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The Flux between Sounding and Sound: Towards a relational understanding of music as embodied action

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In this article I consider implications for the body inherent in two aspects of contemporary musical practice: normative and computer-assisted. I separate music into bodily action and resulting vibration, or the act of sounding and the material of sound. From this ground, I examine the field for an understanding of music that questions the exclusive role of listening in musical experience.

Keywords: listening, performing, embodiment, technology, dualism, visuality

In an essay on Carsten Nicolai's installation, *Telefunken* (2000), Christoph Cox (Cox, 2002, p. 17) writes, 'Nicolai shows how science and art can conspire to dissolve the artificial boundaries that mark off our ordinary sensual access to the world.' With a similar turn of phrase, Ben Borthwick (2003, p. 42) writes about Nicolai's 'fascination with using electricity to reveal invisible and inaudible phenomena.' Both observations tap a theme from Nicolai's work that was distilled by John Cage when he emancipated noise and redressed silence as unintended sound. The width of Cage's project reckoned all matter to be in a state of vibration and, as such, ripe for creative appropriation. Today, the proposal flourishes as technological innovation puts an end to silence and expands the domain of musical sound. Yet for all its influential reformism and wholesome inclusiveness, the Cagean programme carries a dormant caveat. For it redounds upon and questions an ontology of music as an active, embodied practice and challenges its nature as something that precedes the apprehension of sounds and their patterns. As Douglas Kahn writes (Kahn, 1999, p. 164), Cage 'formalized the performance of music to where it could be dependent on listening alone…He *opened music up* into an emancipatory endgame.' Silence was disallowed, the vacuity of inaudibility refuted and the smallest of sounds given voice. Such an appraisal of music's realm and citation of technology's pledge for future practice was issued at high cost for the body and its role in *making* music. Human 'sounding' (enacting a gesture, the consequence of which is the material of sound) was elided in favour of passively registering perpetually motile vibrations of matter, which originated beyond the remit of any individual's being embodied in the world. To some extent, a strain of this Cagean legacy is inherent in Nicolai's *Telefunken*. Yet at the same time, because the *visuality* of its sound relates to our eyes, through television, the installation seems to

move beyond an understanding of musical experience as something designed primarily for the sense of hearing.

The disparateness of events, actions and sounding objects that comprise the field of 'contemporary music' increases as technology continues to govern the first causes of compositional practices. But computer-assisted performance-realizations of prior musical design contrast with new music written for ensembles of traditional formation and nineteenth century technological construction. As regards the latter, 'normative' musical performances ensue, linked to concert halls and other institutions with regular rows of seats arranged for unidirectional listening. Compositional ventures that feed and instantiate normative performances typically demand the intervention of an agent-performer, whose task it is to 'reach out' to an independent listener, which in turn lends the actions of the former (and perhaps those of the composer) a teleology, as if their journey's end were located in the listener's perceptual response to patterns of sound. At the outset of his book, *Musical Performance*, Stan Godlovitch (Godlovitch, 1998, p. 11) formulates an 'intuitive view' of such standard musical performance as 'sounds made by some musician instancing some musical work for some listener'. And indeed this raises an ethical issue - a 'classically Platonic theme' - insofar as 'musicians in giving (offering, dedicating) their performances better (improve, benefit, constructively serve) their would-be listeners' (p. 30).

A significant proportion of new musical activity in Britain today is predicated on this kind of creativity. It presupposes the existence of representations of conventional performances (i.e. scores), the constituents of which differ from those employed by Schubert only by degree (e.g. music written down for later performance by two violins, a viola and a cello). As Chris Cutler writes, 'the inherited paradigms through which art music continues to identify itself have not escaped their roots in notation, a system of mediation which determines both what musical material is available and what possible forms of organisation can be applied to it' (2004 repr., p. 140). Commissions for new work, issued by institutions concerned with music for concert-style presentation by 'ready-made' performing institutions, constitute requests for the *reconstruction* of pre-existent, historical-performative models. The 'new' in such 'new music' is limited by a historical collusion with notational-performative paradigms through which music has been performed in the past. Composing becomes a 'refilling' of existing performative paradigms: a composer focuses on how 'new' sounds and their formation-patterns may be represented in score, over the nature of the performative activities that are their cause. The resulting musical work bears the traces of the composer's having acknowledged ontological restrictions set by the (future) circumstances of its presentation-realization in a classical-style concert (e.g. a work *for* string

quartet). Such restraints, set in advance of any work done by the composer, seemingly validate the very existence of the creative-reflective interstice that characterises the procedure of composing and separates it from performing.

And so, I extract two types of practice from the field of contemporary music. On the one hand, a Cagean extension of silence, an opening up of the 'impossible inaudible' (Kahn, p. 160) in order to let it sound. The realm of music is expanded accordingly, with the aid of technology, but bodily enaction is diminished as such practice remains ensorcelled by sound's vertiginous nature and divorced from embodied modes of production. On the other, there remains a practice that is engrossed in its institutions of presentation - in normative paradigms of performance, traditions that seem to be underwritten by an 'intuitive view' of performance and reliant upon a historical awareness of notation in order to reify the ideas of a composer, an absent presence. There is no doubt that normative performances cannot do without the agent's body as vessel for the instantiation of musical works for some listener. But at the same time, they turn away from the performative body insofar as the musical work is rendered *for* that other being. Against the grain of both conceptions I contend the primary object of musical experience does not consist in patterns of sound and that the act of listening is not of primary significance. I therefore investigate the field for an understanding of musical experience that allows for a process of composing that is primarily a way of effecting relationships between human beings and their environments.

The increasing proliferation of computer-assisted musical performance in conventional concert-style environments and venues (which makes a kind of cross-pollination between the two types described) has the effect of militating against normative instances of musical performance. The operation of a laptop, for example, particularly in a traditional concert venue, challenges the 'intuitive view' of performance insofar as listeners cease to feel the immediate proximity of human agency in apprehending the musical experience. Godlovitch (1998, p. 99) argues that computer-assisted art 'involves remote control' and challenges 'the centrality of immediate agency' (p. 97). 'When based on indirect causation', he writes, 'a distinctive synthetic form of art-making emerges' (p. 97). Computer-assisted performance has also had the effect of pushing the essence of normative performance to its extremities, as if illuminating the history of the score as something that has increasingly exerted a level of restriction-control over the freedom of bodily movement. And yet, musical notation in its early forms furnished a way of linking certain gestures of the body to certain sounds, of which they were previously the cause. As Alan Durant writes, in its Western association with monody, notation 'appears to have recorded general lineaments of successful improvisations, more than prospective, compositional intentions' (Durant, 1984, p. 98). And yet a critical,

historical view of its development illustrates a tergiversation, from its beginnings in close association with bodily movement to its operating increasingly as a formalizing scheme, a way of fixing action in the format of a text-object, thereby lending it a verisimilitude as regards music's nature. Chris Cutler puts it thus (2004 repr., p. 140), 'the whole edifice of western art music can be said, after a fashion, to be constructed upon and through notation, which, amongst other things, *creates* "the composer" who is thus constitutionally bound to it.' In complicity with this change, contemporary computer-assisted music often has the effect of weighing heavily on the act of listening. And this process of physiological 'isolation', now in the digital domain, constitutes a contemporary symptom of a wider, historical denigration of embodiment that has been affecting the actions of musical practice.

The normal process of living engages our plurality of senses and Cage did, on occasion, speak about a need in making art for 'kinaesthetic sympathy' (See Cage, 1961, 1973, p. 95), in particular, for the use of the whole body in perceiving and creating new dance. Yet his emancipatory crusade for the musical status of all sounds of all magnitudes was exclusively rooted in the singular sense of hearing. If Stravinsky and Schoenberg led a twentieth-century, Neoplatonist investment in notation as truth - a belief that a notated composition might, in some sense, have an ontological superiority over the experience of that composition in the time of its performative realization - we might add that Cage was not so far removed from a version of such allegiance in his own compositional practice. For as Kahn argues, when Cage set about stripping extraneous meaning from sound, so was he wishing to remove idea and intention, to leave only '*sound in itself*' (see Kahn, p. 165). Such a process illustrates Cage's historical situation within the development of Western musical tradition and particularly his willingness to further 'its processes of exclusion and reduction with respect to sound in general' (Kahn, p. 165). Thus, Kahn notes, Cage remained loyal to the 'mission' of absolute music, its nineteenth century heritage and its neo-Pythagorean ancestry (see p. 398, note 7). So the Cagean endgame seeks the discovery of music - its revelation - as if it had always been in the process of sounding. And in the guise of its contemporary extensions, it sets out for a technologically-assisted music that inevitably spawns the task of transcending what David Toop has recently called 'the disembodiment that comes with the digital world' (Toop, 2004, p. 2).

If normative instances of contemporary music performance are scarcely more evincive of the experiential aspect of human agency (on account of notation) than those that are computer-assisted, then it is increasingly important for composers wishing to reconnect sound and the body to investigate the philosophical roots of their disassociation. Both kinds of musical work are usually

approached as if the meaning of each resides in any sound that results from any performative action. This apparent disregard for the body, the root-cause of sound, instigates a kind of musical scientism, invoking a Kantian notion that music engenders a cognitive 'free play' and allows us to indulge in a special kind of thinking that connects the emotions, the physicality of sound and the intellectual capacity of mind. That which is 'musical' is thus understood as having to do with the nature of the arrangement, pattern and formation of the physical medium of sound as perceived through acts of mental contemplation. But such a definition moves further away from the body as the cause of musical sound and irrigates a latent dualism that until quite recently has been held by most philosophers.[1]

Against the tide of analytic philosophy, John Dewey stated that the task for art theory was 'to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience' (1934, p. 3). He talked about art as something that has a facility for enriching our perceptual experiences and interpersonal communications, adding to their meaning. Dewey's theory provides a useful starting point for an understanding of the value of music as something that we *do* and not something that we receive, or that is revealed to us. Musical art is an experience of *making*, of bringing sound forward to the senses through the mobility of our bodies in action. As art (and therefore as experience) music does not require a special kind of thinking, through which its spiritual mysteries might be revealed, for the very reason that it does not have any kind of existence in any special realm beyond the 'heightened vitality' (p. 19) of our daily experiences. Dewey wrote of an organism's life consisting 'of phases in which [it] falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it' (p. 14). It is this progression that gives meaning to an organism's life, for 'the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed' (p. 14). Thus, life grows; the organism emerges from phase to phase. Indeed, etymologically, the word 'performance' permits a sense of recovering from states in which we find ourselves before *furnishing* new states of being [Old French, *parfournir*].[2] And according to Dewey, '[b]ecause experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ.' (Dewey, p. 19). By way of illustration, Bill Viola's slowed-down, video images of human action show us that when our emotions take hold, we too enact a kind of performance in struggling to reclaim a stable sense of being. Understanding music as a kind of augmented experience follows our rethinking performance as being 'about' or 'of' something (whether a text or a natural sound) and manifesting itself 'for' another, non-active recipient.

In *The Body's Recollection of Being*, David Levin seeks an 'overcoming' of metaphysics, along with the deconstruction of nihilism (see Levin, 1985, p. 56). His project calls for us to prevail over 'the metaphysical misunderstanding of the being of the human body' and 'our historically deep-seated guilt and shame, flaming into a terrible *hatred* of the body' (p. 56). The issue for Levin is one of retrieving the ontological body. He writes that 'we must actually *let go* of our dualistic, propositional way of "thinking"', and engage instead 'in the opening *wholeness* of our being', which he calls, 'ontological thinking' (p. 56). Citing Heidegger, Levin refers to 'an unchained rage of history' in relation to the 'way of characterizing the historical experience of incarnation in the Judeo-Christian tradition' (p. 56). Indeed, it is tempting to recall the development of Western music, its close historical ties to the church with its Augustinian denigration of carnality and the maturation of music from pure performance into the dualist, notation-authorized programme that provided a platform for the Stravinsky-Schoenberg legacy and score-based 'accounts' of the musical experience. Modern notation reflects this 'misunderstanding of the being of the human body'. As an elaborate system it makes a kind of musical scientism that exerts a level of control over natural phenomena, whether sounds, or the human gestures that comprise their origin. And if musical material can, in some senses, be 'manipulated' by, or on account of, musical notation as a representational system, then such musical endeavour finds resonance in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's understanding of science as creating models of things for analytical intervention: 'Science manipulates things and gives up living in them' (1964, p. 159).

If, after Dewey, we were to say that the isolated process of reflecting mentally upon the meaning of disembodied sounds falls short of allowing musical art to give up its potential for experience, we might seek to understand the primary object of music in terms of human interrelations. Dewey extolled the efficaciousness of art for transforming societal structures when encountered within the realm of the everyday, away from the sanitized plinths of cultural institutions. Recently, with reference to work in a visual field of artistic practice, Nicolas Bourriaud has outlined a theory of 'relational' art, which has to do with the cohabitation and common socio-political conditioning of discrete individuals rather than the private 'consumption' or contemplation of a singular piece of art (historically, through the sense of sight), by a singular percipient (see Bourriaud, 2002). Bourriaud circumscribes his essential contention thus: 'The possibility of a *relational* art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art' (2002, p. 14). The creative premise on which this is based is such that 'the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian

realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real' (p. 13).

Similarly, in *Music and the Ineffable*, Vladimir Jankélévitch rejects the idea of music as something to which we submit ourselves, passively, which in turn necessitates the rejection of our selves as detached sovereign consciousnesses. He argues instead for an understanding of music as something that has an intense materiality to it, which denies an authentic kind of listening insofar as it would validate the idea of intellectual discursiveness, underpinned by traces of dualism. At once, listening becomes a materialist preoccupation and comprises nothing that is of intellectual significance, to which our intellect alone might be directed ('Never believe the silly people whose brows are furrowed with meditation as they pretend to be "following" theme A and theme B' – Jankélévitch, 2003, p. 100). Returning to Bourriaud, we might say that since there can be no authentic mode of listening (as the Platonic theme would have it), we might understand the musical artwork as a *social* interstice: 'What is collapsing before our very eyes is the falsely aristocratic conception of the arrangement of works of art…[the contemporary work] is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to unlimited discussion.' (Bourriaud, 2003, p. 15).

Music, for Jankélévitch is an act of *doing* that relates to the material of the body and demonstrates the difference between saying and making. The fragility of its ontology is disarming, as is its temporal specificity and the physical spatiality of its occurrences. For Dewey, the value of art was to be sought in the experience of its making, not in the material products of actions. To relate this separation to music is to consider the vibrations of air that are the sounds of music as the scattered relics of past, embodied actions. These actions include the operation of instruments and prosthetic technologies as well as the manipulation of the body's own, unassisted potential for noise-making, all of which are acts of sounding. The challenge for contemporary musical practice, then, is to work out the meaning of sounding as part of the work of musical art-making by absorbing the aesthetic significance of all aspects of human experience. Such a task would require a move away from a historically-oriented understanding of the primary object of musical experience as consisting in the organization of patterns of sound, in favour of re-evaluating 'the pleasurable activity of the journey itself'[3] that is the transitivity of musical enaction.

Writing on 'The New Unity of the Body' and against a listening-oriented conception of music, Jacques Attali sidelines music's one-time goal of communicating with an audience in favour of a 'rediscovery and blossoming of the body' (1985, p. 142). Attali's understanding of composition shares in a relational programme, declaring its value for '[a]n exchange between bodies – through work, not through objects' (p. 143). He writes of noise becoming order through human interaction:

'to play for the other and by the other' (p. 143). 'Music', he says, 'has always had but one subject – the body, which it offers a complete journey through pleasure, with a beginning and an end.' (p. 143) Such theory complicates the question of whether the Cagean 'impossible inaudible' satisfies the conditions of music because it highlights its failing to emphasize the performative function that brings musical sound into being. The theory necessitates a better understanding of what it is we do when we are in the process of making music, of how we are relating to the world of which we are a sensible part and in which we share during the frangible temporalities of musical experience.

For instance, the ability to view musical action, with the aid of video, in a creative context of 'composing', permits an increased sensitivity to the role played by the eye in the perception of musical experience. In building new works that find a use for video enhancement-presentation of music in performance, the composer is led to a cogent understanding of musical sound as the *effect* of action and to rethink paradigms of creativity that have developed with the growth of work-idea concepts (that music has as its goal the realization of relationships between events in sound). We recall Attali's announcing 'a new mutation in technology' and his citing 'a herald of this mutation: the recording of images', which may soon become 'one of the essential technologies of composition' (p. 144). To be sure, the use of visual technology allows us to cast a critical eye over the *actions* of music making, to replace an ontology of music as idea reified *in* sound *through* performance with a theory of bodily activity and its wider social implications, of which the production of sound is the result. And so might sound itself be understood as a kind of notation, an audible vestige - a *memento mori* - from our having experienced embodiment and moved through the physical world of things.

In *Art and Embodiment,* Paul Crowther writes about the pleasure that we find in aesthetic experience insofar as it is founded upon and reveals 'a sense of fit or cohesion between our capacity to attend to a thing's sensory particularity, and our capacity to comprehend it in more general conceptual terms' (Crowther, 1993, p. 158). Performance allows for the exercise of free will, for choices to be made between different courses of action, each rooted in a plurality of sensory stimuli. When I engage in a performative act, I may have an idea of what it is I am making. And in finding pleasure within the nature of the aesthetic experience that I bring about, I may satisfy the needs of my self-consciousness as a human being inherent within the aesthetic domain. Crowther writes that it is in exploring this cohesion that we 'exemplify reversibility' - our being both '"of" the world', and 'bonded to it' (see Crowther, p. 165). Indeed, with reference to Merleau-Ponty's deconstruction of subject-object dualism, which plays a formative role in the development of

Crowther's ecological theory of art, we gain deeper insight into musical performance. In his late, unfinished writing, *The Visible and the Invisible,* Merleau-Ponty brought forth the notion of 'flesh' - that of the world or our own body - as a mature development of his phenomenology of embodiment. He wrote about it as 'a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself' (1968, p. 146). This notion of flesh opens the body out 'into the expansive field of worldly being', as Levin has declared, it 'serves to *liberate* the metaphysically delimited body' (Levin, p. 66). In grasping the flesh of each sound and colour, we feel ourselves 'emerge from them by a sort of coiling up or redoubling, fundamentally homogenous with them' and this makes us feel that we are 'the sensible itself coming to itself' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 114).

Music makes a prolongation of our own sounding bodies: when we see it in action, the visual experience reminds us that our body – itself an object of vision - can take a share in the same kind of physical, sonic experience. We *see ourselves sounding* by attending to the 'textures' of musical movement, aural and visual. What we behold is of both general and particular significance. For we are all in possession of a body with which we might move, the consequences of our embodied actions forming the particular materiality of sound, which in some way instantiates the concept of our having made a prior action-performance. Indeed, as Crowther notes, his ecological theory of art causes problems for conceptual forms of art (see Crowther, pp. 192-5), especially as regards such 'designated works' as 'ready-mades' and technologically-circumscribed sounds. For its thesis emphasizes 'the creative *making* of sensuous or imaginatively intended material into symbolic form' (Crowther, p. 192). Initially, products of the Cagean endgame seem endangered as they are embroiled in a programme of assimilation that seeks the disembodied incorporation of all potential sounds into the field of music. And yet we might also propose that after the impasse of the project of sound comes its opening out onto a new stage, its formulating and inhabiting a new medium.

To apprehend the role that a visuality of music might play in a post-Cagean era after the 'impossible inaudible' is to work through the meaning of *Telefunken*. 'Nicolai', writes Christoph Cox, 'reminds us that all matter is creative vibration' (Cox, p. 17). Cox relates the work to the experiments of Ernst Chladni, who drew a bow across the edge of a metal plate covered in sand before exclaiming, as legend has it, 'The sound is painting!' (quoted in Cox, p. 14). This phrase makes a useful tool with which to investigate music as an act of doing for the vibrations of sound themselves issue a kind of performance and so they leave the cinders of movement as a notation of past action. In Chladni's case, lines in the sand; in Nicolai's, televisual patterns. Cox concludes his article by stating that Nicolai, like Chladni, demonstrates 'that synaesthesia is not a rare neural event but a proper description of matter itself' (p. 17). Indeed, in seeking to make historical sense

of the multi-sensory way by which *Telefunken* investigates noise, we may be moving forward in tandem with the tenets of a phenomenological project, enabling the presentation of new agendas for composition that (re)connect our ears to images of sounding movement.

Notes

[1] A. J. Ayer makes this point concerning philosophers and dualism in an article, 'Mind and Body' in Underwood, 2001, p. 115.

[2] On the etymology of 'performance' and its implications, see Barilli, 1993, p. 105-6.

[3] The quotation is of Dewey quoting Coleridge in *Art as Experience* (1934, p. 5).

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