

*SOUND, SILENCE AND TIME:*  
*Towards a Fundamental*  
*Ontology of Music*  
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AESTHETICS AS A BRANCH OF PHILOSOPHY DEALS WITH beauty in art; aesthetics as a branch of criticism deals with value in art. Although the axiological approach originally developed out of a reaction against traditional metaphysics of beauty, both disciplines recently have tended to amalgamate principles and techniques of inquiry. Philosophies of beauty attempt to found speculative concepts on the specific procedure of descriptive analysis or linguistic logic. Critical analyses formulate concepts of value in order to bestow universal significance on their concrete methodology. In general, 20th-century aesthetics rests on the postulate that art is meaningful and is thus encompassed by a vital contemporary concern with semantics, or the meaning of meaning. In this context art is seen as a kind of symbol together with language, myth, religion, philosophy, and other forms of human expression. The question inevitably arises as to what art means or symbolizes, and how this meaningful or symbolic projection is accomplished.

Turning to aesthetics of music as an individual area in this wider field, we observe a peculiar blend of current and outmoded ideas. Whether philosophical or analytical in orientation, this discipline stands within the pale of a long-established tradition that strives to deal with musical significance in terms of the emotional symbolism present in the aesthetic situation. This tacit acceptance of a concept of marginal relevance both to contemporary composition and, more important, to music as a universal phenomenon, relegates aesthetics of music to the peripheries of philosophical inquiry in the present day. The emotive interpretation of music is not a viable criterion for a mode of thought that seeks the primary and universal essence of music. Such a mode of thought should embrace wider concepts from the field of philosophy of art rather than the limiting horizons of expressionist aesthetics.

The philosophy of art is concerned with problems of art and truth. Truth here is neither the cognitive truth of science nor the practical

truth of things, but rather the spiritual truth of being or existence in the phenomenological sense. Truth of being “is essentially something livable. When something *is* truly, as that thing, it has truth of being. It is as its own essence requires it to be; it *has* an essence that requires it to be itself” (Hofstadter 1965:viii). Beauty in art, then, is the convincing rightness of each unique truth illumined in the total form of the individual work of art. Thus, any philosophical inquiry into the truth of being of music necessitates an examination of the basic essence or ontology of its existence. Music, as art, is more than an inanimate thing in the world; it is a living entity whose spiritual being is revealed in the dimension of time.

In his essay, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Martin Heidegger presents a brilliant argument on the revelation of being in the work of art (1964). It is remarkable that Heidegger concentrates on architecture, poetry, and painting as illustrations of his philosophical theory. A consideration of music and time could serve as a particularly vivid projection of his ideas. According to Heidegger, truth as *aletheia*, or the unconcealment of what is, happens in the work of art; it is an event. Music comes to life in time; the happening of its being is inextricably bound up with duration. Through a unique ordering or articulation of time, music reveals its *Sein*: the nature of itself by virtue of which it truly *is*. For philosophy of music this revelation is ontological—that is, fundamental to all music regardless of time and place. For history of music, this revelation is stylistic—that is, specific to different cultures and individuals. These two approaches are neither paradoxical nor irreconcilable. The stylistic order of time in a particular composition can be more sensitively grasped if understood in the light of the universal features underlying the temporal essence of music. As a sketch in the philosophy of music, this essay presents a few suggestions concerning the most basic element of musical time: the relationship of sound and silence as essential to the revelation of music’s phenomenal existence.

The being of a work of art, the happening of truth or what is at work in the work, is revealed in the conflict of earth and world. Earth is more than thing-like matter; it is “that whence the arising of all that arises . . .” (Heidegger 1964:670) and thus, at the same time conceals and supports the potentiality of its form-accepting nature. Only on the foundation of earth is it possible to erect a world. World is more than mere formed matter; it is “self-opening openness” (Heidegger 1964:674). It not only discloses total content as the truth, or unconcealment, of meaningful existence but also permits

earth to show itself *as* earth, the enfolding and protecting medium. In music, sound is matter or earth; it is the medium which becomes formed by silence and pulse. Of these two elements, the latter appears more obvious to the listener and the analyst. Whether percussive or accentual, melodic, harmonic, etc., pulse makes manifest the existence of sounds as durational forms. But silence, if less obvious, is all the more fundamental and primary. Music grows out of and fades into silence both as a total composition and as a series of isolated sounds. Thus, the entire spectrum of its existence is ruled by silence. A series of continuous, even pulsating, sounds without pause would become immobile in the sense that duration would not be perceived as passing: time is hidden. Silences, inserted in sound, give music its basic articulation through which the ordered passing of time is perceived: time is disclosed. This articulation takes place on the level of the background of the musical work. On the middleground, the elements of pulse articulate musical form. Finally, the total world of a work as a perceptual phenomenon is posited on the foreground.

The relationship of middle and foreground is immediately perceived, and for this reason, the formative elements of rhythm, melody, and harmony are most often subjected to musical analysis, both aesthetical and critical. However, these elements are rarely considered as components of pulse which order through their combined interplay the dimensional arena in which world and earth come to terms. Pulse is usually seen from other viewpoints which, although valid, remain inadequate for a philosophical inquiry into music's existence. In order to examine the elements of musical pulse in relation to time, we must first consider that level of structure which lies beneath the middleground.

The alternation of sound and silence articulates a form, or *Gestalt*, in which the basic confrontation of world and earth takes place. This confrontation, unlike that of middle and foreground, can be seen only from the point of view of time: hence, its obscurity and elusiveness. In this relationship silence is neither passive nor negative, but rather active and positive.

It is silence that distinguishes and individualizes sounds and phrases and delimits the period of time in which they are enclosed; its action builds an ordered becoming (Brelet 1958:106).

Brelet distinguishes two types of silences: those which are empty and those which must be filled. The former separate phrases and sections; the latter unite elements in that they are equivalent to tones whose duration they replace. As such, they are part of the rhythmic

organization of a piece. This distinction does not stand too well, for in reality, there are no silences in music that are empty gaps. All are "filled" silences regardless of their function.

Although silence is ontologically present in any musical structure, it is not always handled in a deliberately studied manner. Webern's awareness of silence may be described as intellectualized cognition, whereas Mozart's concept of silence, while equally fundamental, appears to be unconscious and instinctive manipulation of its formative role. The function of silence was attested to by Mozart who, when asked to name the most important element in music, replied, "The rest." While this apocryphal anecdote has its humorous side, the concern with silence of such a composer as Webern is by far more serious. Music, for Webern, presupposes the silence which it fills, and therefore, he includes the silences before and after a composition as part of the total temporal duration of the work. That a pause in the musical texture is not an empty gap for Webern is vividly demonstrated by the indication in one of his scores for a rest with a crescendo. In all music, silence is always present whether it is filled by sound or takes the place of sound. Silence is formative and in the act of forming sound, it contributes to the fundamental conflict of world and earth.

World and earth need each other and at the same time struggle with each other. The repose in this conflict is the winning of the unhiddenness of entities. So in music it is silence that reveals the background of the existence of sound as sonic form; but silence needs sound as a medium in order to articulate time. The true being or essence of both sound and silence is attained in their union. In their conflict is won the unhiddenness of music as an entity: dynamic temporal form. By revealing its being in the light of *aletheia*, music reveals the truth of musical time.

Langer, in *Feeling and Form* (1953), states that music is the realization of virtual time. Would it not be possible to suggest that musical time, or better, the being of musical time, is revealed as the aggregate of real, psychological and realized virtual time? Although musical time is in a sense independent of real time, the fact that a composition happens within a certain clock-measured duration influences its inner temporal organization; whether a piece is long or short, by clock time, has some bearing on both the composer's creation and the listener's experience of the musical duration. Furthermore, music exists both in and out of time: in memory, for example, it is possible to re-experience a piece by reliving it in mentally imagined time, or to remember it as a totality in an instant. In actual percep-

tion, moreover, *Gestalt* psychology has shown us that “the temporal curve of a melody, like that of the whole musical work, is never given to us: we make it for ourselves” (Brelet 1958:108). The physical sounds die away, but we organize these sounds into articulate and meaningful forms. Heidegger’s notion of the perceiver as the preserver of the work of art takes on particular significance in this context.

At this point we broach the most astonishing problem posed by music as an existent phenomenon. Physical sounds are delimited by silence and therefore, as a medium in time, they actually conceal that form which they reveal when formed by silence. The development of Western music can be seen as a cumulative effort to arrive at large forms perceptible in a temporal medium, a seeming contradiction in essentials overcome by an overwhelming act of the human imagination. In no other art has such a monumental struggle of earth (sound) and world (temporal form) been resolved. This dynamic conflict-repose of earth and world is present in each and every musical experience.

Let us take canon as a perennial example of this world-earth relationship. The phenomenon of canon is as old as the phenomenon of music itself and extends from the improvised singing of stone-age man to the complex permutations of contemporary composition. This enduring fascination with canonic form is more than a curiosity of history. It suggests, rather, that canon embodies characteristics that are essential to an ontology of music as a phenomenon addressed to human apperception. Canon is an original and universal procedure which allows music to reveal itself *qua* music: tonal form existing in time. In canon, whether primitive round or sophisticated art-form, we perceive directly the two dimensions of music: the durational, in which music happens in time; and the spatial, in which music projects architectonic form. On the one hand, the imitation of one musical line by another makes palpable the passing of musical time; the listener hears identical melodic phrases stated *successively*, each sounding and disappearing into silence as time progresses. On the other hand, the identity of these phrases refers each one to its counterpart in a non-temporal fashion; the listener relates the identical phrases in a *simultaneous* conception independent of duration. This interrelationship creates the vivid illusion of spatial form that seems to defy the temporal aspect of musical imitation. And yet, this temporal aspect is the dimension that makes the interrelationship possible. These two dimensions—temporal and spatial, linear and vertical—oppose and complement each other at the same time. The

problem of their elementary fusion constitutes the essence of canon. A Machaut chace, a Josquin fuga, and a Bach canon all deal with the fundamental problem of canonic procedure; but each solution is conditioned by the presuppositions of a stylistic period and the musical language of an individual composer.

Canon is only one of myriad forms that pose and resolve the basic problem of the existence of music: dynamic temporal form. Every musical work reveals the being of world—the *Wesen* of tonal form of the style in which the piece is composed. This musical world also reveals the being of earth—the *Wesen* of sound as matter, enclosing and hiding the possibilities of temporal order. The fusion of sound and silence supplies the background design of the musical work of art. In the relationship of sound and silence the essence of time-space truly exists; thus, music stands in the light of *aletheia*. Truth is an event; it happens in the work of art, precisely in the ordering of the design. Duration happens in a piece of music through the ordering of time by the articulation of sound by silence. The happening of duration creates form—sonic form existing in time. Creation is not making, according to Heidegger, but letting truth go forth into the light, into the shining center of world-earth repose in the work of art. This *Scheinen* (light, shining, appearance, semblance, illusion) has a most provocative and fundamental connotation when considered in relation to the essence of the being of music. This being is dependent on the repose-conflict of world and earth, sonic form and temporal order, existent first and foremost on the background level articulated by sound and silence.

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