
A Voice Resounds¹

Jean-Luc Nancy

A voice resounds in the space of musical thinking – thinking on the subject of music as well as the thinking that music itself bears (on the condition of being able to distinguish strictly between them). This is the space, as it were, of the ‘philosophy of music’, which is neither a discipline nor a speciality but instead a distant, difficult to access and rarely frequented region – but whose preoccupation haunts the whole history of thought since it is that of a limit where it turns out that music says and says only what it alone can say² and that philosophy can only evoke.

Yet a philosophical voice is heard to declare that music is not simply its *object* but its *motif*. It specifies that this motif gives it the impulse for its movement. No doubt, there is no true philosophy that is not mobilized and moved by what it is concerned with, but this should not make us forget that here the term *motif* can only resonate with the musical value it has taken on for a long time and which makes it the equivalent of the theme, in other words, of a properly musical datum through which the entire register of a composition is engaged.

A *motif* – the voice says this in following – is at once a situation, a difficulty and impulse to get out of it. It is a surge and the indication of a tone or of a regime of expression. This voice is not far from declaring that it sings its philosophy or that it makes philosophy an instrument, albeit a special one, of the music it is talking about.³

This voice of that of Günther Anders. Unexpected, is the least one can say. The fact is nonetheless that the philosopher of *The Obsolescence of Humankind* and of *Hiroshima is Everywhere* had set out by writing about music and was destined to

have an academic future as a philosopher of music. The most important of the texts in this volume – the German original of which was not published until 2017 – is indeed a habilitation project submitted to the University of Frankfurt am Main in 1930. In addition to his studies in philosophy, Günther Stern (at that time he still bore his family name) had a background in music education and training, which is described in detail in Reinhard Ellensohn's afterword.⁴

Günther Stern's project was not accepted. Not without bitterness did he accept his path, but he did take it as an opportunity to reflect and change direction, the springs of which are extremely hard to divine. This would obviously require the work of a historian – which I am not – and would probably only remain partly conjectural.

However, such a peculiar circumstance – especially given the strength and subtlety of the project's description – at least demands that we attempt to understand it in such a way as to be able to take another perspective on the text than that of its academic failure and its apparent abandonment by its author (who nevertheless tried to publish it, but in vain, in the United States).

It seems possible to say that this text was caught within a critical situation that shut off access to it. Irrespective of the political circumstances, which we can glean from the German documents, Adorno's theoretical opposition obviously played an important role. Adorno could not help but have bristled at a work whose Heideggerian and Augustinian inspiration (a duality whose arrangement can only be appreciated on reading) seemed to him to be an ahistorical spiritualism alien to the issues of the social and cultural transformation of the time. Moreover, he could not but look down on Stern's musicological knowledge, which was very poor compared to his own (especially concerning composition, as Anders himself later recognised). Stern must have felt if not guilty, then at least inferior to the task required by the times. Adorno's technical and personal authority convinced him (albeit despite himself) that he had to take a different path – not only with regard to music but as a philosopher.⁵

Today, it is impossible not to gauge the extent to which the respective thinking of Adorno and of Anders were fundamentally not that distant. What appeared to him in Anders as spiritualist and bourgeois complacency was not so far removed from what he had meant by proclaiming, following the "saying" of music, "the idea of a language different from that of men."⁶

If the romantic and bourgeois 'spiritualisation' of music stands, for Adorno, 'in stark conflict with the ineluctable determination of every artwork as spirit',⁷ "spirit" is nevertheless what it is about, and the necessary "determination" is to be found in the severity of compositions (such as those of Schönberg or Webern) intended to

“consciously resist the phenomenon of regressive listening.”⁸ Even if the texts I quote here are post-1930, this does not mean that they reflect the late thinking of their author. But would Adorno have judged that Günther Anders was giving in to the “regressive listening” that he castigates – pleasurable and delighted listening, not a listening to the rigours of constructions? This seems improbable because there is nothing in the habilitation to suggest an abandonment musical delight and to a non-consideration of “the musical nexus that establishes meaning.”⁹ We will come back to this in connection with ‘rapture’. Adorno was no doubt rather irritated by the Heideggerian provenance and by the Augustinian reference of Anders’ thinking, whose interest he could not entirely misjudge.

There is no need to dwell further on this episode here, but it is important to point out the misunderstanding and the gap between two dispositions that, while very different, are fundamentally less exclusive than Anders had felt. What can be said today is that Anders, while probably not attentive enough to the “regression” of the age, nonetheless saw the philosophical stakes of music (and the musical stakes of philosophy) better than Adorno did.

Unheard – or rather not listened to – in 1930, his voice can be better perceived now. It deserves to resound, amid a soundscape even more complex than that of 1930, as a call to sense in music a “vital element”¹⁰ amidst the deadly signs that oppress us. Not that it is up to music alone, in its determined forms, to resolve the anguish of present times: but it can point to the possibility of a “saying something without asserting anything,”¹¹ perhaps something that our world needs most – at least if it is true that it appears to have nothing more to say. Of this, we can be convinced by reading this text, which seems to have been pushed into the background only to speak to us better today.

A preface does not have the purpose of commenting on a book, but only of suggesting its taste or tone. Here I would not want to do much more, and could not than to characterise in broad strokes the *motif* – which thus also forms the *motive* – of Günther Anders’ work on music.

The first feature is that by which philosophy, in this work, strives to separate itself from itself and to go beyond. Anders specifies that ‘to do philosophy’ is to thematise and analyse our relationship to the world¹² as we exist in it – whereas we can also be or exist ‘*in music*’ in a sense that he qualifies as ontological – which means, in the Heideggerian vein of *Being and Time*, of the order of the fundamental conditions of existence. In other words, the possibilities of our existence are not exhausted by an understanding of the world: we also exist, and simultaneously, in another mode. The latter is no longer a matter of understanding, it is of a different

order, and that is why this philosophical work requires us to go beyond philosophy (which also has a Heideggerian sound to it, although in a register completely foreign to Heidegger, who would not have believed his ears).

In order to do this, we must overcome the “compartmentalized astonishment”¹³ from which philosophy stems and which, in the case of music, always leads to a series of dead ends formed by the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity. What is important is to accede to the existential reality of what Anders calls ‘co-realisation’: the subject and the object of music are realised together, whether we mean the listener and the work or the composer and the work or the work and the situation, and so on. The music is not just about the subject, but also about the object. Musical ‘ontology’ refers to the existential character of the experience in which I hear – or ‘understand’ – music only insofar as it occurs in me; at the same time, it means that in this existence I myself am musically produced and become another subject than the subject of my understanding existence – or better still, I exceed the regime of the subject/object couple.

It is therefore a question of going beyond existence within existence itself. In the experience of music – a concrete, lived experience, part of the most familiar world – this exceptional transformation takes place by which ‘one becomes oneself [...] the medium *in which* one is’.¹⁴

This is how the *motif* of a transformed or outdated philosophical work takes on its full scope: it is a question of thinking about an existential transformation by which existence exceeds itself (or exceeds, to speak like Nietzsche, its all too human humanity) and by exceeding itself it discovers itself as something else. One could say that the entire sphere of art, or of the arts, is thus bound up in this – and this would be right despite the fact that Anders himself dwells on this very little. However, in this sphere a privilege accrues to music, one that consists in its disturbing proximity to language.

This proximity has given rise to a prodigious amount of questioning and commentary since Plato and Aristotle, for both of whom it was necessary either to set music aside or to model it on the *logos* – which implies dividing the musical phenomenon by a non-musical criterion and thus ignoring its specificity. If this specificity has not ceased to create confusion and to demand that every thinker of music explain himself on the basis of this saying – which says nothing – it is because this ‘saying’ is not simply resolved – neither in the manner of Plato nor in that of the prolix glossators of musical effusion or narration (which may include the composer himself, as with Beethoven’s calling his 8th symphony ‘Pastoral’, but not without adding a reservation: ‘rather expressed emotion than descriptive painting’, that is to say, basically, a non-linguistic expression).

It can be shown that there is no strong thinking about music that does not strive to indicate, in its way, how music 'says' beyond language.¹⁵

In this regard, Günther Anders presents a singular audacity. For him not only is there nothing linguistic about music but, in addition, music sets out from and goes towards something that pertains to a pre- or post-musical dimension – to a transcendence. Music, in the proper sense, proceeds from an *Ertönen* (translated here as 'resonance'), that is to say from an 'entering into sonority' or 'resonating' (itself anterior – in ontological precedence – to the *Verlautbaren*, to the 'putting into sounds' (one dares not say 'sonorisation'; here the translators rendered it as *entonner* (strike up)). This call, all in all pre-acoustic, is addressed to a listening that is not simple auditive reception but a *Lauschen* – an untranslatable word here rendered in the French translation as *'écoute à l'affût*, (listening in wait) and which evokes a curious, indeed indiscreet, listening, one strained toward what in the end could turn out to be inaudible.¹⁶

From this side to the other side of sound, that is the truth of musical experience – but takes place only through the crossing of sound. The awakening of resonance and the culmination (if it is one) of intimate listening belong to a transcendence of sound that must be understood in two senses: the sound transcends and it is transcended. Thus it does not mean that, if meaning always presupposes a subject who appropriates it, the musical experience is, on the contrary, as such – and it is more or less learned, provided it is a listening experience – that of a 'detachment from oneself'.¹⁷

The essence of this detachment does not lie in some dubious evanescence: it consists entirely in the 'co-realisation' by which listening tends to merge with the resonance that gives rise to it and that it lies in wait for.

One can already hear the exclamations or grunts of 'that austere Schönbergian or Adornian superego that slumbers in the bad conscience of every slightly educated music lover'.¹⁸ The situation in 1930 is not always or everywhere outdated, so great is the mistrust of spiritualist sirens and romantic enchantments. This mistrust is justified because it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between effusion and sensible finesse (it depends above all on the language used...). That music in all its forms is capable of transporting us is the least that is expected of it - if only as an incitement to dance,¹⁹ and this expectation itself responds to a call, to a resonance that 'shakes exteriority'²⁰: there is a kind of primitive, elementary animation of the body through the most ductile form of sensation: sound, itself linked to time. This analysis, which Anders takes up from Hegel, has nothing idealistic or spiritual about it: on the contrary, it is attentive to the very precise characteristics of living, sensitive and thinking matter.

Nor, therefore, is there any reason to suspect of complacency the expression that designates shaking in its most subtle and unbounded form, namely the 'rapture'²¹ or transport (*Entrückung*) that can precisely be found in a work by Schönberg – a work, moreover, that Adorno would later come to praise.²²

Stefan George's poem 'Rapture', also translated as 'Transport, which in the fourth movement of Schönberg's String Quartet No. 2 is set to music for soprano voice, contains these lines in particular²³:

I lose myself in tones, circling, weaving,
With unfathomable thanks and unnamed praise,
Bereft of desire, I surrender myself to the great breath.

Even if George's poetry seems to us today to be florid, Anders – after Schönberg and before Adorno – sees in it a convincing testimony²⁴ of what, he writes, 'one could call *negative ecstasy*'. It is indeed to suchlike that music exposes us: not a negation of ecstasy, but an ecstasy that opens onto no other transcendence than that of an exit from oneself – from human finitude – without passing through any empyrean of any sort. The considerable resources that Anders was able to draw from Augustinian thought on music nonetheless did not convert him to Christianity. This is why, while carefully noting the discrepancy between 'that which is sung' and the song itself, he refuses to see it as a contrariety but as an 'elementary ambiguity'²⁵ that is constitutive of musical experience.

It is always within 'the limits of human expression' that music is produced, but it is no less than a 'human expression' or 'intended for' man. This surpassing of man within man himself (where one can feel the effects of Hegel, Heidegger, Augustine and also Judaism) corresponds to a transcendence that does not overshadow immanence but rather is inherent in it.

A particularly striking feature of this transcendence in immanence is the way that Anders places the instrument beyond voice as an objectivity beyond subjectivity, as a sweeping away of the human into the 'detachment' of the musical order.²⁶

Anders finds a non-theological confirmation of what Augustine had suggested to him in the Kantian thought of the sublime. He writes:

the sublime is not simply that which exceeds our capacities without any danger, it also embodies the Law to be respected, the terrifying power. In listening alone (as obedience and observance) the perceived object appears primarily as power.²⁷

The ontological privilege of sonority thus corresponds to a sensible privilege, which is another way of indicating how musical 'transport' is neither mystical nor fantastical and, on the contrary, is entirely a matter of the proper nature of human existence in all the power of its *ex-*. The 'coming out of oneself' which here substitutes for 'nature' or 'essence' is achieved in *transformation*.²⁸ Music certainly does not exhaust all the human possibilities of transformation (or transcendence or transmutation, as we shall see later) but it does offer a privileged case in the sensible order. By attesting its proximity to language, its affinity with time (two registers of *ex-*pression) and its capacity for the 'co-realisation' of object and subject, of content and of medium, and finally, one could say of the 'self' and the 'non-self', of the same and the other.

'What it means for an existence to be able to be fully and completely with something else': this is what music represents in the order of sensibility, in the precise sense of sensation, but as one of the sensory properties, the property of sound and its use in music allows or calls for a singular resonance in the order of affective, intellectual and spiritual sensibility. What it means to be transported to something else resounds as much in chords, timbres, rhythms as in love or mourning, in the intuition of an enigma or in the evidence of a logic: in everything that makes sense and in the extraordinary teeming diversity of possible 'other things'. The otherness of the other thing is then not worthwhile as simply another, but rather as a transformation and transport of existence outside itself within itself. However, unlike love, for example, music 'remains close to an object' as a kind of 'work'.²⁹

In an intervention in 1930 Günther Anders stated – implicitly referring to his thesis and gathering his thoughts:

To admit that man, in the musical situation, takes part in forms of time and movement, or even finds himself transmuted into these forms of movement, torn from the globality of his life and projected into another realm of being, is to open up a problematic that is fundamentally anthropological-ontological; in what is man transmuted, what does he constitute from then on. These questions can only be dealt with from an ontological angle.³⁰

What being? The thesis answers that it is a matter of this mode of existence 'where one becomes oneself, *qua ontic*, the medium in which one is'. 'This type of transformation will be called "transformation from substance to medium."

The world (...) is then realised as music, or in music (...).³¹

This transmutation³² has something alchemical, as much as simply chemical, about it, something magical as much as existential – a surprising dissonant and consonant duality as much as an ‘elementary ambiguity’. This is how we can hear the voice of Günther Anders, struck up from oblivion.

Translated by Steven Corcoran, 2021

¹ This text by Jean-Luc Nancy serves as a ‘Preface’ to Gunter Anders’ work, *Phénoménologie de l’écoute*, trans. from the Germany by Martin Kaltenecker and Diane Meur (Paris: Editions Philharmonie, 2020).

² Adorno says this in reference to Schönberg in ‘Arnold Schönberg’, collected in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, MIT Press, 1981, p. 157.

³ This declaration is perhaps unique in the annals of musical philosophy: I do not have the required competence to affirm this. It seems to me that it most closely approaches the book by Bernard Sève, *L’Altération musicale* – published in 2002, thus well before Anders’ text became known – which expressly seeks a thinking itself altered by the alteration that it discovers at the core of musicality. More recently – once again without having known the German text published in 2017 – André Hirt collected texts from 2017 in *La Condition musicale* (2018), whose title seems to resonate with the expression ‘musical situation’ from Anders but that moreover and above all the unbroken bass is given by the title of the foreword – ‘Exist in music’ – which is perfectly consonant with Anders, as well as, although of course with some differences, the sentences that develop this theme thereafter. The musical Anders is more current in 2020 that he was in 1930.

⁴ The same author, editor of the German volume translated here, has published in 2008 *Der Andere Anders – Günther Anders als Musikphilosoph* (ed. Peter Lang) – (the other Anders – Günther Anders as a philosopher of music)

⁵ He was also confronted with having to discuss with Marxists from the Frankfurt School about the social determinations of music: attesting to this are his reflections on the sociology of music and his exchanges with the Eisler circle that we find in the annex of this volume.

⁶ Adorno, in ‘Arnold Schönberg’, *Prisms*.

⁷ *Philosophy of New Music*, edited, introduced and translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006 p. 21.

⁸ ‘The Fetish Character in Music’, in *The Culture Industry*, ed. J.M. Bernstein, London/New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 60.

⁹ *Philosophy of New Music*, p. 12.

¹⁰ See *Phénoménologie de l’écoute*, p.12.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 13.

¹² Ibid. p.8.

¹³ Ibid. p. 9.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 14.

¹⁵ Two contemporary examples from thinkers far removed from ‘effusion’. Alain Badiou: ‘music, that perfect music above to name everything, since it is hardly a sign, but you might say, the secret of things, their prayer’. (*Almagestes*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964, p. 101). Bernard Sève, with a sentence that without speaking about language implies a distance from it (and renders, unbeknownst to him,

an accent close to Anders): 'musical experience [...]: a transformation of humans through music, a transformation of man through music, by himself playing music, listening to music, playing his *own* listening (i.e.: listening to it thoroughly)'. *L'Altération musicale*, p. 329. In Hirt, cited above, we find the following: '[...] the *act* itself of *being* music (or of making oneself music in making it, of existing *musically* an instant', p. 141).

¹⁶ See, in particular, p. 75.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 81.

¹⁸ Francis Wolf, *Pourquoi la musique ?* Fayard, 2015, p. 147.

¹⁹ See in particular section § 13.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 62.

²¹ Ibid. p. 70. The German term here is *Entrückung*, which elsewhere is translated as 'transport'.

²² In *Prisms*, p. 138. In Anders the work is cited on p. 100.

²³ I am proposing an equivalence without pretention...

²⁴ Ibid. p. 100.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 8.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 18. – in 1956, in § 15 of *The Obsolescence of Humankind de l'homme*, he contrasts the instrument of music that extends man to the technical instrument of which man is the mere extension.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 89.

²⁸ See *Phénoménologie de l'écoute*, p. 13.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 13. I would be tempted to question this assertion as it does not seem to me certain that love – or thought or commitment to a cause – nor the other artistic forms, is entirely devoid of the features recognized in music. But then I would no doubt be compelled to recognize that the musical paradigm imposes itself in one way or another when speaking about the other 'transformations'.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 125.

³¹ Ibid. p. 14.

³² *Verwandlung*, transmutation or metamorphosis, is a strong term. Kafka turned it into a well-known title.