Jean-Luc Nancy. 2007. *Listening*, translated by Charlotte Mandell. New York: Fordham University Press.

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After years and years of debate, has music studies come to a consensus on how to relate culturalist and historicist claims about music to formal claims? Or are most analytical approaches still too external to musical experience? To be sure, many solutions to the structure-context debate are out there already. Scholars can look to a formalism or analysis immanent to the culture of the musical situation to avoid importing foreign perspectives. And for those so inclined, one could take an Adornian position, maintaining that musical material could not be thought outside of the history of musical specificity anyway; the truth content or utopian moment in music could not exist only formally or only specifically. In this case, structure and context must be related dialectically. Finally, we always have the option of abandoning analysis all together, leaving the "actual music" untouched so we can instead focus only on socio-cultural testimony garnered from context. But must the immateriality of sonorous structure be related the materiality of practice and context at all? Could we try coming up with a wholly different perspective that gets us out of this dualist bind?

In Charlotte Mandell's splendid translation of Jean-Luc Nancy's brief but passionate *À l'écoute*, the French philosopher gives us a glimpse of this completely different philosophy of music. Uninterested in wresting out the dialectic between immaterial structure and the materiality of a self-evident cultural practice, Nancy's notion of music in *Listening* (as Mandell has translated *À l'écoute*) respects no proper distinction between subject (listeners, participants, composers, musicians, or otherwise) and object (say, a thing or phenomenon of organized sound). Surpassing or subverting this traditional orientation, Nancy prefers to think of music as the becoming-sound of sense, where music is perhaps only an intensely sonorous version of our endlessly shared sensing of the world. This means his book is not so much a "philosophy of music" in the regular sense of the phrase as it is a philosophy of *listening*. Nancy conceives of this thesis in a very particular way. I will try to flesh this out by analyzing what I see as the most salient moves of the book on my own terms, and then I will end with some critical remarks. Since Nancy's work is so new to music studies, for the purposes of this short review I have kept my own reservations about this book (and his philosophy more broadly) to a minimum.

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The book, just shy of eighty-five pages (footnotes included), is divided into three sections: a large first section called "Listening" that contains the core philosophical arguments followed by two shorter sections that explore music with a bit more specificity (though these are not included in the original French edition). Nancy begins the book by opposing two different French words for "listening": *entendre* and *écouter*. In French, the verb *entendre* (which Mandell translates as "hearing") implies a kind of hearing that is also a way of understanding, for *entendre* also plainly means "to understand" or even, "to intend." *Entendre* imposes a truth on what is heard. It suggests that we hear sonorous form as presented figures, or that we hear internally consistent, knowable, and identifiable *beings*. *L'écouter* or "listening" is different. It implies an orientation towards something behind or aside from the sound of presented beings. When we "listen" we orient ourselves towards the temporal, processual presenting of sense itself, not the specific beings we might seek to understand in themselves. Listening means that we strain from one moment to the next, splitting and stretching the listening subject into the grounded opening of experience itself. Where *entendre* implies the closure of understanding and truth, *écouter* implies the openness of negotiation, uncertainty, and exposure.

When we listen (in the sense of *écouter*) we do not seek to understand what we hear in advance, nor do we simply receive a communicated meaning that awaits us. We are instead oriented towards something Nancy refers to as "*sens*." The French word "*sens*," which can mean at once "meaning," "direction" and "sense" in English, is a key concept for Nancy. Moving, coming, and happening, rather than processing and regulating, if *sens* is anything like a "faculty" (and it is a stretch to call it that) it is one that gives only the experience of what exceeds coding and systematization.[1] It is not a property of a mind of a consciousness, but the product of a shared existence made by constant circulation and iteration, flushed with alterity. *Sens* exceeds or precedes any particular *beings* as such, meaning that it is never indicative of positive significations like linguistic signs. It happens among us, nowhere else than in this world, remaining both integrated with experience and still beyond containment and total understanding. Perhaps most broadly, *sens* is the experiential mark of what Nancy will call "infinite finitude": the limitless or infinite repetition of nothing but finite, concrete, worldly happenings.

In this book, listening (which is always a listening for *sens*) affirms *this* infinite finitude as a first principle, or ontology. As Nancy says, when we listen we are always "on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin . . . " (7). It is through listening right at this margin and edge of meaning in this concrete world that we experience it. And in

listening, we do not practice a way of hearing that is only mine or only yours—we have to share it—or more forcefully it is precisely an originary sharing of multiplicity. Thus, listening is always an exposure to something unknown or different.

Listening in this way, we are oriented towards a *renvoi*, a re-sending, reference, or referral that maintains no stable identity over time or across space. Much like Derrida's notion of *différance*, Nancy's *renvoi* demonstrates the way something like meaning can be shared through the back and forth of endless alteration and iteration. Between us, we cannot fuse our nervous systems together in a perfect solidarity, nor can we communicate information among one another without remainder, distortion, or excess. There is always space between us, and this spacing keeps us from immanently becoming one with another, preventing the actualization of a perfect communion or transubstantiation. Instead of total solidarity and security, listening gives us the necessary friction of incessantly touching *right at* the open space between us.

In this book, a *renvoi* is exemplified by the *resonance of sound.* Nancy makes the empirical point often enough: of all the arts and of all the senses or materials of art, sound is uniquely diffuse, resonating, and fleeting. It does not present itself as permanent; it presents itself as resonant. And this resonance is not a fusion and a present being, but a coming and a going, or a presencing. It is "made of referrals" (7). It is an exemplary showing of this incessant touching and presencing that keeps us imperfectly sharing the world as such. As Nancy writes in *The Sense of the World*: "[Sound] resonates elsewhere, at a distance, in an exteriority that is spaced out in all the other directions and that the ear hears along with the sounds, as the opening of the world" (1997:85). If we were willing to risk a little formula: listening to the *renvoi* of sonorous resonance orients us toward the resonance of *sens*, a resonance that lies beyond signification.

Now listening does not simply use sound to expose us to forms of the unknowable, leaving us there in total uncertainty. What makes listening possible is, finally, the incessant rhythm or resonance of returning from the unknowable back to the self in a "fit of self" (9). In always re-taking the self in an infinite "crisis," we are never a substantial and secure "subject," but nothing more than the incessant approach to ourselves. He writes: "Approach to the self: neither to a proper self (I), nor to the self of an other, but to the form or structure of self as such, that is to say, to the form, structure, and movement of an infinite referral [*renvoi*] since it refers to something (itself) that is nothing outside of the referral" (9). This kind of a resonant self bears a special kind of infinity: the limitlessness of this "self" lies exactly in its power *to return to itself* amidst the relentless onslaught of finite, transitive, referrals

of meaning. One should not downplay how extreme this formulation can be. These referrals include the totality of all living movements *between* us and *in* us broaching space and time; this includes every mediation from organic, cellular processes in our bodies all the way up to massive social ideologies. The "fit of self" is the way a life lives through these mediations. Or more traditionally, the "fit of self" echoes the broadest gesture of Heidegger's philosophy. Listening in a "fit of self" does not mark a subject eccentric to the actual world who makes it an object of conscious observation or perception. Instead, it marks a living attunement grounded in the contaminated anxiety of everything that is already there in the world.

To widen the frame a bit: this kind of listening self is not brought into a cosmic *harmonia mundi* (an otherworldly transcendence), it does not commune with lost composers and stage personalities (an intersubjective transcendence), and it is not the musically-seduced victim of a false consciousness (an objective determination on behalf of a transcendence like culture, race, the Other, history, and so forth). It is a listening self that obeys no proper, nameable, or consistent law of transcendent regulation except the minimal coherence immanently necessary to keep together a self in the world. It is one always already contaminated by an originary sharing of *renvoi*, making an openness neither active nor passive that comes to us in sonorous form as an exemplary mark of our uncertain, negotiated coexistence. As a consequence, this listener never ceases to expose the inside to the outside and the outside to the inside, blurring and flipping the border between self and the world: "Listening thus forms the perceptible singularity that bears in the most ostensive way the perceptible or sensitive (*aisthetic*) condition as such: the sharing of an inside/outside, division and participation, deconnection and contagion" (14).

Now, let us look closer at Nancy's account of technical or "musical" listening. What exactly does it mean for Nancy, that people listen *well* or listen *closely*, or listen *musically*? This book might seem to open new answers to these very old questions, since we know that music, for him, is not listened *to*, implying all the regular coordinates of subjectified bodies and musical gestures and objects. In *Listening*, music "listens to itself." This means that just as listening exposes the inside and the outside to one another, music can now listen "to itself" because it is nothing but a listening *to* self. It is not something that needs to be listened *to*, or translated by a subject external to it. But can we strengthen this definition?

Suppose a musical object is a thing of repeatable sound, a thing made of different kinds of *musical writing*, structured and preserved in the media of notes, recordings, edits, techniques, skills, instruments, reproductions, memories, treatises, traditions, genres, and so on. And suppose a musical

subject to be a conscious being who makes sense out of this object. So, in order for a standard subject-object account of musical perception to work, it should be assumed there would be *some* technique, however broadly defined, that would be listened *to*. The listening subject must perceive a figure, a melody, a harmony, a rhythm, a meter, an edit, a skill, a filter, an instrument, a vibrato—anything. For it would be impossible to perceive a musical object that had no technical content.

But Nancy's radicalization of listening attempts to think that listening *really happens* outside of any regulated recourse to a *specified* technique of musical writing. It is never a matter of a conscious subject perceiving musical notes or formal structure, or even gestural patterns in so far as these properties of the musical object would have to be normatively stabilized and agreed upon. Only after agreeing and stabilizing the technique could we then determine if a subject really heard it, or in any case, *what was really heard.* But for Nancy, it never matters "what" music is heard. It is the *activity of the listening* that matters. This means that when music "listens to itself" *no demand can be made for an adequate listening*, since adequacy has to be judged against the repeatable properties of a musical object. And these properties as forms of musical writing or musical technique always remain *unspecified.*

Pushing things a bit further, we might say that when music listens to itself, these musical techniques are not perceived or specified by a conscious subject, but *are listened to by more techniques* (like, say, the basic cognitive techniques of memory and anticipation). Listening is actually just techniques listening to techniques, without any strict identity maintained between a technique of hearing and a technique of sound. Then, music is no longer defined as an objective being of actual sonorous form, but is the presencing activity of listening itself. Music is the mobile couplings of the "musicianly and the musical" (64). Or: "Musical listening seems, then, to be like the permission, the elaboration, and the intensification of the keenest disposition of the 'auditory sense'" (27). Musical listening is not the accurate perception of musical form. It is the given sense of a particularly intense listening, one technique freely finding another, presenting no determinate musical form or signification, but presenting only its own tension as its own being: the sonorous presentation of presentation.

Without a formal musical object, it follows that anyone's "technical" expertise in listening (however unconventional) is sufficient to make music into what it is—a bearer of *sens*. He writes: "It is not a hearer [*auditeur*], then, who listens, and it matters little whether or not he is musical. Listening is musical when it is music that listens to itself" (67). I take this affirmation very seriously: nothing technically specific to an act of listening is required

for music to listen to itself. Technical or musical listening like that of a specialist can allow music to listen to itself, but it is not necessary. All musical techniques are affirmed in a pure but worldly multiplicity.

This logic, carried to its conclusion, bears a radical thesis: when we really listen, we can take no recourse to a proper unit of musical technique (like notation) to ground the act of listening, since such a proper unit would only exist in order to secure the identity of music *qua* object. Music is strictly the irreducibly plural collection of its technical elements, no matter what they are: pitches, notes, instruments, gestures, traditions, institutions, treatises, styles, solos—anything. Music could be built on the modulation of sonorous amplitude by any parameter, by any technical means, according to the logic of any minimal unit of repetition, or unit of musical technique. Here is how Nancy affirms the openness by which we can apprehend the mobile relations between sound and its poetic assemblage: "Actually, this time [the linking of the musicianly and the musical] it is a matter—according to very different modalities—of the distance between what links a work to its means, conditions, and regulated contexts, and what makes it exist as such, in its indivisible unity (which is, moreover, nothing but the indivisible unity of a whole and of the discrete units, all just as indivisible, of its parts, moments, components, aspects . . .)" (64–65). And still more explicitly, there is no proper criteria for an adequate link between musical sound and technical listening: "Without a doubt, musical listening worthy of that name can consist only in a correct combination of the two approaches or of the two dispositions, the compositional and the sensory. The fact remains that the determination of the correctness in question does not stem from any criteriology, whether musical or aesthetic" (63–64). Without criteria or positive and actual musical codes, there is consequently no proper code to regulate hearing-as-understanding, or *entendre*. This leaves listening exposed to its own being, oriented away from the musical object as such. Musical objects don't disclose truths, but only present themselves as the technique of the sonorous made into an active presencing.[2]

To throw a wrench in the whole matter, the third section of the book, called "March in Spirit in Our Ranks" explores the opposite kind of listening: *entendre*. In an oblique response to Nietzsche's *The Case of Wagner*, Nancy gives us a clear definition of how music can fail to resound: "What truly betrays music and diverts or perverts the movement of its modern history is the extent to which it is indexed to a mode of signification and not to a mode of sensibility" (57). For Nancy, this kind of indexing corresponds exactly to the powers of myth—the same powers that give fascisms their sense of community, using music for specific ends, silencing its resonance and paralyzing its spacing. There is nothing surprising here: music that

engenders unwavering solidarity is dangerous mythology; we should instead always orient listening to the porous resonance of *sens*, keeping ourselves exposed to a kind of originary plurality of being together. But how could we have a *kind* of music on the side of *entendre*, a mythical kind of music that has been saddled with horrible signifying content that "disfigures," "obliterates," and "stifles" resonance? How would we know a specific musical genre or situation has been reduced to the pure signification of mythology? That is, if we know from our earlier analysis that any kind of musical listening can be oriented towards *sens* as *écouter*, how, then, would we know *entendre* when we see (or hear) it?

Perhaps these questions are so hard to answer because *entendre* still apparently needs a proper technical foundation (memory, notation, tradition, recording, instruments) to make its mythology. Otherwise the music would have no stable identity from which we could judge its dangerous effects. Only if we knew what the music was, and how it was made, would we be able to come up with specific theories as to how signification imposed itself upon music's resonance. But all we know is that this mythological music involves some very general link with musical form that is the carrier of *sens* "as content." In these situations "there is no room for anything but utterance and persuasion of a sense through a form supposed to constitute the adequate expression of this sense itself regarded as content" (58). Simply, there is no spacing. Like two nervous systems fused together, or a dialectic that has conquered its internal differences, freezing the singularity of its motion, music has ceased to resonate between us. The consequence is an affective solidarity: "Thus feeling manages to be identified all at once as signified and signifier of realities, images, or concepts like 'people,' 'community,' 'destiny,' 'mission,' and so on" (58).

When Nancy writes like this he suggests that a musical genre or situation could be actually purified of *écouter*, totally stripped of any resonance ("... there is no room for anything ..."). But earlier in the book Nancy writes of *entendre* and *écouter*: "the one cannot, in the long run, do without the other" and that they are "two paces [*allures*] of the same" (1–2). Here *allures* might also mean speeds, looks, appearances, airs. If it is clear in this passage that *sens* cannot simply be made into a presented thing, and presented things are nothing outside of the *sens* of the presenting (the two forms need each other), a determination about whether or not music had been saddled with a signification would have to remain open and undecidable. Alternatively, if I am correct to see an affirmation of the plurality of musical techniques in Nancy's work, wouldn't this make such a claim to a pure *entendre* impossible anyway, since there is no proper technical medium to ground the repeatable hearing of a signification?

Other passages on *entendre* do not offer clearer answers to these questions. Take, for example, note seven, from the first section: "Perhaps we are permitted to consider two positions or two destinations of music (whether it's the same music or two different genres): music heard and music listened to (or, as they used to be called, background music [*musique de table*] and concert music [*musique de concert*]). The analogy would be difficult to make in the domain of the plastic arts (except perhaps with decorative painting)" (70n7). Here, decorative painting and background music (*musique de table*, *Tafelmusik*, or *divertimento*, assuming all are ornamental, nonintentional, or passive arts) are "heard" [*entendre*] whereas concert music, which is more likely to be appreciated as an object or a "work," would still be "listened to" [*écouter*]. But why wouldn't background music be securely on the side of *écouter*? It seems to share many of its attributes: it is widely shared, porous, carrying little weight of signification; it merely ornaments experience, rather than seeking to be understood. Is background music not precisely the kind of music that could listen to itself since it needs neither objecthood nor a proper technical format?

Finally, even as Nancy considers technically proficient listening as an orientation towards *écouter*, is it possible, conversely, to see it as an orientation towards *entendre*? The discipline of educating youth to, say, "listen musically" certainly uses concepts to secure the perception and identity of musical objects with proper forms of musical writing, forming them into knowledge, and developing the sense of hearing precisely as a mode of understanding. Couldn't such "disciplined" listening make *écouter* more difficult, since the didactic practices of music appreciation might close off the necessary distance between sound and sense in order to secure the apprehension of form? Supposing disciplinary listening practices are taught via a proper and agreed upon unit of musical technique like notation, at the very least, this challenges Nancy's affirmation of an open and plural sense of musical technique. Or we could pose this challenge as an empirical question: can we make judgments of *degree* between *entendre* v. *écouter*? That, in certain circumstances listening is just easier? And that in others, disciplinary situations make listening to *sens* more difficult?

Nancy tends to be vague when confronted with this kind of detail. As long as the act of listening is in some sense immanently musical, or drawing attention to the sounding of sound, it can be oriented towards a *renvoi*. That's it. He finds possible orientations towards *écouter* everywhere. Here, it is at work from animal cries all the way up to music theorists: "The ear is stretched [*tendue*] by or according to meaning—perhaps one should say that its tension is meaning already, or made of meaning, from the sounds and cries that signal danger or sex to the animal, onward to analytical listening,

which is, after all, nothing but listening taking shape or function as being inclined toward affect and not just toward concept (which does not have to do with understanding [*entendre*]), as it can always play (or 'analyze'), even in a conversation, in a classroom or a courtroom" (26).

Whatever one thinks of Nancy's account of musical specificity (no doubt, it is usually easy for a specialist to challenge a philosopher on the specialist's grounds), I suppose that this book is most rewarding when read on philosophical terms.[3] It might be useful to remember that, like Deleuze, when Nancy writes about music it is never to do musicology or music theory. Their writings on music are probably best read as occasions to do more philosophy. The motifs of *sens*, of being singular plural, and of presencing, are never exclusively musical. We can look to an essay in *The Muses*, for example, and find a thought that is equally novel, and practically identical to the notion of a "fit of self" explored in *Listening*. Here, I quote from "Painting in the Grotto":

> The same is the same without ever returning to itself, and this is how it identifies with itself. The same is the same of an identity that alters itself from birth, thirsting after a self that has never yet been self, and whose birth is already alteration, and who appropriates itself as this very alteration. (1994:70)

Just like "the self" in *Listening*, "the same" cannot remain identical with itself across space and time. The world is one in which beings must remain endlessly different; they must "mean" *to* and *with* other beings always. This comes from our individual births: exposures or openings of possibility and uncertainty that never stop opening us to the world, over and over again. The births are both actual and eternal: actual because they are nowhere but in this world, and eternal, because, like Nietzsche's eternal return, the non-identical becomings of life never cease to radiate through all living things, even as they are always re-appropriated as a living "self."

Notes

1. *Le Sens Du Monde* (1993) published as *The Sense of the World*, translated by Jeffrey S. Librett (1997) is both a great introduction to Nancy's philosophy, and a good place to get a grasp of Nancy's particular use of *sens*.

2. Perhaps it is a bit easier to see, now, why Nancy can claim that the differences between cultures, genres, (and even more broadly the senses and the arts) are not limitations to listening, but its conditions: "...one could say that the difference in sense (in the 'perceived' [*sensé*] sense of the word) is its condition, that is, the condition of its resonance" (11). Simply, if we do away with our desire to make listening adequate to musical objects, we simply affirm the self in resonance, which is also an exposure to a difference so generic (the mobile couplings of techniques) that is almost trivial to add that these differences could be social and cultural too.

3. For further reading of Nancy's work, I recommend *The Experience of Freedom* (1993), *The Sense of the World* (1998), and *Being Singular Plural* (2000), as well as the essays collected in *The Birth to Presence* (1993). They are all much more philosophically substantial, providing detailed explorations of Nancy's ontology.

References

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