

MUSIC AND THE SOUND: A PHILOSOPHY OF PERCEPTION

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Abstract. How can someone have the right perception of sound and its nature? We hear sounds everywhere: we hear the wind, the accords of a piano or a loud bang. How can we tell which of them is music, and which is a mere sound? To say what music is, we must first understand how it is possible that something like harmony to be recognised. This article aims to define the unity between music, conscience, and natural things.

Keywords: music, perception, judgement of taste, sounds, phenomenology, acoustic hermeneutics

I. INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of the 20th century until today, the world of music has undergone a continuous revolution. A so-called *realistic aesthetic* was advanced to substitute the classical theories, starting with atonalism and continuing with minimalism and post-minimalism. In the following, I will focus on the aesthetic of music from a philosophical point of view. The perception of sound is different from a conscious act. In the writings of Kant, Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, the idea of a conscious feeling was not explicitly formulated. They wrote about the consciousness of perception associated with a judicative interpretation but the idea of the consciousness of feeling as an emotion was not approached. Music, above all, is feeling. This is the first premise from which we should start.

Musicology, beginning with Ancient Greece, classical European period to the contemporary post-tonality theory had the same

perspective regarding the essence of music: it creates emotions, feelings, destroys the walls of loneliness, calms the panic, approaches our souls to the transcendent and brings happiness. This is how we relate to music. We do not think how it is made, how the sounds are thought or if there are philosophical or mathematical concepts that are implied. Music reveals both our ontical and non-ontical essence. Sometimes, music can express the non-seen: in some Celtic rituals, the birds of the deity Rhiannon were meant to sing in such a way to lead the people more easily into the final world (into death).

Secondly, our aesthetic inquiry is intended to advance two new philosophical terms: “the critique of subjectivism” and “the pure reason of perception”, as formulated by the phenomenological investigations.

Edmund Husserl developed and justified, in his 6th Investigation, a doctrine of the judgement of perception. In appreciating the sound, we shall start from nature, where we can first hear sounds. Then, we should think of them with the faculty judgement. The latter has an important role in developing the sense of sounds. It is well-known that music influences our lives. Besides this, it also has a major role in sculpting our perception of the world. The unity between perception and things was named, by philosophical hermeneutics, “apperception”, which, if related with the essence of music, reveals some of its ontical characteristics.

2. THE LYRICISM OF SOUNDS AND FEELINGS

Songs were often included in the lyrical arts. They were related to harmony. The essence of music resides, however, in the unity of the transcendental Ego and the ‘I’. The perception of sounds defines the becoming of music in an ontical way, as in the case of Being. Sounds unify my perception with my inner world and the world in general.

The term “lyrical” was also used to describe “the expressive character of music. Lyricism captivates us through the intensity of the emotion” (Firca 1967, 26). In other words, lyricism is a way of expressing feelings in a creative and intensive manner. The sound has the major role to improve the power of lyricism because it directly affects our sensations. We can cite, in this purpose, Merleau Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, where it is indicated that singing involves not only profound emotions but also has the major role to coordinate our body:

During the rehearsal, as during the performance, the stops, pedals and manuals are given to him as nothing more than possibilities of achieving certain emotional or musical values, and their positions are simply the places through which this value appears in the world. Between the musical essence of the piece as it is shown in the score and the notes which actually sound round the organ, so direct a relation is established that the organist’s body and his instrument are merely the medium of this relationship. (Ponty 2002, 168)

We can propose, thus, the original idea of the embodiment of sound, which means that a sound can be incarnate, as saying felt with its all intensity. A musical work puts us in front of the dualism “style – lyricism”: both work together to harmoniously complete the work of art. Elements of “Klangfarbenmelodie” (Firca 1967, 27) exist in Enescu’s music. In painting, they were exercised by Kandinsky. The sound must have a colour. Each sound corresponds to a colour, as in the poem *Correspondence* of Baudelaire (Baudelaire 2005). The idea of sound as colour is present in many other creations. Moreover, the sound has also a psychological function. We think, for instance, of Gilbert Durand, who said that we can talk about the symbolism of the sound in a “daily” and “nocturnal” regime (Durand 2016, 197-199).

The lyrical elements are correlated to pure music. One of them is the calm immobility of the sounds. Silence comes out from the correct succession of the sounds in a peaceful way.

We can easily observe how the art of some musicians is throbbing, nervous or lyrical. It depends on the fact that sounds

meet themselves in a variety of harmony, which is equivalent, in philosophy, with the unity of apperception. Some sounds are loud and explosive since the fragment has to express the gravity of feelings and emotions. Others are in piano, to express tenderness.

A second principle is the idea of decorating and designing the sound, which means that there are some other sound-effects able to ornate the musical fragment, as in the case of an *art nouveau* building. The ornamental sounds play an important role in designing the entire harmony. Executed with precision, they vibrate in the most amazing way. Jules Levallois said that nature is above imagination (Levallois 1895). Music is the pure manifestation of naturalness and spirituality.

Talking in *abstracto*, the objects with the varied combinations of the lines, planes shadows, and colours, constitute a mysterious language, but miraculously very expressive, which you need to know if you want to be an artist. (Hautecoeur 1942, 222)

This is also true in the world of music. Due to the persistence of lyricism in music, we can say that each song is a classical one because it expresses the values of humanity: goodness, beautiful, silence or sadness. As Guy de Maupassant said: we must look inside us and let every feeling shout out.

A sound does not close to itself but opens to the whole universe. Let us think of the songs composed by Maverick, Havasi, Ólafur Arnalds or Sarah Brightman. Music is in itself the most intimate universe of ourselves. The form of the sound must be something compact and it is used by the musician to combine different types of volumes and tonalities. We can say that exists a cosmology of sounds or a topologically form to arrange them in a harmonically manner.

Music creates a report of dependence to the world, it creates the flow of life. The Universe is the becoming of our inner voice and perception. Music means listen to the most silent sounds. It has to be lyrical to be capable to touch our perceptions and being received

through our faculty of judgement. Music moves the soul because, in each of us, lives a *homo musician*, thirsty for sounds and spiritual food.

3. THE CRITIQUE OF SUBJECTIVISM AND THE MUSICAL PERCEPTION OF SOUNDS

The human being is defined by subjectivism: it perceives the external world through its faculties of knowledge (Kant). Therefore, suppressing subjectivism it is not possible. It is our consciousness that works with both kinds of given facts - subjective and objective data. Thus, the critique of subjectivism refers to observing the subjective elements produced by our senses. What objectifies them is the faculty of judgement.

Clarity is not, as the logicians say, the consciousness of a representation; for a certain degree of consciousness, which, however, is not sufficient for memory, must be met with even in some obscure representations, because without any consciousness we would make no distinction in the combination of obscure representations; yet we are capable of doing this with the marks of some concepts (such as those of right and equity, or those of a musician who, when improvising, hits many notes at the same time). Rather a representation is clear if consciousness in it is sufficient for a consciousness of the difference between it and others. To be sure, if this consciousness suffices for a distinction, but not for a consciousness of the difference, then the representation must still be called obscure. So there are infinitely many degrees of consciousness down to its vanishing. (Kant 1999, 449)

Music transcends the unity of our mental representations and, at the same time, provoke our consciousness. The “obscure representations” of which Kant was talked about are the unfulfilled acts of our consciousness. Music helps us access them. The faculty of judgement correlates natural sounds with their musical representation. Each note represents a sound-concept and it is a representation of our consciousness. The last is moving all the time. It is always opened to the sensations that it receives from nature.

If we take the above propositions in a synthetic connection, as valid for all thinking beings, as they must be taken in rational psychology as a system, and if from the category of relation, a starting with the proposition. “All thinking beings are, as such, substances” we go back through the series of propositions until the circle closes, then we finally come up against the existence of thinking beings, which in this system are conscious of themselves not only as independent of external things but also as being able to determine themselves from themselves (in regard to the persistence belonging necessarily to the character of a substance. (Kant 1999, 450)

Furthermore, if human beings are related with substance, the latter is subjectivism, as the relationship between the ‘I’ and the selfhood of things. Kant said that we can hear sounds in three particular ways: “as a subject, as an identical subject and as a simple subject” (Kant 1999, 450). From this, we infer that there are three different, but similar, hypostases of the listener. It is the subject himself who puts his headphones and listens. But this person becomes similar to the person who composed the song because the composer is also an “I”: a person, a first-person. Thus, we observe that the first-person prevails over the song. Then, the song itself became a self.

For the historian, time is not an undifferentiated continuum, as it is for the physicist, but a hierarchically ordered network of moments, incidents, episodes, memories, epochs, eras, etc., whose conceptual boundaries are determined by the nature of the events or the processes occurring within them. Similarly, for the musician, a piece of music does not consist merely of an inarticulate stream of elementary sounds, motives, phrases, passages, sections and movements, whose, perceptual boundaries are largely determined by the nature of sounds and the sound-configurations that are occurring within them. The temporality of a song implies different levels of “temporal-units” (Tenney & Polansky 1980, 205). Music respects the perceptual unity of sounds. In the field of music, the so-called “objects” from phenomenology are sounds:

To look towards the nature of the objects as itself [in our case the sounds] is to find the nature of the objects towards themselves, to find at least the objective nature of the language [in our case the sounds] in which stays the

imperfect nature of the humanity. The fact that it gets towards a poem [in our case the song] of transitivity this is the mood of how the things function. Due to their true transitivity of the communication, there is something which starts with the inner nature of the things (Crăciun 2009, 202).

We observe, thus, that objectivism is an effect of subjectivism related to our inner emotions and feelings. Since it is not possible to separate subjectivism from objectivism, in music, just like in painting or ballet, we talk about the transitivity of things in themselves towards their inner world. Transitivity designates the relationship between the subjective form of human nature and the objective and subjective forms of things. In the phenomenological field, all things have both subjective and objective parts. Adorno considers that, if we think of music in technical terms, as *Gesamtkunstwerke*, as a totality, we fail. (Adorno 2005, 91). On the other hand, Phillip believes that music must be understood in emotional terms, as drama. (Phillips 2015).

We can argue that “the matter founded on other matter” is the substance mentioned above by Kant. Therefore, we should ask ourselves if we perceive music as a totality of matters. These matters are to be found in the *matter-as-totality*, which is the equivalent of the essence and naturalness of music. Furthermore, Husserl insists: “The original source resides anywhere in the fact that any simple matter (any matter which does not include a material fundament) is a nominal one”.

Music is a nominal function of our inner acts. The sound perceived is a representation of what “is reproducing through it” and it is “the difference between the imagined subject and the reproduced object” (Husserl). The “reproduced object” is the sound and the “imagined subject” is the song itself - music, harmony. All these forms are subjective because only their reproduction by tonality produces something objective.

According to Dan Zahavi, “selfhood” means something that is correlated with an “experiential dimension” (Zahavi 2005, 117), which introduce a difference between judgement and intuition. How

can we correctly understand the concrete connotation of the subjectivist doctrine in the acoustic hermeneutics, which now is a recent field of phenomenological investigation? Since the appreciation of natural things is connected with their natural essence, it is necessary to be capable to correctly distinguish between intuitional knowledge (which is part of the intellect) and “experiential” knowledge, which is related to common feelings. The “experiential” dimension of existence is reflected in this type of subjectivism. Thus, we should give, through the “experiential” dimension of music, a new reflexive interpretation of the world, people, intimate feelings and thoughts.

4. CONCLUSION

It is not enough to introduce a critique of subjectivism in the judgement of perception because feelings are more powerful. In music, they are subjective but we can objectivate them in conscience due to the fact that the act of perceiving them unify the perception of sounds with what we hear or the manner in which we hear a song. We can go further to investigate various examples of melodies that are capable to produce in ourselves “winged knowledge”

In terms of musical aesthetics, it is necessary to introduce an acoustic hermeneutics capable to show the connection between the ontological plane and the existential one: the sound is *Being in becoming* but, on the other hand, it can be timely delivered to the Being. This time stolen by Being through the temptation of the sound is existential time. Music is medicine for souls. It is incredible how it has the ability to heal injured souls and create unity between the listener and the Universe. For hundreds of years, humanity is expressing the deepest dilemmas about Being through music.

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