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Listening origins, habits, and habitus

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Abstract:
Mark Zanter: Marshall University, (USA): Listening origins, habits, and habitus:

Listening habits offer us insight into music’s affect on us as individuals, artists, and as members of the various communities we inhabit. Using the lens of phenomenology to assess and explore the nature of the listening experience, I will investigate recent writings on music perception, and modes of listening focusing on their use: by individuals in everyday life; in perceiving musical works and the role of music in multimedia; and in generating habitus—social codes in the musical cultures we inhabit. Once the notions of habits and habitus have been established, I will posit that listening, in the context of new technologies affords the opportunity to the individual to compose, or use listening as a creative or performative process; generating, as Attali has proposed, “one’s own relationship to the world.”

Bio:
Mark Zanter, composer/performer, has received commissions from the UIUC Creative Music Orchestra, CU Symphony, the American Composers forum, the WV Arts Commission, WVMTA, Due East, Solen Dikener, Rick Kurasz, Cetin Aydar, Ankara University Soloists, Lindsey Goodman and others. He has appeared on NPR’s Live at the Landmark, WILL, IPR, Second Sunday concerts, on WVPN In Touch With The Arts, is published by Les Productions d’OZ, European American, and MJIC Music publishing, and his works have been performed internationally at festivals including, MUSIC “X”, June in Buffalo, The Cortona Contemporary Music Festival, NYCEMF and the Atlantic Center for the Arts. He is the recipient of grants/awards from The American Society of Composers and Publishers (ASCAP), The American Music Center (AMC), The American Composers Forum (ACF), The West Virginia Division of Culture and History, and WV Music Teachers Association. Dr. Zanter is Professor of Music at Marshall University, Huntington, WV, USA.
Listening Origins, Habits, and Habitus

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Understanding sensory perception and listening processes in particular have been the subject of studies in the Social Sciences; and in Music Theory, and Musicology for well over the past fifty years. In Music Theory a survey analytical techniques reveals that most focus implicitly or explicitly on perception of musical phenomena and perception of musical structure on increasingly ‘deeper’ levels; showing relationships that may be immediately consciously perceived and those that may be shown to exist but only perceived ‘unconsciously’ by an ideal listener (one who can understand and hear all relationships). In addition, other forces in music invite interpretations of meaning referencing the external world through the use of topics that are mimetic of ‘something’ in ‘someway’ be it in relation to a dance form, a musical style (e.g. march, empfindsamer style) and the like (Agawu 2009). The discussion of analysis gives us the general framework for this discussion of listening modes which is directed towards phenomenon located in three essential elements: the musical object, its production in musical context, and its perception by individuals and groups (Molino 1990).

Professional musicians listen in a variety of ways; analytically we listen for structural phenomena, function, formal and stylistic elements; as performers we listen for intonation, balance, rhythmic coordination, and so on; and yet we may never have thought about listening: How should, or rather, might I listen? What should I focus on if anything? Why does this piece of music make me feel a certain way? Should I imagine images, see metaphors, or create a narrative for sounds I hear? Should I associate memories, references to literature, and other musical works freely with what I am hearing? What are the most important elements on which to focus? Do others share my experiences? Where are these experiences located individually and culturally?
We have accumulated our listening habits and expectations over time, and it is likely that as musicians, we are only somewhat aware of our habits in various situations in our daily, and professional lives (Becker 2010: 129). So why dwell upon issues that appear to be common knowledge? I would argue that a broader understanding of our own listening habits and modes of listening, those of our colleagues, our students, and the those of our audiences will enable us to communicate more effectively about music to colleagues and audiences, become better teachers, understand better the role of music in the various cultures we inhabit, and acknowledge its role in those we do not. At present, we will focus on new research into modes of listening, and return to the concept of affordances later.

EVERYDAY LISTENING:

Ruth Herbert outlines her experiences reading Lionel Salter’s (1950) comments on music listening where:

Salter equated such listening modes [for concert music] with everyday experience of music—particularly recorded music. His ideal way of listening…is grounded in the Western classical concert model of (supposedly) autonomous passive listening, where music is the main focus of attention. It’s now virtually a truism to observe that this type of listening behaviour no longer typifies the way in which most people in the industrialized West engage with music. The question is whether it ever did. (Herbert 2011: 1)

The last portion of the quote may be disconcerting, but as we begin our discussion of listening modes, we will begin to understand that focused, absorptive listening for long periods of time, is a practice in which an individual chooses to engage, and that choice—for most persons—is rare. Herbert proposes in her book, Everyday Music Listening that individuals listen with varying degrees of “trancing [meaning] the combination of absorption (total involvement that is effortless and non-volitional) and
dissociation (detachment—the temporary alteration or separation of normally integrated mental processes in conscious awareness) (Herbert 2011: 5).” Herbert supports her claim citing:

Absorption and Dissociation are best understood as useful holistic ‘wrapper’ or shorthand for the overall subjective ‘feel’ of certain types of experience arising from the interaction of a number of psychological processes. Empirical evidence indicates that they are ubiquitous components of everyday experience (Herbert 2011: 5-6)[.] The previous statements focus specifically on the effects of, and psychological processes of perceiving music by individuals, and locate listening in everyday experiences—those activities individuals conceivably engage in on a daily basis. Much of Herbert’s study assesses the listening habits and perceptions of a group subjects, throughout she acknowledges that the range absorption can be greater or lesser depending on the context, and individual factors. Slobodba acknowledges this as well and in, The Handbook of Music and Emotion goes further in defining everyday experiences as typically: having low emotional intensity, being ‘average’ and less memorable, short lived, influenced by the attendant context, and are reactive to surface characteristics of rather than deeper structural aspects of a musical stimulus (Sloboda 2010: 496-503). Sloboda goes further stating that those events that are not ‘everyday’, may engender stronger experiences of higher emotional intensity; producing memories which are longer lived (p. 500). Both authors accept the importance of context in which music is heard, and each views ‘everyday’ as important given its ubiquity. Further each mentions that there are fluctuations between high and low absorption reported by listeners—either anecdotally as in Herbert, or as subjects in studies as in Sloboda. Last both authors focus their discussion on the effects of perceiving music reported by listeners; but effects perceived by an individual (e.g. observations of one’s mood,
perceived references, images, or narrative) are only a portion of a phenomenological approach to music perception:

The phenomenal-perceptual field includes the listener himself, the array of musical events which confront him, and his concomitant states of consciousness. It encompasses the totality of his awareness at a given moment and consists of "phenomenally objective" musical events such as tones, intervals, chords, rhythms, dynamics, timbres, and connections existing between tones (the auditory field) as well as "phenomenally subjective" thoughts, memories, feelings, etc., (the psychological field) that accompany the auditory field. Subjective behavior is determined by the nature of the auditory field. (Pike 1966: 253)

Summarizing; in music tones, intervals, chords, rhythms etc. exist as components of the sounded object and these stimulate in the individual various responses that will be of varying intensity depending on the degree of attention (absorption), the attendant context in which they are perceived, and the state of the individual who is perceiving (dissociation). The psychological effect of perceiving music then is shaped by musical stimuli; their perception, and conscious integration of the two by the individual into the individual’s current conscious state.

THE ECOLOGICAL APPROACH:

The Ecological approach to musical perception acknowledges that the environment is organized by physical laws, and that the cycle of perception employs action, adaptation, and learning. In action, perception is seen as essentially exploratory; stimuli sought yield more information about the environment, actions lead to, enhance, and direct perception, and further exploration is shaped by responses to perceptions (Clarke 2005: 19), or adaptation—the resonance of the perceptual system with environment and the exploitation of existing opportunities (Clarke 2005: 21). Action and adaptation focus the individual’s attention towards specific affordances (aspects and potentials of what is perceived) while ignoring others. Perceptual learning results when the continuous tuning
of the perceiver’s perceptual systems towards invariant properties of the environment enables increasing sensitivity to previously undetected distinctions of/between/amongst stimuli perceived (Clarke 2005: 22, 25). In essence the ecological [approach] rests on the premise that perceptual specification is a reciprocal relationship between the invariants of the environment [objective elements] and the capacities of the perceiver (Clarke 2005: 44). Further, environmental invariants need not exist as a hierarchy ranging between physical factors to abstract constructs, and/or social factors; rather all factors are active simultaneously and individuals may draw upon as many elements in the perceptual field as may be discerned. For instance, in hearing an authentic cadence in ‘F’ it is as likely (maybe even more likely) that a musically untrained listener would hear the cadence as an ‘ending’ without any knowledge of the key, chords, or scale degree resolutions (Clarke 2005: 45)—all conclusions are useful interpretations. In other instances individuals with little musical training can often discern elements of musical style, and emotional content/mood with little or no knowledge of melodic, harmonic, or formal structures.

*The advantages of [the ecological approach] as far as music is concerned are that it places the emphasis on an investigation of the invariants that specify all of the phenomena that music afford[s] in relation to the diversity of perceptual capacities of different listeners; and that it offers a framework within which attributes of music that have previously been regarded as poles apart (from physical sources and musical structures to cultural meaning and critical content) can be understood together. This last point…recognizes the distinctiveness of different phenomena and the manner in which they may be specified, as well as the reciprocity between listeners’ capacities and environmental opportunities (affordances), while asserting the commonality of the perceptual principles on which a sensitivity to these phenomena depends (Clarke 2005: 47).*

The implications of the concept are broad especially when one considers analysis of musical works where traditionally one might begin by reducing structures into their component parts ‘reassembling’ them through as series of causal events to eventually
reach conclusions about how the musical surface is shaped into increasingly larger structures and structural functions. Using an ecological approach that validates perceptions at all levels, one could proceed simultaneously from initial perceptions of affect, be they a description of structural function, or emotional content etc. and trace ‘backwards’ following the thread from abstract concept to finite cause and vice versa.

Edward O. Wilson (1998) mentions this multi-level approach:

[T]he brain is a messy place at best even when handling the most elementary of ideas. Scientists themselves do not think in straight lines. They contrive concepts evidence, relevance, connections, and analysis as they go along. (Wilson 1998: 69)

Further, in initial stages need not dwell upon any one type of perception. By validating all perceptions the ecological approach recognizes that individual perceivers will read the ‘signs’ of each musical object differently based on individual sensitivity, context and other factors.

A collation of critical comments from several experienced listeners who have experienced the same work provides some basis of common experiential factors. Through further observation and comparison a systematic criterion of reactions can be made. The nature of the experience can also be studied and discussed objectively by an analysis of the music itself. Once the norms of a style have been ascertained the affective content of music can be analyzed without constant reference to the subjective responses of the listener (Pike 1966: 254).

The ecological approach’s acknowledgement of objective elements of sound, their subjective characterization by listeners, and the validity of all perceptions on a continuum from most general, affective, to the most pointed analytical statements is the most inclusive view of listening practice derived from the phenomenological perspective. By increasingly locating the listening experience with the individual we can see how listeners—increasingly ‘armed’ with personal listening devices, begin to ‘compose with’, or use recorded music in performative manner to accompany everyday events. It is perhaps the sensory incompleteness of aesthetic objects—music, paintings,
literature etc. that encourages this active participation (Windsor 2000); and thinking about other things, memories, external environmental surroundings, and other associations rather than being a distraction may eventually be conceived as an essential element in the reading of a work (Herbert 2011: 57). In essence, the listener then becomes a ‘collaborator’ one who begins to ‘compose’ their own relationship to the world through their individual use of various aesthetic objects (Attali 1985). This introduces the notion of Habitus—one’s individual disposition and place within a social structure—but before we proceed, I would like to examine Pierre Schaeffer’s approach to phenomenology and trace its development through his work and that of his colleagues; a discussion that will further define phenomenology as it is applied to electro-acoustic music, and throw into relief the notion of habitus for composers and listeners of this music.

SCHAEFFER’S REDUCTIVE LISTENING (Acousmatic):

Electro-acoustic music is unique in that it affords us the opportunity to examine listening in the context of a music: that employs an enormously varied sonic palette of sounds which may or may not refer to the ‘outside’ world; that typically exists without an external score, thus situating analysis specifically with the sounds of the work, their structure, morphology, and possible external implications; whose practitioners may or may not be musically trained, and as a result will employ a wide array of methods; and a music where the analytical literature ranges from reviews of technological development and use, to discussion of musical structures and topics in aesthetics.

Pierre Schaeffer founder of ORTF (Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Français) and then GRM (Groupe de Recherche de Musique) was a composer/engineer who theorized
extensively and was highly influential in the world of electro-acoustic music. Schaeffer’s *Traité des objets musicaux: Essai interdisciplines* (1966) an extensive work, was initially undertaken to provide a descriptive taxonomy of sounds and posit a theory of listening. A theory that is implicitly phenomenological in that it focuses on disclosing the essential ‘realism’ of the acoustical domain (objective/invariant elements) and ‘psychologism’ (subjective elements) of musical practice (Kane 2007: 13). Schaeffer takes up Husserl’s concept of phenomenological reduction or *époche*, and his use of it served the taxonomic bent of *Traité* as he sought to use perception: to become aware of sound through the listening process; to bracket out external references, and explore a sound’s inherent objective qualities which he defined as acousmatic. The acousmatic is defined as: ‘Acousmatic, adjective: referring to a sound that one hears without seeing the causes behind it’ (Schaeffer 1966: 91, 92). Reductive listening serves the purpose of classifying sound structure and morphology (changes over time). It is “the act of isolating and of defining the musical characteristic[s] of recorded sounds” (Battier 2007: 198), but it is not possible for all listeners in practice since electro-acoustic works often provoke curiosity about the origins of sounds. To this end Schaeffer developed four modes of listening to parse ways in which listeners interpret information.

*The first mode (écouter) concentrates on the objective qualities of sound and is intentional; Schaeffer describes this as “I listen to that which interests me” (Schaeffer 1966: 113). Mode two (oir) refers to the purely physiological process of hearing sounds and entails no intention or interpretation. Mode three (entendre) describes hearing while attending to particular aspects of sound; Schaeffer describes it as “I seek to understand.” Mode four (comprendre) constitutes an engagement with sound and its external references. We practice different combinations of these four modes depending on the object and purpose of our listening. (Demers, 26-27)*

*Comprendre* encapsulates aspects of the Ecological Approach, and may be understood as the emergence of Heidegger’s ‘second phenomenology’ in Schaeffer’s thinking where
“experience cannot be questioned alone or in isolation, but must be understood ultimately in relation to its historical and cultural imbeddedness” (Ihde 2007: 20). Further developments in reductive listening were proposed by Dennis Smalley a student of Schaeffer and Bayle (GRM director ’75-97) who proposed Spectromorphology—the study of sound changes and transformations over time as a means to examine the intrinsic qualities of sound, and characteristics of a work; as a technique that may be used by all listeners. Smalley recommends that reduced listening be used analytically, but that composer cannot ultimately control how individuals will perceive their work (Demers 2010: 34-35). In other words, beyond the intrinsic qualities of the work itself, its interpretation rests entirely upon the listener (esthesis). In essence we have returned to where we began, but one of the interesting facts is that electro-acoustic music’s sound material, its production, and performance context engendered amongst its practitioners the desire to create a taxonomy of sounds, and to assess with great vigor the modes of listening; focusing first on separating sounds from attendant references (e.g. reduced listening) and then eventually acknowledging the necessity of a more ‘ecological’ approach, and a shift of focus towards validating listener’s perceptions. In Schaeffer’s earliest writing A la recherché d’une musique concrète he was aware of this duality:

So, every sound phenomenon (like the words of a language) can be taken for its relative meaning or for its own substance. As long as meaning predominates, and is the main focus, we have literature and not music. But how can we forget meaning and isolate the in-itself-ness of the sound phenomenon? (Schaeffer 2012: 13)

Though the concept of reduced listening is only a portion of a phenomenological perspective of music, the importance of Schaeffer’s principle of acousmatic—to separate sounds from visual stimuli, and audible cues of ontology—the importance of his
extensive experimentation and classification of sounds cannot be ignored.

HABITUS:

Our personal disposition, a connection to a community and its values afford the opportunity for habitus—one’s habits and predispositions within social community that are an unquestioned part of the individual:

*Habitus is an embodied pattern of actions and reaction, in which we are not fully conscious of why we do what we do; not totally determined, but a tendency to behave in a certain way. Our habitus of listening is tacit, unexamined, seemingly completely ‘natural.’ We listen in a particular way without thinking about it, and without realizing that it even is a particular way of listening. Most of our styles of listening have been learned through unconscious imitation of those who surround us and with whom we continually interact.* (Becker 2010: 130)

Most working musicians likely belong to multiple musical communities, and if one’s contact with different communities involves aesthetic ‘friction’, it is more likely that they will be made more conscious of their musical values, listening habits, and possibly aspects of habitus. Demer identifies communities of electro-acoustic musicians through means they use to create: construction—synthesis, reproduction—sampling with a purpose, and destruction—sampling as material. She differentiates further, but I would argue that knowledge of habitus will eventually lead to consciousness one’s place as both an insider and outsider in networks we inhabit; an increasing awareness of one’s individuality; and knowledge of and perhaps a desire for one’s own self-expression using whatever means are available. Jacque Attali in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* states:

*[W]e can envision one last network…in which music could be lived as composition, in other words, in which it would be performed for the musician’s own enjoyment, as self-communication, with no other goal than his own pleasure, as something fundamentally outside all communication, as self-transcendence, as a solitary, egotistical, noncommercial act.* (Attali 1985: 32)

Bibliography:


