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Resonant Listening

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The subject, a diapason?

Each subject, a differently tuned diapason?

Tuned to self – but without a known frequency?

(Nancy 2007: 16–17)

I **Liquid**

According to Zygmunt Bauman, the developed world has witnessed a paradigm shift from 'solid' to 'liquid' modernity. Of the five features of liquid life the fourth and fifth interest me in this essay. The fourth is this: 'the collapse of long-term thinking, planning and acting, and the disappearance or weakening of social structures in which thinking, planning and acting could be inscribed for a long time to come, leads to a splicing of both political history and individual lives into a series of short-term projects and

episodes which are in principle infinite, and do not combine into the kinds of sequences to which concepts like “development”, “maturation”, “career” or “progress” (all suggesting a preordained order of succession) could be meaningfully applied. A life so fragmented stimulates “lateral” rather than “vertical” orientations.’ The fifth is this: ‘the responsibility for resolving the quandaries generated by vexingly volatile and constantly changing circumstances is shifted onto the shoulders of individuals – who are now expected to be “free choosers” and to bear in full the consequences of their choices’ (Bauman 2007: 3–4).

For Jean-François Lyotard, similarly, contemporary art has undergone significant changes. Art today ‘consists in exploring things unsayable and things invisible. Strange machines are assembled, where what we didn’t have the idea of saying or the matter to feel can make itself heard and experienced’ (Lyotard 1989: 190). Indeed, art ‘is not merely a cultural object, though it is that too. It harbours within it an excess, a rapture, a potential of associations that overflows all the determinations of its “reception” and “production”’ (Lyotard 1991b: 93). This has the effect of making art an event that ‘dismantles consciousness’ (Lyotard 1991a: 90).

Also noteworthy is that, although music is the paradigmatic art of listening, listening itself is much more than a musical pursuit freely undertaken in the presence of live musicians. There are many modes of auditory engagement that are not primarily musical or aesthetic, from everyday conversation to the use of enforced listening as a weapon (Cusick 2008), from classroom teaching methods to the validation of legal testimony, from the gestures of lovers to the techniques of good managers and the CCTV cameras listening to our every movement. In parallel, contemporary artistic practices have radically expanded the notion of listening and appropriated modes of non-musical

listening with varying degrees of success, as in the work of composers like John Cage and Luigi Nono.

The changes articulated by Bauman and Lyotard are powerful and far-reaching. What interests me about liquid life and contemporary art so described is the extent to which listening is implicated as an important – even urgent – activity. How does liquid life and the art-making that contributes to (or perhaps undermines) it hinge on the specific type of listening that is afforded the subject? The constant demand to listen ‘more’ and ‘better’ is a moralising exhortation to collaborate with other citizens and improve the common lot: to perform or else. But is it also an ethical demand to turn inwards towards the subject’s inner self, to truly know thyself? What is the role of listening in the constitution of the subject?

Following leads from Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, this essay argues that the ontology of the subject is auditory; that the subject is constituted as (a) listening. This listening is rhythmic and is a matter of resonance before it becomes a matter of intentionality and thence signification and identity. This resonance is of the timbre of sound, and this engages the subject before they are even a subject: they are subject to timbre. Some wider implications of these propositions are discussed at the end.

II Timbre

We begin when listening starts: with timbre. To get (back) to timbre we need to consider what happens before listening becomes an activity of hermeneutic interpretation, before the contents of perception are transformed into a signifying object: before the semiotic turn. ‘Before’ in this context does not denote a moment of

choice as such. It denotes the moment when sound is still timbre and yet to be assimilated and phrased in terms of meanings and significations, the moment when 'Sensation makes a break in an inert nonexistence' (Lyotard 1997: 243). This timbral moment is double: it is 'sound without language, [...] sonorous matter without form' (Lyotard 1997: 220); the acoustically measurable attack of sound, and the perceptually continuous or recurring sonorous presence. The point is that 'If listening is distinguished from hearing both as its opening (its attack) and as its intensified extremity, that is, reopening beyond comprehension (of sense) and beyond agreement or harmony (harmony or resolution in the musical sense), that necessarily signifies that listening is listening to something other than sense in its signifying sense' (Nancy 2007: 32). This 'something other than sense in its signifying sense' is the focus of my essay.

Timbre is not primarily a matter of meaning, and 'has no hidden face; it is all in front, in back, and outside inside, inside-out in relation to the most general logic of presence as appearing, as phenomenality or as manifestation, and thus as the visible face of a presence subsisting in itself'. Indeed, to listen to timbre is 'to be at the same time outside and inside [sound], to be open from without and from within' (Nancy 2007: 13-14). This surface that is simultaneously timbre's depth suggests that sound is a Moebius strip: one-sided and continuous, without an underbelly to hide or repress, and full of the acoustic energy that keeps it spinning around on itself. Thus, timbre 'is not exactly a phenomenon; that is to say, it does not stem from a logic of manifestation. It stems from a different logic, which would have to be called evocation, but in this precise sense: while manifestation brings presence to light, evocation summons (convokes, invokes) presence to itself' (Nancy 2007: 20).

Timbre is the 'inside of thought' (Lyotard 1993: 174). It strikes the listener both too early and too late, presenting itself before the subject can constitute itself (Lyotard

1993: 179), yet tempting the listener to assimilate it hastily before it has even been presented as timbre. Lyotard says it causes reflection; and by 'reflection' he means something specific: 'this reflection is not a bending of thought back upon itself, but rather a bending within thought of something that seems to not be itself since thought cannot determine it' (Lyotard 1993: 174). This 'something' that is non-identical with itself is timbre, and it is 'the first consistency of sonorous sense as such' (Nancy 2007: 40). The listener is exposed to timbre (Lyotard sometimes says 'nuance' [Lyotard 1991: 183, 201–3; Lyotard 1997: 31, 243]) as to a contagion. Indeed, timbre is infectious, and it demands a response. For Lyotard, such a response to timbre is a matter of obeying its sensory demands, and this means listening to it. This is why he is able to write of obligation as matter for 'the ear rather than the eye' (Lyotard 1991a: 81; Lyotard and Thébaud 1985: 22, 63, 66), and why resonance remains loose and a matter of being in tune with timbre rather than fixing it in a network of significations. Listening to timbre (insofar as timbre is something that can be separated from the very act of listening) unfolds 'an inexhaustible network linking listening to belonging, to the sense of obligation' (Lyotard 1991a: 178).

Timbre is thus more an event of feeling than an event of thought (which would imply a pre-constituted subject ready to have such a thought). In order for the subject to emerge from this timbral event there must be a working through, and this is timbre's resonance in the body. This resonant working through, which is a response to the demand of timbre, is ambiguously pleasurable and simultaneously worrying, for maintaining the moment when timbre is still timbre (and does not yet signify sonority) requires patience and sensitivity. It is an ability that can never be mastered, and the demand that timbre resonate is never ending.

Timbre is the paradigmatic form of sensibility (Lacoue-Labarthe 1994: 162); the 'sensitive (aesthetic) condition as such: the sharing of an inside/outside, division and participation, de-connection and contagion' (Nancy 2007: 14). Timbre intensifies audition, bending it towards meaning and sense and working towards the auditory (musical) object. Indeed, in timbre 'Sense reaches me long before it leaves me, even though it reaches me only by leaving in the same moment' (Nancy 2007: 30). There is a curvature to listening which Nancy and Lyotard pick up on, the latter often with reference to Freud and the Nachträglichkeit of (analytic) listening (Lyotard 1991a: 84). In various late essays Lyotard returns to the infancy of thought and thinks listening not outside time, but outside mere succession, in order to do justice to feeling and what in general he terms the essential 'childhood' of the faculty of listening (Lyotard 1993: 151).

III Resonance

Letting timbre resonate without forcing it to signify requires probity, and this is a quality of listening that affords the good life. It is an attitude, not of judging or apprehending events in which the telos is mastery and possession, but of taking care over singular details. It is a matter of being sensitive to timbral sensation, of avoiding force, and of remaining mobile. Resonance opens the subject to being touched by events of timbre and feeling, and sensitive to nuances in what is heard.

In this sense, resonance stretches and bends the ear towards musical tone, and is a matter of listening in and overhearing, straining to hear something that is not quite fully within earshot. As Lyotard puts it, it is a matter of attending to what 'arises', and this 'must be understood in the sense of pricking up one's ears, of listening' (Lyotard 1991a: 84). There is thus a certain looseness and openness in resonance, for while it is

not set against knowledge, and can be practised, it is bent towards reflective judgement. There are no criteria by which it happens, no way of judging in advance whether the timbral event heard is resonating or has merely been reduced to what it has come to signify. Indeed, the rules and principles of reflective judgement come later and have to be created in the wake of resonance; timbre and its resonance come first – listening before responding. As Lyotard writes, resonance ‘is not a matter for the ego; it is matter taking on a form, and its hold is neither active nor passive, as it exists before the act and before subjectification’ (Lyotard 1989: 226). In this respect, the resonance of timbre occurs before subject and object are teased apart by rhythm, and before the subject is aware of itself qua subject.

Resonance arises from the fact that ‘sonorous presence is an essentially mobile “at the same time”’ (Nancy 2007: 16): ‘The sonorous [...] outweighs form. It does not dissolve it, but rather enlarges it; it gives it an amplitude, a density, and a vibration or undulation whose outline never does anything but approach’ (Nancy 2007: 2). The expanding and stretching of sound is key to resonance, in making sound more than just sound – and thus in listening (as opposed to mere hearing). ‘One can say of music that it silences sound and that it interprets sounds: makes them sound and make sense no longer as the sounds of something, but in their own resonance’ (Nancy 2007: 32). Resonance works on sound like the ‘aspect perception’ grounding Roger Scruton’s (1997) aesthetics of music, although given that ‘meaning and sound share the space of a referral’ (Nancy 2007: 8), Nancy would probably say that Scruton does not go far enough in working through the passage between sound and tone, that is to say, the resonance of timbre in the body. Scruton’s listening subject is essentially unchanged by the passage of ‘hearing as’ and still in control of its faculties; in Nancy’s grammar, it remains the ‘listening subject’ and is not the ‘subject who is (a) listening’). In contrast,

Nancy's subject becomes itself and gains its faculties in the movement of that very passage.

Nancy's description of resonance as wave-like – stretching, contracting, and hollowing out time (Nancy 2007: 13) – is compatible with the musicological use of metaphor and schema theory to move beyond linear models of time (Adlington 2003). Resonance involves 'passage'. To wit: there is a 'vibration that animates the auditory apparatus' (Nancy 2007: 29) and 'the release of a body' (Nancy 2007: 39), that 'gives direction to this feeling' (Nancy 2007: 56) as the listener is 'propelled into an expectation' (Nancy 2007: 66). Although Lyotard spends time unpacking the initial moments of sensation, Nancy, perhaps surprisingly given that he has written elsewhere about how the event surprises itself (Nancy 2000: 159–76), does not spend long on the 'surprise' of resonance, the attack of timbre, and the opening toward the musical subject, focusing instead on how the subject emerges as a rhythmic entity.

IV Subject

As timbre resonates, it becomes rhythmic. It is upon this condition of possibility that the subject emerges (Lacoue-Labarthe 1994: 195). Rhythm follows resonance, folding resonance in and out upon itself and opening up towards sense and meaning. It is essentially an act of disturbance, with roots in the Freudian schematic repetition 'fort-da' that follows the disappearance and re-appearance of the object. Nancy argues that it 'is nothing other than the time of time, the vibration of time itself in the stroke of a present that presents itself by separating it from itself, freeing it from its simple stanza to make it into scansion (rise, raising of the foot that beats) and cadence (fall, passage into the pause). Thus, rhythm separates the succession of the linearity of the sequence

or length of time: it bends time to give it to time itself, and it is in this way that it folds and unfolds a “self” (Nancy 2007: 17). The subject, then, is self-reflexive and listens to itself, ‘straining toward or in an approach to the self’ (Nancy 2007: 9). It hovers on the rhythmic edge of meaning formed by the rhythmic resonance of timbre, its repetitive and disturbing cycle of scansion and cadence.

This, however, is not a phenomenological subject but a resonant, resounding subject; the former emerges later, in the wake of resonance, by which point, as Lyotard says, ‘hearing’ has developed from the resonance of timbre to an egological project: ‘To hear this [timbral] event is to transform it: into tears, gestures, laughter, dance, words, sounds, theorems, repainting your room, helping a friend move’ (Lyotard 1984: 93). What the resonant subject reveals is ‘the affectability of the soul by sensation’ (Lyotard 1997: 242), and the manner of its awakening or birth is ‘the mystery of sensation’ (Lyotard 1997: 249). The term ‘soul’ is broadly equivalent to Nancy’s term ‘subject’; both agree that the soul is able to listen to demands (1991a). While Lyotard does not say much about how the soul continues in or beyond the initial sensation (although he does imply that ‘rhythm’ structures the soul and propels it along (Lyotard and Thébaud 1985: 34, 51, 90; Lyotard 1991a: 202)), Nancy proposes that it resonates; that a rhythmic movement of folding back in timbre is the beginning of the constitution and ‘echo of the subject’ (Lacoue-Labarthe 1994; cf. Lyotard 1997: 229). In this respect there is a Freudian tone to the argument, albeit ambiguously anthropomorphic. As Lacoue-Labarthe notes, music ‘primes; it sets off the autobiographical gesture’ (Lacoue-Labarthe 1994: 151).

Keeping the subject’s constitution going thus involves music, or at least aesthetic activity of the avant-garde sort about which Lyotard wrote extensively. Such activity, as Cage’s work exemplifies, particularly in the late 1940s and 1950s, is concerned with the

nature of active relationships between events, with what constitutes appropriate and prudent modes of response, continuation, and linkage, and the consequences of deciding in favour of certain linkages rather than others. The subject, in other words, needs art if it is to last beyond its beginnings in the resonance of timbre.

V Survival

If, as I have argued, listening to timbre is resonant, then what are the implications for listening practices? How does timbre draw listening into the world? What can listening do today? As Jacques Attali notes, music ‘explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things’ (Attali 1985: 11). What kind of new world might be created by the subject who is (a) listening?

This essay has suggested that listening has more than just aesthetic value. Indeed, it has more than ethical value, too; pretty much all ethical theories advocate listening (Lyotard and Thébaud 1985: 22, 39, 63), whether to laws, maxims, rules, feelings, or intuitions. Equally, it is more than a metaphor; it is ontological (Lyotard 1991a: 83), arising before the emergence of such issues as cultural self-appropriation and the social position of aesthetic listening. Resonance is a mode of attending to timbre fluidly, using the whole body as an echo chamber for timbre to resonate, become rhythm, and constitute the subject. It is a matter of moving the body around the resistant material world, but not attempting to master the musical event or discover an ideal form through which it must be understood.

This listening (if the ontological arguments of Lyotard and Nancy are reduced to a matter of aesthetic choice) is one that was implied by a certain ideology, apparent

from Debussy to Cage. The intention was to reinvigorate auditory culture and to rethink the nature of sound on its own terms, or at least on terms less dominated by the teleological obsessions and Cartesian drive for mastery characteristic of much Western thought (Bruns 1994). According to this ideology, what was needed was 'a mode of being within the world based on listening, through hearing the sounds of the world as music' (Kahn 1997: 556). In the bold terms of Cage's 'Juilliard Lecture': 'The wisest thing to do is to open one's ears immediately, and hear a sound suddenly before one's thinking has a chance to turn into something logical, abstract, or symbolical' (Cage 1967: 98): This is an aesthetic extrapolation of resonance, taking a necessary and unavoidable moment of listening (the attack and resonance of timbre) and elevating it to a point where it becomes conscious (and has political overtones).

Lyotard generally takes Cageian principles and sets them in motion as philosophical ideas, but in addition he sometimes treads similar ground to Cage: '[One must] become open to the "it happens that" rather than the "What happens" [which] requires at the very least a high degree of refinement in the perception of small differences [...] The secret of such asceticism lies in the power to be able to endure occurrences as "directly" as possible without the mediation of a "pre-text"' (Lyotard 1988: 18). This – the demand of timbre that it resonate in and as the subject, and without mediation – is an opening to 'modes of individuation beyond those of things, persons or subjects' (Deleuze 1992: 26). It requires 'An ear deaf enough not to be seduced by the melody and harmony of forms, but fine enough to take in pitch and nuance' (Lyotard 1997: 31). For, as noted at the outset, the subject has become but a moment within liquid life, dismantled by events, and best thought of as constituted as (a) listening. Cage himself hinted that the essence of timbral resonance can be taken as not just ontology but as an aesthetic technique: 'listening to this music [the Concert for

Prepared Piano] one takes as a springboard the first sound that comes along; the first something springs us into nothing and out of that nothing arises the next something; etc. like an alternating current' (Cage 1961: 135). There are clear overlaps here with the way in which Lyotard deals with 'the nothing' upon which resonance, phrases, and the subject emerge, although Cage is characteristically fearless in facing the possibility of nothing, bearing nothing of the sublime anxiety that marks Lyotard's account (Lyotard 1997: 228).

In the kind of approach represented perhaps most energetically by Cage, it has often been claimed that art resists the dominant and domineering weight of the System (what was once called Capital); this is the line of thinkers like Attali and Adorno, as well as Lyotard. Such resistance, or perhaps sheer disinterest, on the part of timbre may prove to be its real power (political or otherwise) – and of listening – in a liquid world: to challenge and unsettle the System, whether in Japanese noise music at one extreme or the delicacies of Morton Feldman at the other. However, to do so, the art of Music needs to relate to the music (small m) of the world, and the biological working of the ear needs to connect to the transcendental pretensions of its usage: namely, 'to leave a trace or make a sign, within the audible, of a sonorous gesture that goes beyond the audible' (Lyotard 1997: 218). This is the question of the 'general rhythmic' of social life (Lacoue-Labarthe 1994: 198).

There is a far-reaching connection between ontological listening and biological listening. On the one hand, portable digital technology has accelerated the transformation of the individual from a mere resident into a devolved and self-governing citizen (DeNora 2000), and has enabled life to become more intrinsically musical ('music is what I am'; 'live music', urge the adverts); this is Bauman's 'liquid world'. On the other hand, 'musical listening' has become a smaller subset of 'listening'

(it is one way to listen to sound, as Scruton's (1997) aesthetics of music implies) and has to compete for the subject's attention. What listening makes of musicking (Small 1998) and art-making in general is much more than merely a matter of taste or skill. It is 'an activity by means of which we bring into existence a set of relationships that model the relationships of our world, not as they are but as we would wish them to be' (Small 1998: 50). As such, it is a survival mechanism, contributing significantly to cross-modal re-description and the species' continual adaptation to ecological change (Cross 1999). From this hard empirical angle, it seems that, pace Nietzsche, an unmusical life would be an error.

Listening is a faculty of the subject, like the faculty of judgement, although working at a more fundamental level than Kant could imagine (Evens 2005: 142–8). The ability to engage music meaningfully is likewise 'a general characteristic of the human species rather than a rare talent' (Blacking 1995: 36); this is evident in research into the essential role of proto-musical interactions between mother and child during early child development (Trevvarthen 1999). Why else would every culture on the planet have a central place for music, if it were not for its power to develop cognitive flexibility (the looseness of resonance)? It is, after all, only recently in human history that looseness and flexibility have taken a back seat in thought (Toulmin 1990, 2001). It is precisely because the subject is constructed, as this essay has argued, as (a) listening that the subject qua human species has evolved in such a singular manner, developing complex musical discourses on the back of the timbral resonance that becomes aesthetic listening (in the usual sense of the word). As part of our ecological adaptation and survival, listening helps us to articulate our relationship to the public and private spaces we inhabit, provides a model for living well, and cultivates virtue (Smith 2000; Higgins 1991; O'Dea 2000). At one extreme, it plays a key role in shaping public attitudes

towards global events, while at the other it provides useful leverage (or difficult obstacles) in our efforts to relate to our immediate neighbours (Ritter and Daughtry 2007; Biddle 2007). In this way, a general human cultural aptitude – musicking – and its primary mode of engagement – listening – is grounded in the passage from timbre through resonance to the rhythmic subject.

Thus, ironically, musicians deserve better investment (in every sense), since the impact of their practices is much wider and deeper than blithely thought by the ocular-centric administrators managing the First World. While, as Lyotard notes, it is inevitable that ‘Timbre will get analysed, its elements will be put into a memory, it will be reproduced at will, it may come in useful’ (Lyotard 1991a: 203), and that ‘The system silences noises; in any case, it keeps watch over them’ (Lyotard 1997: 200), listening should not be considered a ‘minor sense’ (Lyotard 1991a: 194). It is what we are: I am listening. More attention and effort should be put into helping music education in order to make our musicians more musical: which is to say, more nuanced and better listeners, more ethical and prudent citizens – more themselves.

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