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Music of the Eye, Music of the Ear

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Abstract

The paper explores the concepts of Ear world and Eye world, according to McLuhan's theory, applying them to the difference between classical music and popular music. Ear music is a world of more passionate sounds and close to the body.

The Eye music is a world of sounds heavily influenced by technology and by the professionalization of the music. A difference that is close to that theorized by Durkheim between mechanical and organic solidarity. In the text there are several examples of the two types of music, also through telematic links.

Keywords: music, McLuhan, technology, social solidarity.

1. Introduction

Sociology takes an interest in music essentially for its social function, i.e. for its capacity, as every other product of human cultures and society, to interpret and support the main social processes under way in the society that surrounds it and which produces it. This reflection and this integrative synergy basically take place in two ways.

Both through the contents, especially in music with lyrics, with the diffusion and reiterations, through the music itself, of social stereotypes, of the models of reference, of the social representations that can convey and socialize the patterns of functioning and the world view of that specific society or that specific social group. And through the very rhythmic and melodic

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structure of the music, as is obvious, through the ways and rituals with which it is produced, transmitted and shared in that specific social group.

We will dwell in particular on this second level of interaction between music and society, leaving the analysis of the contents to other disciplines which, with greater competence, can deal with them, with the conviction that the analysis of the structural synergies and homologies which, at the level of relational forms, are contained in various cultural products, and the “golden” level of analysis in which the sociology of culture can give its best and in which it embraces with greatest vigour its object of research.

The analogy of our intention with the epistemological turning-point, already many years ago by [McLuhan \(1964\)](#) cannot be missed, in shifting the focus of the sociological analysis of communication and the media from the content delivered by the medium, to its communicative structure, to the “communicative territory” and to the networks of relations that, in its functioning and in its nature, it implemented. We believe that the close relationship with the society that uses and has produced that medium, as well as the greater impact that this has on it, its greater disciplinary and integrative force, lies precisely in this level.

From the point of view of music, our proposal, exactly in line with McLuhan’s thought, is a division between music of the ear and music of the eye as synergetic forces and structural mirrors of the society in which they are produced and enjoyed. It is a division which is similar in many aspects that that proposed by Fiedler (2006) in his writings at the end of the 19th century between intuitive and artistic knowledge of reality and logical consequences.

We will structure our reasoning according to two “ideal types” which also fit into an ideal historical sequence, although continuing to coexist in our world as well. The evolutionary and distinctive common thread that we will propose runs from the thought of Durkheim and the concept of solidarity to then be linked to the overall evolution of society, in particular in the passage to the modern era and industrial capitalism, trying to find the connections between senses (eye and ear, *à la* McLuhan), technological evolution and the relationship between man and technology (again *à la* McLuhan), interfacing culture with social stratification (“high” and “popular” culture); all with special consideration for the structures of authority homologically expressed by the organization of the musical event in the two ideal-typical versions we will be proposing on the following pages.

The essay we are presenting here is an expanded and updated version of the lecture published in 2008 in the book “Mozart Day”, edited by Antonio Carocchia and Marta Picchio, published by Edizioni Thyrsus of Terni.

2. Music of the Ear

In this dimension, the social function of music addresses the community and empathic adhesion, supports and helps the expansion of the mechanical solidarity founded on equality and in the inter-changeability of the subjects. This is obtained thanks to the music of the ear, which works by stimulating the synchronous participation in movements of collective and repetitive bodies. This participation takes place through the induction of recursive and shared movements that music induces and makes automatic. To obtain this result, the music of the ear is above all of the rhythmic type, is extremely elementary and based on a recursive, almost hypnotic, rhythm which stimulates the collective rhythmic automatism. This way, the community empathy typical of mechanical solidarity is immersed and takes root at the physical-corporeal and emotive level, completely skipping the rational register. Essential for this function are the rhythm and the simplicity of the musical phrase, a result usually obtained through the abundant use of percussions and the structuring of the piece in a few simple and, above all, recursive musical phrases. The collective rhythmic and repetitive (hypnotic) singing which accompanies the sound is typical and essential. This is a mechanism which plunges the individual into the group, which annuls his subjectivity and the capacity to differentiate himself and stand at a distance.

In this sense, it can be assimilated with the description that McLuhan gives of the spoken word in relation to the written word (McLuhan 1967: 84).



In this meaning, music becomes an extension of the spoken word which, according to McLuhan, is for expressing feelings and emotions, and promotes participation and social inclusion. The social context that characterizes it is

that of the family, and we add, of the clan, with great inclusivity and fusionality.

Examples of this type of social function of music of the ear are magic dances, up to inducing states of trance (like the chants sung to the rhythm of drums typical of the [Native](#) Americans); [military](#) music and the music used for wars and military conflicts, (like [bagpipes](#) and drums) as well as marching [band](#) music, which stimulate the individual to plunge into the group and prepare for altruistic suicide in the name of the community. More recently, we can include rock and pop music amongst the musical events typical of this genre of music, especially in its collective expression of concerts or discotheque rituals (like the music of the [AC/DC](#), of the [Rolling](#) Stones or country music or [ballroom](#) dancing music).

They are all major ceremonies of fusion of the individual into the group, or rather into the mass. The ear is characterized above all by being a sense that is always active, not very directional and therefore above all emotions, not easily used to develop the idea of the point of view and differentiating subjectivity, typical of the social genesis of the individual (Panofsky 1961). In the case of the music of the ear, in actual fact listening is immediate and does not only concern the ear: the rhythmic sound, which is particularly rich in the register of basses, is heard and perceived not only by the ear but also by the hollow organs, going through and taking over the whole body.

It must also be remembered that in rock and pop music and rap, an oral expression is asserted that is at least equal to the instrumental part and which on the other hand, in music of the eye tends to be predominant, and the role of the singer's voice becomes, in some cases detached from the meaning of the words, as pure sound.

In [rap](#) in particular, the word also immediately becomes music, something similar to the rhythmic songs of African or Native American dances, different, as measured by rhythms, from other examples similar to the Sardinian [Tenores](#), in my opinion closer to the instrument than to the voice. According to some scholars, rap, with its connection between discourse and music, could be one of the means of expression closes to the point of the origin of language (Innis 2007, Falk 2011).

If we think about the function of the alphabet and the book in constructing the individual, in the exaltation of rationality, of the point of view and individual distancing (McLuhan 1967: 93), we can say that it is a pre-book society and music. The book that is associated with music of the ear is the book which is read or often sung collectively, made up of short, recursive phrases with rhythm and always in rhyme, like the lyrics of the songs and, as far as listening to it is concerned, it is above all learned off by heart, more like

a sound than a word: the writing in rhyme helps, in this case, the aspect of recursiveness which we mentioned earlier.

We can give some examples of these books of the ear, perceived as sounds and not as words, referring to the old [mass](#) in Latin, to the teaching of the [Koran](#) in Koranic schools and the Buddhist [mantras](#), or nursery rhymes for children or the “*Chansons de Geste*” recited in the squares or in the Sicilian puppet theatre. In all these cases, although there are books, the dominion of the ear continues, which means the dominion of the group over the individual. The instrumentation to produce this type of music can also only be absolutely simple, very often the instrument is the body itself, in singing, tapping the feet and the hands and the use of [rattles](#).



Sound communicates, helps and concretizes ascesis and the community fusion of the individual who is annulled in the group and submits to it, who submits his individual interest to that of the community.

The music of the ear is the music of the group, of the horde and of emotions.

One characteristic that also remains in the more recent “postmodern” evolution of this type of music is the music compiled by DJs. There would be a great deal to say about the evolution of music, as the supports have changed (instruments, vinyl, digitalization, CD, mp3), but in the economy of these brief notes I will limit myself to referring readers to the few, enlightening lines by Baudrillard (2006 :21,22). The music compiled by the DJ also responds to the same structures and enjoyment as the music of the ear, in fact, the DJ constructs his compilation which is based solely on rhythm, constructing virtual and fleeting assemblies, which interpret the group ritual of the

moment, merging different rhythms also on the basis of the empathy with the collective event that he is contributing to create and modulate through the music he combines, by following, creating and modulating, “moulding” like sonorous clay, the shared evolution of the collective event.

3. Music of the Eye

This second type of music becomes asserted with modernity and with the individual, with the point of view of painting, with the predominance of the causal-linear rationality and with the advent of technology: one of its roots is in the principle of specialization and differentiation, typical of modern industrial societies, the other in the principle of linear evolution, of progress, also linked to modern thought and the alphabet. It is characterized according to the replacement of the ear by the eye (McLuhan 1967: 95) by sequential and not holistic structures, by specialization, it encourages individualism and privacy, detaching the individual from the group and specializing him, also thanks to technology. As a whole, the music of the eye moves along a process that is synergic with the effects of the alphabet and printing.

Its key of action is division and estrangement and the control of emotions and feelings, it creates civilized man (McLuhan 1967: 85). It limits the fantastic emotive and sensory life in favour of the rational, realistic and organized one, it is associated with the control and fragmentation of time (metronome), which becomes an entity in itself, abstract outside human life, time gives order to life, to synchronize organic solidarity, instead of flowing from habits and therefore being variable depending on the needs of bodies and the group (“time is” with respect to ” time is made”), metronomes and clocks are the technical incarnation of this type of time (Secondulfo 2011). Just as the score, written music, closely related to mathematics, can be considered the emblem of the passage from music of the ear to that of the eye.

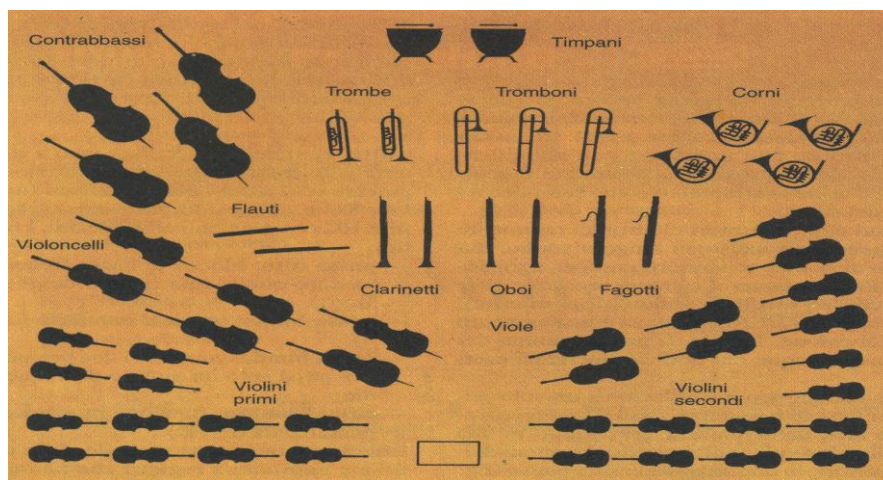
This complex of relations produces and favours a type of music which is not structured by recursive cycles but by progressive lines of melodic, rhythmic and harmonic evolution. It privileges the individual point of view and the division of work, it speaks to the brain and not to the body. It is a music which is born, is based and favours the division of work as organic solidarity, as well as the emergence of the individual over the group, the mass and the pre-modern communities of blood and place (for example, the music of Bach or Beethoven or, from the instrumental point of view, music for the piano or organ).

This takes place essentially on the basis of three main functions: the difference between listener and performer, the difference between venues for music and venues for other social purposes and the development of the

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division of work, including in the production of music itself. This is expanded and structured gradually in time through the articulation of the production of the musical event in instruments and performers, separate but coordinated, a progression which parts from the duet and arrives at the symphonic orchestra. There is also a fourth function, which we will see later, which represents all this being recomposed according to the principle of authority.

All this is developed in parallel with the evolution of a culture of the book which is no longer enjoyed collectively but read individually and in silence, a typical way of the age of the [individual](#).



From the point of view of the division of work and of the development of technology, there is then a further element of differentiation, which wedges itself between the performer and his music, it is the technological evolution of the instrument itself, which tends to incorporate, according to the typical logic of the civilization of the industrial machine, an increasingly large number of skills in the instrument, basically transforming the instrument from an extension of the body into a complex and in some way autonomous machine with which the performer interacts no longer symbiotically but through techniques and interfaces which are formally and strictly [standardized](#).

The evolution of the flute from the baroque flute, with only the holes, without mechanics and in this similar to the recorder, to the 18th century flute, with mechanical keys, can be an example of this change, but also the appearance of the piano on the musical scene is a clear example of a turning-point in the progressive imbalance of the relationship between performer and instrument.

In the new technological instruments, the preponderance of the body in the production of music is reduced, the score/technology combination creates a univocal correspondence between what is written and the sound produced, guaranteed by the technical nature of the instrument. The same key will always produce the same note whoever plays it, corresponding to the specific sign on the score. This, unlike less technological instruments, where the note has to be “looked for” on the instrument, which does not have any technical interfaces between the body and the element that produces the sound.

The image shows a page of a musical score for an orchestra. The tempo is marked "Allegro vivace". The score is written for various instruments: Flauto I and II, Oboi, Clarinetti in B, Fagotti, Corni in Es, Trombe in Es, Timpani in Es u. B, Violino I and II, Viola, and Violoncello e Basso. The music is in 3/4 time and features a complex melodic line in the woodwinds and strings, with a strong rhythmic drive.

Still in the sphere of the effect that the unfolding of the division of work has on music, from the point of view of the social community as a whole, we can note how it divides music from the listener once and for all, taking away from music its characteristic of being the direct expression of a community and of an undifferentiated group, and making that fusion between the individual and the group which had previously been guaranteed by the music of the ear, impossible once and for all.

This takes place essentially in three ways: with the clear distinction between player and listener, with the transformation of music into a commodity, therefore there are those who pay and those who are paid, and lastly with the construction of a linear, complex and non-recursive music, which relegates the rhythmic register to a secondary place, which tends towards high sounds, with a strong melodic part which dominates the rhythmic part, and with the percussions in an absolutely secondary role: the period that sees the birth and the domination of the symphonic [orchestra](#).

The music of the eye and in particular the division of work that it brings with it, as we said, also succeeds in separating the player from his music, through the interface of the technological-musical instrument, which gradually, as we said earlier, increasingly absorbs the musical output, in such a

way as to modify the type of skill required of the player, especially from the point of view of the relationship of the body with the instrument. If in the violin the note is looked for by the fingers of the violinist, in the piano the pressure of the key mechanically reproduces the same identical note over and over again. Furthermore, it is music that can be written down, that therefore cannot be objectivized and which materializes as “third” with respect to those who listen to it and those who play it. In contrast with the music of the ear, which always came into being from the interaction here and now between communities of players and instruments, being continuously renewed in its being forged in an event that was not pre-ordained but free to evolve in all directions. We can incidentally note that this particularity remains in the fascination that always emerges from the times when, even in coded representations, there are important variations which arise from the interaction between the players involved in the event, as in jazz, as well as the fascination kept by “live” recordings with respect to pieces pre-packaged in a studio and distributed for mass consumption. The aspect of complex tuning, in a collective “in progress” process, which is recursive and shared by the playing and singing group, was one of the essential points of the music of the ear. That of the eye is the music of reason, and thus is quickly separated from popular music, introducing the differentiation between high art and low (popular) art. It becomes a third music, which is learned technically, which is very difficult to play instinctively except after a very long corporeal training of a disciplinary type, and this is why it cannot be played by anyone and this guarantees the division between player and listener. A similar evolution also goes through dance, but a specific analysis would take us far away and we restrict ourselves here to mentioning this structural analogy. From recursive and rhythmic dance transported by the music of the ear, often differentiated only by gender or by class of age, in which everyone takes part and not only professionals, in which the body lets itself go more freely to the rhythm, there is a passage towards a rigidly coded dance, in which the body has to be educated about rhythms and positions which are often unusual, almost unnatural, and where the hierarchical differentiation intervenes massively between dancers (first ballerinas, in the front and with freedom of movement, ballerinas of the corps de ballet, behind them and with less freedom). With the major conditioning of the body, here too infinite time and practice is necessary, creating the division between professionals and the rest of the world; this is a dance in which not everyone takes part, indeed, only a few professionals clearly separated from the public who watch them and applaud them, exactly as in orchestra performances. The skill of the conductor appears from the perfect coordination of the corps de ballet.

All this is accompanied by long, extenuating and rigid processes of socialization, not only to the positions, the rhythm and the control of the body, but also to the lifestyle, the values and the ethics of the “ballerina”, concretized in the figures of the “*étoiles*” of dance. This mechanism is very strong in classical ballet, but no less present in modern and contemporary dance, although the aspects of coordination, symmetry and control of the body are less emphasized.

There is also a separation of place. Places are built, container-machines, explicitly adapted to this type of music and performances, organized from their planning according to the model of separation – specialization – control, the load-bearing structure of nascent industry; these places are called symphonic [theatres](#) and come into being to contain and allow the functioning of the music machine which is called a symphonic orchestra. The music of the eye and that of the ear, learned music and popular music, are physically and territorially separated from one another at this point as well. In the performing theatres, controllers and audiences are physically and clearly separated, according to a model of biopower typical of industrial modernity. Bodies are excluded from the event and from enjoying the music of the eyes, the music machines (theatres) are built in such a way as to block the bodies, both of the audience and of the performers, the only freedom is left to the person in command, i.e. the conductor, who guarantees the unity of everything and is the only one who can still interpret the music with his body, leaving in the music of the eye a little of the corporeal tribal quality of the music of the ear.

The orchestra is based on the principle of specialization and fragmentation of work, recomposed by the individual fragments specialized in the overall unity thanks to the theatre-machine, a real machine of communication which starts from very far away and, with the orchestra and melodrama, is organized in a specific way, in harmony with the rules of the period in which this takes place. We can therefore state that the organization of the symphonic orchestra embraces particularly strongly the organizational characteristics of 19th century industrial capitalism: with its organization, the division of work, the principle of control and vertical authority, we could say that the symphonic orchestra represents a sort of well-organized workshop, made up of specialists, each with their small piece of collective work, linked to their specialized machine, which the conductor coordinates and brings back to unity; in addition, unlike the musical performances of the previous centuries, there is a clear separation between those who produce and those who consume, between the musicians and the audience, who are also firmly contained in their seats so that they can do nothing but listen and, at the appropriate moment, clap.

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In this case too, it is interesting to recall the analogy with a political meeting and with the passive position: in this case too of the public whose participation is reduced to cheering. This is also associated with the considerable technological evolution of musical instruments and their consolidation, which also sanctions which ones have the right to exist and which, on the other hand, are forgotten or relegated to music of a lower ranking, popular music.

The most significant figure of all this mechanism is certainly the conductor, He undoubtedly embodies the principle of the individual and sole person in command, so dear to industrial, military and religious authoritarian structures ("A single man in control," as the sports commentators in the 1950s would say). If we compare the serial structure and the rigid division of work of a symphonic orchestra with what was then to happen in the development of rock music and jazz, with the structure in musical groups that are far more equal and much less specialized, we think that the difference leaps out violently.

Let's return to our orchestra. As we said earlier, the most interesting figure is definitely that of the conductor, who acts as a point of conjunction between the audience and the orchestra, and condenses in himself the magic of recomposition: from the fragmentation of the instruments to the global and unique event of the music played. The structural societal message is clear; so many individuals without a leader and a command only produce confusion.



He is the real star of the event, he embodies the principle of authority and absorbs in himself all the magic of the musical event and it is no coincidence that he is the only one free to move as he wishes, and he is the only one who always arrives late, like real bosses. He is the priest of the ritual, when he arrives the magic of the liturgy starts, everyone falls quiet, each takes up their position and music fills the space. This communication structure means that all the other components of the musical event (music, singers, orchestra and audience) take second place with respect to the charismatic figure of the conductor, the charismatic figure who becomes the demiurge of music, invoked, hated, at the centre, not only of the musical event but also of the political and economic structure that rotates around him. If we wanted, we could compare him to the great surgeon in a hospital. From the symbolic point of view as well, his power to evoke great musical masses with only the movement of his hand, recalls exactly that of the magic mythology of industrial society, dominating the great forces of nature with small gestures and great technological-organizational levers.

It is certainly no coincidence that the figure of the conductor comes into being at a certain point in history, in the second half of the 16th century, exactly in the historical phase when modernity and industrial production were beginning to expand in society, both as a force and as a discipline; until that time, for centuries, orchestras had always played on their own, at most with the negotiation of the first violinist or the composer of the piece, usually at the harpsichord, who supervised the orchestra, but remaining a musician not a conductor.

It was in the following century that the use of the baton, a tangible symbol of authority, like all phallic symbols, became consolidated; in this case,

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as it is artificial, the length can vary, usually from 25 to 60 cm., even though batons as long as three metres have been reported.



This great battleship, the product of the encounter between industrial rationalization and music, like the great ships of the early 20th century met on its route an iceberg, represented by the possibility, also the fruit of technological progress not of the mechanical industry but of electronics, of the technical reproduction of works of art. This capacity of reproduction, both of mass society and of mass consumption, led to the revival and the economic dominance of popular music, the only one capable of having, precisely, a mass market.

The structure of the orchestra thus remains frozen in its very costly artisanal skill and overwhelmed by the serial reproduction of popular music which invades all markets. “Classical” performances become museum pieces and the attention of audiences, as well as of the performers, is increasingly concentrated more on the virtuosity of performance than on the musical contents, which no longer have any substantial surprises in store. The evolution of music is developed above all in popular music, both with the evolution of genres and themes, and with the evolution of the structure of musical groups as well as in the methods of listening to music. “Highbrow” music is thus exposed to the risk of developing above all maniac attention to virtuosity and performance, which generates every particular type of consumer, the fanatical music [lover](#).

This type of musical consumer is often completely detached from the cultural and musical content of the work, concentrating maniacally on the virtuosity of the performance, thus developing support-like forms for the various performers with struggles and controversy between the opposing factions, according to the model of football supporters, which is often

extended to other figures and individualities which inhabit the world of “serious” music (the Callas v. Tebaldi controversy can be an example of these phenomena).

The evolution of music, as we said, both from the point of view of contents and that of technologies and instruments, is developed in popular music, the only one that remains alive and linked to the evolution of society, as shown by the development of the various musical waves., from rock to punk or rap, and the methods of listening, from the concert to mp3.

With a little courage, we could state that music of the eye was an intermezzo linked to the period of predominance of the alphabet and writing (from about the 5th century to 1500), between two periods of domination of the ear, the very long age of the predominance of language, from the word up to the 5th century and the contemporary period of the dominance of electronics, the period of the renewed electronic “global village” prophesied by McLuhan.

4. Conclusions

At this point, wishing to conclude these brief notes, we believe that the ideal-typical division between music of the ear and music of the eye, inspired by the theories of McLuhan on technologies and the media, serves very well to understand some differences between highbrow music, popular music, primitive music and learned music. The two ideal types can be useful both diachronically, linking technological and social evolution and type of music, and synchronously, linking the different types of music to the different social functions of the different events in which it is played. Last but not least, it suggests a level of analysis of the musical phenomenon according to material culture., i.e. seeking in the technical structure of the instruments or in the spatial and architectonic structure of the venues, further light on the social and cultural meaning of the musical event placed under the magnifying lens, with the conceptual advantage of framing them in a wider theory of culture and in particular of manmade objects (material culture). Connecting a theme which to date has been mainly studied as “*sui generis*”, at the most in connection with cultural and generational flows of the historical periods which saw their birth, to a theoretical *corpus* of a more general type, could open up the possibility of drawing, even from inside this cultural sphere, concepts, approaches and interpretative logics valid transversally for society and cultural in a general sense. For example, using the theoretical frame of McLuhan also explains the fascination of the musical instrument, which increases as the instrument becomes autonomous from the player, similar to the fascination with which every technology, understood in the McLuhan way as amputation, envelops

society and individuals to whom that capacity, reified and multiplied in the technology, originally belonged.

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