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Listening

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CHAPTER 24

LISTENING

MARCEL COBUSSEN

LISTENING AS A MULTISENSORIAL EXPERIENCE

7:15 A.M. While I am peeling fruit and preparing sandwiches for my two kids, my oldest one—just turned eleven—turns on her favourite radio station. Within a second, the familiar sounds of a weekday morning—the boiling of the water, the singing and yelling of my youngest daughter in the bathroom, a contractor sinking piles, cars leaving our relatively quiet neighbourhood, etc.—are drowned out by the sounds of synthesizers, drums, and the slightly hoarse and childish voice of Ellie Goulding singing “Burn.” It’s one of my kid’s favourites, so she increases the volume and sings along as she turns the living room into a dance floor. “Burn” is followed by “Marrakesh Express” by Crosby, Stills, and Nash: obviously less popular with a girl on the verge of adulthood, the volume is quickly lowered. During breakfast the radio stays on; some songs pass by unnoticed, others can count on a (temporary) consenting humming or rhythmical tapping on the table. When breakfast is over and the kids have left for school, I turn the radio off, letting “silence” enter the house again.

What does it mean to listen? What does it mean to listen to music?¹ These are immense questions. How can one approach them? Without intending to postpone or circumvent the topic at hand, let’s start with an ostensible detour: instead of immediately addressing the ear, I will pay attention to the eye and the body.

One of the first popular music theatre productions in The Netherlands had the title *Music (Also) to Watch*. In an essay I wrote in 1996 for a Dutch weekly magazine I heavily criticized both the title and the production as a typical example of a culture dominated by the visual where even the core of our cultural aural practice—music listening—was not protected against what I then called “the terror of the eye.” I also noticed this visual dominance in the extreme popularity of music videos, in which the attention of the consumer was most of the time more focused on the images than on the music (Cobussen 1996).

Some twenty years later, the time has come to modify this well-intentioned effort to protect our auditory culture against (even more) subordination. Although I am still interested in the way human beings relate aurally to their environment and what such an aural orientation implies ontologically and epistemologically, I have come to think of music as involving more than just our ears: experiencing music is, can, or should be multisensorial.

Two examples of this should suffice. First, I sometimes attend performances of experimental improvised music that are sonically not very interesting. However, this doesn't imply a wasted evening: the ways the musicians interact among themselves, with the audience, the venue, their instruments, technology, a musical and cultural context, etc.—in other words, the tactile, visual, emotional, social, and intellectual components of the performance—can be extremely rewarding. Sometimes I listen with my eyes more than with my ears. At other times, the body becomes the primary site of listening. For example, Olivia Lucas (2014) describes the sensation of “becom[ing] aware of my body as an impressive aural-tactile organ” as the drone doom metal band Sunn O))) weave a timbral tapestry of bass (60–300 Hz) and sub-bass (20–60 Hz) frequencies that vibrate through her. Although she notes that “in the sub-bass range, the hearing of the average adult is weak,” given that Sunn O))) plays at a volume of about 120 dB(A) (“quite near the threshold of pain”), the sound “manifests as a knocking on my sternum, and . . . buzzes in my sinus cavity.” One can touch and be touched by the sounds; the body becomes a total aural-tactile organ. Or, as Salomé Voegelin describes her engagement with noise music: “I cannot even hear myself but am immersed in a sonic subjectivity, *more felt than heard*” (Voegelin 2010, 67; my emphasis).² In other words, one can touch and be touched by sound. In these instances, the listener is attacked, stunned, and physically pinned down by the music rather than being allowed to adopt an attitude of contemplative attention. Thus, listening includes being aware of one's own body “as sensitive skin, as vibrating sympathetic vessel” (LaBelle 2006, 180).³

So, often, listening to music becomes a multisensorial event involving our eyes and bodies in addition to our ears. In the late 1970s, psychologist Lawrence Marks contended in *The Unity of the Senses* (1978) that the entire sensorium interconnects and works in tandem to inform our spatio-temporal perceptions.⁴ Adapting this general idea to music leads to the question of whether a simple audio CD can do justice to musical perception, as any strictly sonic engagement is by definition void of visual and tactile aspects. However, my argument takes a different course, intervening in a (still) prominent discussion within the domains of musicology and music psychology about the opposition of *distracted* and *attentive listening*, wherein the former often alludes to the interference of visual, physical, emotional, or psychological influences and the latter refers to concentrated aural attention. The main questions that will haunt us here are whether it is still valid to make a clear distinction between these two ways of listening and whether it is possible to subsume specific listening attitudes under one or the other category: are dancing to the radio or listening over headphones while commuting *distracted* or *attentive* forms of listening? Can someone be immersed in music while ostensibly *distracted* at the same time? Is background music—if such a thing exists at all—a

priori activating less concentrated ways of listening? Conversely, are we always engaging in attentive listening while attending live concerts?

In reflecting on these questions, I present various *regimes of listening*, covering diverse ways of engaging with music, events wherein music addresses us, and moments in which it intervenes in our daily lives, thereby being led by the idea that over the past decades thinking about listening has also meant embracing an awareness of the material, political, and social contexts of listening as well as the auditory environments in which our listening is embedded. In combining this holistic approach to listening with the proposal that listening is a multisensorial activity unrestricted by the capacities of the ear, the alleged opposition between distracted and attentive listening will be deconstructed, sometimes implicitly but always unequivocally.⁵ However, this deconstruction is not a conscious act of an individual or collective subject. As Jacques Derrida states: “Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject” (Derrida 1988, 4). In other words, the alleged opposition deconstructs itself.

FROM ATTENTIVE TO DISTRACTED LISTENING

8:30 a.m. I leave the house to catch the train to the university, a forty-minute trip. Before leaving, I grab my earbuds from my desk. I can commute without music—sometimes I prefer the silence of the compartment, the sounds of the train, or even the murmur of my fellow passengers, sometimes I cannot concentrate on my reading with music on—but at times I just need to distract myself from the environment, to lock myself up in my own “sound bubble,” either because I’m tired or because I don’t want to be disturbed by the sounds and noises around me. When I do play music in these conditions, it is usually (alternative) pop or (progressive) rock rather than my favourite genres of contemporary classical, improvised, or experimental electronic music. Perhaps they require too much attention, too much concentration when commuting inevitably implies that one pays attention to the environment every now and then, if only for the regular announcements (usually about delays). In fact, one is almost constantly interacting with one’s environment: for example, turning the volume down and back up again or taking out at least one earbud when the ticket collector passes by.

What does it mean to listen to music? What does it mean to listen to music in the second decade of the twenty-first century? First, the music most frequently listened to is pop music, although its ever-increasing diversification makes it harder to define genre boundaries.⁶ Second, we hear music mostly through electronic devices, be they sophisticated hi-fi systems or mobile phones with (or without!) cheap earbuds.⁷ This implies that listeners have some control of their sonic environment: they can, for example, determine the volume, order, and listening location for music. Third, sociological reports and psychological research tell us that most concentrated listening today doesn’t take place in concert halls, where people become annoyed by the noises or even

the mere presence of others, but rather during car journeys, especially (of course) when the driver is the sole occupant (Sloboda, O'Neill, and Ivaldi 2001; Bull 2000; Blackburn, cited in Hindley 2007; Bijsterveld et al. 2014). Fourth, listening to music is not (anymore) what (traditional) discourses surrounding music have taken for granted for so long, namely attentive or concentrated listening. Especially so-called structural listening, which requires an almost exclusive focus on the intrinsic components and logic of music, is rooted in specific cultural predilections. In *Ways of Listening* Eric Clarke comes to more or less the same conclusion when he writes that in the concert music of the West listening has become autonomous—attending to the qualities and properties of sounds in themselves and their purely sonorous relations with one another—and in large part divorced from overt action such as dancing, worship, coordinated working, persuasion, emotional catharsis, marching, foot-tapping, etc. (Clarke 2005, 38). Moreover, as Marta Garcia Quiñones, Anahid Kassabian, and Elena Boschi make clear in their introduction to *Ubiquitous Musics*, “the whole enterprise of musicology can be considered a justification of the value of those canonized musical works and of the *attentional frame* that has been built around them” (Garcia Quiñones, Kassabian, and Boschi 2013, 3; my emphasis). These authors, along with many others, reject the claim that this particular listening regime is the only or most legitimate way to really experience music. Doing something while listening to music—note that this phrasing implies that the act of listening is not considered doing something, an assumption which might be contested—is no longer or not always regarded as a betrayal as it may disclose unexpected, rich, and multisensorial experiences. As such, it deserves much more attention in scholarly discourses around music.

Today the imperative “you *have to* listen” seems to have been replaced by “the *right* that was given to me to lend an ear” (Szendy 2008, 1). In “Functions of Music in Everyday Life,” a report of a modest experiment on listening attitudes, John A. Sloboda, Susan A. O'Neill, and Antonia Ivaldi found that at any randomly sampled moment between 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. there was a roughly 50 per-cent likelihood that the participants would have heard music in the preceding two hours, but only a 2 per-cent chance that music was the main focus of their attention. Rather than having the attentive and respectful listening attitude of the stereotypical true music-lover, participants were performing some activity with music as accompaniment, with personal maintenance (washing, eating, cooking, getting dressed, shopping), travel (car, public transport, biking), and leisure activities (games, sports, socializing, eating out) being the most common of these (Sloboda, O'Neill, and Ivaldi 2001; Clarke 2005, 144). Sloboda and his colleagues come to the conclusion that people listen to music most often in a rather instrumental manner, that is, as a means to mood enhancement or mood change, as a stimulus for exercise, as a social facilitator, or as sound to fill otherwise awkward silences.

However, the observation that people are not listening consciously or attentively does not mean that music does not shape reality and experiences of that reality (Voegelin 2010, 11). Music is used to increase arousal, present-mindedness, and concentration (or conversely, distraction), and thus influences the way one perceives the environment; it

significantly determines the atmosphere of a place. This furthermore implies that the more someone can exercise control over the music being heard the better its instrumental function works. People want to be—and indeed have become, partly as a result of technological developments—their own disc jockeys.⁸

It is here that an interesting paradox, tension, or reversal that deconstructs the alleged opposition between distracted and attentive listening seems to emerge.⁹ A critical questioning of this opposition can be found in Lawrence Kramer's argument challenging *submissive listening*—a term more or less interchangeable with attentive listening—as an institutional norm:

Is my not listening that way really a deviation? Am I failing to experience the music when I vary my attention level or simply let it fluctuate, when I interrupt a sound recording to replay a movement or a passage, when I find myself enthralled by a fragment of a piece that I hear on my car radio without losing concentration on the road, or when I intermittently accompany my listening by singing under my breath or silently verbalizing commentary on what I hear? . . . These questions all point to a mode of musical experience . . . that cannot be regulated by unitary ideals or norms. (Kramer 1995, 65)

Kramer's experience highlights the fact that undermining and relinquishing of the dominance of concentrated or attentive listening in musical discourse by replacing it with attention to more distracted or instrumental regimes of listening does not lead to the ostensibly logical consequence that music becomes less important or less prominent. On the contrary, not only are we more and more exposed to music, not only is music regulating and accompanying our daily activities, not only does music affect our state of mind, but there also seems to be an increasing awareness of the music we want to hear in different situations and at different times. Add to this the growing number of situations in which we can have some sort of control over the music we listen to—Spotify or iTunes offering us almost any music we like to hear, iPods and mobile phones making music available at any time and almost any place—and the observation might be made that so-called distracted listening is in fact not very distracted: although we might not listen attentively in every situation, we are quick to change musical settings when they don't fit with our current desires, mood, preferences, condition, state, activities, etc. Listening has become an act of mastery, imposing a self-selected order on a seemingly chaotic world. The most important question relating to this desire to control our sonic environment has become “to shuffle or not to shuffle?”

This brings me to the proposition that in various regimes of listening to music we are both distracted and attentive at the same time, consciously as well as un- or subconsciously experiencing it. This supposition also challenges the boundary between listening and hearing: whereas hearing is usually thought of in physiological terms, always occurring (albeit mostly subconsciously), listening is regarded as a psychological phenomenon, an interpretative action in order to understand and potentially make meaning out of the sound waves (see Barthes 1991, 245). Jean-Luc Nancy echoes Barthes,

saying “if ‘to hear’ is to understand the sense . . . to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning” (Nancy 2007, 6). However, as Anahid Kassabian argues in *Ubiquitous Listening*, “all listening is importantly physiological, and . . . many kinds of listening take place over a wide range of degrees or kinds of consciousness and attention” (Kassabian 2013, xxi–xxii). Many listening regimes seem to occur in a space between distraction and attention, between consciousness and subconsciousness, between the physiological and meaningful, or shifting from one to the other and back again, as my commuting example also demonstrates.

MUSIC CO-CONSTITUTES THE LISTENING SUBJECT

10:00 a.m. My first class today: “What is Music?” As it is already the ninth meeting, the students know the beginning: “Batman” by John Zorn’s band Naked City. Today the tune sonically marks the transition from pre-class conversations to a thorough discussion of Edward Cone’s ideas about music and silence, alternating with concentrated listenings to music by Chopin, Schoenberg, and Cage. The ending of the class is delineated too: Frank Zappa’s “Weasels Ripped My Flesh” from the album of the same name. I realize that my use of Zorn’s and Zappa’s music can be compared to how Cone thinks about silence: just as, according to Cone, music is framed by silences at the beginning and at the end, my class is framed by two musics without it being overtly clear whether they are already part of the session or not (yet).

At first, the students are overwhelmed, perhaps even shocked by Zorn’s eclectic and dynamic music and Zappa’s noise, which lasts almost two minutes. They are trying to make sense of it, trying to relate to it, and we discuss the selection of this music in relation to the class’s topic: “Is this music?” and “How does framing work?”

What does it mean to listen (to music)? Where are we when we listen to music? Whether distracted or attentive, listening establishes a relationship between subject and object: there is no place where the listener is not simultaneous with the heard. The subject is *in* the sound, surrounded by it—they share a space (Voegelin 2010; Sloterdijk 1995). On the one hand, a subject produces the sounding object from its particular position of listening (Voegelin 2010, 14); on the other hand, by invading the subject’s body, sound constitutes the body and gives access to a notion of self; the subject thus emerges *as subject* from the resonant, listening body (Gritten 2014, 212; cf. Nancy 2007, 12). This relationship is why Nancy (2007, 10) can state that the sonorous has to do with participation, sharing, and contagion, while Voegelin maintains that listening is not a receptive mode but a method of exploration, “full of playful illusions, purposeful errors and contingent idiosyncrasies” (Voegelin 2010, 54). When we listen to music we are not (only) in a concert hall, a train, sitting on a sofa, or in a shopping mall: situated by the music, we enter a sonic world of possibilities, we are (within) sound.

However, *how* a subject constitutes the sounding object and vice versa also depends upon a context within which both participate and operate. To be precise, specific listening attitudes cannot be connected to distinct musical styles; musical styles or genres cannot a priori determine how one is supposed to listen to them. According to Garcia Quiñones, Kassabian, and Boschi (2013, 6–7), “works of classical music [can be] played as background music”.¹⁰

In the example given above, Zorn’s music might first be perceived in a distracted way—students are still entering the room and unpacking their books and computers—while gradually receiving more attention as they realize that the music is already part of the class. The music transforms them from young people into students, while in another setting the same music might constitute them as fans of alternative rock, as politically leftish, or as being interested in the New York Downtown Scene. In other words, music and listener do not have prearranged, fixed positions in a relationship; rather, they are contingent, negotiated, contested, and subject to political, social, economic, and aesthetic power.

FROM DISTRACTED TO ATTENTIVE LISTENING

12:30 p.m. My second class is called “Introduction to Auditory Culture.” Here, music is only one aspect, albeit an important one, of our sonic environment. Although we also discuss several texts about how humans relate to their milieus through hearing and listening, today’s class is mainly an exercise in “ear cleaning,” as R. Murray Schafer has formulated it. It is time for a soundwalk through the city, and the students are asked to describe some of the sounds they hear in acoustic, psychoacoustic, semantic, and aesthetic terms. We experience Cage’s famous statement at the beginning of his 1937 essay “The Future of Music: Credo”: “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain” (Cage [1937] 1961 3)

Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* was often annoyed with the soundscape of big cities; she was convinced that it was bad for her concentration, contemplation, and creativity. Woolf’s main character expresses the concerns of many intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century about the increasing noise level in industrialized cities. Schopenhauer’s complaint about whip-cracking paralysing the brain and murdering thought is famous (Schopenhauer 2007, 77). Another German philosopher, Theodor Lessing, maintained that street noises narrowed and dimmed the intellectual functions (cited in Bijsterveld 2003, 166–167). For these and many other philosophers, listening almost exclusively meant listening to the voice of the inner self, not distracted by any other (real) sounds, often including musical ones.¹¹ In general, making noise was considered uncivilized, primitive behaviour which needed to be controlled and suppressed. In that sense, Schopenhauer and Lessing’s intellectual attacks on noise pollution ran parallel with the gradual silencing of concert audiences over the course of the nineteenth century. Attentive listening, reinforced by darkening the concert space, among

other tactics, became the norm, soon followed by a privileging of so-called structural listening that required a deep understanding of musical developments and the overall compositional organization. In the opening chapter of Theodor Adorno's *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, "Types of Musical Conduct," this structural listening—silent, stationary, uninterrupted, ears glued to the musical structure and eyes closed—even becomes the only listening type demonstrating true respect to the music itself (Adorno [1962] 1988, 5; see also Clarke 2005, 136).

According to Adorno, structural listening as a close focus on music's formal components is most common among people with a proper musical training. He even states that only professional musicians can really achieve this listening state. I have already pointed out above how uncharacteristic this is of most people's listening habits. Even Adorno has to admit that "quantitatively the type is probably scarcely worth noting" (Adorno [1962] 1988, 5), although the "good listener" and the "culture consumer"—types two and three in his hierarchically-ordered list of eight listener types—could also be said to listen to music's formal developments, albeit alternating with more atomistic attention and concentration on performance techniques.

Without downplaying this highly attentive form of listening, the question remains if this has ever been the dominant type of listening behavior through which people have engaged with music. In other words, can musicology and music theory legitimately present this kind of listening as (almost) the only proper way of dealing with music? In *Everyday Music Listening*, music psychologist Ruth Herbert writes:

At any time, regardless of the context in which music is heard, I can find myself veering between "everyday" and "proper" modes of listening: whether at a live classical concert, at home, listening to music in a lecture or on the move, I might find myself "wallowing" in the sound, be exposed to unbidden imagery, narratives, associations and memories, notice myself analyzing aspects of the music, experiencing my surroundings slightly differently—or even forgetting the very presence of music. Notably, my awareness can fluctuate between these ways of listening to music in a single hearing. (Herbert 2011, 1)

What Herbert makes clear is that attention is inevitably multi-distributed, which makes the binary opposition between special and everyday musical interactions irrelevant. In other words, just as associations, memories, and the awareness of elements of the external surroundings might be conceived as essential elements of sense-making during live concerts, so too a listener can be unexpectedly drawn into (musical) sounds that until then had been subject to distracted attention (Herbert 2011, 57; Clarke 2005, 136).¹² In both cases there are fluctuations in attentional focus, shifting from intense perception to reduced awareness. Furthermore, listeners not only switch between perceiving musical and extra-musical sounds, they also blend together aural, visual, tactile, and other elements "to construct multisensory listening episodes" (Herbert 2011, 57). Combining several sensorial impressions in and through this multisensorial listening regime may lead to enriched experiences that an exclusive focus on the music's internal developments might never be able to provide.

THE LISTENING BODY

5:00 p.m. Back in my hometown, I decide to go for a workout at the nearby gym. After the university and the train, I enter another sonic world. as Middle-of-the-Road (MOR) up-tempo electronic dance beats blend with the dull sounds of falling dumbbells, the high-pitched clicking of workout machines, and the groaning and panting of the serious fitness seekers. In an adjacent room, two voices of instructors periodically drown out Ariana Grande's dance tune "Break Free," encouraging the participants in a group cardio class to extend their physical and psychic boundaries. Although there is an occasional humming, tapping, or nodding along with the music, it mostly goes unnoticed; only "inappropriate" silences and slow tempo tunes are registered (and commented upon) by the exercisers, even though more than half of them are wearing their own audio devices, seemingly dissatisfied with the music choice of the gym's management.

Distracted and/or attentive listening—it seems as if listening to music is a purely mental activity. However, from the opening sentences of this chapter I have tried to emphasize the role the body plays in the perception, interpretation, and appreciation of music. The body is, perhaps above all, touched by musical sounds—literally, since the sound waves touch the eardrum and make it move. In other words, there is a physical force that traverses our act of listening, thwarting any uncluttered opposition between distracted and attentive listening. Music philosopher Vincent Meelberg (2009) calls this force a “sonic stroke,” an acoustic phenomenon that has an impact on the listener’s body or that induces affect before or without signification. Hence, a sonic stroke influences and determines the (physical) relation between music and listener; it creates an affect, understood here as the ability of one entity to impact another from a distance. In other words, we—that is, our bodies—are able to register and react to sounds before or outside of a cognitive appropriation that aims to recognize, categorize, frame, or analyse them.

“What is it to be infected by sound? How are bodies affected by rhythms, frequencies, and intensities before their intensity is transduced by regimes of signification and captured in the interiority of human emotions and cognition?” Steve Goodman poses these fundamental questions in his book *Sonic Warfare* (Goodman 2010, 132). Goodman finds examples of sonic interventions into man’s affective sensorium in infra- or ultrasounds, Muzak or ambient music, and sonic branding. Meelberg’s sonic strokes should therefore not be understood solely as noisy or conspicuous interruptions; perhaps they are more frequently, but less conspicuously, found in today’s omnipresent musical wallpaper. Goodman’s examples suggest that the grey zone between consciousness and unconsciousness is the place where many of our musical experiences begin.¹³ If that is the case, it is necessary to rethink the idea of musical wallpaper associated with Muzak, background music, *Tafelmusik*, or ambient music. As Goodman notices, these musics can quite easily shift from background to foreground and back again, thereby undermining this distinction. However, and this is an important addition, this is not primarily a feature of these genres but rather points to a shift in regimes of listening (Goodman 2010, 143).

Here I would like to draw a connection between Goodman's reflections and Brandon LaBelle's work on Muzak in shopping malls in *Acoustic Territories* (2010). Usually music in these locations is analysed in terms of how it immerses customers in a sonic environment that influences consumer behaviour; the music should not be actively registered, but functions as a pleasurable background, acoustically filling up a space that might otherwise consist mainly of (unwanted) noises. This surround sound culture both disciplines and controls consumers' bodies and minds—regulating their flow and spending—for the most part on a sub- or preconscious level. As Barry Truax writes in *Acoustic Communication*, Muzak “imposes its character on an environment because of its ability to dominate, both acoustically and psychologically” (Truax 2001, 134–135). The auditory dominance of this music seems to force the consumer-listener into an attitude of distracted listening: although determining the (sonic) atmosphere and influencing the customers' behaviour, it is not meant to be attentively listened to. LaBelle, however, argues against this rather totalizing idea: “The [sonic] script of the mall is also prone to slippages” (LaBelle 2010, 180). The relational frame in which listening to Muzak situates us, a frame usually defined by distraction and consumerism, is always already supplemented and displaced by other experiences, from ignoring the music altogether to listening consciously and attentively, sometimes even resulting in singing along. Advertising jingles, sound logos, and ringtones might unconsciously enter our bodies as sonic strokes but they can easily attract our attention and start dominating our sensorial perception: “the ear veers and slips, focuses and drifts” (184), pushing the listener-visitor into different levels of attention. “[T]he undoing of the strict distinction of figure and ground, back to fore, aims for a distracted subjectivity that might productively find new points of contact and alternative narrative within scripted space” (198).

My point here is twofold. First, terms such as *sonic wallpaper* and *distracted listening* are misleading, as the presence and perception of music in contexts where attention is divided between various activities or stimuli is not necessarily superficial. Although at times barely perceived, music has the capacity to mediate, focus, colour, and integrate aspects of experience. Second, people may experience the same intense involvement with music in a shopping mall as they do while listening to music in a concert hall (Herbert 2011, 19). So-called background music is capable of entraining processes of mind and body on subconscious levels; moreover, the mere framing of music as background does not necessarily mean that it is passively perceived.

IMMERSION AND AESTHETIC LISTENING

8:30 p.m. I'm attending a concert of one of my PhD students, the Chilean composer and guitarist Miguelángel Clerc Parada. When I enter the concert hall, the musicians—a small chamber ensemble consisting of some twelve people—are already playing. It sounds like a strange mix between tuning their instruments, improvising, and polymetrical contemporary music, but which of these is most likely is indeterminable as the conductor is already in

front of the musicians, yet standing motionless. They play on the verge of audibility so that the musical sounds blend with the voices of the still-conversing audience and the scraping of chairs. Gradually the playing volume increases, and the audience becomes aware that the piece has already started; they settle into stillness and focus on what is happening on stage.

What does it mean to listen to music?¹⁴ The question can be posed again and again, each time leading to new reflections, considerations, explorations, theories, and texts. Listening, listening to music, knows many manifestations, inflections, (dis)organizations—in short, many regimes. Often, however, listening to music is regarded as an act of becoming immersed, a condition wherein the listener is totally enveloped, absorbed, and enmeshed in a musical world in which the boundaries between self and environment dissolve. This world of musical sounds is in a sense a “virtual” world, a special event that is clearly demarcated and separated from all other (“non-musical”) sounds (Dyson 2009, 1–15).

In contrast, the piece described above lacks certain elements that alert listeners to the fact that they are hearing music, for example a discrete beginning and a clear separation between musical and non-musical sounds. Listeners may become confused: to what are they listening? To what should they listen? Which sounds belong to the piece and which don't? Should they be silent and attentive, or are they still allowed to focus their attention elsewhere, on the conversation they were having, on finding a seat, on the atmosphere of the hall? In other words, what means does this performance invoke in order to evoke a specific listening strategy? Perhaps Clerc Parada is playing with different listening regimes by requiring an ongoing gestalt switch from background to foreground sounds, from musical to non-musical sounds, from conversations to music, and from multisensorial experience to so-called pure listening. Perhaps this piece grants the listener opportunity to develop nomadic abilities of attention, as it permits and encourages giving attention to several simultaneous occurrences. Perhaps it encourages a type of listening that Joanna Demers calls “aesthetic rather than musical,” a kind of listening that includes “the experience of appreciating the characteristics of nonmusical sound as aesthetic objects” (Demers 2010, 151–152). Attending this performance, listeners can at one moment be aware of the people, clothing, furniture, coughing, shuffling, air conditioning, and lighting of a performance venue, while at another instant be completely engaged with the musical events. Attention will always fluctuate, not only shifting from one external stimulus to another, but also from external to internal focus as stimuli appeal to emotions, imagination, associations, and memories.

Through this work Clerc Parada tries to rethink conventional ideas about listeners being immersed. Whereas immersion is usually understood as a state of being enveloped and transformed by a virtual environment or simulated space Clerc Parada assumes a non-dialectical relation between the virtual (music) and the real (the sonic environment). Immersion becomes a state of continuous transition in which different experiential layers interact simultaneously; it should be apperceived as experiencing multiple realities at the same time, rather than operating separately from reality. Unlike Demers, Clerc Parada does not want to disconnect aesthetic experiences from a perception of

reality. Instead, in and through his artistic work he argues that Demers's "aesthetic listening" (ostensibly quite close to Pierre Schaeffer's [1966, 270–272] notion of "reduced listening," that is, listening with the intention of focusing on the qualities of the sounds themselves) and Adorno's "structural listening," should be replaced by the listener's attention towards multiple sonic fields, achieving a multi-directed sensory experience (Clerc Parada 2014, 166).

"What place does a musical work assign to its listener? How does it require us to listen?" Peter Szendy asks. From the position of the listener the questions become: "[W]hat can I make of the music? What can I do with it? What can I do to it?" (Szendy 2008, 7–8). In this particular case, Clerc Parada's musical world does not consist solely of the music's own formal processes, but is far more heterogeneous and heteronomous; the music should not (necessarily) be perceived as autonomous. During the performance, attentive listening is alternated with, inhibited or transected by other forms of interaction between perceiver, music, and environment, moving between a blending of sensory impacts, attention to the (extra-musical) sonic environment (whether or not in combination with the music), and an inwardly focused experience where music triggers imaginative involvement (Herbert 2011, 187).

If this essay contains the germs of a new theory of listening, of listening to music, of listening to sounds musically, such a theory must be a complex one that incorporates many actors, factors, and vectors, some of them often marginalized, ignored, or excluded. Listening involves the whole body: the visual, tactile, and even olfactory systems contribute in very specific ways to auditory experiences. Listening also involves the mind: it triggers our intellect as well as our emotions, imagination, and memories. Listening is influenced by the environment: material as well as immaterial contexts determine not only *what* we hear but also *how* we hear it. Various regimes of listening determine and are determined by social, political, ethical, economic, historical, and aesthetical issues in rather singular ways. And of course music "itself" affects our listening attitude. It is this complexity which should form the basis of further analyses of listening practices.

(No) CONCLUSION

12:15 a.m. It is quiet (not silent of course). Everyone is asleep. I am in my study, rereading this text, listening to its voice, hearing its multivocality. Although the text has a kind of linear structure, it doesn't lead the reader in one direction, it doesn't arrive at clear and explicit conclusions. While writing, while reading, while listening, more and more voices can be perceived, more and more voices enter the stage, more and more voices support or contradict my own voice as well as those of many others. In the end, the question "What does it mean to listen to music?" cannot be answered due to its grammatical singularity. Not only can we distinguish between many regimes of listening alternating with each other, these analytically separable regimes might also be operating simultaneously. Distracted and attentive listening, passive and active listening—they are not (always) clear opposites, poles

on a line; often they are closely interwoven, the one on top of the other, the one in the other, the one with the other . . . They are continuous rather than categorical, constantly in transition rather than operating as stable counterparts. Simultaneously it needs to be stressed that music produces the listening, and listening produces the music, thereby suggesting that the field of perception can be regarded as a performative arena (LaBelle 2006, 101).

Rain is ticking on my window, wind gusting, accompanying the dry clicks of my keystrokes. I listen to the complex polyrhythms of these sounds, to the many nuances of the wind's white noise, and to some extremely high pitches—are they the external sounds of this room or a ringing in my ears? Can I reflect on my own listening while listening? Posing this question already seems to distract me immediately from my connection to the environmental sounds. Voices in my head, physiologically inaudible perhaps, do interfere with “real” listening. . .

I am tired and turn off my computer. It is time to go to sleep. Am I listening while sleeping? And if so, how? Attentively? Distracted? Aesthetically? Subconsciously? Immersed? . . .

NOTES

1. During the last decades, listening (to music) has become an important topic in sound studies, musicology, music philosophy, and music psychology; to present an exhaustive literature list here is simply not feasible. It is my intention in this text to bring insights from these four fields together, first, to argue that our contact with musical and non-musical sounds is most often multisensorial, and second, to stand up for regimes of listening that often have been treated with some scorn. In order to do so, this text is framed by philosophical reflections on listening—for example by Jean-Luc Nancy and Peter Szendy—on the one hand, and psychological research—represented by John Sloboda and Ruth Herbert—on the other.
2. Of course, people frequenting dance events know that music is not only perceived through the ears but is a total bodily experience: the erotics of music consumption. Moving to music is perhaps the most natural way to relate to its rhythms, its meter, and its sounds.
3. I am not the first to draw attention to the bodily dimension of listening. In the first pages of Richard Leppert's *The Sight of Sound* from 1993, one reads that “the body, simultaneously site, sight, and possessing sight, is an object of tactile sensation and an aural phenomenon. The body *sounds*; it is audible; it hears. Sound constitutes the atmosphere supporting life on and in the terrain of the body . . . Whatever else music is ‘about,’ it is *inevitably* about the body; music's aural and visual presence constitutes both a relation to and a representation of the body” (Leppert 1993, xix–xx).
4. More than a decade before Marks, Pierre Schaeffer acknowledged the multimodality of our normal experiences of sound in his *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966), arguing that we often confuse an auditory sensation with visual perception further processed by contextual information.
5. Here I deviate from my previously exclusive attention to attentive listening, which I presented as a possible ethical relation one could have towards music (see Cobussen and Nielsen 2012, 29–33).
6. I mention the dominance of pop music here because listening to pop music is often assumed to imply multisensorial listening, while attentive listening is often associated with “classical” or “serious” music.

7. The ideal of attentive listening comes from a century in which “serious,” composed music could only be heard in concert halls. Discourses on music listening often still proceed from the premiss that what is listened to is *live* music.
8. This control reaches beyond the mere choice of music to which to listen. One can lower or raise the volume at will, take away bass or treble, add effects, jump from track to track or from fragment to fragment, mix two or more tunes, etc. As Peter Szendy remarks, “we listeners have become arrangers” (Szendy 2008, 71).
9. Although Derrida firmly argues against the reduction of deconstruction to a method or a set of rules that can be adapted to any text, theory, subject, or event, I detect a certain repeatable strategy: first, a (hierarchical and often implicit) opposition is traced (here: attentive versus distracted listening, with the first being the dominant term); second, the opposition is reversed (here: the attention to distracted listening at the expense of attentive listening); third, the opposition is dismantled (here: attentive listening is understood to always already include moments of distracted listening and vice versa).
10. It should be noted that even if musical genres cannot prescribe how they will be listened to, they can encourage certain ways of listening and discourage others. For example, one reason I do not listen to contemporary classical music while commuting, when I am dependent on earbuds, is that the music often changes in dynamic level. During quiet passages or silences, the compositions are, unintentionally and involuntarily, permeated by too much noise from the environment.
11. In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes: “Formerly, philosophers feared the senses . . . [They] saw the senses as trying to lure them away from their world, from the cold kingdom of ‘ideas’, to a dangerous Southern isle where they feared their philosophers’ virtues would melt away like snow in the sun. ‘Wax in the ear’ was virtually a condition of philosophizing; a true philosopher didn’t listen to life insofar as life is music; he denied the music of life” (Nietzsche 2001, 237). Perhaps the most famous example of this sentiment can be found in the beginning of Plato’s *Symposium* when the flute player is sent away before the dialogue begins, as music could only negatively impact the voice of *logos*. In “Derrida’s Ohr,” the Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han takes up Nietzsche’s idea by claiming that, paradoxically, philosophers often assume deafness in order to hear more. And this is not solved by Derrida’s attack on logocentrism. Although Derrida certainly blames the philosopher’s voice in constituting a subjective introspection, and although deconstruction “hears” and reveals other voices in texts, these are not phenomenal voices: they do not sound; they are not embodied; they have no real volume (Han 1997).
12. This phenomenon regularly occurs in my Auditory Culture class when students start paying attention to their sonic environment, sometimes perceiving it *as if* it were music.
13. There might be a similarity between Meelberg’s sonic strokes, Goodman’s affects, and what musicologist Erik Wallrup (2015) calls “attunement listening.” Music first of all invades listeners in a primordial way, that is, the attunement comes over them, and they find themselves wrapped up in this sonic ambience before reflection, recollection, and analysis.
14. According to Cochrane (2009), one should distinguish between listening to music as part of a group and listening to music on one’s own. Whereas the latter implies far greater control over exactly what is listened to and how it is listened to, joint attention makes listeners aware of their mutual participation in a listening experience. Although the intrinsic emotional states might be different, group listening implies sharing an experience.

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