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1. The Kantian framework and the epistemology of music

Kant's "Copernican revolution" in philosophy introduced a picture of human knowledge comprised of three components: 1) things-in-themselves, 2) which are apprehended through a sensory manifold, 3) which is itself organized and cognized through *a priori* forms of intuition and categories. This picture can also be found in the epistemology of music. When philosophers of music, theorists, musicologists and composers think through the question of musical material, the epistemology of music expounded often relies implicitly upon a similar framework: 1) the physical-causal reality of the acoustic signal is detached from, 2) its sensory apprehension or impression, 3) which is itself organized and cognized through culturally given or *a priori* categories. The Kantian framework is often summoned up in a shorthand form as the distinction between *notes* and *sounds* (with the physical-causal reality typically falling away, considered irrelevant or, at the very least, incapable of illuminating some vaguely defined inner "musical experience").¹

2. Brief overview of the dissertation

I am critical of any ontological commitment to the *note/sound* distinction and the subsequent one-sided valuation that often follows. In the first half of the dissertation, I try to neutralize the distinction by giving extended consideration to two thinkers who explicitly rely on the difference between notes and sounds: Pierre Schaeffer, theorist and

¹Some instances can be found in Lehrdal and Jackendoff's *Generative Theory of Tonal Music*, Hindemith's *A composer's World*, Gestalt Psychologists like von Ehrenfels, Koffka and Köhler, John Cage's *Silence* and Tristan Murail's writings, *et al.*

inventor of *musique concrète*, and Roger Scruton, a prominent philosopher of music and British cultural conservative. Although Schaeffer and Scruton sit on opposite sides of the musical-cultural fence, both subscribe to the Kantian framework in the form of a commitment to the *acousmatic* reduction (more on this below). I also extend this analysis beyond the domain of music theory and philosophy by showing how the distinction still shapes musical compositional practice in two specific case-studies: Gerard Grisey's *Partiels* (1975) and Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (1988).

As a way of overcoming the Kantian framework, I transpose Wittgenstein's argument about aspect-perception from the visual to the musical domain in order to re-describe both notes and sounds in terms of aspects. This does not reconcile the two positions, but dispenses with the ontology upon which their mutual exclusivity depends. Further, I draw a connection between the perception of aspects and our practices of listening, ultimately arguing for the important critical potential for New Music to challenge our habitual modes of listening. As a composer, and a specialist in contemporary music, I argue that New Music holds a unique position to recursively highlight the presuppositions and tacit commitments we share in our musical "form of life". Rather than simply promote a practice of New Music that aims to "reconnect with audiences," I argue that the marginality of New Music within our shared form of life grants it a unique critical position. This last point is illustrated, and grounded, through a discussion of Elliott Carter's *Night Fantasies* (1980), Morton Feldman's *Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello* (1987) and Michael Finnissy's *English Country Tunes* (1977).

3. Sonorous objects and indispensable fictions

Pierre Schaeffer (1910-1995), although studying music in the university, began his career working in French radio in the years immediately before WWII. It was there that he began to experiment with recorded sounds, convincing the radio station's management to let him use their equipment. He tried playing sounds backwards, slowing them down, speeding them up and juxtaposing them with other sounds—all techniques which were virtually unknown at that time. Compositionally, Schaeffer, along with Pierre Henry, invented the school of electronic music known as *musique concrète*. Unlike its German counterpart, *elektronische Musik* (which, associated with such figures as Herbert Eimert, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Gottfried Michael Koenig and others working in the studio in Köln in the 1950s, constructs sounds through the composite addition of sine-waves), *musique concrète* worked subtractively by manipulating, filtering and editing rich, pre-recorded sound materials, rather than building

Perhaps more significant than the *concrète* works, Schaeffer's theoretical writings (in particular, the voluminous *Traité des objets musicaux* from 1966) have provided a philosophical grounding and framework for intellectuals and composers working within the field of sound.² But, like many French intellectuals of his generation, Schaeffer relied on Phenomenology as method for confining the field of research to the domain of immanence and reducing experience to its essential structures. This phenomenological commitment led Schaeffer to describe “the musical experience” according to two interlocked reductions:

² See Denis Smalley, Simon Emmerson, Makis Solomos, Hugues Dufort, Michel Chion's multiple books on sound in film, etc.

1) **The acousmatic reduction.** Schaeffer posited that sounds can be intentionally grasped apart from their sources. By bracketing out the physical-causal source of a sound (along the lines of Husserl's *epoché*) from its perceived result, Schaeffer constrains discussion of sounds to the *plane of hearing alone*. Schaeffer writes, "Often surprising, often uncertain, we discover that much of that which we thought we were hearing, was in reality only seen, and explained, by the context." For Schaeffer, radio and the experience of listening to sounds through loudspeakers perform the acousmatic reduction and constitute the material basis for Schaeffer's insight.

2) **Reduced listening.** Grasping a sound apart from its physical-causal source, rather than providing a perception of the sound-as-such, actually encourages the treatment of the sonorous phenomenon as a *sign or index*. In order to circumvent this possibility and promote what I call (after Whitney Davis) "wild hearing," Schaeffer theorized a second reduction which brackets out, through an "anti-natural effort," everything "inessential" to the sound-as-such. Only at the stage of reduced listening does the "sonorous object" (*l'objet sonore*) emerge for the listener as the ontological foundation of sonic meaningfulness.

Schaeffer's phenomenological reductions duplicate the outlines of the Kantian framework: 1) physical-causal sources are rendered irrelevant, 2) replaced by the sensory perception of the sonorous object, 3) which is distinct from the treatment of such objects as culturally given or *a priori* signs/indices. The problem is that Schaeffer's one-sided valuation of *sounds* (i.e. sonorous objects), over *tones* (signs/indices) is utterly ahistorical—wild hearing has no past. In short, Schaeffer's commitment to the acousmatic reduction cannot account for the manner in which wild hearing is itself a

historical construction, hiding within its own ideology a modernist fantasy of a musical *tabula rasa*. I address this critique at length in the dissertation.

Schaeffer finds a strange doppelgänger in conservative British philosopher and aesthete, **Roger Scruton** (1944-). Yet Scruton, who argues for the persistence of the eternal virtues of tonal music against the onslaught of 20th century atonal and electronic music (precisely the field where Schaeffer's work has been the most influential and significant), uses Schaeffer's acousmatic reduction as the basic premise upon which his conservative music aesthetic is founded. "In listening," Scruton writes, "we spontaneously detach the sound from the circumstances of its production, and attend to it as it is in itself: this, the 'acousmatic' experience of sound...is precisely what is exploited by the art of music."

But rather than follow Schaeffer in proclaiming the acousmatic experience of sound an end-in-itself, Scruton subordinates the acousmatic experience to the "intentional" order that one hears in sounds. "When we hear music," Scruton writes, "three things occur: there is a vibration in the air; by virtue of which we perceive a sound, which is a 'secondary object', heard as a pure event; and in this sound we hear an organization that is not reducible to any properties of the vibration that causes it. *Hearing sounds* involves the exercise of the ear: it displays an acoustic capacity, and all that we hear when we hear sounds are the secondary properties of sound events. Animals also hear these properties, and respond to sounds and to the information contained in sounds. But to *hear music* we need capacities that only rational beings have. *We must be able to hear an order that contains no information about the physical world, which stands apart*

from the ordinary workings of cause and effect, and which is irreducible to any physical organization.”

Scruton has a name for this difference between the physical organization of sounds and the intentional order of tones—metaphor. “Our experience of music involves an elaborate system of metaphors – metaphors of space, movement, and animation.” We are being metaphorical when we describe a melody as *rising* or *falling*, as *reaching a climax*, as *moving up* or *down in tonal space*; we are also being metaphorical when we describe a tempo as *lively*, *brisk*, *slow but not dragging*; when we describe a minor key as *tragic*, a modulation as *distant*, or a cadence as *deceptive*. Metaphorical musical space, possessing a tonal center of gravity, is precisely the virtual location where music’s intentional relationships and connections occur. In addition, by delimiting the scope of music to an intentional order that is irreducible to mere sound events, Scruton argues against the validity of any music which resists the force field of tonal musical space—in essence, drawing a line in the sand that distinguishes tonal *music* from atonal, or electronic *organized sound*.

The problem with Scruton’s account (as if his blanket dismissal 20th century musical modernism were not egregious enough!) is his inability to distinguish various orders of musical experience: everything from pitch perception to extra-musical programs is placed on a single metaphorical plane. Although terms like “high” and “low” are used to describe our perception of pitch, they are hardly metaphorical in any rich sense of the term. Rather, they are our culturally given ways of describing *literal* differences. Scruton neglects the difference between intentional cases of hearing-as and cases where involuntary perceptual mechanisms impose order on successions, granted that there exists

a certain degree of conscious control over perception. At the same time, Scruton has difficulty integrating the parameter of timbre into his account of music's indispensable metaphoricity. At his most dismissive, Scruton writes, "In describing the timbre of a tone we are not situating it in the musical space; *nor are we identifying anything that is essential to it as a musical individual.*" Scruton's failure to account for timbre is telling: metaphors may be indispensable to musical understanding, but no single set of convergent metaphors can be absolutely comprehensive.³

4. Wittgenstein, Lebensformen, and New Music

By adopting the acousmatic reduction, Schaeffer and Scruton share a picture of the nature of aural perception; namely, both accept that the significance of musical sounds is distinct from what is immediately given in sensation, although the goals of their respective musico-aesthetic projects move in contrary directions. Scruton's "secondary object," upon which the indispensable metaphor supervenes, is equal to Schaeffer's "sonorous object," free from "residual signification" via reduced listening.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, **Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889-1951) attacks the temptation to picture visual experience in terms of the presence of a visual impression which only the perceiving subject has access to. I assume the same could be applied to aural experience. Wittgenstein argues that the idea of a visual impression conceived as a

³ The attempt to make various musical metaphors congeal into a single "musical space" produces the following bit of absurdity: psycho-acoustician Roger Shepard, in "Structural Representations of Musical Pitch," tries to give a spatial model of the musical pitch that captures three basic aspects of pitch perception: a) the verticality of absolute pitch relations, b) heightened similarity at the octave, and c) heightened similarity at the perfect fifth. To spatially represent relations of similarity, Shepard uses a two-dimensional circle. By combining the three models (1+2+2 dimensions, respectively), Shepard argued that an elegant structural representation of musical pitch is "a double helix wrapped around a helical cylinder in five dimensions". Ah, but of course!

private object within the consciousness of a perceiving subject is incoherent when applied to concrete situations. Through a series of arguments, Wittgenstein debunks 1) the claim that one can possess such objects, by showing how the concept of possession does not make sense in a context where ownership cannot *a priori* be transferred from person to person, and 2) the quasi-material status conferred upon the visual impression, by showing how the concept of an object cannot be made to fit the sensory impression. As Marie McGinn summarizes it, “If we try to conceive of visual impressions as private, sensory representations of the material world, then we find that we cannot begin to specify either what sort of thing they are or what our relationship to them is.” Wittgenstein is not denying that one sees the world from a particular perspective, distinct and unique to the viewer, nor does he deny that subjects experience the world in dramatically different ways. But these unique differences in visual perception do not deserve ontological status. It is a mistake to think of the private sensory impression as a new kind of entity. Rather, says Wittgenstein, “what you have discovered is a new way of looking at things. As if you had invented a new way of painting; or, again, a new meter of a new kind of song.” Instead of thinking of sense impressions as quasi-material entities, Wittgenstein encourages us to conceive of them as ways of re-describing reality, or alternatively, the creation of a new language-game.⁴

⁴ One could argue that Scruton’s argument about the indispensability of metaphor is motivated by precisely the same reasons as Wittgenstein’s attack on quasi-material sense impressions, namely, that it is our descriptions of reality that possess meaning, not the literal facts of sensory impressions. But Scruton’s proscriptive attack on 20th century music is at odds with the descriptive emphasis of Wittgenstein’s argument. Furthermore, his account of metaphor, although modeled on Wittgenstein’s argument about aspect perception, confuses cases of “continuous aspect perception” with those of “aspect dawning.” In the case of pitch perception, it is not clear that it makes sense to say, “Now

Skipping over a large portion my intended argument, let me assert the claim that works of New Music, for me, can also be thought of as re-descriptions of reality. By drawing the connection between the worlds created in works of New Music, and the overlapping, clustered language-games that inhabit one's "form of life", I believe that lessons learned from music composition, music analysis and critical listening (and re-listening), which I assume share many common features, can bring the problems of musical understanding to light, in a context that moves beyond the acousmatic reduction.

New Music, due to the lack of a highly normalized common practice, leads to special problems in analysis and listening that are not found in other musical genres to such a high degree. For example, in performing musical analyses, one must never forget that a composition is a palimpsest of various layers, usually created over a large span of time (relative to the length of the work), whose final sequence does not necessarily reflect its chronology of manufacture. Furthermore, most new works lack complete, explicit documentation of their manufacture, and usually have sketches or programs notes that are incomplete, often incoherent, and sometimes intentionally misleading. Thus, there is no way to objectively re-create the chronological sequence of artistic decisions and material conditions that result in the final composition. By 1) utilizing the ear (via performances, recordings, or in the imagination) to find significant or pregnant moments within the work, 2) making inductive generalizations and testing patterns of expectation, and 3) attempting to reconstruct or hypothesize the logical, chronological, temporal and intentional orderings of the work, analysis must be seen as subjective, speculative, critical and contingent. The circuitry between composition and analysis/listening initiates a chain

I am hearing this pitch as high," or "Now it is high." This is caused by the demand that musical metaphors be explicit, as cases of "double intentionality".

of replications, where a set of aspects that may or may not have been relevant to one composer's works (and may even obscure the set of aspects central to that composer's intentions), are brought to explicitness through analysis/listening, and thus inform the production of new works. At the same time, New Music, can also capitalize on its lack of a widespread common practice, by continually resisting the normative and institutionalized modes of listening that inhabit the center of one's "form of life" and by creating works that force continuously perceived aspects into audibility, and thus into question. Rather than ontologize sounds and tones, New Music organizes and emphasizes the real, contingent practices of how, precisely, we flex our ears *in situ*. And, with that in mind, phenomenal descriptions of New Music's complex constructions might be less revealing than merely sitting quietly and listening.