SOUNDING OUT THE TITLE

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In calling this online, open-access journal *Soundposts*, we borrow a technical term from instrument building and, plucking the string of this word, let it resonate with all the possible overtones and reverberations of what a soundpost might be: matter and sound; listening and writing; music and society; media and environment; space and time; here and now. It may not be enough, but it’s a start.

/saʊndˈpəʊsts/

A soundpost is a small cylindrical piece of wood placed upright inside the body of violins and other bowed string instruments. Situated just under the bridge and wedged between top and back, it acts to stabilize the instrument against the tension of the strings and to communicate vibrations between both sides of the body. The soundpost cannot be glued into position, but rather must be placed by the expert hand of the luthier in a spot that allows it to vibrate freely, where it, in turn, allows the instrument to produce its desired tone to the fullest. Moving the soundpost even a fraction of a millimeter can alter the tone completely, so much so that, in other European languages, the soundpost is referred to as the “soul” or “voice” of the instrument. There is no scientific way—no ratio, no measurement—to determine the placement of the soundpost. The luthier must decide on it anew in each case, based on the resonance of the particular instrument and the desired tone and playability. No two luthiers would place the soundpost in exactly the same way in the same instrument. And once in position, the soundpost is all but invisible to the outside world, dwelling in the shadows of the instrument, in the empty space where its sound is born.

In describing any object related to the production of sound, even one as humble as the soundpost, it becomes nearly impossible to decide where the material description ends and the metaphorical dimension begins. Although the soundpost has a seemingly modest structural function, as a metaphor, it is the soul of the instrument, its voice, the mysterious and invisible origin of
its sound. Describing the material nature and function of something as simple as a soundpost already gives us a rich sense of its meaning. This is one of the most vexing, but also rewarding and productive challenges in writing about sound and music. If we can only begin to describe the sounds we hear, where they come from, and how they strike us, we are on the way to articulating their meaning.

The soundpost is also a reminder that sound is always an expression of friction, tension and pressure. The forces of sound are almost geological in their scope, and if I might mix my metaphors a bit (and why not get as many metaphors in the mix as possible?), the soundpost is a kind of sounding, a core sample, in geological terms. Sounding refers to various techniques of measuring the depth of bodies of water, or examining the composition of layers of soil deep in the earth, or the stratification of air in the upper reaches of the atmosphere. Sounding, like the soundpost, connects surface to depth, reveals a complex, unseen unity, and reminds us of the layers of force that are embedded underfoot and overhead.

Couldn’t we think of music itself as a sounding of social strata? As an index of what is going on in the hidden depths, where the tectonic plates are shifting, the currents are changing, and a new landscape is in the making? Music, understood as a sounding, would be more than just an aesthetic expression, but a measure of the invisible tensions and pressures that hold an entire society together—and threaten to rip it apart.

From the perspective of the soundpost, a human society is not especially different from a geological or atmospheric system: it is merely a configuration of units of matter held in dynamic equilibrium with itself and animated by a vibrational energy that both stabilizes and subverts that equilibrium. The soundpost occupies that singular position in the system (the instrument) where it can balance the internal tensions that would otherwise destroy it (a snap in the bridge, a crack in the top) and project them outward as a beautiful tone. The soundpost reminds us that the more beautiful or compelling the tone, the closer the system is to the point of total collapse.

If all this is true, then how would we listen to music now and how would we respond to what we hear?

A soundpost is also a post, like a fencepost or a trading post—a stake that marks out a particular territory (a border or a meeting place) and at the same time draws that territory into relation to what is around and beyond it. In view of the soundpost, there is something at stake in the music we make and listen to, in the sounds that circulate around us as noise, background or
atmosphere. The soundpost marks out the particular place where we stand and registers the pressures that surround us and resonate through us.

Finally a soundpost is also something *posted*, a message composed and sent out, perhaps to a fixed addressee, perhaps to no one in particular. The soundpost not only marks a territory, a point in space, but it also samples and records a particular moment in time, preserving it for some distant, or not so distant, future. Like a message in a bottle that washes ashore, a crate of old records unearthed in the backroom of a thrift store, a song you overhear blaring out of a car window, the post does not necessarily have an intended receiver and can create an unexpected web of connections that makes the concept of cause-and-effect a little like time travel. What matters in a post is its openness, its desire to start out from a specific point, yet to circulate with no particular destination, to move with the forces and currents that it simultaneously captures and encodes.