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A Brief Insight into the Musical Role of Non-Tonal Aspects

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ABSTRACT. In this essay on musical experience, I would like to make an initial exploration of those aspects of sound that, on first approach, do not fulfill a role in the perception of a tonal organisation in sounds. I will consider the following dichotomy as forming two aspects of the same experience: the 'sensual' attention to the sources of sound and their modes of production and the 'organisational' attention to the relationships between sound pitches in time. In order to understand the latter, I will rely on Roger Scruton's concept of 'acousmatic listening' in view of its considerable explanatory power. However, I will consider some objections to his aesthetics of music with regard to the 'sensual' experience of sounds and how this influences the concept of musical understanding resulted. I propose that, in order to understand this twofold musical experience, we can take methodological inspiration from Richard Wollheim and his view on representational experience. Once we consider how to understand this analogy in the musical case, we can see its usefulness in making explicit the dialogue between tonal and non-tonal aspects of our musical experience.

1. Introduction

My proposal is to conceive the experience of musical understanding in the following way: listening to music with understanding includes two aspects, the sensual enjoyment of sounds – appreciation of timbre, instrumentation, the virtuosity of the musicians, circumstances of sound production, etc.–, and the cognitive enjoyment of a certain organisation in them (Davies, 1994, p. 323). I would like to review the role that the former plays for Scruton within our musical

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understanding and consider some criticism.

One way of summarising Scruton's reasoning for my purpose would be to say that experiencing music involves, first of all, a contemplative attitude towards sounds (Scruton, 1997, pp. 225–228). And we can define this attitude by contrasting it with its opposite, 'informational hearing', that is, not the contemplation of sound for sound's sake, but attention to sound as it informs us of events in the world. In searching for information about the world by hearing it, we try to find out the material cause of the same, its spatial position, whether its source moves in certain directions, and so on. In contemplative listening, on the contrary, the intentional object of our listening is no longer these causes or spatial positions, instead, we listen in search of a different experience.

This experience, distinct from the mere sound-material-cause linkage, is described as 'acousmatic listening' (Scruton, 1997, pp. 1–2), which in short consists of a kind of attention to sound in whose experiential content the material cause of the aural event does not figure in an essential way. In this sense, we can see how there is a clear boundary between ordinary hearing sounds and listening to music even when both actions occur simultaneously in musical contexts.

The key point is that, although it may appear that we are dealing with two completely different listening experiences, on the one hand, Scruton's view on musical experience derives from his definition of sounds as a *secondary object* (Scruton, 1997, 2009a, 2009b), from which the idea of acousmatic listening is a corollary. And on the other hand, in some sections we can read that for Scruton (2009, p. 64), our listening to music –that requires 'acousmatic contemplation'– is just an extreme case of something we ordinarily experience. Given the nature of sound, this separation from its material causes is conceivable in any context, not just musical.

I will now summarise what seem to me to be the key points of Scruton's musical aesthetic that we will discuss below.

Firstly, is only through listening that we have knowledge *by acquaintance* of 'what a sound is like' (Scruton, 1997, p. 1). Sounds are essentially, *things heard*, i.e., *audibilia*.

Secondly, sound allows us to conceive of it as separate from its material cause, being an object in its own right. A sound has no body, movement, or position in the sense that its material source does. This peculiar kind of object is called a '*secondary object*' by Scruton,

and its identification⁴⁹ can be made independently of its material cause (Scruton, 2009a, p. 50).

Thirdly, that sounds are not anchored to the things that cause or emit them makes them a particular kind of event. We do not have to understand them as events occurring to something. For example, we could not perceive the event 'traffic accident' without identifying the individuals involved. But the sound events that we hear could be identified without knowing anything about their cause. An event that does not require identifying its cause is a *pure* event (Scruton, 2009a, pp. 61–62).

This independence of the sound event from its cause and the perceptual privilege conferred on a single sense-modality does not make sound a kind of illusion, nor does it make it an unparalleled phenomenon. Scruton on several occasions names other secondary objects that are also *sensibilia* such as rainbows (Scruton, 1997, pp. 3–4, 2009a, pp. 59–60) or smells (Scruton, 2010, pp. 272–273) and from which these particularities of sound can be better understood.

There is thus a tendency in Scruton to conceive of sounds and hearing in a merely accidental relation to their material causes and contexts of production (Scruton, 2009, pp. 61–62). Because of this, I find it interesting to study how other authors, on the contrary, tend to give a much more essential role to the material circumstances of sound production in order to account for our musical understanding.

2. Some Cases Studies

Adrian Renzo in his article *Exploring an Everyday Aesthetics of Popular Music* (2018) points out that historically there are two ways of studying popular music, either trying to find the compositional complexity that can be rescued from the pop and rock phenomenon, or understanding it as a sociological phenomenon of identity construction. In both cases it seems

⁴⁹ Identifying a sound means being able to classify, differentiate and generally experience a sound meaningfully. For example, walking through the forest we feel various sounds and are able to differentiate them without yet knowing what produces them. In music we can identify a sound object independently of the development of its material sources. For example, a piece ends on a long F note, and as we lengthen that note we go from the voice gradually fading out to a flute that finally sustains the same note for a few seconds. The timbre changes, the material source of the sound changes, the way it is produced, even the position from which the orchestra plays that note, but we still identify a single sound object: the final F note of the piece. The material reality of the sound does not interfere in the perception of the concrete tone that we have to perceive.

that we are left with, either recognizing the experience of popular music as a minor form of musical immersion –as it never reaches the complexity shown by listening to the classics–, or as a phenomenon whose only novel aspect comes from outside the music itself, i.e., its media spectacularization and sociological role.

His article moves in the direction of discovering new ways of studying the act of listening to music itself, looking at what we can learn from the actions that the consumer of popular music performs when listening to music with a particular understanding.

In view of this, he compares the ‘standard kind of listening’, that of the musicologist as opposed to the ordinary listener. He considers the former as isolated, generally sedentary, and concentrated listening whereas the latter seems to be distracted and superficial. However, it seems that basically, the criterion for this hierarchy has to do with how much of the musical structure we are able to listen to with understanding. Whatever terms the listener uses, we want to find out whether they are able to hear key changes, harmonic sequences, tensions, resolutions, etc.

On the basis of his observation, Renzo concludes that, despite this attention arising in a different context than the isolated listening of the ‘musicologist’, that is, listening while gaming, while shopping while dancing in a concert, and so on, the everyday listener of popular music pays much more detailed attention to the music than appears to be the case. Now, this attention is focused on moments –even brief seconds– rather than on the whole song, a question that is interesting insofar as it seems opposed to a tendency in musicology to analyse listening to complete pieces (Renzo, 2018, p. 340).

What I am interested in highlighting is how this kind of immersion in the music is externalised, because it gives us a clue as to what it is that these listeners seem to be understanding. Are they understanding the music or something else that happens while there is music?

In Renzo’s experiments, the subject after presented one of his favourite songs often enacts an embodied response to the moment such as lip-syncing, facial expressions, gestures, body movements, etc. Implicit in such studies seems to be the idea that acousmatic listening, that is, the abstraction of the circumstances of sound production, as also criticised by Hamilton, seems to be an ideal rather than an actual listening (Hamilton, 2007, p. 113). As I understand Renzo, these experiments could show that in the ordinary listener of popular music we can

discover, perhaps more obviously, the role of our attention to the circumstances of sound production when listening to music.

Naturally, Scruton also has certain ideas regarding the listener of popular music. His main criticism is that these consumers relate to aspects that are external to the music. For example, in his opinion, some pop music has no musical rhythm but a kind of external body dynamic imposed. For example, some songs seem to generate the rhythm internally while other songs seem to be composed to follow the movements of the musician (Scruton, 2018, p. 233).

In Scruton's view, the listener is not immersed in the music but in the presence of the artist; the listener does not follow the musical movement, but the movements that the artist imprints on the music (Scruton, 2018, p. 239). Here, Scruton defends the idea that the spectacularization of these elements unrelated to musical movement results in an experience that diminishes our musical understanding. Of course, Scruton thinks that attending to the material sources that produce the sounds in which we listen to music has a role, although a secondary one as in the case of sound timbre (Scruton, 1997, pp. 77–78).

The main problem for Scruton is that here our listening is guided by the literal movements of the musician and not by the musical dynamics. The musical movement for Scruton is better imprinted on other aspects of the sound, those that can be experienced without relating them to their material sources, such as pitch or its distribution over time.

3. Critics of the Acousmatic Listening

Scruton's idea of acousmatic listening and his notion of sound presupposes that the flow of sound contains in itself aspects that allow us to order it and thus to experience it meaningfully (Scruton, 2009a, p. 64). In other words, for some authors, the controversial issue here is the idea that we can have meaningful sound experiences –i.e., the ability to individualize sounds, recognize them, group them as 'belonging to one event distinct from another', etc.–, only by perceiving sound qualities without them being perceived in some essential relation to the source that emits them or the events that produce them.

Nudds comments that, for example, if we hear a glass breaking, we seem to have the choice of hearing the sound of the event or say that we hear the glass breaking (Nudds, 2010, p. 283). The second type of listening, he says, occurs for example in psychoacoustic

experiments with artificially generated sounds, which are difficult to relate to any cause. This type of listening would be similar to Scruton's acousmatic listening, which, he says, in an ordinary context would have little or no ecological significance, that is, it seems that «we do not describe the qualities of sounds that we hear, we describe the apparent sources of the sounds» (Nudds, 2010, p. 283).

The idea I would like to propose is that sounds are ordered on the basis of detecting in them a coherence that corresponds to the events from which they emerge. That is, in a sense, in listening to the sound of a car we perceive an 'aural image' of it.

This inevitable ecology of sound is also highlighted by Rob Van Gerwen. I could summarise his remarks in three main points (Van Gerwen, 2012, pp. 223–225):

- 1) Acousmatic listening is only one way of listening, the result of 'twisting' our ordinary listening by adding a certain level of abstraction, but it is not the main of performing it.
- 2) It errs in considering that I hear isolated sounds when in fact I hear events or processes happening to objects, thus their material cause is part of the content of my listening.
- 3) It is a theory that ignores that learning to have meaningful auditory experiences depends on their interaction and cooperation with the other senses.

Van Gerwen, therefore, suggests an *embodied* conception of perception, which implies not only that the senses directly perceive events without separating them from their causes, but also that they are in constant cooperation with each other in perceiving how the world appears to me.

From this perspective, it does not seem plausible that, even if I never see what causes a sound, I perceive it without any other information regarding its mode of production or apparent location. In fact, I think the interesting thing about sounds, as Matthew Nudds (2009, p. 72) puts it, is that they inform us about their sources and that the information from these sources is embodied in the patterns of frequency component of the sound waves. The information extracted from sounds, far from individualising them independently of their sources and contexts of production, seems to link them to each other.

Listening itself could not be developed by isolating these aspects. In this respect, Hamilton (2009, p. 179) points out that learning to have meaningful auditory experiences incorporates information that I have learned to perceive in my multisensory interaction with the world. The point is that, once I learn to listen in this way, I do not need to bring all this multisensory information back to me every time it occurs, it is somehow incorporated into my very listening experience.

It is a different matter to propose that, in musical experience, it is the *attention to some* audible aspects that is relevant. In that case, we would have to investigate whether even in ordering sounds on the basis of such aspects, the source of the sound somehow permeates the experience in a way that is relevant to our musical experience. If so, we could not completely rule out attention to the material sources of sound in our musical experience, even in its 'organising phase'.

3.1. A Case of 'Distances'

Let us consider a case in which, under Scruton's view, the musical experience is detached from its spatial context of production. He suggests the following example: the third movement of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. In this case, an English horn begins to play a melody which is answered by an oboe placed offstage. For Scruton, there are two distinct 'distances', on the one hand, the literal distance of the two instruments on stage, and on the other the musical distance between the first melody and the second. He states that: «the spatial array of the orchestra induces us into the musical space; but it is not part of it, and gives way to it, just as soon as we are gripped by the musical perception» (Scruton, 1997, pp. 12–13).

There are several senses in which we can understand what is meant by a 'musical distance', for example, when we speak about 'distant' or 'close' keys in which a modulation can occur. This analysis of the musical space seems accurate; however, Scruton seems to present those different senses of distance as if they were incompatible. We should oppose the hypothesis that perceiving this musical distance implies getting rid of the experience of the melodies as coming from a certain distance from us.

In my view, the experience of the spatial distribution of instruments in relation to us is a determinant part of our musical experience and musicians do not expect us to abstract it when

we listen to music. Of course, the position of an orchestra or a sound system is generally standardised, but taking its position for granted does not mean that it is not part of our musical experience. Berlioz could have placed the oboe on the stage and find another way to create 'distance', for example by playing two melodies in very distant keys or command the performer to play *pianissimo*, but this is not the musical experience he wants to achieve. To use Wollheim's term, the musician 'thematizes' that aspect of the sound which now gains aural prominence and guides our listening (Wollheim, 1987, p. 20).

Hamilton similarly comments that, in addition to hearing the tones arranged, part of our musical attention is also directed towards appreciating how the musician responds to the acoustics of the room. The musical experience would include the piece itself and the musician's adjustment of its performance based on a space that becomes part of our experience (Hamilton, 2009, p. 166).

4. Musical Twofold Thesis

Scruton's theory, as Hamilton points out (2009, p. 160), can provide a basis for understanding music listening as a single act with two aspects: an acousmatic one by which sound pitches are ordered tonally and a non-acousmatic one by which we attend to the material cause and mode of production of the sound. However, Scruton's version of the acousmatic thesis, as applied in music, only conceded that our organisation of sounds according to a tonal order carries a genuinely musical character. This view seems to fit with our use of the terms 'melody' and 'harmony' as essentially musical ordering experiences that we apply metaphorically in other situations (Zuckermandl, 1969). Thus, we can accept to some extent the idea that attention to tonal relationships is particularly linked to music and sometimes has a significant *preponderance*

In this context, Hamilton (2007, pp. 108–111, 2009, pp. 169–173) proposes a *twofold thesis* that, in his view, is capable of justifying why, in experiencing music, we also attend to the production of sounds and their material sources; being this a genuine musical aspect of it, even if it is the case that this attention does not possess an organizational role. This proposal is inspired by Richard Wollheim's considerations regarding the experience of pictorial representation (Wollheim, 1980, p. 142). However, we will have to establish carefully in what

sense we can draw parallels between the terms used in the visual and auditory case. Let us examine how this step can be taken.

Wollheim (2003, pp. 132–133) argues that the particular experience we have in front of representations can be understood through the notion of 'seeing-in', which allows me to see something represented in a painting while simultaneously maintaining two aspects: seeing the surface on which the figure is painted and seeing the figure, or to put it another way, my vision is twofold distributed although it does not have to be evenly distributed (Wollheim, 1980, pp. 142–143).⁵⁰

There are several occasions in which Hamilton proposes musical versions of Wollheim's formula: listening to music is «hearing the phrase that opens the second movement of Brahms's Symphony No. 4 as a melodic unity, at the same time as hearing that it is sounded on the horns» (Hamilton, 2009, p. 171), experiencing a literal as well as metaphorical dimension, (Hamilton, 2009, p. 169), having non-acousmatic and acousmatic experiences (Hamilton, 2009, p. 170), or that part of the pleasure in listening to music is a sensuous pleasure in sounds, which may not involve acousmatic experience (Hamilton, 2009, p. 170).

However, I do not find it easy to think of a 'musical arrangement' of the formula 'seeing *y* in *x*' based on the pictorial reflections that Wollheim proposes in his texts, but I think we can try to 'triangulate' a similar methodology in music. In my view, this proposal can be summarised as follows: in experiencing music, we can differentiate two aspects, that my listening orders the sounds but also attends to the cause of these sounds. Both experiences are genuinely musical, and one cannot happen without the other.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that composers present both, different proposals of sound ordering and the production of that sounds itself. For Wollheim, painters never cease to seek an ever more intimate rapport between the two experiences (Wollheim, 1980, pp. 144–149). It is this talent that we admire in the masterpieces of representational art (Wollheim, 2003, p. 147). What one cultivates is a kind of seeing-in appropriate to representations (Wollheim, 1980, p. 141), which deepening the sensitivity and knowledge of the viewer, in tune with the artist's intentions (Wollheim, 2003, p. 114).

⁵⁰ For example, in the case of Berlioz, if I place the oboe offstage and make it respond to the cor anglais from there, my attention to the space where the oboe is placed stands out much more than in normal cases, where I am generally hardly aware of the position of the instruments even though their location is part of the content of my experience of sounds and melodies.

The cultivation of our ability to adequately perceive a painting involves seeing something, but also *how* that something *in* a material object, is depicted, for example, that a figure is presented with colours that are not those it has in reality. Seeing these colours does not reorganise or change the figure we see, but presents it in another way. This is how, according to Wollheim, it is often initially ignored, but after special attention and cultivation of representational seeing, certain people can modify what they see by attending to how a figure has been presented (Wollheim, 2003, p. 144). Wollheim (2003, p. 142) presents three ideas: the ‘Representational how’, the ‘Presentational how’ and the ‘Material how’, but I would rather like to consider how these reflections can help us in musical cases.

- 1) Let us consider the following example: Voices are generally divided into bass, tenor, alto, and soprano. This division of course does not mean that a bass cannot sing tenor sections and vice versa. But the same melody, if sung by one or the other, is perceived differently because of the very nature of the voice. When a bass sings very high melodies, even if he sings them perfectly, the effort in his voice is noticeable. The tenor will sing the same section and sound relaxed. Here, a melody emerges from the sound with a certain tension or relaxation. Now precisely because that tension in the vocal cords is perceived, the musician may determine that such tessitura is more appropriately placed in a conclusive section rather than as a passage section. Part of this experience of resolution depends precisely on our attending to how the sound is produced and this matches perfectly with the musical practice where artists also thematise this aspect of sounds.
- 2) Tonal rearrangement through attention to sound production: Imagine, for example, someone playing the notes belonging to the scale of C major and its relative minor, A minor. As both groups of notes coincide, the scale I am listening to, that is, the tonal centre of gravity of the piece can be determined by the accents. Accenting has not only the tonal sense of placing a note at a certain moment in the bar, but also listening to the way in which the sound has been produced –the attack. This seems to cover some of the cases of ambiguities presented by Janet Levy (1995). She argues that certain musical sections can be heard as an ending or as a beginning and this tonal rearrangement can occur by attending to actions that have to do with

how the instruments produce sounds. The tones are the same, but the generation of the sound is not. She mentions various aspects of musical performance such as tiny hesitations versus rushings forward; agogic or dynamic stresses; points of attack and so on, which «are involved in conveying separation versus connection, event versus process» (Levy, 1995, p. 154).

- 3) Musical virtuosity: Several authors pay special attention to how the musician's movements are part of my musical experience, for example, Davies (1994, pp. 353–354), Hamilton (2009, p. 166) or Van Gerwen (2008, p. 34). What is interesting about this observation is that, when listening to music, we do not admire the virtuosity of musicians as long as they are able to manipulate with great speed or great technique the objects with which they produce sounds, as if they were juggling with the instruments –which on its own it makes no musical sense. In my view, in understanding musical virtuosity there is a reciprocal relationship between the musician's movements and how they execute a melody with certain movements that give it a new character. This ‘character’ includes the production of the sound in the content of my musical experience. Failure to include this aspect would be a detriment of the musical experience.

5. Conclusion

This short theoretical foray is intended to highlight the special character of musical listening without abstracting it from its contexts of production. If these latter aspects, even if they do not have an organisational role, can be thematised and musically exploited by artists, I believe that we will be favouring an interdisciplinary point of view on the question of musical meaning. Asking ourselves, for example, “in what sense is it important to discover that Berlioz’s compositional practice is due to the idiomatic qualities of the guitar?”, become not only an exploration in terms of chord sequences but also a new listening proposal: that of attending to how our musical understanding emerges from interactions with the material possibilities of our instruments (Hovland, 2017).

The study of musical aspects on which I focus here, have as a background objective to support the perspective according to which musical experience is best explained in terms of

musical understanding (Arbo, 2013; Defez, 2013; Kaduri, 2006; Scruton, 2004), a stance on meaning, influenced by Wittgenstein's texts. In my view, this analysis can help us to grasp the relevance of his remarks on music, in which he points out that understanding a musical tradition impels us to question such things as, “do children and women give concerts or only men do?”, “is music played mainly in bourgeois circles?” and the like (Wittgenstein, 1967). This further link between music and its social function is additionally indispensable for a fair assessment of both, the role of the ordinary music listener and the musical traditions of others. In none of these cases would it be correct to say that we are dealing with "less musical" subjects simply because, in their relationship with music, attention to non-organizational elements of music is more prominent (Blacking, 1973).

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