

## Utopia, Attunement and Anarchy: The Pipe Organ and Queer Failure

In 2021 I wrote a piece for pipe organ titled *Malum Opus* (translation apple/disaster work). The piece was inspired by the process of a decaying apple and involved slowly pushing in and pulling out the stops creating unstable, beating effects. Through working on the initial piece with Catherine Harris on the organ in St. Anthony's of Padua Catholic Church in Beeston, Leeds, and working with Huw Morgan on a second performance on the organ at St. Thomas the Martyr in Bristol, I began to realise that The Organ is, in many senses, an instrument that fails. The two renditions of the piece were very different. Due to the capabilities of each instrument, the glissandi were more prominent in Catherine's performance and formed a more subtle beating effect in Huw's, with distant microtonal flutes. I also learned that on the organ in St. Thomas the Martyr, pulling the stops out partway to leave one manual a quarter-tone lower than the other results in the pitches for each key on the manual being uneven, creating more denatured beating effects. The piece quite literally became my *Malum Opus*, and I enjoyed exploring its failures on the two different organs.

Pipe organs have been built and played since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, inevitably resulting in many variations of the instrument. Throughout the years they have remained mostly unstandardised, with each organ possessing a very unique character that takes care to maintain. Each organ may have a different number of manuals (keyboards attached to the instrument), a different number of stops (components that admit pressurised air to a set of organ pipes), different timbral potential with stops, and different coupling options (having a single manual connected to multiple stops). Because of this, experience and knowledge of one organ will likely fail on another. This makes composing for pipe organ to be a very complicated task to think about. There are multiple approaches to this:

- You could write the 'safest' music possible, that can be played on 'all' organs, though there are still likely to be exceptions. Examples of this can be seen in the typical canon of organ repertoire such as Bach or Handel's organ works
- You could accept that organ music will inevitably be different on different organs. A good example of this is Huw Morgan's *Island* album which is played on an organ that was left for months over lockdown and was thus, fairly out of tune. Rather than waiting for the organ to be tuned, Morgan simply played it anyway and accepted those imperfections. My piece *Malum Opus* was also approached in this way as it was very different played on different organs.

- You could write for the capabilities of a specific organ alone. This is present in the work of Ellen Arkbro and Kali Malone, who work with organs tuned to specific tuning systems.
- You could explore the possibilities of a specific organ by attuning to its intricacies and tensions. This is very prevalent in the work of Claire M. Singer, Jack Langdon and Eva-Maria Houben who explore tuning inconsistencies, mechanical actions, and interference patterns in the organ's sounds.
- You could tinker with the possibilities of the organ mechanically. This is often more relevant for artists who build their own organs such as FUJI|||||||TA, or take apart organs such as Jake Randell. Though there is of course attunement involved in the later stages, the creator must first explore the organ as a mechanism rather than as an instrument.
- You could extend the limitations of an organ using other tools. This can be seen in Ellen Arkbro's work, the work of DIY organ builders such as FUJI|||||||TA, those who work with organ and electronics such as Huw Morgan or Jack Langdon, or those who excite separated organ pipes in different ways such as in the work of Jake Randell.

Though there are many more examples of these methods of composition being used on the pipe organ and thus, many interactions with failure, this paper will focus on the music and processes of three composers/improvisers/organ builders, Ellen Arkbro, Claire M. Singer and FUJI|||||||TA. This essay will refer to Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* in order to discuss the position of failure in contemporary pipe organ music.<sup>1</sup> The first section will discuss Arkbro's track titled *For Organ and Brass*, from the album of the same title. It will argue that through extending the organ with brass and achieving just intonation, Arkbro attempts to create a utopia, which inevitably (as you utopias do) fails and creates music that is empty, unfamiliar and unsettling due to our experience of the Western World. Drawing parallels with Judy Bamber's paintings, this section will argue that though this utopia creation fails in some ways, it does create something interesting that expands horizons. The second section will discuss Claire M. Singer's composition and improvisation practice, specifically in her tracks *Molendinar*, *Forrig* and *Fairge*. This section will discuss how Singer (a non-traditional organist) attunes to her instrument and accepts both her own failure

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art Of Failure* (London: Duke University Press, 2011)

and the failures of the organ. This section will compare Singer's music to the aesthetics of glitch music and will argue that allowing something to go subtly wrong can result in an engaging aesthetic. The section will also follow on from attunement and discuss the idea of tinkering (messing around with materials without regular feedback) in relation to FUJI's album and will argue that tinkering as part of a pre-composition process can sometimes be just as important as attunement. This section will also argue that tinkering can sometimes be destructive and fail whilst still being a productive force. The essay will conclude that all of these approaches, though some more problematic than others, through their failure, can be productive.

Halberstam states in *The Queer Art of Failure* that 'Failure, of course goes hand in hand with capitalism'. Or rather, to succeed, one has to fail. Though this pattern is taken to brutal extremes in the context of capitalist society, it is relevant to acknowledge that patterns of opposing phenomena that rely on each other to exist are everywhere. Many of these relations are culturally constructed to establish power, and are complicated and relate to many other things, for example, success and failure as pointed out by Halberstam or masculinity and femininity as pointed out by Connell.<sup>2</sup> However, there are also physical examples of phenomena that oppose in similar ways. For example, just intonation is the attempt to tune all musical intervals as whole number ratios of frequencies (such as 3:2 or 4:3), resulting in no beating being heard when such intervals are sounded. Beating is when two tones are close in pitch but not identical, resulting in the difference in frequency generating a tremolo-like effect. Just intervals consist of members of a single harmonic series of a fundamental pitch. The harmonic series is the sequence of harmonics whose frequency is an integer multiple of a fundamental frequency. Achieving just intonation is impossible on keyboard instruments, to achieve justly tuned fourths and fifths (Pythagorean tuning) you compromise the third, to achieve justly tuned thirds (meantone tuning) you compromise the fourths and fifths. The typical 'solution' is to compromise all intervals excluding the octave and divide each pitch equally (equal temperament), resulting in none of the intervals being justly tuned. In *For Organ and Brass* Arkbro uses the *Galma Stan* organ in Stockholm tuned to meantone temperament. Taking inspiration from her teacher La Monte Young, she uses septimal intervals that are also justly in tune in meantone. However, rather than simply accepting the organ's failure and just playing thirds, Arkbro decides to extend the instrument

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<sup>2</sup> Halberstam, p. 88 ; Raewyn Connell, 'The Social Organization of Masculinity', *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995)

by adding a microtonal brass trio, capable of playing justly tuned fifths. Through listening to the track and how the instruments interact, it is clear that Arkbro sees the ensemble more like a single entity and in this, she forces these impossibilities to exist. This section will argue that Arkbro attempts to create a utopia in her extension of the organ into just intonation, and will discuss the inevitable failure that comes from attempts at perfection.

In the *Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam discusses Monique Wittig's argument that 'if womanhood depends upon a heterosexual framework, then lesbians are not "women," and if lesbians are not "women," then they fall outside of patriarchal norms and can re-create some of the meaning of their genders.'<sup>3</sup> Or rather, they reinvent the framework entirely. By extension, it appears that Arkbro in this track has built her own framework to create just intonation, arguably her utopia. The idea of physically assembling one's own queer ideal is also shown in Halberstam's discussion of the 2005 film *Robots*, where the robot baby is assembled not by means of reproduction (or in this case, reproduction by the heteronormative standards). But rather through a queer and improvised construction.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to note that Arkbro creates just intonation very rigidly in *For Organ And Brass*. The music is beautiful, yet simple, strict and repetitive. She also decidedly refuses any unnecessary connotations to anything in its title as she believes it reduces her work.<sup>5</sup> Utopia is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'an imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is 'perfect'.'<sup>6</sup> Arguably a piece of music that uses a full palette of intervals, is theoretically, the closest one can get to this ideal in music. Sargent argues that the nature of a utopia is inherently contradictory because societies are not homogenous and desires conflict and therefore cannot be satisfied.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, (comparing to *For Organ And Brass*) a common theme when trying to create utopias is rigidity. A fictional example is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian feminist novel *Herland*. In the novel, Gilman attempts to define a utopia that is ironically queer in attempting to define a space for

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<sup>3</sup> Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), quoted in Halberstam, p. 4

<sup>4</sup> Halberstam, p. 45

<sup>5</sup> Alexandra Fraser, 'I think about sounds as sculptures', *SUBBACULTCHA* <<https://subbacultcha.be/editorial/detail/i-think-about-sounds-as-sculptures>> [Accessed 22 May 2022]

<sup>6</sup> 'Utopia', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online] <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/220784?redirectedFrom=utopia#eid>> [Accessed 22 May 2022]

<sup>7</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 21

women only (women could not even vote when the novel was written), yet defining it as a space for middle class cisgender heterosexual white women, and thus a space without sex and supposedly a space without problems.<sup>8</sup> According to the male characters who visit, Herland falls flat, the art is described as mediocre, the women are compared to bees in a hive working towards the greater good and it is described as ‘a heaven where nothing ever happens’.<sup>9</sup> It could also be argued that Arkbro’s album also falls flat (not literally), though falls flat in quite a wonderful way. Through this intense perfection, Arkbro’s album has a certain emptiness to it. Perhaps this is because as Luigi Russolo stated in his 1913 manifesto ‘The Art of Noises’, we are accustomed to the speed energy of noise of the industrial soundscape and therefore desire this in the music we listen to.<sup>10</sup> Though Russolo’s manifesto is very extreme, essentially advocating for noise music, this point is perhaps also valid on a micro-scale: we are accustomed to slight imperfection and are more comfortable the slight dissonance of equal temperament or noisiness of pitched sounds with noisier elements. Something such as Arkbro’s album is alarmingly perfect and simple in contrast to the sounds of everyday life and everyday music. When describing a 2019 performance of her later album *CHORDS*, Ridout states that ‘there is a very self-conscious concern with psychoacoustics and the phenomenology of listening, concerns which for me tend to induce a certain level of scepticism, or just plain boredom’.<sup>11</sup> Though Arkbro’s music could possibly be described as boring, this statement arguably misses the point. Empty and boring are not synonymous. Arkbro’s utopia seems resemblant of Judy Bamber’s seascapes as discussed by Halberstam. It represents the ‘expansion and contraction of our horizons’ yet still drains away the sense of romance, and does not convey nostalgia.<sup>12</sup> The expansion of horizons idea is incredibly significant. Though Arkbro’s music inevitably fails at creating a musical utopia as it’s perfection creates emptiness: it does expand horizons and create something that is interesting and unique in its own right. *For Organ And Brass* in my experience is both fulfilling and

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<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Utopian Novels* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999) ; Curbed Staff, ‘Episdoe 7: Reimagine Utopia’, *Nice Try* (2019) <<https://archive.curbed.com/2019/7/18/20695030/nice-try-podcast-herland>>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Sam Ridout, ‘Ellen Arkbro and Marcus Pal; Claudia Molitor, Decay, hcmf//, 16 November 2019’, *Tempo*, 74 (2020) 85-86 (p. 85)

<sup>12</sup> Halberstam p. 116 ; Halberstam p. 106

empty, delightful and unsettling, innate and unfamiliar. To me, there is something really special in these contradictions. Perhaps (though entirely contradictory to the term) as Adorno has suggested, a work of art can create a temporary utopia, a ‘moment of ‘standstill’ in its immanent process.<sup>13</sup> Though a utopia would have to be permanent to exist in reality (which implies the death drive as discussed by Endelman).<sup>14</sup> Perhaps snapshots such as Arkbro’s *For Organ and Brass* or Bamber’s paintings should be regarded as tiny temporary utopias in their own right, or at least a suggestion, or even a force for possibility and alternative perspectives, even if they do fail.

It seems often that in terms of harmonic palette, contemporary organ composers such as Ellen Arkbro and Kali Malone gravitate towards just tuning systems because certain organs such as the *Galma Stan* allow for this possibility. Claire M. Singer takes an opposite approach. The most defining feature of Singer’s organ works is her technique of slowly pushing in and pulling out stops while she plays, this technique reduces and increases the air going into the pipes, thus changing the tuning of the pitches and allowing timbres to fade in and out. Pieces of hers such as *The Molendinar*, *Forrig and Fairge* demonstrate this clearly. This technique is a clear example of making the organ fail at its original purpose. This section will discuss Singer’s improvisation and composition process as a process of attunement to a particular organ’s quirks, or rather acceptance and attempts to work with failure. It will acknowledge Singer’s position as a non-traditional organist and discuss how this ‘failure’ or lack of understanding of traditional organ technique results in advancement. The section will then follow this idea of attunement by discussing the process of tinkering in the work of FUJI |||||||TA, drawing attention to the importance of tinkering as a pre-compositional process in organ building and will then talk about the potential destructive nature of tinkering and how even this can be a productive force even if sometimes destructive.

It seems relevant here to draw parallels with the idea of the glitch in music technology or the ‘aesthetics of failure’ as defined by Kim Cascone.<sup>15</sup> Though the glitch is a very well defined and recognisable sound, with clear associations and connotations, the way that it is worked into music is fairly similar to Singer’s process. Due to our experiences as humans in

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<sup>13</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1997), p. 84, quoted in Christa Velten-Mrowka, ‘Brian Friel and Theodor W. Adorno: Utopia, Dialectics and Performances’, *Irish University Review*, 48.2 (2018) 299-314 (p. 303)

<sup>14</sup> Lee Endelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005)

<sup>15</sup> Kim Cascone, ‘The Aesthetics of Failure: “Post-Digital” Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music’, *Computer Music Journal*, 24.4 (2000) 12-18

the west, the sound of an ‘out of tune’ pitch (in our case, a pitch not in the twelve-tone equally tempered scale) or the sound of malfunctioning technology are often signs that remind us that things are not right.<sup>16</sup> In addition to this, both of these techniques are carried out by subverting a tool’s conventional purpose whether that be rewiring CD players in the work of Nicholas Collins, scratching CDs in the work of Oval or Yasuano Tone, or in Singer’s case, detuning the pipes on the organ even though the pipes were built to be ‘in tune’ for playing a particular canon of repertoire. Singer works with the detuning of pitches into her work in a similar way to how glitch is worked into Oval’s *Systemisch* album. In this album, glitches are worked through compositionally to create coherent music purely for aesthetic (rather than conceptual) purposes. Sanglid describes this method as the ‘oceanic glitch’.<sup>17</sup> Unlike the harsh noise of Yasuano Tone’s *Solo For Wounded CD* (a noise album that uses similar techniques), the ‘dense, flitting textures’ of Oval’s *Systemisch* add subtle instabilities to the source material (Aphex Twin’s *Selected Ambient Works vol. II*).<sup>18</sup> Singer’s album is also subtle in its instability, allowing the movement of the stops to create glissandi and beating yet otherwise playing fairly tonal music. This aesthetic of subtle, liminal, instabilities is often appealing. It seems relevant to Halberstam’s discussion of Tracy Moffat’s photographs of athletes coming fourth.<sup>19</sup> Rather than finding *just* a (non)place outside of recorded history, Singer’s music finds various (non)places in between aural perception.<sup>20</sup> This, of course, contrasts with Arkbro’s work, instead of trying to create something perfect and failing, Singer invites the audience to explore the just imperfect.

It is important to note that Singer (a composer and improviser who is not a trained organist) gravitated towards a technique that is not used in the canon of organ repertoire. It has been pointed out by Windsor that unlike Margaret Boden’s view on creativity, ignorance or avoidance of a ‘conceptual space’ can sometimes be quite productive.<sup>21</sup> For example,

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<sup>16</sup> Torben Sanglid, ‘Glitch—The Beauty of Malfunction’, in *Bad Music: The Music We Love To Hate*, ed. by Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 198-211 (p. 205)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 199

<sup>18</sup> Kim Cascone, ‘The Aesthetics of Failure: “Post-Digital” Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music’ (p. 13)

<sup>19</sup> Halberstam, p. 93

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>21</sup> Mia Windsor, *Using Machines To Define Musical Creativity* (unpublished undergraduate dissertation, University of Leeds, 2021) <<http://miawindsor.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/mia-windsor-dissertation.pdf>> [Accessed 22 May 2022] p. 5 ; Margaret Boden, *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms* (Reading: Cardinal, 1992), p. 3

when Holly Herndon trained her AI *Spawn* to sing, she avoided past canon as training data, resulting in *Spawn*'s interpretation and timbral abilities being unique in comparison to a classically trained singer.<sup>22</sup> Halberstam, (especially when discussing Dory's forgetfulness in *Finding Nemo*) states that the 'absence of memory or the absence of wisdom—leads to a new form of knowing.'<sup>23</sup> In my experience of Singer's music, this new form of knowing is impactful. My first thought when listening to her music was 'why on earth are more people not doing this', this sentiment has also been suggested in Norman Record's review of her *Solas* album stating 'Why have we had to wait this long for this excellent sound to be recorded and released?.'<sup>24</sup> This gives an indication that failure through ignorance can be productive.

Although Singer is quite literally changing the tuning of the organ, she is also carrying out the process that Pickering would describe as 'tuning'.<sup>25</sup> Spatz argues that both artisanal crafts and scientific experimentation involve a subtle and complex interplay between skilled handicraft and the emergent properties of materials. They state that this is carried out by working with the productive problems and questions that arise from a material's complexity, stubbornness, and only-ever relative reliability.<sup>26</sup> The process of interacting with these materials to achieve outcomes defined by the practitioner as successful can be described as 'tuning', as it requires constant complex interaction and feedback between practitioner and material. Singer's improvisation and composition practice clearly involves attunement to her materials. Whichever organ she is playing, and whatever quirks it has, she takes the time to explore the possibilities and complexities of that instrument by playing, manipulating (by placing pencils on the keys and pulling out stops), listening and responding.

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<sup>22</sup> Sónar+D, 'Sónar+D Talks: Listening to the Voice of #AI, with Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst', *YouTube* (2019) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k67IKMXzD7A>> [Accessed 23 October 2020]

<sup>23</sup> Halberstam, p. 54

<sup>24</sup> Norman Records, 'Claire M Singer: Solas', *Norman Records* <<https://www.normanrecords.com/records/160001-claire-m-singer-solas>> [Accessed 22 May 2022]

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), quoted in Ben Spatz, 'Embodiment as First Affordance: Tinkering, Tuning Tracking', *Performance Philosophy* 2.2 (2017), 257-271 (p. 261)

<sup>26</sup> Spatz, 'Embodiment as First Affordance', p. 258-259



Prior to Pickering's 'tuning' concept, Knorr described a somewhat similar process that she referred to as 'tinkering'.<sup>27</sup> The main issue with the term tinkering according to Spatz is that 'it is often not clear when tinkering whether the situation is getting better or worse. And even when there is clear improvement, one may wonder if the situation could be made better still. Tinkering may continue indefinitely.'<sup>28</sup> By this suggestion, tinkering may finish when the practitioner checks the outcome, which happens irregularly, if at all. However, tinkering does give some indication of queer failure. Though the outcome may not be a success, the practitioner is refusing to acquiesce to the form that the material exists in, which may result in progression, even if misguided or even destructive. A lot of examples of tinkering can be found in composers, performers or improvisers who build their own organs. The organ builder takes on the role of both musician and mechanic, and thus carries out both the process of tinkering, followed by tuning. FUJI|||||||TA's *iki* album is a wonderful example of this. FUJI|||||||TA's self-built organ only has eleven pipes, an air pump called a »fuigo« which was modelled after a traditional blacksmith's one, and no manual. The album creates an unapologetically mechanical soundscape, with the sound of the manually controlled air pump being present throughout the album. The album explores many avenues within the constraints of the instrument with powerful beating in *nNami* coupled with the natural rhythm of the air pump pumping, and staccato sparseness of *sukima* with random-sounding interference from the bellows creating beautiful contrasts within the gentle sound world. Following the discussion of the avoidance of 'conceptual space' exploration, FUJI|||||||TA did not come to the organ as an organist and therefore did not project excesses of prior knowledge onto the instrument. The initial building process was likely a tinkering process, that evolved into tuning as soon as it was possible to intuitively interact with the instrument. However, in this case, it seems convincing to argue that much of the creativity and uniqueness of this album is wrapped up in the assemblage of the materials themselves (or lack thereof of materials), with the 'tuning' (in Pickering's definition) coming from exploration of these constraints. Or rather, unlike Singer's work, which happens in the moment, in FUJI|||||||TA's *iki* album, the pre-composition process is just as essential. This demonstrates that tinkering with the mechanics of the instrument has a lot of value.

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<sup>27</sup> Karin Knorr Cetina [Karin D. Knorr], 'Tinkering Toward Success: Prelude to a Theory of Scientific Practice', *Theory and Society*, 8.3 (1979) 347–76

<sup>28</sup> Spatz, 'Embodiment as First Affordance', p. 261

Another mechanical tinkering process could be to take apart an already existing organ. Jake Randell's practice focuses on allowing himself and audience members to tinker with and attune to decoupled organ pipes which are sourced from unserviceable pipe organs dismantled from churches and theatres. However, it is important to acknowledge those who may not source their organ pipes ethically, or instead, tinker in dangerous and destructive ways. In the context of a pipe organ, tinkering may involve breaking an existing organ, taking apart pipes, leaving the organ irreparable. This especially draws parallels with Halberstam's discussion of Irvine Welsh's 1993 novel *Trainspotting*, with antagonist Renton and his mates expressing their discontent with Thatcher's Britain and refusing life, yet destroying themselves in the process with many of them dying from drugs, HIV, violence and neglect and also projecting aggression towards other minorities, punishing people of colour, women and queer people.<sup>29</sup> However in his failure and damage, Renton is given 'space to expose the contradictory logic of health, happiness, and justice within the postwelfare state.' This, therefore, suggests even tinkering to be a productive method of queer failure even if it is sometimes as problematic as aggressively trying to create a utopia.

Circling back to Arkbro's approach of creating a utopia, Arnold suggests anarchy to be a clear opposite of utopia.<sup>30</sup> Yet whether it be the emptiness of failing at creating a utopia or the nihilism of smashing up a pipe organ for no reason other than to see what happens, both inevitably fail and can be destructive. Though Singer's approach of attunement is certainly more aware of failure and less problematic in that it doesn't force rigid ideals upon anyone or destroy or damage anything, it seems convincing that all of these approaches are worthwhile in their own ways, as they all move away from the tedious canon of traditional organ repertoire. As Halberstam states 'Renton, Johnny Rotten, Ginger, Dory, and Babe, like those athletes who finish fourth, remind us that there is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner.'<sup>31</sup> Or in this particular scenario, bring down Bach. So whether your Magnum Opus becomes a Malum Opus, your Malum Opus becomes an alternative Magnum Opus or you simply want to wreak havoc in the world of pipe organs, I encourage you to fail magnificently.

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<sup>29</sup> Halberstam, p. 92

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Arnold, quoted in Jorge Bastados da Silva, *The Epistemology of Utopia: Rhetoric, Theory and Imagination* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Pub, 2013)

<sup>31</sup> Halberstam, p. 122

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