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The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre ← in Popular Music

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dealing with the flaccid setup, keeping the tone brutal while also exercising the formidable technical control necessary to execute punchy, fast riffs. They also need to play on the thickest string gauges available.²⁶ Despite precautions and special playing techniques, however, at a certain point in the progressive downward slide, the strings literally become unplayable. There is, of course, a physical limit to how low one can detune an electric guitar. As Paradise Lost vocalist Nick Holmes puts it, “After a point, I mean, how heavy or downtuned can it get—until the guitar strings are literally hanging off the neck?”²⁷

Although lower pitches effectively symbolize the “heaviness” of the genre, detuning in death metal is preeminently a matter of timbre. Loose, heavy strings sound the way they do however they are pitched, corroborated by the fact that groups with seven- or eight-string guitars also commonly detune them. If easily reaching low notes without the physical inconvenience of limp strings were really the issue, why push it even lower on an added-string guitar, which results in the same string slackness as before? The Swedish progressive metal band Meshuggah, for example, uses eight-string guitars tuned down to F or D#. For the song “Spasm” from the album *Nothing* (2002), they drop their tuning a perfect fifth to B for a sludgy, tonally ambiguous effect (Web example 3.5 ▶). In absolute terms, this is lower than a standard four-string electric bass, but pitch is only an ancillary issue; detuning in death metal is less about frequency than it is about material-based extremes and the audible limits thereof. In fact, the timbre of a radically downtuned guitar is itself sonic evidence that the peripheries of the instrument are being violated in a transgressive, “brutal” manner. Contributors to the forum on the official Meshuggah website celebrate the audacious boundary crossing of “Spasm,” commenting that the guitar is “totally flapped out.”²⁸ This “flappy” designation is a quantifiable attribute of the vibrational properties of thick strings themselves. Thick strings, regardless of pitch, produce more inharmonicity and vibrate in a less predictable manner than thin, high-tension strings.²⁹ Before the signal even reaches the amp, then, it is already marked with timbral brutality. When it does, moreover, standard guitar speakers are typically not designed to reproduce such low frequencies, and as a result, speaker cones are often subjected to audible strain. Like thick distortion and polarized EQ, detuning—in its “floppiness” and inharmonicity, amplifier stress, and menacing low register—helps death metal guitarists perform the timbral “edgework” necessary for the simulacrum of sonic violence fundamental to the genre.³⁰

Page 84 »

guitar.com/forum/archive/index.php?t-803/39.

26. For more on string gauge, see Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 32.27. Quoted in Mudrian, *Choosing Death*, 222.28. Nem, on “Official Meshuggah Forum,” <http://www.tandjent.com/meshforum/archive/index.php/t-238.html>, accessed November 9, 2011 (site discontinued).29. Chris Forster, *Musical Mathematics: On the Art and Science of Acoustic Instruments* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2010), chapter 4, “Inharmonic Strings.”30. For more relating Chris Jenks’s idea of “edgework” to metal, see Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 29.31. This style is also referred to as *death vocals*, *extreme vocals*, *harsh singing*, *cookie monster singing*,