is also a “singing with” in the specific context of Nietzsche philosophical style and with regard to his epistemology.
Between Performance Practice and the “Becoming Human of Dissonance”

Nietzsche’s philological and phenomenological investigations of the spirit of music in antiquity began with his explorations of the musical character of the Greek language as spoken/sung, beginning with his reflections on Greek music drama and dance, all replete with little illustrations, *arsis/thesis*. Nietzsche’s exploration turns out to be all about dance, drama, but above all about the literal music of the poem itself, which phenomenological hermeneutic in turn was dependent upon Nietzsche’s discovery of the musical resonances of ancient Greek.

And because kd lang walks the music as she does it struck me that we might learn something hear something, guess at something, for, as Nietzsche also always reminds us, we need to guess where we do not, cannot know. What might this tell us about the chorus, about its movement in ancient Greek tragedy, and about the tragedian, qua lyric artist, as Nietzsche posed this question, but also and indeed in terms of the song itself?

Nietzsche argued that the artistic role of his own science, namely of classical philology as science, corresponded neither to that of the artist nor that of the composer but and much rather to the performer, the scholar’s work would amount to a virtual making present, a *Vergegenwärtigung* of the kind one can perform by articulating, that is speaking/singing

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The Birth of kd lang’s Hallelujah out of the ‘spirit of music’

Nietzsche alludes to Beethoven’s music as artist and not less theoretically by way of Beethoven’s early 19th century Harmonienlehre of dissonance and consonance27 and Beethoven’s reflections on dissonance are of interest to Nietzsche’s own writings on dissonance but also on harmony and not less on the differences between Greek musical forms and lyric convention, as Beethoven rather didactically explains: "Keine Dissonanz soll eher resolvieren, als bis der Sinn der Worte völlig geendet ist — Wo man sich verweilen: lange Noten; wo man wegeilet: kurze Noten."28

We note that Nietzsche emphasized a similar precision at the heart of poetry in a religious if demystifying context in his own writings: rhythm and rhyme are used to influence the deity. If Beethoven’s significance cannot be overstated in the context of Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy even if we were only to note the relevance of the woodcut he commissions for the title page of his first book, illustrating Prometheus freed from his chains and which same Prometheus Nietzsche thematizes as formative for humanity but, unlike the Western parallel of a creator God, as Prometheus assumes the responsibility for, that is the guilt of human transgression upon himself as Nietzsche discusses the different conceptions of sin, the Greek blames the gods and the titans for his shortcomings and the Judeo-Christian finds humanity guilty of its own sins. The allusion via Goethe to be sure, is to Beethoven’s Ballet, Creatures of Prometheus (Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus, Op. 43).

I contend that it the Beethoven context that is relevant to Nietzsche’s project in The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music, as indeed in other related studies. Nietzsche thus undertakes to clarify the particular kind of performance context as lived in terms not as we ourselves might experience it but in term of what he speaks of as the origin of the tragic work of art (out of the folk song and in the context of religious ritual and

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28 Ibid., p. 316. [No dissonance is to be resolved until the significance of the word has completely come to an end where one tarries, long notes; where one hurries away, short notes.]
specifically vernal or fertility cults) together with the importance of dance to song in the lyric poetic and musical context of the ancient Greek tragedy.

Although the publication history of the title vignette has been thoroughly discussed, the reference to Beethoven is nearly completely overlooked or else it is reduced in a trope that seems to be an obligatory tic for those who write on Nietzsche, as scholars do tend in nearly every case to discover that Nietzsche should be reduced to Wagner, say, as is common whenever one speaks of Nietzsche and music, or else as in the case of other associations, to Gerber, Lange, or Schopenhauer. Here I would add yet another reference to Beethoven beyond the title, recalling as Nietzsche did, that and since Hölderlin's Sophocles, the heart of tragedy is nothing other than joy itself: das freudigste, freudig zu sagen. Accordingly, we find that at the beginning as at the end of his first book

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30 By contrast, the connection between Nietzsche and Beethoven is rarely adverted to, although a key exception would be Carl Dahlhouse. I discuss this further in the book that has grown on the basis of this essay, The Hallelujah Effect, forthcoming, 2012. See further and for a general and contextual discussion Daniel K. L. Chua, Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially what the author calls the symphonic monument that towered over the nineteenth century, p. 235f., where I would argue that this is relevant to Nietzsche own analyses of Beethoven's symphonic form in Nietzsche published and unpublished writing.

31 Joyfully to say the most joyful.] Beethoven and Hölderlin were both born in 1770 and as Günter Miethe observes the influence of Schiller's Ode to Joy, an die Freude is to be seen in Hölderlins representation of Bacchus as Freudengott in Miethe, Friedrich Hölderlin: Zeit und Schicksal (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007), p. 113.
Nietzsche refers to Beethoven. And at the end attempts to illustrate what he called ūthe musicū of the tragic art form: a ūplayingū with dissonance, with the ūhorn of sufferingū. ūThe key metaphor is musically technical.ū And with Beethoven, we are, as the musicologists tell us, already underway to what comes to be called the ūemancipation of dissonanceū in studies of early 20th century atonal music.

We have emphasized that Nietzscheūs resolution of the question of tragedy was musical (BT §22), referring to the sound, the music of very words themselves, that is to Greek as it was sung. But where our reflections return to kd lang, singing of desire and its indigence, its failures ūour love is not a victory marchū ūreferring to the paradoxical question that illuminates the problem of pleasure and pain in the ancient Greek tragedy play, speaking of the very phenomenon of ūmusical dissonanceū (BT §24), we are returned to kd lang as she sings, repeating Cohenūs Hallelujahs and including the gut pain of loss and disappointment in oneself; both defiantly and as she crouches into this, drawing her singing out of the depths: Hallelujah in the face of pain, hence and thus they embody, incarnate, Nietzscheūs description of the ūbecoming humanū (BT §25) of dissonance.


33 A visual metaphor for this same ūemancipationū with reference to Beethoven is already evident in Nietzscheūs commissioned woodcut illustrating the liberation of Prometheus and used as frontispiece for his first book. But it is also important to note that the subtitle of Thomas Harrisonūs 1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). The term as such is usually attributed to Arnold Schoenberg who uses it in his 1926 essay ūGesinnung oder Erkenntnis?ū in: Schönberg, Stil und Gedanke. Aufsätze zur Musik, ed. Ivan Vojt (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1976), Vol. 1, p. 211. But for a discussion of the origination of Schönbergūs ūEmanzipation der Dissonanz,ū see August Halmeūs Harmonielehre (Berlin: Göschen, 1900) analyzed as ūBefreiung der Dissonanz,ū See too Rafael Köhler, Natur und Geist. Energetische Form in der Musiktheorie (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1996), throughout, but here: p. 230ff. Of course the claims in this regard go even further back in the 19th century (see here, among others, Barbara R. Barry, The Philosopherūs Stone: Essays in the Transformation of Musical Structure [New York: Pendragon Press, 2000]) a circumstance to be expected given the dynamic between consonance and dissonance as this Beethoven discusses just this tension in his own writings on composition.

34 Musical dissonance in this sense permeates the 19th century and I argue that this inspires Nietzscheūs own notion of dissonance. This is not quite the place to argue this but this may be where, perhaps, Adorno himself might have been going in his Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
For McClain this is the strength not the weakness of popular music and this is why, if we follow his argument, so many artists are drawn to *cover* Cohen’s *Hallelujah.* In another context I would keen to emphasize that the language of *cover* is a music industry term: all about copyright and royalties. Here the point takes us to the heart of the *problem* of the artist as Nietzsche posed this problem, although it should be noted that Nietzsche only raises the question as he does because of his keen concern for what he also called the *genius* of the heart, that quality, whatever it would take, that would be able to break everything as Nietzsche says, *self-satisfied* about us, and we are if anything consummate masters at self-satisfaction even as our world goes as it were to hell in a handbasket, animals, life of all kinds, destroyed at a pace like no other, human beings along with every other being, and the earth with it.

This genius of the heart might expose us, where being so exposed is the first condition for reflection, compassion, for what Heidegger called thinking.

Here we note the reality of dissonance in tension with the ideality of consonance. And it is for this reason that in his notes Nietzsche gives us his reflections on *pain* as productive, and that is to say, and it is here that Ernest McClain analyses of pain in musical metaphors can be useful to us, related as counter-color and as *generating* the beautiful, to use the language of generation as McClain illustrates it.

The indifference, the equanimity in the face of either pleasure or pain that is an allusion to Schopenhauer in Nietzsche is also the same that alludes to the dreamer’s insight into, or through the veil of Maja. It is we ourselves who are the figures in the dream of a god, figures, as Nietzsche reflects upon Schopenhauer’s initially Buddhist point, who have figured out *how* that god dreams.

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35 The appended Hallelujahs sung here are freely varied by the singer to please herself (and NOT what is printed). They are an equivalent to your expected Greek choral response, and Lang makes them her own as a *reaction* to the memory of the verse she has just sung, a counterpoise of nostalgia and disappointment shared universally in which the audience is invited to participate sympathetically and does; people are partly applauding themselves along with her professionalism. McClain, email to the author: Sunday, May 01, 2011 06:41PM.

Beyond Nietzsche published work on the work of art, on the artist, on consonance, dissonance, harmony in *The Birth of Tragedy* and including discussions of both tragedy and music in *Human, All-too-Human*, one has in the notes numerous discussions of these themes but in each case it makes all the difference to note the relevance of Nietzsche inquiry into what he titles in his notes the “Origin and Goal of Tragedy.” As Nietzsche here explains:

> What is the feeling for harmony? On the one side, a subtraction [wegnehmen] of the with-sounding *mitklingenden* overtones, on the other side, a not-individual-hearing of the same. (KSA 7, 164)

To explore what we might call Nietzsche’s *Harmonienlehre* further here would require a hermeneutic of influence and reference but at this juncture, in this context, it is worth noting that in the same locus we read Nietzsche critical accord with Schopenhauer, invoking nothing less modern than the notion of a false tone (KSA 7, 202) included together with pain and we may think of Cohen’s *cold and broken Hallelujah*, as we also recall what I once called Nietzsche’s impossibly calm ideal,37 in order to characterize his elusive image of a cold angel, just short of the calm that is the extraordinary breath that is the end of kd lang’s *Hallelujah*.

The question of the artist, the question of the performer, of the dynamic actuality of the singer, invokes the working power of the work of the composer, as it is this that was also for Nietzsche the very political question of musical culture. There is for the Greek *no term for art*, there is for the Greek *no cult of the artist* but rather a contest between artists, in a democratic culture of contests that involved the entire polis. It is thus that I understand Nietzsche musing: “es muß viele Übermenschen geben.” (KSA 35 [72], 541)38 that is there have to be many instances of what Nietzsche imagined as a future higher humanity in order that each might speak and play and live for and with each, for the sake of a higher culture and just because, as Aristotle also emphasized, good things can only develop among like and similarly good things. Only an excellent individual can

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38 [There have to be many over-humans.]
appreciate an excellent individual. The rest of us find such excellence grating or and in another sense of the term, dissonant. Thus Nietzsche argues that the exception tends to perish and never reproduces itself, and as a corollary, contends that only kind of human being survives as the fittest, i.e., beyond the day after tomorrow as Nietzsche puts this very modest future, and that is, as he says, the incurably mediocre. But this makes the exception problematic.

In this way Nietzsche struggled from start to finish with the question of whether the artist, the genius, the maestro was to be valorized as we do indeed valorize the artist. The problem of the artist is thus related to the problem of the scientist, which Nietzsche would also go on to differentiate in more colorful terms as gay versus gray, that is as plodding researcher vs. Argonaut of the spirit. Thus Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* distinguishes between what he calls the spirit of science (BT 17, cf. HH I, §6, §224, §264) and the *Spirit of Music* out of which he traces the genesis of the tragic work of art. And arguably, it is the cult of the artist, the cult of the star, that is also to say: the music-, the culture-industry that similarly blocks our path today.

Here we return to kd lang. For Nietzsche, the scientist is an artist tout court, but one who not only fails to know this about him (or herself) but who also denies it, dissembling this artistry whenever an inkling of this truth comes to light be it for him- or for herself but above all for society inasmuch as here too one finds (as everywhere) will to power and it is science today, rather than religion, that is the very best means for the advancement of both our slavish capacities and our slavish morality, where there is for Nietzsche, and of course, no other kind.

kd lang, so I have argued above, would seem to know all this and more about the artist. And thus Nietzsche privileges the artist above the scientist, but and only for the sake of life.

As kd lang sings what Cohen would say: Hallelujah.
The Birth of kd lang’s Hallelujah out of the ‘spirit of music’


Link to additional photographs at