

On Musical Sense

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I accept the opportunity for this encounter with music because for me it is an opportunity to advance into unknown territory. Though I've written some texts that come close to music, I do not have any authority or expertise in musical matters. I am merely a listener and a very average one at that, attentive but not in possession of any musicological means.

It is perhaps for this reason that I have long been intrigued by the question of the 'sense of music'. As a philosopher, I know the extent to which music has been loaded with significations – from that of awakening or the control of this or that affect up to the expression of the soul of the world, from the mobilisation of passions up to the invocation of myths. I also know how many cultures recount the world's origin in music – in the vibration, for example, of a divine arc – and I know how much music has also defied, and even quite simply disarmed the philosophical desire to give or produce sense. I also know, though not a great deal, what an enormous quantity of debates, interpretations and theoretical propositions exist (and have for a long time) on musical sense.

Before going any further, I am placing a first musical punctuation here.¹ There will be six in all – each time a very short passage from Quartet no. 1 by György Kurtág, performed by the Keller Quartet. I punctuate the text with them just as brief reminders of the following: that only music makes heard what cannot be said. The performance I refer to is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiEotDuONII>

By speaking about 'musical sense', as I did to give this encounter a title, we already encounter an ambivalence. Either it is a matter of what the French translation names *Le Sens musical* in order to translate the title of John Blacking's *How musical is man?*; or it is a matter of the sense that music can have or communicate, of its possible signification(s) – a question on which you can read entire libraries.

I would like to remark that both meanings can only tend towards each other. If human beings have a sense for music (for producing and receiving it), then this must be because it makes sense for them. And this sense 'of' music can only respond to a sense 'for' music. A sense is either sensible or it is not, this is a simple axiom. An intelligible sense (a signification) is sensible. This much John Blacking says to explain what he learned from the musical life of African cultures:

All matter is a manifestation of spirit; in the process of playing, the process of allowing your body to submit to the musical act, you experience a sense of fellow-being with other humans and the world of nature. This is a mystical truth. (...) The idea of possession has some relevance—playing Chopin and experiencing the spirit of Chopin.³

You might be guarded about using words such as 'empathy', 'possession' or 'mystical'. This is a matter of words. However, that there is a physical, sensible experience of musicality, is unquestionable. At bottom, we all know, regardless of our musicological knowledge or ignorance, that music *is felt* (*se sent*—In Italian this amounts be heard or understood (*s'entend*) and that it makes sense (some affect, emotion, motion, some fold or tension, an impression, almost an idea...)

At three minutes into the performance, for me, here, the issue is merely this sensibility, without which there is no music. As you probably know, Claude Lévi-Strauss, for whom music is the 'supreme mystery of the science of man'⁴ — which means at once irreducible to scientific treatment and that it carries within it the last truth of humans – wrote that music is 'language without meaning'.⁵

As with every well-crafted expression, this one is open to the question of the meaning of words... What does each of these words mean without the other? 'Language' indicates, then, at least 'address', a sending toward the other (be he in myself), and the other's return if only of a signal of reception. Lévi-Strauss's expression also suits very well to what I experience when around me an unknown language is spoken. I perceive a sonorous ambiance, a play of sounds or of tones, of rhythms. And this makes no sense, even though it may well evoke affective dispositions.

That there is a musicality of language – that is to say of languages, each on its own account – this is what the linguists designate as 'prosody' in order to embrace a language's set of phonological features – accent, tone, rhythm, tempo (yes, this

musical term is used), and so on. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe establishes a parallel between this prosody and what we know about the child *in utero's* sensitivity to sounds: 'everything happens as if before coming into the world (...) one already had, in a very deep memory – so deep that it is forgotten – the hearing of something of language: its "music".' And he adds 'So, if music seeks to imitate something – like all art, according to the Greeks – it would be this thing heard absolutely before.'⁶

Absolutely before, in this 'before' that finds itself simultaneously on the side of nature and of myth, on the side of the species and of the community, on the side of the sexual as well as linguistic relation – and which, as a result, also goes on or extends itself absolutely 'afterwards', which resonates beyond what we perceive but which makes us feel this 'absolutely' elsewhere.

If, therefore, Lévi-Strauss understands the word 'language' with this scope, then his sentence means that this more-than-initial sending or calling and its return - echo, response, resonance - in a way inextinguishable is completely detached from meaning as signification. Technically, it might be said that language is subtracted from what is called 'double articulation' – that is to say, the duality of signifying units and differentiating phonetic units. I distinguish between the words 'music' and 'physics' thanks to the phonetic differences that underpin the semantic distinctions – a difference foreign to musical writing. Language as prosody would be the music that precedes in us the meaning, that calls it and surpasses it at the same time.

According to a Kabbalistic account, the Creator invented music to persuade the soul to enter the human body. In the Vedic tradition, sound and instrumental music are closely associated with origins and deities. Music seems inevitably to evoke the archaic and the distant.

But it also proceeds from the most elementary and material. What is 'absolutely before' – or 'after' – is as much a matter of impenetrable matter as of the finest penetration of mind (this is also what John Blacking suggests). Think of a violin string, its material, its tension, the pressure of a finger (the control of muscles, gestures), or the touch of a bow (itself with its material, its tension, its holding), and the escape of a sound that we would say is immaterial but which is a vibration of air, a tremor, the displacement of a compression and the resonance of a crystalline immateriality, the sensation of a palpitation or an impulse, an emotion that captures and vibrates both the matter of an eardrum and what Proust calls 'the communication of souls' to designate the music.

And if we are wary of what the word 'soul' might have to do with the religious or with (*affecté*) the pseudo/, we can rely on Proust himself, for whom the soul 'is not an immobile prison,' but on the contrary, is 'swept along in a perpetual impulse to surpass it, to reach outwardly [...] the resonance of an internal vibration.'⁷ Two

vibrations would meet, one turned towards the other, one responding to the other – or it is the same vibration that mutually shakes the inside and the outside.

Little matter. What matters above all here is that we are dealing in an essential way with mutuality, reciprocity, a beat by which there is sending and returning, call and response, resounding, resonance. It is sonority itself.

For sound weds the space that it travels through and the duration of this journey belongs to it as an intrinsic property. Sound does not unfold *in* time: it spatio-temporalizes *itself* according to its own characteristics (its frequency, its timbre, etc.). Resonance, i.e. the very existence of sound, is nothing other than the appropriation or shaping of a space-time by a determinate vibration. By propagating itself, that is to say by extending and lasting, it does something other than present this or that sensation (a noise): it configures a presence to the world (and a presence to me of the world). It does not penetrate the ear alone, but the whole body, its muscles and nerves – and we can add that it also penetrates the social or common body. At least this is how we elaborate, intensify and modulate sound when we are in music (whether we listen to it or interpret or compose it).

But that itself is the meaning or makes the meaning. There is meaning only in a return of the sensible to itself – the sensing and the sensed can neither be separated nor confounded, and 'sensation' as well as 'feeling' and even 'intellectual sense' only ever take place in this reciprocity of a sender and a receiver, of one inside and one outside, of the same and another. As Georges Bataille says, "there is no meaning for only one" (*il n'y a pas de sens pour un seul*). I would like to add that music is the first manifestation of non-solitude, in the double sense that it opens up a relationship with the world and that it does so for many. For one musician is already two: making a string (or pipe) vibrate, one also listens to it.

With the musical instrument (or with the voice treated as an instrument), we do not use a means: rather we continue or propagate ourselves, we even take ourselves beyond ourselves, as Günther Anders says. I invite to listen from until 6 minutes into the composition.

Aristotle puts it as thus:

When sound comes to be at work, it is always from something in relation to something (as well as in something). For it is a striking that produces it, so that it is impossible for sound to come about when there is only one thing, since the thing striking and the thing struck are different. Thus the thing sounding sounds in relation to something.⁸

One could distinguish two registers of this intrinsic relationship or relativity of sound: either it is indifferent (when one listens only to the message of the noise or the voice) or it assumes all the importance – and that is the musical sound.

Music collects and cultivates for itself the relationship whose resonance is the start or suggestion. It does not deal with reference (the noise comes from a motorbike or rain) nor with the message (leaving aside here the question of sung text). In this, it places itself from the outset in the pure element of meaning – not of a language that would say something, but of a language that would only say the 'saying' itself, even if we can hear the 'saying' below or beyond 'speaking'. The distant origin of the word 'saying', 'to say' (*dire*) relates it to a 'showing', and the showing (*monstration*) is silent. The silence of signification opens the resonance of sense.

Of course, there is nothing general about this sense. To the contrary. It does not have a general sense or meaning, since each time meaning is played out in a possibility of sending and returning, of resonance (it is interesting to note that a contemporary sociologist, Hartmut Rosa, uses the term 'resonance' to speak of the relationship to the world of social groups – as if to envisage a wider sphere than that of meanings, of conceptions of the world).

No form of music offers a vision of the world: each instance of it resonates a singular world or a singular possibility of a world. Of course, in each cultural tradition associations are registered. There is European music of mourning or melancholy that does not resonate at all in the same accent to an African or Asian ear. We have become used to affective correspondences – sometimes even narrative ones – and a large part of nineteenth-century music made the idea of 'program music' possible. In fact, it was to break with this coded and conventional expressiveness that the break with tonality – which could tend to become a code of expression – occurred.

What is at stake in this rupture – but which we can find at work already before it – is to unmoor associations of affects, of images or of climates – in short of significations – from musical forms of all orders (tonalities, timbres, rhythms, and so on.). This uncoupling makes it possible for the musical to unfold for itself; it brings listening closer to research, to the birth and elaboration of a sense that is its own and that refers less to expectations than to unheard, unexpected capacities whereby a sense is announced that is each time new, absolutely singular. We can hear this from 6-9 minutes into the piece.

The autonomy of the musical sense, of that sense which is valid by its own singular resonance, by a writing, an instrumentation, a performance and a listening that is in sum recreated each time – this autonomy has of course never been absent from music. Even with simple types of music, born in dance, or in hunting, in rituals, the musical element retains something irreducible to the signal or to signification.

When Bach composed a *bourrée*, he did more than set down a cadence for dancing. But perhaps this has to be said also of the simplest *bourrée* set in its own time from the repertoire of a village musician. What I mean is: the musical, musical sense, is already there, even if it is not grasped for itself, nor played nor listened to for itself.

When there is music, let's say 'musical creation', what plays out is less the product of studious elaborations linked to affective colourings than the attention or tension of the musician (composer, player, listener) towards the occurrence of a specific meaning. The composer Paolo Pizzetti wrote: 'it is as if one begins to glimpse the emergence of something, whose possibility of "making" meaning will depend on the measure in which we can have it (or let it) take shape and not in the sense of "covering" a given sense with sound matter, but just bringing it to acquire its own subjectivity, its own unity articulated in a new body of sound'.⁹ This sets the remainder of the piece until its end.

Certainly, this 'body of sound' which is valid through its unity can be called a 'phrase', and this phrase can be defined by 'a complete meaning'.¹⁰ But this meaning is complete via a breath, an utterance or a declamation, if you like, not through some signification.

I will add that this 'new sonorous body' holds above all through its novelty: each time, even repeated, it arises and its surprises – it also goes away to come back and relaunch its novelty (reprise, variation...). As the musicologist philosopher Marie-Louise Mallet puts it: 'Listening is not being able to keep and test it. It is to hear what you are listening to move away, lose itself, even in its arrival. To listen means not being able to maintain present'.¹¹

The writer Jean-Christophe Bailly echoes these lines as follows: 'Sound is linked to the ungraspable, and this is why listening, despite its swiftness, vivacity or patience, always remains imperfect and tense, as everything happens for it as if even that towards which it tended was fleeing and slipping away'.¹²

Yet this very non-presence, which is not absence but a sensation of passage, of sending and returning, which in turn sends itself, makes sense in all its finesse, delicacy and fragility – and in its superabundant diversity. No meaning is presented or each one - mourning or joy, gaiety or complaint, knowledge or power, triumph or defeat, strength or failure, desire or bitterness, meaning or nonsense – immediately goes beyond itself, announcing its own interminable modulation, its mutation, its alteration, its innovation. And we are well aware, deep down in all our experience of language and relationships, that this is exactly what makes the meaning itself. Meaning differs from itself, it does not resonate without also being dissonant. As the

Greeks said, there is a *diaphonia* without which *symphonia* would be reduced to silence.¹³

Translated by Steven Corcoran, 2021

Notes

¹ The original text included embedded audio. Instead time punctuations have been inserted to create continuity by Cindy Zeiher.

² Published in 1973

³ 'John Blacking: An Interview Conducted and Edited by Keith Howard,' in *Ethnomusicology*, Winter, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1991): 55-76. Online at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/852388.pdf>

⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques*, vol. 1, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 18

⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man: Mythologiques*, vol. 4, John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 547

⁶ *Le Chant des Muses* (Paris: Bayard, 2005), pp. 25-26.

⁷ Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), p. 184.

⁸ Aristotle, *De Anima*, Book 2, VIII, 10-15. trans. Mark Shiffman

⁹ Personal correspondence with the author.

¹⁰ As is the case in the *Dictionnaire de la musique* ed. Marc Vignal (Paris: Larousse, 1996).

¹¹ "L'incantation inachevée résonne..." in *Un jour Derrida*, <https://books.openedition.org/bibpompidou/1352>

¹² "Les fontaines qui écoutent au loin..." in *L'élargissement du poème* (Paris: Bourgois, 2015).

¹³ See Anne-Gabrièle Wersinger, "La philosophie entre logique et musique," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, no. 56, vol. 4 (2007).