

# **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 11, 2019

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar Jovanović

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# *The Experience of Music: From Everyday Sounds to Aesthetic Enjoyment*

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ABSTRACT. There are many examples of natural sounds that are welcomed into musical works. Yet, in Western artistic music tradition definition as well as understanding of music from traditional to modern theories considers music to be first and foremost an effect of artistic creation; a product of compositional working, a composer's work. The dominating element in definition of music seems to be its rational source and a good design. From the Ancient understanding of music, which sees in it a careful combination of sounds and rhythms (Augustine, Boethius), to twentieth century definition of musical work as sound structure indicated by X at t (Levinson 1980, p.20), music is conceived, pre-arranged, and executed to the point. The idea that music may just happen is contrary to intuitions as much as it is to most of its descriptions. How then are everyday sounds present in the experience of music? How is music made of everyday sounds? Can wind blowing, or sea roaring be truly considered music? In other words, there seem to be a huge disparity between expectations that music is rational and created by man containing complex design and the fact that anything sounding may be heard as music, and that essentially music is perception. The paper discusses difference between understanding music as primary rational and artefactual and considering it a matter of perception. Can music be seen as pure sounding? Where the listeners' willingness to hear certain phenomena as

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significant, beautiful or culturally potent is what's important. Discussing contemporary accounts of music of Jerrold Levinson's and Roger Scruton's among others, and contrasting them with musical experiences of different kinds. Author suggests that music was always born out of perception. And willingness to hear music is as important and the ability to listen for it. The primacy of perception doesn't have to be in conflict with the studies showing human cognitive abilities to be musical (Honing 2011). The natural tendencies and biological grounds of human cultural functioning cannot hide the fact that the will to hear music going hand in hand with the perceptive readiness to listen for the music is crucial to any music experience.

## **1. Introduction**

How is music made of everyday sounds? In what way, if any, is music made in response to environment? Can wind blowing or sea roaring be truly considered music? And if so, how does the theory of music and music philosophy deal with that?

The premise I would like to start with is such that there are many examples of everyday sounds that are welcomed into musical works. Traditional wind chimes, the chirping of the birds, the sounds of rain drops or the sounds of the thunderstorm are represented in musical works and also sometimes incorporated into them<sup>2</sup>. The more contemporary examples

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<sup>2</sup> The best example might be Ottorino Respighi's *Pines of Rome* (1923) or Einojuhani Rautavaara's even more impressive *Cantus Arcticus* op. 61 (1972) where composers have called for recordings of birds' voices to be used in performance. See

include sounds of car engines in the *City Life* by Steve Reich or street shouts in Luciano Berio's *Cries of London*.<sup>3</sup> Yet, Western artistic tradition defines music as first and foremost an effect of artistic creation; a product of compositional working, an effect of intellectual careful fashioning.

The composer fashions his work in a creative effort, over a certain period of time. This labor fashions something – the musical work in fact – that previously did not exist but from the moment of its coming into being does somehow exist quite independently of whether anyone performs it, listens to it, or takes any interest in it whatsoever. (Ingarden 1986, p. 2)

Similar assumptions may be found in Jerrold Levinson and Roger Scruton among others. (Levinson 2011, p. 63, Scruton 1997, p. 20) The dominating element of such definitions of music seems to be its human and rational character and an ordered design (“composer’s fashioning” and “creative effort”). From Ancient understanding of music, where it is seen as carefully chosen combination of sounds and rhythms (Augustine, Boethius), to twentieth century definition of musical work as a sound structure indicated by X at t, musical work (a composition) is believed to be conceived, pre-arranged, and executed to the point. (Levinson 2011, p. 82) The idea that

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TO3YRZWLvQo> (accessed on 01.11.2019).

<sup>3</sup> In Steve Reich’s work there is an actual recording of street sounds as well as the instrumental sound acting as double of that sound scored in the piece.



music may just happen is, therefore, contrary to most of its theoretical descriptions as much as it is counterintuitive. And yet, in contemporary musical compositions as well as in literary descriptions of music the everyday sounds are found a part of music. There is a need to explain or perhaps to diminish the disparity between expectations that music is rational, created by man and contains a complex design and the fact that anything sounding may be heard as music, that essentially music is perception. This last realization, however, I would like to put in context of a wide understanding of perception and an array of examples of what I mean by everyday sounds being part of music. Finally my own beliefs, are that (1) music appears in perception of a willing listener and therefore it is a matter of willing inclusive interpretation or a response to environment, and therefore music may be seen as a relationship between being and her/his environment. In support of these claims I would like to refer to John Dewey (Dewey 1980) as well as to Eric Clarke (Clarke 2005) before turning to contemporary examples of musical works. I would like to suggest that music is always born out of perception rather than fashioned from physical processes. However let me say that the traditional belief that music [musical work] is always a matter of artistic creation doesn't have to be in conflict with that aforementioned view. And (2) the artistic creation is in fact – as the contemporary neurological research shows and phenomenological philosophy have been saying for years – based on perceptual impulses much more than it is rational and individually pre-thought the claim that music is

created doesn't have to be in conflict with the first belief.

## **2. The Problem of the Theoretical Incompatibility**

There seem to be a considerable difference between understanding music as primarily rational and artefactual and considering it to be a matter of perception. The first of part of the problem seems to span from considering music, a work of music, to be an independent entity, which seems to be discordant with considering it to be a perceptive data or an effect of perceptual processes. The second part of the problem consists in seeing music as primarily created that seems to contradict considering it a matter of perception. I would like to address the first part of the problem first.

Despite the fact that the aesthetic theory has been considering music and its place since Antiquity, the difficulty with establishing what exactly is that which we call music, has been as taxing today as ever. The existential status of the work of music has been dubious or wavering at best for a long time now. Nonetheless, some of the most widespread assumptions about music are what affects the definition and description of music. The most widespread beliefs about music are that music is met and understood in a form of a singular artefact, a piece of music or a work of music, which is finished, endures in time and is a product of someone's creative effort (Levinson 2011, p. 66). The product like treatment of music is certainly very

common although historically it is no more than two hundred years old.<sup>4</sup> Even though we may think that music has always been seen as an individual artistic creation, perhaps such understanding of music is truly modern in its core as suggested by historians and philosophers alike. (Goehr 1992, Dahlhaus 1989)

Let us ask, instead, if music is truly experienced as a complete individual work, a structure of auditory elements that have been assigned and arranged in a certain way or perhaps, could it that music is found playing freely in our heads and that it is only divided into artistically independent pieces through a reflective effort? While theories of music ontology are abundant, none has solved the problem of the music's character quite completely.

## **2.1. The Theories of Musical Work**

From the Ancient understanding of music, which sees in it a careful combination of sounds and rhythms to twentieth century definitions of musical work as sound structure indicated by X at t, music is seen as conceived, pre-arranged, and executed to the point. Most of all music is seen as created by man in an artistic process and therefore rational at core. Even

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<sup>4</sup> "What we understand today to be perfect compliance has not always been an ideal and might not be in the future. Actually it is quite peculiar and rather unique. It has characterized classical music practice only for the last 200 years" (Goehr 1992: 99).

in theories like Levinson's where music is seen as a preexisting structure, it is a human endeavour to fashion it further (as determined by X at t) that truly makes it what it is – a musical composition. (Levinson 2011, p. 82) However, many theories recognize the problem of ontological interdependency of music. As Roman Ingarden's theory describes a work of music as a dependent and insufficient entity, which is nevertheless both artistically and aesthetically brilliantly potent. Still Ingarden sees music as an individual work experienced independently rather than as a succession of processes. The form, the technique, the structure recognized and qualified as music. (Ingarden 1986). Even though in Ingarden's theory the music – as a particular work of music – is experienced through its different manifestations and lives in its different forms – in and out of aesthetic experience, music is carried out through a different types of entities.

## **2.2. The Problem of Creativity and Rational Design**

If music is a matter of perception it is no longer seen as created and exclusively man made but rather as found, a matter of realization. There is a difference not to say a clash between music understood as rational creation, artistic or otherwise, and music seen as perception, rather than cognition, where it is primarily the listeners' willingness to hear certain sounding phenomena as significant, beautiful or most of all culturally potent that counts. While in traditional aesthetic theory music has been perceived most

of all as the creation of man by way of her/his imagination (talent), skill and knowledge. I would like to come back to that argument at the end of the last section.

### **2.3. The Rational Grounding of Music**

In *The Aesthetics of Music* Roger Scruton declared that music is perceived as ordered sounds. As Scruton further suggests to hear music as tones, one needs to know the language of music or the implications of that language, that of theory of music, of harmony and inner musical structure.

(...) to hear sounds as music is not merely to hear it but also to order it. The order of music is a perceived order. When we hear tones, we hear their implication in something like when we hear grammatical implication of words in a language. (Scruton 1997, p. 18)

The thesis as Scruton explains it is evidently true but not for everyone and not all of the time. To hear music is also simply to perceive something as music, to hear something as having a peculiar order or inner structure to it – not the order or the structure but a structure – any possible structure. So when, for example, we hear language as having a certain melody within it we listen to it in the same way that we listen to music, even though we still recognize it as language – a system that is supposed to be understood

immediately and which, when understood is almost completely see through – almost. So with music we are talking about perception and – what I would like to stress here – there is the way to hear music, which is primary or elementary perhaps, in which we hear something as music before we can recognize its building blocks, before we can say what music is it.

### **3. Avant-garde Music and the Performance Uses of Everyday Sounds**

In contrast to traditional believes that music is rational and created by man or in fact geniuses, it might seem strange that the avant-garde music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been filled with attempts to make music out of almost anything. In John Cage's *Livingroom music* (1940) players are expected to use coffee tables, window frames, newspapers and other household objects to play the piece. In Steve Reich's *clapping music* the music consists of rhythmically clapping of hands and in his *Pendulum music* (1966) the sounds or the event/process are the minor sounds that happen when the microphones swinging by the loudspeaker produce an audible sound(s). That last example would not even qualify as everyday sound, where it not for the fact that such sounds do happen as byproducts of some situations. In Pierre Schaeffer's *Suite pour l'homme* composer uses multiple concrete sounds like laughter, parts of speech or door slamming at cetr. These or

similar examples are multiple: from Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room* to Tan Dun's *Water Concerto*, sounds have been found and converted to form musical compositions. Yet the use of those sounds is quite refined. These sounds are often products of sophisticated and hardly ever really random activities, quite the opposite: they happen as a consequence of a pre-thought and fully prepared activities. However, there are sounds, which happen unexpectedly and which are everyday or random and yet become music.

British dance group "Stomp" proclaims that music may happen anywhere regardless of whether one plays an instruments or not. Anything may become music and all the sounds and rhythmical patterns may be considered music. This idea may sound preposterous to many music lovers, but in truth it isn't any more irrational or difficult to accept than the idea that we perceive something as blue or green on the bases of a cultural agreement.

In the performance by *Stomp* players perform music by using their feet, sweeping the floor, blowing in glass bottles, swinging wet socks and using everyday objects and producing everyday sounds. Their performances are choreographed and theatrical but at the same time they apply the natural ability to make music out of any possible sound and rhythmical pattern. Groups such as *Stomp* show in a way more persuasive than any theory ever could that the phenomenon of music is born out of perceptive attitude first and foremost.

Even though music has been developed in cultures throughout

thousands of years and the standards for music practice as much as its various theories and theoretical systems have changed in time, in many cultures and for many people music occurs spontaneously, out of nothing, unexpectedly and without reference to a formulated system of knowledge. It is safe to say that music happens as much as it is created. In traditional cultures and in many ethnic cultures music appears because of the social occasion and grows freely without any plan or a score. Random outdoor listening or a MR scan examination may induce experiences of listening to percussion music even though the sounds produced are machine made and even quite unpleasant. The point of this example is that unexpected listening experiences may turn into music experiences depending on an attitude. Music may be found when walking in a forest with the wind blowing through the tree leaves.

The idea behind those examples is that listening is much more than passive receptive activity. It is a perceptual adjustment and as such it is most important in hearing something as music. In other words despite the rational design origins of most of the works of music, music as such – music in general – is founded on an ability to hear sounds in a special way, to hear sounds as music.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Roger Scruton believes this to be the case, yet he insists that it is the sign of rational grounding of the music. He may be right, still I believe that it more important to stress the perceptual character of our ‘discoveries’ of music, in which we transgress the functional premises of our existence and chose to listen reflectively.



#### **4. The Experience of Music**

I suppose that for many listeners these outer qualities of music are melodic contours while for others these would be rhythmical patterns. Regardless of which one is it, when they hear music, they know that it is music, before they know what music it is – what kind of music or anything more specific about it; let's say on which instruments it is played or in what style, what century at cetr. I would like to suggest, furthermore, that music exists on a more general plane – when it is being recognized as music even when there is no music, not only no style, no instruments and no composer, but no humans to conceive of it, as well. The music in this sense is evoked by poetry and literature all the time. “The music of the forest”, “the music of the sea” and “the music of human body”. We perceive those expressions as metaphors that draw our attachment to instrumental music on the one hand and to ancient metaphysical theories of music (the cosmic music, the music of the universe) on the other.

What I would like to propose instead is that in spite of many complex systems of music that exists and has existed throughout ages, there is music in the simplest sense, when we hear something as moving or melodious. Roger Scruton suggested something very similar, but as he is very cautious he offers more conditions for anything to be considered music. (ibidem)

The difference between these ways of seeing music is not easy to qualify as it is a difference of approach. I have a deep respect for the theory, in which music is understood as a set of sounds related to each other, forming an ordered (usually pre-conceived) structure. Yet, in some general sense and in a very important way, music is perception based, so anything is music if so perceived. The theories that claim that music is a rational, pre-conceived structure, usually suggest that to call music something that has not been conceived and executed by humans is a mistake – an error of judgment, or a frivolous, playful if irrational attempt to disqualify music. And as much as I would like to agree with that, as much as often times I think to myself that this [composition] certainly is not music, I believe that there are many ways, in which music is found<sup>6</sup> rather than produced.

#### **4.1. Perception of Music as Dialogue**

Let me pause for a moment to consider a well-known musical example of *Different trains* (1988) by Steve Reich. This composition in uses both found sounds – the noises of trains, the recordings of conversations – and “musical” sounds made by instruments. Although a minimalistic piece, this

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<sup>6</sup> By “found” I mean sounds that were not previously considered or even noticed – in musical context – but that aren’t in any way changed or adapted for the purpose of musical composition. In that sense the ‘found’ sounds would be the sounds of microphones swinging by the speakers in Reich’s *Pendulum music* or the sounds of trains et cetera.

composition uses a very complex and varied material. In one way at least the material for this composition is far from just being found, as the author has thought out this composition in detail, even though the sounds used in the composition are everyday sounds. Again, it is not the point of the composition to mistake the sounds in the music for the actual historical sounds – the historical material in the composition are the voices of the survivors and the interviews recorded, the sounds are nonetheless evocative of the other sounds and whole historical soundscapes. The point I am trying to make is that to hear something as music a listener has to adjust her/his ears and be ready to perceive these sounds as music.

The other example I would like to turn to is Tan Dun *Water Concerto* (2007). It is an orchestral piece with lots of instruments, in which however the major part is played by set of percussion instruments that have never existed before. These percussion instruments are plastic balls filled with water, in which there are other object of different sizes and materials that create a spectrum of water like sounds that are unique and fascinating. And again, listeners hear this piece as music and the water instruments as percussion instruments clearly because of the context, the performance practice that is a part of, the orchestra, the conductor, the instruments and the stage, all of these play its part in allowing the listener/viewers to recognize this as music.

It is very different than the water sounds that Tan Dun – as he says in interviews – has used as inspiration, his memories of water being splashed

and water sounds surrounding him since his childhood. Let me give another example – the water drum. In 1992 when I was studying musicology at the University of Warsaw, we were told about the water drum in Africa, what it was and how it was used. I never imagined what it was until sometime in 2010 I saw the video on you tube: *Water drumming by Baka women*.<sup>7</sup> The water drum is an instrument as much any percussion instrument of today could be and yet it is also a way of playing with water. All the sounds connected with that playing are everyday sounds and if it weren't for the way in which the woman splash the water I doubt that anyone would treat this as an example of a musical instrument. This is music only as much as you as a listener wants it to be. A perfect example of perceptive change needed to cognize such sounds as music. However, it is also one of examples from the area of ethnic music of considering an everyday sound as music in a given musical practice.

## **5. Everyday Sounds in Concert Music**

There are many examples of concert music that uses every day sounds as its part. In Steve Reich's *The City Life* (1990) composer introduced car engine's sounds and the sounds of slamming of the car doors that have been recorded and then added to the sound spectrum of the electric piano. Reich

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNzX5t5S4Ls> (accessed on 7.06.2019).

used these to make the orchestra burst with the actual street sounds. The other example that is perhaps less popular is Luciano Berio's composition *The Cries of London* (1976). The composition is made of the sound of street vendors that shout out the name of their merchandise. These shouts are rarely considered music – and they exist in many countries around the world, where usually they are considered noise, even though most “musical” people would admit that these shouts are very musical not to say that they represent music. Berio doesn't use the actual cries but the texts of such vendor's cries and also comments in the vocal lines.

Last but not least the vocalize and scat music are made out of sounds such as “na na na” or “dib ba ba ruba” and the like. Such vocalizing uses part of everyday speech yet turns it into music by stretching the melody line, which has been traditionally part of music since Middle Ages, where in plain chant the choirs or cantors would use the simple “la” or “a” for singing the most complex melodies in clauses.

## **6. Everyday Sounds as Music in Literature**

One particular example of everyday sounds or nature sound represented as music that has stuck with me over time is Hans Christian Andersen's story “The Bell”. In this story the sounds of the sea and the forest are perceived by everyone around as the music – very soft music of the church bells to be

precise, which no one knows where it comes from – people living in the town, didn't recognize these sounds as they were always busy with their lives and distracted by daily struggles and loud sounds around them. Only the pure of heart could hear those sound clearly and not knowing what they were they followed them to discover their true meaning. In Andersen's tale the unknown sounds turn out to be the sounds of the sea and the hidden truth was revealed as the magnificent beauty of the nature, which can be experienced as a perfect enchanting music but only to those, who are capable of listening.

## **7. Music as Perception – Ecological Theory of Music**

As much as in tradition of acoustics music is described as set of sounds or a sounding process in ecological theories the stress is placed on listening. Music phenomena appear when people perceive sounds and sounding phenomena [around them] as meaningful. As Eric Clarke explains "Perception is the awareness of, and continuous adaptation to the environment". (Clarke 2005, p. 4). Our human way of perceiving sounds is functional and driven and for that reason alone far from being passive or simple. The perceptive experience may be direct and instinctive or reflective and elaborate, but it is always at the same time an attentive and imaginative way of responding to environment.

Clarke explains further:

Perception is a *self*-tuning process, in which the pick-up of environmental information is intrinsically reinforcing, so that the system self-adjusts so as to optimize its resonance with the environment... (Clarke 2005, p. 19)

When listening to music, we use our concept of music and understanding of music's place within our world but at the same time, there are various ways in which, listening to music is risky and challenging.<sup>8</sup>

## **8. Conclusions**

In conclusion, let me say that the disparity between music as explain in philosophical theories and the music as an experience is not as wide as it has been believed. The primacy of perception doesn't have to be in conflict with the studies showing human cognitive abilities to be musical. (Honing 2011) The work done in terms of material, form and means of production may just as well be explained in terms of forces of nature resolving their natural tensions and the deliberate artistic work in its carefully designed shape may not necessarily be different to the naturally occurring waves of tensions that

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<sup>8</sup> Musical sounds inhabit the same world as other sounds, and while the majority of writing on music, and music perception, has tended to cordon off music from the rest of the acoustical environment, it is self evident that we listen to the sounds of music with the same perceptual systems that we use for all sound (Clarke 2005, p. 4).

drive the music situation in the rain (Dewey 1980). The natural tendencies and biological grounds of human cultural functioning do not hide the fact that the will to hear music going hand in hand with the perceptive readiness to listen for the music is crucial to any music experience. That willingness to hear sounds as music, and moreover as interesting, pretty and harmonious is crucial in receiving music, and the most important difference is not between the rational and irrational ways of recognizing music but between the exclusive and inclusive ways of thinking about music. The difference is in approach.

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