

Peter Szendy. 2008. *Listen: A History of Our Ears*.
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Reviewed by Brian Kane

Peter Szendy's first translation into English has appeared on the shelves not merely by chance. It arrives in the wake of two recent trends in the academic world: an intense interest in all things having to do with the history and culture of the senses, and the sudden accession of Jean-Luc Nancy as the Academy's *philosophe du jour*. Of course, these two trends are not unrelated, for few philosophers have questioned the senses, especially the sense of touch, in the way that Nancy has over the past two decades. Nancy's foreword to Szendy's book is guaranteed to draw attention to the new release, especially coming immediately on the heels of Fordham's translation of Nancy's short volume, *Listening*. Its "positioning" couldn't be better.

However, unlike the terse, Heideggerian-inflected prose of Nancy, Szendy's work appears far more sober. At first glance, it is little more than a piecemeal work, centered around three topics: a sketchy history of musical copyright, a rehashing of the rise of the work concept, and another critique of "structural listening" in the name of Benjaminian distraction. And distraction appears to be a formal commitment as well—the ideas are doled out in small servings, a few pages each, typically featuring a historical anecdote, a quick textual reading, or a suggestive morsel of musical description. Swerving away from the grand abstractions of late-deconstructive thinking, the book has no labyrinthine close-readings, no world-historical pronouncements, and ties itself in no tortured linguistic knots.

Szendy begins by posing the question, "Who has a right to music?" Like a keynote, continually developed throughout the text, it initiates a sustained investigation that is more than it first appears. Szendy, echoing Nancy, reformulates this question by playing with its prepositions—auscultating its various senses:

Who has a right to music? This question can also be reformulated thus:
What can I make of music? What can I do *with* it? But also: What can I
do *to it*, what can I do *to* music? What do I have the right to make *of*, do
with or *to* music? (8)

Essentially, Szendy is trying to outsmart a problem that is inherent in any history of listening: what is the artifact? Without direct access to the listening

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of others, how can a history of listening be constructed? How do I share my listening, how do I make it available to others? How can I hear others hearing?

Using a deconstructive method that never becomes overly narcissistic, Szendy develops an argument about the ecstatic structure of listening—listening as a practice whose essence always requires the presence of another: another listener, another work, another performer, another instrument. Listening is never reduced to sensory stimuli, or even a perceptual phenomenology. The investigation is philosophical in nature (which may come as a disappointment to readers craving a new contribution to the anthropology of the senses): less a history of the sense of hearing than the philosophical structure of the listening self.

Within this horizon, *Listen* is a suggestive meditation. The history of musical copyright, the ontology of the musical work, and the eclipsing of structural listening, are linked within listening's interrogative horizon:

... I can *copy* (plagiarize, steal, divert) music; I can *rewrite* (adapt, arrange, transcribe) it; I can, finally and especially, *listen to it*. Schematically, I'll take the risk of regrouping these three possibilities under the generic term *appropriation*. (8)

In this history of our ears, listening carves out a space inside the work, where the listener can appropriate it; the essence of the musical work is not indifferent to this space of appropriation, but is perpetually on the horizon yet-to-come, constituted by the ongoing history of such appropriations.

These are all clever ideas. And even when they are echoing work already done in literary theory and philosophy (Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, Benjamin, de Man, Derrida), one is delighted to see them brought to bear on questions of listening. However, suggestive meditations, while often intriguing to read, are not always convincing—but I'm getting ahead of myself. Organized into four chapters, with a prelude and epilogue, *Listen* treats three main themes. Chapters 1 and 3, organized like a series of journal entries or a scrapbook of historical anecdotes, deal primarily with the question of musical copyright as an indicator of the history of listening practices. Chapter 2 works through the question of musical works from the perspective of "transcription" or "arrangement." Chapter 4 and the Epilogue form a unit on "the making of the modern ear," one that moves beyond "structural listening" towards a listening supplemented with all sorts of electronic and computerized tools—an earful of remixes, mashups, and montages. I will address each of these themes in turn.

1. Musical Laws and Introjection

If there can be no direct history of listening, if listening possesses no immediate artifact, a history of our ears must search out different, often covert routes to uncover its historical traces. Szendy posits that scenes from the history of musical copyright afford precisely such a covert history of the ear by reflecting the changing habits and demands of listeners in relation to the consolidation of the musical work.

The year 1835 marks a “great change” in musical copyright (22). In that year a lawsuit was initiated by the directors of the Paris Opéra and Opéra-Comique which would deny the rights for public performance of selected excerpts of current operas in arrangements by unaffiliated orchestras. Essentially, it marked a “shift of music towards the paradigm of the theater” (24), where every musical performance is considered to be a representation, subject to rules of exclusivity, ownership, and authorial interpretation. Arrangement becomes illicit in relation to the authorized work. But it also marks a shift in our habits of listening, in that this authorial right becomes introjected into our ears. Exhibit A: a legal case initiated in 1853 by a Count Tyskiewicz, who tried to sue the Paris Opéra for its performance of an arrangement of Weber’s *Der Freischütz*. Szendy sees in this suit evidence of something remarkable: a trial initiated *by a listener in the name of the work*—a demand for the authenticity of the work in the name of authorial privilege. The law has been introjected into our ears. Consolidation of musical copyright in the hands of authors and publishers discourages the malleability found in musical work before the “great change” of 1835. Rigidity stifles the work’s reception: “...the increasing restriction on music’s adaptability... goes along with, and gives rise to, a concomitant reduction of its *critical space*” (31).

Szendy coins the term *polemology* to describe the struggles over who has a right to music, when it can be played, where it can be performed, and to what degree it can be altered. Musical listening is always shaped by some interest or demand. “Our private thoughts as listeners are dependent on a *polemology* of listening... *a form of polemology always haunts our listening*” (31). If the work-concept has become second nature to us, Szendy wants to remind us that its formation was itself polemical, even dogmatic in nature. It comes from outside, and we lend our ears to it when we accede to its polemics, or when we come to believe in its truth. But be forewarned, “...if we are more readily tempted to take the side of someone like Tyskiewicz, we should not forget that his pleading for the *work* is also a taking by violence” (31–32). In summary, “That there is a history of the notion of the work is not self-evident; but I hope that I have convinced you that the seemingly

obvious idea according to which *individual musical works exist* has emerged only slowly, in close correlation with the constitution of author's rights and with the consolidation of certain practices of performance" (102).

Let me stop the account right here and inquire, what reader still needs to be convinced of this claim? Isn't there a terrible anachronism in trying to persuade us that the work concept is a construct? Moreover, are we so naïve as to think that the space of listening is not a political space? To put it bluntly, I am puzzled why Szendy feels the wheel of New Musicology needs to be reinvented.

Despite Szendy's fascination with the legal history of musical copyright, the reader might be less captivated. The historical anecdotes presented (which are amusing and well-written in their own right) are unable to support Szendy's central claim that one can read the shaping of listening in the history of musical law.¹ There is no specificity about the demands of the listener, about what the ear is actually hearing; Szendy offers no articulation of this listening, no insight into what Tyskiewicz might have been hearing. Demanding that a work remain intact means something quite different in the mouth of a dilettante, amateur, snob, or connoisseur—but Szendy subsumes such differences under the introjections of musical copyright. The use of historical anecdotes could have been greatly elaborated, providing a rough facture to the story, rather than forcing them to assert a schema. As it stands, the argument sticks out like the ribcage of some scrawny animal. Simply claiming that the demands of the work eclipsed a *critical space* of listening does not amount to proving it. Unfortunately, this critical space is not explicated in Szendy's recounting of legal history. Thus, the reader feels no pathos when it gets replaced by a *polemology*. What one receives instead is a bygone ideology critique—a toothless nip at a dying work concept—and something far less ambitious than a critical history of listening.

2. Arrangement as Translation

Szendy's best work concerns the topic of arrangement, or transcription.² The premise is surprisingly simple: arrangements afford an opportunity to listen to listening. The arranger is able to appropriate the works of others in the name of a listening; they "sign their names *inside* the work... [setting] their names down next to the author's" (35). Szendy posits this thesis:

Now, it seems to me that what arrangers are signing is above all a listening. *Their* hearing of a work. They may even be the only listeners in the history of music to *write down* their listenings, rather than *describe* them (as critics do). And that is why I love them, I who so love to listen to someone listening. I love hearing them hear. (36)

Szendy's premise that arrangement *inscribes* a listening opens the horizon to other works which we may never have considered to be arrangements: remixes, plunderphonics, mashups, etc. (Szendy address the consequences of these modern forms of arrangement in the final two chapters, in relation to structural listening. See part 3, below.)

Arrangements, like listening, possess an ecstatic structure. We listen to them as they point away towards another work—a structure of referrals, with a borrowed essence. There is always a “desire for the original in the hollow of the transcription” (57). Conventionally, arrangements have been understood as peripheral to musical works—a kind of degraded reflection—or simply a functional means of transmitting a work from the concert hall to the salon before the age of mechanically reproduced sound. They do not occupy the same ontological space as the musical work proper. Lydia Goehr describes the logic of devaluation that dogs arrangement: “Transcription, orchestration, and arrangement . . . [were] described as being bound and limited by the presence of an already existing work and, therefore, as not being strictly creative” (Goehr 1992:223). Szendy interrogates the derivative status of transcription to reveal its under-appreciated aspects.

By reorienting transcription from the perspective of listening, Szendy moves beyond a historicist critique of musical ontology, to argue that the musical work has always already been complicated by a shadowy double—arrangement. By proliferating copies that are not merely copies, versions that challenge the unity of the ideal, arrangement undermines the autonomy of the musical work. In Szendy's line of questioning, the work necessarily involves its appropriation by listeners, arrangers, performers, *Liebhavers*, and opportunists. “The original and the arrangement are complementary, contiguous in their incompleteness and their distance from the essence of the work” (38). If at first glance this sentence seems to reinscribe the original and the copy as both equidistant from a unified essence of the work, let me suggest that the word “complementary” should be read in the sense of Derrida's use of the word “supplementary.”

In fact, Szendy is adamant in rejecting any concept of transcription that encloses it within a “*functionalist* horizon” (44). Transcription cannot simply be understood as subordinated to a nineteenth-century demand for piano reductions or other instrumental arrangements for the purpose of wider circulation. Nor can they be simply understood as adaptations, which allow works of one culture to be transported to the tastes of another, as in the adaptations of Mozart's and Weber's works for French audiences. For Szendy, there is always something about arrangement that is in excess of this functionalist horizon.

In an arrangement, our listening is “torn between two parallel lines, one present and the other ghostly or spectral, our listening is stretched to the breaking point like a rubber band, between the transcription and the original” (58). It forms a space where listening oscillates, bounding and rebounding in a series of referrals. (This line of thinking is very close to Nancy’s concept of the *renvoi* elaborated in *Listening*.) In Szendy’s terms, an arrangement reveals our listening as malleable, plastic, capable of forming to the contours of the “hollow.” “Tension” is a distinguishing characteristic of arrangement even in “the most simplistic or the kitchiest” (58). Using Stokowski’s arrangement of Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D Minor as an example, Szendy elucidates arrangement’s complex phenomenology: “My ear is continually pricked up, torn between the actual orchestration and the imaginary organ that keeps superimposing itself like the shadow of a memory. I hear, inseparably, *both* the organ screened by the orchestra *and* the orchestra screened by a phantom organ... *we are hearing double*” (36). This is a wonderful phrase, and Szendy puts his finger on a strange consequence of transcription for any logic of listening: our listening is “divided,” “doubled,” “oscillating” between the original and its arrangement.

Franz Liszt often drew an analogy between his own work as a transcriber and the work of literary translation. Szendy, explicating the analogy, reconceptualizes transcription using the lens of recent theories of translation. In particular, Szendy borrows heavily from Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Task of the Translator,” which dismisses functionalist notions of translation in favor of translation as a *critical* act. Benjamin understands translation not as a carrying-over (literally “*übersetzung*”) from one language to another, but as revealing the historical nature of the original. Literary works, like musical works, are constructed in a medium undergoing constant historical changes—they are plastic in nature—and develop, mature, and alter with the medium. According to Benjamin, artworks must be envisioned as living things that possess an “afterlife.”

In its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meanings can undergo a maturing process. (Benjamin 1969:73)

Maturation would not be possible if works possessed a fixed, ahistorical essence. If so, translation would simply be a derivation or diminution of the original. But if arrangements appropriate works and articulate ways of hearing the original, we are forced to recognize that the work’s essence is fluid, on the horizon, coming to be. Arrangement supplements the work, articulating the “plasticity of the original” (52); it discloses the variety

of possible senses of the work, senses which are always in the process of formation, yet-to-come.

This Benjaminian perspective guides Szendy in his analysis of arrangement and it is one of the most productive marriages of literary theory and musicology in recent memory. Unlike the material on copyright, with its bygone conclusions, Szendy manages to radically transform some very well-entrenched ideas about transcription. It is suggestive in the best sense of the term, and, if read closely, will act as a spur to further musicological and music-theoretic projects concerning transcription. This reviewer has yet to encounter better writing on the topic. It is reason enough to read this book.

3. Beyond Structural Listening, Again

The final sections of the book are dedicated to “the making of the modern ear” (99), and trace the transformation of arrangement from the end of the nineteenth century into the twenty-first. It is a provocative idea—who else has drawn a connection between concatenated digital mashups and Romantic transcription? The connection is convincing, given Szendy’s perspective on arrangement. One can agree that all these practices articulate listenings by making them available to others. However, there is a methodological problem that dogs Szendy’s analysis. Instead of maintaining the *supplementary* relationship between arrangement and work, Szendy retreats to a pre-deconstructive bifurcation, where modes of listening are sorted along musico-ontological lines: the work concept leads towards a mode of structural listening, while transcription (and contemporary digital practice) leads towards a mode of distracted listening.

Starting with the former, Szendy offers a reading of Adorno’s music sociology. “[The work] seems to be for Adorno the only *objective* pole on which can be propped a sociology of musical listening that threatens otherwise to be lost in the elusive and infinite variety of *subjective* individual reactions” (101). The mode of listening adequate to the work is found in the “expert” listener, and is called “structural hearing” (Adorno 1976:4–5). Structural hearing

designates a form of *plenitude* that admits of no void, no distraction, no *wavering* in listening . . . It is a *functional* listening (it is a *function of the work*); it is a listening that, even though it *analyzes* (in order to grasp “simultaneous complexities . . . separately and distinctly”) is finally aiming at a *synthesis*. (103)

As in the chapter on arrangement, the term “functional” is Szendy’s personal F-word. To listen structurally is to submit oneself to the demands of the work, to have one’s listening determined *by the work*, rather than from a *critical* relation to the work.

The aim of expert listening is to hear everything, to make all relationships available and audible. Szendy provides two examples. First, he describes Schoenberg’s arrangements as subject to this law of expert listening, a demand for total transparency. Schoenberg said one reason for orchestrating Brahms’s G-Minor Quartet was that “I wanted to hear everything, and I succeeded” (127). Thus, arrangement is *functionalized*: orchestration is deployed in order “to make the work absolutely transparent to listening.”³ Rather than a listener appropriating a work by parsing it, by giving it articulation and emphasis, the expert listener’s desire for total transparency de-differentiates the work, willingly submitting the ear to the work’s absolute autonomy. Second, Szendy addresses the idea of total audibility in the Wagnerian reception of Beethoven. Wagner theorized Beethoven’s deafness as a withdrawal from the “phenomenal world” which afforded him a hearing “undisturbed by the bustle of life” (121). Paradoxically, Beethoven’s deafness, by detaching him from the distractions of the phenomenal world, afforded him access to the absolute transparency of the structural laws of the work. The deaf composer hears nothing but the essential. Szendy coins this paradigm of listening, *clairaudience* (121).

A dialectical reversal comes at the very moment when Szendy equates the expert listener with *clairaudience* and the demands of the work:

But since the equal sign that Wagner implicitly draws between deafness and total listening is reversible, we are right to wonder, in turn if this total listening isn’t precisely a form of deafness *on the part of the listener*. To listen without any wandering, without ever letting oneself be distracted by ‘the noises of life,’ is that still listening? Shouldn’t listening welcome some *wavering* into its heart? Shouldn’t a responsible listening (which can account for itself as well as *for* the work, rather than simply respond *to* an authoritative law) always be *wavering*? (121–2)

In fact, distraction is what Szendy is after: “. . . *distraction, lacunary listening*, might also be a means, an attitude, to make *sense of the work*; that a *certain inattention*, a *certain wavering* of listening, might also be a valid and fertile connection in *auditory interpretation at work*” (104). Distraction entails an articulation and emphasis on various parts of a musical work. Against the de-differentiation entailed by *clairaudience*, Szendy encourages a listening that makes sense of the work by reorganizing its relations according to the listener’s demands.

The distracted listener acts like an arranger who submits the work to his own law. Szendy identifies himself as precisely such a listener, “a discophile,” early in the book; he describes, in a hyperbolic paean, “. . . the masterpiece I dream of, that suite articulating my best, favorite moments” (21). He describes his love of turning knobs on the stereo, to emphasize a particular passage, to place an accent on some musical turn of phrase or particularly captivating moment. Rather than a *functional* submission to the work, distracted listening is a *critical* appropriation—a modern, technologically-mediated *reinscription*.

I cannot help but read Szendy’s defense of distraction as Benjaminian in nature. The conflict between structural and distracted listening echoes these lines from Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”:

Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it . . . In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. (Benjamin 1969:239)

This opposition of concentration and distraction maps directly onto the expert listener and the discophile. The hegemonic demands of the work absorb the expert listener in contrast with the discophile’s distracted absorption of the original in the reinscribed piece. Even the *critical* motif is an echo of Benjamin; a distracted listener does not identify with the work because “[distraction] permits the audience to take the position of a critic” (Benjamin 1969:228).

Could it be that *Listen* secretly attempts to add an additional round to the Adorno-Benjamin debate? I think so. But the rebuttal is problematic because Szendy fails to characterize expert listening as anything other than a caricature. Let me pose the reader a question: Have you ever recognized yourself in the expert listener? Does Adorno’s description of the expert listener adequately represent his own transcribed listenings as evidenced in his other musicological writings?

I think the answer is—on both counts—no. Perhaps it should be recalled that the expert listener, as part of any typology of listening, is an “ideal type” (Adorno 1976:3). Adorno offers an example of an expert listener as someone who, “on their first encounter with the second movement of Webern’s Trio for Strings can name the formal components of that dissolved, architectonically unsupported piece” (4). However, Adorno’s own listenings, as captured in his *critical* writing on Mahler, Berg or Beethoven, move far beyond such formalism. Szendy, like so many critics of Adorno, reads structural listening

as formalism, plain and simple. Yet, the straitjacket of formalism doesn't fit the rest of Adorno's output. Considering Szendy's love of arrangement, perhaps he is upset over Adorno's harsh flogging of arrangers in the essay "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" (Adorno 2002). But this should not stop him from recognizing that Adorno—in the very best of his musicological writings—oscillates between whole and part, creating a productive tension that mutually illuminates the philosophical claims and the musical details. Like many critiques of the "expert listener," it is easy to get a mouthful of hay when biting a straw man.

If Szendy makes a case for distraction to underscore the listener's appropriation of the work, a few more issues need to be addressed. First, he ignores the line where appropriation becomes identification with the given. Appropriation is one of the surest means of control, as Adorno analyzed in the culture industry. Power over the individual is dissimulated when the distracted listener mistakes forced consumption with appropriation. Adorno wrote, "the fetish character of music produces its own camouflage though the identification of the listener with the fetish" (Adorno 2002:305). Second, Szendy's dream of a "suite articulating my best, favorite moments" (21) may sound nice as a music lover's discourse, but it veers dangerously close to valorizing only what is already known. In this dream there is no space for difference, nowhere for the listener to encounter what is unfamiliar. It remains unclear how one can conceive of a musical work whose ontology is yet to come if such room for the unknown is excluded; and that is a shame, because it was one of the best theses in the book.

Lastly, if listening is an act of appropriation, the proof should be in the listenings that one shares. After reading Adorno, Beethoven *sounds* different. But unfortunately, one could not say the same after completing Szendy's book. At the very best, after reading it, we *conceptualize* arrangements differently. And that is to be celebrated. But Szendy never attempts to share an extended listening with the reader.⁴ Sadly, we never get the opportunity to listen to Szendy listening.

Notes

1. I am not saying the claim is false, just that Szendy does not provide enough evidence to make the case.
2. "Arrangement" and "transcription" will be used interchangeably in this review.
3. One could also support this with Adorno's claim that, "The total construction of music permits constructive instrumentation of an undreamt-of degree. Schoenberg's and Webern's arrangements of Bach . . . translate the most minute motivic relationships of the compositions into those of timbre and thus realize them for the first time" (Adorno 2006:69).
4. The one exception is a very schematic reading of *Don Giovanni*, which plays out the simply binary opposition between two regimes of listening: distracted listening vs. clairaudience.

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