

No One Listens: Meaning, time, and momentary subjectivity in music

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100-word abstract for PSi

Music, like all sense-content, inspires meaning through interaction with listeners' individual and communal histories, and analysis of listening reveals a dynamic play of subjectivity, sound, and time as musical content interacts with listener conditions. Listeners' senses of self, in flux, perform ontological stability in the face of semiotically-unstable music. Familiarity and pleasure are two relevant parameters in a general hypothesis on the play of subjectivities in relation to musical content. An emphasis on the insubstantiality of both self and time bears on the performance of selves *in time*, and leads to a proposal that the self *is time*.

Longer abstract

How does music hold meaning, and how do listeners sense themselves in relation to music while hearing? Music, as a time-tracing art, holds meaning in part by interacting with listeners' individual and communal histories, and is theorized in the musicology literature using both semiotic and phenomenological tools, one focused on the attributes of the musical object, the other on the experience of the listening subject. Meaning — deeply relative, unfixable, contingent — has haunted the European classical tradition since the dialectic of “Absolute” and “Program” music in the 19th century. What does music mean “now”? Sounds unfold moment to moment, creating continuities and discontinuities in time; creating senses of time. If “time” is a name for the sense of continuity, discontinuity, change, and flow, then it bears directly upon the self, since “self” is also a name for something both continuous and discontinuous. Western discourses of the self and identity hinge upon a subjectivity formed in relation to hegemonic structures. Selves thus form — and perform — a normative audience for music, and perform the fiction of ontological stability in the face of semiotically-indefinite music. Investigating the contingent formation of the self-sense in relation to music thus reveals a dynamic play in and through time, as musical content interacts with listener conditions to reveal changing subjectivities. Familiarity and pleasure are theorized as the relevant parameters in a general theory of the creation, flux, and dissolution of subjectivities in relation to musical style and content. And Buddhist phenomenological tools are valuable in an analysis of the process of perception and its relation to an unfixed, unmoored, deeply contingent self. Buddhist emphases on the insubstantiality of both self and time bear on the performance of selves *in time*, and lead to a proposal that the self *is time*.

What does music mean? And how do listeners understand themselves in relation to music while hearing it? A charged conversation about meaning in music has been a constant in western writing about music since the European nineteenth century at least.¹ Meaning bears directly upon subjectivity. The content humans hear affects how we feel a sense of self in relation to environment, culture, place, and situation, including to power structures and external forces that impact subjectivity directly and often painfully. Music is used by every culture to communicate and share concepts, emotions, and many kinds of symbolic content, though the pathways that “communication” takes can be complex. Music behaves in some ways like language, which communicates specific signs with some consistency, and in some ways like abstract arts and poetic language which attract more idiosyncratic interpretations. This essay touches on both semiotic and phenomenological tools to unpack the experience of subjectivity [what is this subjectivity? Is it the same as singularity? Or particularity? Or self?] that arises while listening to music. I will consider music as a specifically heard experience, leaving aside for now a discussion of music notation and its relationship to written language. I assert parallels between played-heard music and spoken-heard language in a discussion of musical meaning and its effects without unpacking the complex interpretive issues that arise in consideration of written music as a map of musical realization (and thus as a charged discursive object in its own right). Semiotics assists the understanding of music as it communicates specific meanings through learned signs, while phenomenology asserts the primacy of perception in ascertaining the meaning or existence of something, and as such elides into a reader-response approach.

¹ See Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: toward a critical history*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002). A primary hinge of that conversation in European classical music was between the opposing views of music being “absolute” (completely non-referential) or “programmatic” (symbolic and mimetic). The question of whether music expresses “meaning”, and how, is by no means resolved in the musicological world.

Parallels between music and spoken language

Like spoken language, music communicates meanings that are apparent to those who are educated in its vocabulary and grammar. Every culture's music demonstrates both internally consistent structures and vocabulary (syntactic forms, sound choices, performance preferences) and idiosyncratic variations unique to the style of each community and individual musician. Musical styles occur in part like languages, in broad geographic areas that produce music that is stylistically coherent enough to be familiar to that area's residents, as well as being divided into recognizable regional dialects, with social class (sociolect) and individual (idiolect) variations. The musics of cultures that are geographically (or sociopolitically) distant from each other can operate with such difference in both form and content that a member of one culture who has never heard the music of another culture might express substantial non-understanding of it, to the point of not recognizing it as "music" at all.² The judgment of whether a heard sequence of sounds is music or not is primarily a reflection of cultural familiarity, and as such is learned rather than innate.

If we could define musical competence in the same way as linguistic competence, the subject would be able to say, when listening to an auditory sequence, it is music or it is not music. If such a judgment can be made, it is only with reference to a cultural and historically determined context, and not in reference to universally musical structures or to musical thought in general.³

Leaving aside for the moment Wallin and Merker's assertion of "universally musical structures", there is considerable weight in the musicological literature for the view that music functions in part like language — with learned vocabulary, grammar, syntax, semantics,

² For a sarcastic but apropos gloss, see Milton Babbitt, "Who Cares if You Listen?," *High Fidelity* (1958). The charge of an unfamiliar style being "not music" seems most often leveled against music a listener doesn't like. A Google search of the term "It's not music" led to recent rants primarily directed at "rap" music, and an early rant against "jazz" and "syncopated music" with both religious and race overtones: Anne Shaw Faulkner, "Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?," *Ladies Home Journal* 1921.

³ Nils L. Wallin; Björn Merker, *The Origins of Music* (Boston: MIT Press, 2001). 451.

and other standard semiotic structures — and in part not. On the side of not, the direct association of individual signs with communally-shared meanings is much less consistent in any form of music than in language. Music, for instance, does not include truth conditions, as both natural and formal or constructed languages do.⁴ [Music theory did however for many years (see Croce) argue that music was ‘pure’. And only some languages have ‘truth’ conditions. Plato for example theorized the ideal as a way of demonstrating that truth was impossible to realise/recognise] However, considerable work on music as a system that is linguistic enough to be analyzed semiotically has been undertaken, most centrally since 1994 by musicologist Eero Tarasti, who studied with A. J. Greimas and names American semiotician Charles S. Peirce as a significant forerunner.⁵ Tarasti locates the origin of the semiotic approach to music in the work of semiotician Claude Lévi-Strauss, who proposed a model in which myth and music both derive from language, and Roland Barthes’ work on the semiotics of the voice as gesture.⁶ Tarasti’s musical semiotics arises from a desire to “explain... the total heterogeneity of musical reality” and to answer “the question whether there exist any common features in all human uses and practices of music, i.e., musical universals, categories of the human mind that form the basis for any and all musical activity.” He asks whether musical semiotics can serve this task of theorizing a “musicological metalanguage” that can “describe these universals”.⁷ He begins his theory by rehearsing some of the arguments *against*

⁴ See Kraut, “Perceiving the Music Correctly” in Michael Krausz, ed. *The Interpretation of Music: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 104. For an opposing view, and the possibility that a refined grammar like western tonal classical music *does* have something like truth conditions, see Charles Rosen, *The Frontiers of Meaning: Three Informal Lectures on Music* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994). 23. Rosen asserts, in a discussion of erroneous and variant readings of classical pieces, that a certain “standard version [of Chopin’s Sonata in B-flat Minor] is patently idiotic” because the chord progression and implied modulation is “literally incompetent”.

⁵ Eero Tarasti, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). xiii.

⁶ Eero Tarasti, *Signs of Music: A Guide to Musical Semiotics* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002). 5.

⁷ Tarasti, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*: 3.

a direct parallel between music and language, and without repeating that rehearsal here, it is enough to affirm the imprecision of the simile. Music is both interestingly like *and quite unlike* language. Nevertheless, it is *like* enough that a semiotic approach to music listening and understanding has proved a fruitful analytic method, establishing several threads of inquiry this essay will attempt to elaborate upon. [rhetoric of music...]

A semiotic approach, analyzing music as a system of signs that are learned and then understood by the educated listener, has its roots in music's ability to communicate, imitate, or invoke — and which of those it does is a well-worn debate — emotion. [what's the difference between emotion and affect?] The beginning of music theory in Europe is in the writings of Pythagoras, who asserted that the various modes (musical scales that each have a unique intervallic profile, and which evolved into our modern “major” and “minor” scales) express different human emotions. The modes began as regional musical variations (which will act like dialects), and retain the names of their originary locales: Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Ionian, Aeolian.⁸ These regional differences in scale pattern become associated with various affective experiences, and begin to establish the idea of music as mimetic. By Plato's time, all the modes were familiar in Athens, but Plato rejects most as being “relaxed” and debilitating.⁹ Mimesis in music for Plato has direct ethical consequences, and he warns against emotionality and excess in music as he does in his critique of theater.¹⁰ Plato retains as acceptable the Dorian mode (what we now know as the sequence of whole and half-steps that one hears when playing a white note scale from D to D on the piano), which expresses “the cardinal Greek virtue of temperance”, and the Phrygian mode (E to E, though it's unknown whether he was referring to

⁸ Dorian and Ionian, particularly, referred not just to locales but to specific Greek language dialects as well.

⁹ Louis Harap, "Some Hellenic Ideas on Music and Character," *The Musical Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1938): 157.

¹⁰ Ibid.

this mode we now call “Phrygian” or an earlier variation), which for Plato “manifests courage, and is useful when citizens need to ward off dangers to themselves and to the republic”.¹¹

Aristotle criticizes Plato for his celebration of Phrygian mode, which was earlier known for being “exciting and emotional” rather than “courageous”, but their debate agrees on the essential point, stated by Plato, that “musical compositions are all imitative and representative”.¹² Music *represents*, and for the ancient Greeks that is fundamentally an ethical issue, because the beautiful is the good. [what is the relationship between representation and beauty? Only if I know this will the connection with ethic and the good make sense] Modes that represent qualities that are useful to the state (temperance, courage) are praised, while those that represent more emotionally arousing qualities are considered dangerous. The assertion that music represents emotion led to the assumption or observation that music arouses emotions in listeners, and thus to a long historical conversation about the appropriate place of music in both the public and private sphere.

Learning the language: interpretive communities and ideology the following para is too long. Please give your reader a break!

If music is similar to spoken language in that it uses signs with specific representational meanings, like the Dorian mode’s expression of the emo-ethical quality of temperance, then like a language, those signs must be learned. Like any language, the system of signs enacted by a given music will be learned through a listener’s association with a culture that listens to, and perhaps plays, that kind of music. Music learning thus happens in what Stanley Fish calls

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 156-57.

“interpretive communities”.¹³ As a member of the American educated middle class, I grew up hearing Western classical and folk music, surrounded with it as much as I was with spoken English. Long before I could speak or express my experience of hearing this music, I was learning to respond to its vocabulary (notes, chords, rhythms, timbres), grammar (phrase structures, cadences, tonal relationships of dissonance and resolution), and associational meanings (especially when music is used in relation to visual images, accompanying various situations in movies and television shows). I was thus inducted before birth into the interpretive community of my social class, location, and culture, and trained to “read” music by its rules. Some of these rules inscribe presuppositions upon the act of listening itself, giving different weight to solitary, casual group (among friends), and formal group (concert hall) listening. Some inscribe meanings upon genre choice, for instance in my absorption of a message that “Bach is king”, and that the purity and rationality of Bach’s contrapuntal music makes it the crown jewel of western music, with all earlier and later music lesser (a view that I held firmly by high school, without my recognizing its origin). And some were the rules of basic tonal grammar — for instance that the tonic chord (I) is to be heard in primary relation to the dominant chord (V), secondarily to the other four diatonic chords, and that the common sequencing of these chords inscribes a pathway of “away” and “return”, chiefly through the seemingly-universal practice in western tonal music of dominant-tonic cadence. Even though variations on this structure are abundant, the basic directionality remains the same: return home.

All of these vocabularies and grammars I learned through hearing, long before I learned to read music notation, and they underly the interpretive experience of fluent listeners to these genres regardless of formal musical training, just as many more people are fluent in a language

¹³ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class: the authority of interpretive communities* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1980).

as speakers and listeners than are literate readers. The rules of music reception are transmitted through the organs of power and education via curation, criticism, promotion, canonicization, and the cultivation of subcultures based on musical genre, often with commercial aim.¹⁴ Powerful actors in the musical meaning-production sector are the commercial music industry, schools, churches, popular media, community musical groups, family, and friendship circles, all of which consist of overlapping interpretive communities, and all of which are involved with the production of meaning through the relatively consistent use of formal musical signs.[but some of which are ideologically or hegemonically constrained more than others]

As listening to music transmits socio-political content among its various meanings, many of these organs become (after Althusser) cultural ideological State apparatuses (ISA), serving hegemonic power through defining the boundaries of interpretation and subjectivity.¹⁵

“Understanding” a piece of music is largely conditioned by the listener’s familiarity with the style and conventions of that music, whether learned in an informal or oral way or through formal education and training. Of course, this training only goes so far. Specific meaning in music is idiosyncratic — subtly or grossly different for every listener — while still carrying communally consistent aspects. Americans may generally associate minor keys with sadness, and major keys with happiness (casual questioning of my piano students returns very

¹⁴ Though non-commercial music making continues to defy State control, it still often follows stylistic trends. Most amateur music making in the United States, for instance, still conforms to genre-specific rules of tonality, and in doing so repeats the ideologies that that grammar historically implies, both in classical and folk usage, including the hero’s journey (see Scott Burnham, “The second nature of sonata form,” in *Music Theory and Natural Order from the Renaissance to the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Suzannah Clark; Alexander Rehding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).), and the “expression of subjectivity” (Lawrence Kramer, “The Mirror of Tonality: Transitional Features of Nineteenth-Century Harmony,” *19th Century Music* 4, no. 3 (1981): 199.).

¹⁵ See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review press, 2001). For investigation of some of the ideologies enshrined in western tonal music, see Jean-François Lyotard; Adam Krimms; Henry James Klumpenhouwer, ed. *Music/ideology: resisting the aesthetic* (Amsterdam: Psychology Press, 1998).

consistent results when asked about their experience of a single chord), but when hearing actual music, the response is much more complex, depending on many factors, including the presence of text, style and cultural background of the music, and social factors. Listener response is not absolutely relative, or no two listeners would ever agree on their interpretation of a piece. Nor is it universal, even though studies of the perception of emotion in unfamiliar music show some evidence of translatability, and other studies identify aspects of musical form as approaching universality of perception, if not direct meaning, such as contour — a metaphor, as many descriptions of sonic sequences are, but one that seems to be experienced by listeners of many cultures.¹⁶

A semiotic approach to understanding musical meaning focuses on the aspects of musical grammar that are consistent enough within a musical style that they are learned by listeners, and therefore expected when listening. Expectation — manifested in the dialectic of dissonance and resolution through sequences of chords and melody notes— is itself a primary sign, or broad class of signs, in European tonal music, both folk and classical, and has spread to be an element of many cultures' musics through the global exportation of European and American music. Casual listening to Indian pop music, for example, including bhangra and Bollywood film music (*filmi sangīt*), supports this observation, with many songs using dominant-tonic chord sequences in typical western variations, with return to tonic chords at phrase and section endings. In comparison with Indian classical and folk musics, it seems like western influence on Indian pop music has led to the overlay of tonal harmonic material on a modal system that did not traditionally use chords to create temporal phrase structure.¹⁷ In

¹⁶ Laura-Lee Balkwill; William Forde Thompson, "A Cross-Cultural Investigation of the Perception of Emotion in Music: Psychophysical and Cultural Cues," *Music Perception* 17, no. 1 (1999). See also Dane L. Harwood, "Universals in Music: A Perspective from Cognitive Psychology," *Ethnomusicology* 20, no. 3 (1976).

¹⁷ Peter Manuel, "Popular Music in India: 1901-86," *Popular Music* 7, no. 2 (1988): 168.

our model of learned understanding of common signs based on membership in interpretive communities, it is then expected that listeners to Indian pop music that uses tonal chord progressions in consistent ways (like dominant-tonic chord sequences that exemplify the western dissonance-resolution dialectic) would then “learn” the chord sequences and experience the expectation for resolution that is invoked by the use of these progressions in the west. The inclusion of western chord progressions in Indian pop music thus changes the tonal sense of the music such that listeners may perceive “movement” (as from a dissonant chord to its resolution) differently than when hearing Indian classical music, in which tension-resolution patterns are often expressed by melodic choices and placement of phrases within the rhythmic cycle, or *tala*. Indian pop music listeners have then learned through repetition to hear western-style chord progressions similarly to how many Europeans do, even though their music didn't traditionally use them.

It is doubtful, however, whether a hypothetical Indian listener accustomed to a modal music that rides a single steady pitch center hears western chord progressions in their music with the *same* sense of dissonance and expectation of resolution that many western listeners do. The music still is primarily modal, and almost never modulates to different key areas, leading to the strong possibility that the layers of chordal material serve as ornamentation — a venerable and complex practice in Indian classical music — rather than serving a grammatical function as it tends to in western tonal usage.¹⁸ Expectation of a particular usage would be learned through membership in an interpretive community, but of course it is impossible to know what group of people in a given place — especially one as vast and heterogenous as India — constitutes a particular interpretive community. A model of overlapping interpretive

¹⁸ Ibid. Manuel understands chordal material in Indian pop in this way — as primarily ornamental rather than structural.

communities — family, social circle, community, age group, political party, virtual community, nation, and on and on — is descriptive of how understanding of a musical dialect is shared. Understanding a certain music a certain way may then map directly onto the listener's identity, since membership in these communities also will help define the listener's position and subjectivity within the larger culture and world. [but one has a subjectivity only within hegemonically dominant communities. There are many other communities alongside the hegemonic that ask for or enable a different kind of individual than one focused on the compromises, needs and desires of subjectivity. This is the problem with semiotics as opposed to rhetoric. Semiotics stays with the hegemonic — we did all this in 265a last year and the relevant material is Stuart Hall's. I don't know what you've done with Kriss, so she may not want you to pursue this thought]

Humans identify themselves in part by the languages they understand. My own deep familiarity with European classical music and the English language both manifest as part of my sense of myself (along with so many other familiarities, including an beginner's — and foreigner's — familiarity with Indian classical music). Since the content and ideology expressed in music is part of what gives shape to listeners' sense of self, the changing harmonic content of Indian popular music is expected to produce concomitant shifts in the subjectivity of fluent Indian listeners. I hypothesize that this shift coincides historically with the economic and social westernization of India in general, and with the development of Indian post-colonial identity. Alongside culturally significant westernization, Indian listeners are “learning” western harmony, and with it the various ideologies and impacts on subjectivity that that harmony manifests.

Musical genre as dialect: reader-response, heteroglossia

In addition to semiotics, phenomenology is the second major strand of analytic thinking to be relevant to musical meaning. Phenomenological approaches to a discussion of meaning in music are by definition rooted in the experience of a listener, if “music” is understood as a framing or assembly of sounds. Sound is a physiological phenomenon in which stimulation of the inner ear gives rise to the perception of pitch, volume, timbre, spatial location, and other sonic and mental experiences, including the perception of meaning. Direct experience of sound does not depend on semiotic understanding, and this freedom from the domain of a linguistic model and orientation toward embodiment is the promise of a phenomenological approach. Bert O. States emphasizes this distinction, and his assertion of phenomenology’s greater relevance as a method is applicable to music as well.

...the danger of a linguistic approach to theater is that one is apt to look past the site of our sensory engagement with its empirical objects. This site is the point at which art is no longer only a language. When the critic posits a division in the art image, he may be saying something about language, but he is no longer talking about art, or at least about the affective power of art.¹⁹

“Our” sensory engagement with the objects of the theater becomes in music our engagement with the sensuous object that is sound. To discuss the arising of self in relation to the sensuous object of sound it is then necessary to parse the experience of hearing in a more directly phenomenological way.

How does a listener experience meaning in music, and how does that meaning contribute to the listener’s subjectivity? Music, like many aesthetic activities humans engage in, can give rise to a sense of self, and many people and groups use music as a substantial marker for that

¹⁹ Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: on the phenomenology of the theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

self.²⁰ Every culture makes music, and many cultures express substantial identity with “their” music, as evidenced by government and private programs to protect, sponsor, develop and propagate that music. If music carries cultural identity, it must contain specific enough signs to be recognizable by members of that culture and differentiated from the music of other cultures, even those nearby or related enough that each one’s music is coherent and “understandable” to each other. Identification with linguistic dialects offers a relevant parallel to this process. A devotee of English Renaissance music, who loves, say, the lute music of John Dowland, might also “get” Irish folk music, perhaps in part because the two musics share enough modal (pitch collection), timbral, rhythmic, and stylistic characteristics that the perceptual map that this hypothetical devotee follows while listening to Dowland is similar enough to one that works for Irish folk music as to make the Irish music familiar. “English Renaissance” and “Irish Folk” are both “dialects” of a broader European tonal “language”, and share significant tonal/modal and rhythmic vocabulary, as well as using similar instruments (thus timbre) and formal structures (“song form”, among many others). The similarity in elements is enough that the two styles may be understandable by similarly conditioned listeners, but distinct enough that they would never be confused for each other, except perhaps by someone completely unfamiliar with either style. The Dowland lover is *identified* to some degree with English Renaissance music simply by virtue of understanding the language. S/he may be somewhat less identified with Irish Folk music, but still more at home (and this implies place, orientation, and positionality as aspects of subjectivity) listening to it than when listening to, say, Javanese gamelan, in which the modal, timbral, rhythmic, and stylistic characteristics of the music are quite unlike any kind of European classical or folk music. The

²⁰ A common example is the personal and group identity creation in Western teenagers that uses music as a significant element. National or tribal identification with a musical style or artist in times of threat is another. For a discussion of teenage musical identity that uses a semiotic approach, see Thomas Turino, "Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music," *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 2 (1999).

hearing of foreign music might even serve to cement the listener's identification with the more familiar ("I don't get it. I prefer classical..."). In short, it is by the listener that music is learned, perceived, "understood", and in the listener that the experience of subjectivity arises. Two elements that give rise most directly to understanding and thus subjectivity are familiarity and pleasure, which are primarily learned experiences.

As discussed, one of the results of hearing a piece of music is the arising of a sense of self, or subjectivity, in the listener. [ok, of course I'd want you to separate out self from subjectivity..] That subjectivity is a collation [or collocation] of the meanings that arise as specific sounds appear in temporal sequence ("music", broadly defined) and meet the conditioning and social context that each listener carries. Meaning is idiosyncratic — subtly or grossly different for every listener — while still carrying some communally consistent aspects. The dialects (musical styles and genres) that many listeners understand are various and overlapping enough to constitute Bakhtinian heteroglossia, with tonal harmony being the most common "unitary language" in the west.²¹[I would disagree with this used of 'heteroglossia', perhaps for a future discussion?] Listener interpretation — within a culture, or interpretive community — often shows substantial congruence and predictability.²² "Understanding" a piece of music is then largely conditioned by the listener's familiarity with the style and conventions of that music, whether through informal exposure or through formal education and training.

²¹ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981). 270-71. For a discussion of Bakhtin's approach to musical content, see Michael Chanan, *Musica practica: the social practice of Western music from Gregorian chant to postmodernism* (London: Verso, 1994). 37.

²² For example, Carol L. Krumhansl, "Perceiving Tonal Structure in Music: The complex mental activity by which listeners distinguish subtle relations among tones, chords, and keys in Western tonal music offers new territory for cognitive psychology," *American Scientist* 73, no. 4 (1985). This study measured listeners' hearing (and thus understanding) of pitch relations in a western tonal music context, revealing substantial similarity between separate listeners' responses and correlation with the formal semantics of tonal music. In other words, the listeners demonstrated fluency in the language and ability to "read" a central carrier of meaning.

Understanding music: familiarity and pleasure [have you read Barthes on pleasure and bliss?]

Charles Rosen offers a simple description of what it means to understand a piece of music:

What does it mean to understand music? ...Understanding music simply means not being irritated or puzzled by it. ...More positively, taking pleasure in music is the most obvious sign of comprehension, the proof that we understand it.²³

Rosen takes the position that pleasure is proof of comprehension. He follows the assertion that understanding means not being irritated with a story of his being initially nauseated by Bartok's Fifth Quartet, a sickness that transmuted to pleasure when he became familiar with the genre and piece. Implied in his equation is the assertion that we cannot take pleasure in a music that we do not understand, and that pleasure and therefore understanding arises with familiarity. If I like it, I get it, and I'll get it once I've heard it (or something like it) enough times. He refers to the Bartok being "just close enough to the kind of music I knew and loved best for the frustrations [of lack of familiarity] to be particularly painful."²⁴ Rosen's sense of self (as is true for many music lovers, including myself) seems imbricated with his musical tastes, and maintained by the satisfaction of expectations, which is the sign of familiarity. "My lack of familiarity with the style meant that everything I expected of music was frustrated and thwarted" he writes, noting that once he was familiar with the piece,

...of course, the Fifth Quartet gives me nothing but pleasure — with, occasionally, a slight sense of disappointment because of my overfamiliarity with the piece as well as its style: it no longer solicits my attention at every turn as it once did.²⁵

"Of course". Rosen takes for granted that familiarity leads to pleasure. I will extend the "of course" to the expression of subjectivity that Rosen demonstrates (and projects upon his

²³ Rosen, *The Frontiers of Meaning: Three Informal Lectures on Music*: 3.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

cultural ancestry). Discussing how (presumably European) classical music listeners “learned” new musical styles in the early twentieth century:

In music, the loss of tonality was deeply upsetting, no matter how the history of nineteenth-century music seemed to lead to it, at least in hindsight, but we learned to take pleasure in the passionate phrasing of Schönberg and Berg. The coolness, the apparent absence of passion of Anton von Webern was the next obstacle to overcome, but we were won over by the exquisite balance of his symmetrical patterns — only to have these subsequently withheld by younger composers influenced by Webern, like Pierre Boulez, who substituted a much more free-wheeling texture.²⁶

The passage rings with identity. “[D]eeply upsetting” — to whom? “[W]e learned”, “we were won over”. The listeners Rosen identifies with seem to be educated classical music listeners of indistinct nationality, but Euro-American at least culturally, who were fond of — even attached to — nineteenth century and earlier tonal music, and who struggled through a process of learning to “take pleasure in” the music of a sequence of European expressionist and modernist composers that have now become canonical. Rosen was born in 1927, so was a child for much of the historical process he describes, though apparently one with strong opinions about music early on.²⁷ “I am told, though I do not remember this myself, that at the age of eight I was made indignant by my first hearing of Debussy. There should be a law against music like that, I am supposed to have declared roundly.”²⁸ His childhood reaction is moral as well as aesthetic: “The normal reaction to music we do not understand is moral outrage”.²⁹ Rosen’s

²⁶ Ibid., 5.

²⁷ Schönberg’s formal break with tonality is sometimes said to occur in the final movement of his second string quartet, written in 1908, the first of his pieces to bear no key signature and use the chromatic scale (all 12 pitches) in a seemingly non-hierarchical way, though it still does end on a major triad. Schönberg later denied that any movements of the piece were atonal, claiming that the piece still ended on the tonic. Bryan R. Simms, *The atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg, 1908-1923* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000). 43.

²⁸ Rosen, *The Frontiers of Meaning: Three Informal Lectures on Music*: 5.

²⁹ Ibid., 6.

congenial narration of a putatively normative classical music listener is revealing for the sense of identity it displays. He seems to be telling the story of his own learning process, at the distance of some years, as a sequence of exposure to difficult music that runs parallel to the historical sequence of composers he names.

Subjectivity refers in part to the sense of self as affected — created — by hegemonic power. That force manifests its gravitational pull through controlling the communal discourse (through ISAs and other modes of meaning production). As Rosen the young music lover (the real reader), and Rosen the imaginary public struggling with new music as it comes out (the historical and fictional reader) are elided in his narrative, his subject position in relation to the developing modernist canon solidifies (and he grows into an “ideal reader” of these “texts” — the canon of Euro-American modernist classical music). This solidification happens through the process of familiarization and concomitant increasing pleasure. He is drawn (by his curiosity? by his social circle? by academic indoctrination? He doesn't say...) into relationship with the music. He is “won over”.

A sense of self in the act of listening to music thus arises when two factors are present: familiarity, providing spatio-temporal orientation, and pleasure. Familiarity, according to Rosen, precedes pleasure, and is not black and white, though his narrative might imply so. There are degrees of familiarity experienced by any listener with any music, and familiarity can be usefully mapped as having a hypothetical “familiarity quotient” of 0% (absolutely unfamiliar, demonstrating no recognizable aspects in any parameter) to 100% (absolutely familiar, with nothing unmapped on any level). Of course the two poles are imaginary. Every sensory moment contains some amount of recognition and some of non-recognition. I will call these two types of sensory information “familiar” and “strange” as if a moment of experience contains some amount of each as separable monads. This model of perception is temporal

rather than momentary, because familiarity is a quality that is apprehended over time, with the connection to memory and thinking-of-again implied by the word: re-cognition. Consider four hypothetical types of music heard by an imaginary listener who is fluent in some genres of music (has heard the styles of their place and culture enough to be “not puzzled” by them):

1. A piece in a genre that is extremely well-known (95% familiar, 5% strange), with most of the idiosyncrasies of the particular piece — specific melody, instruments, etc. — very expected. An example like this might be music perceived as cliché: jazz standards, classical or oldies pop radio, MUZAK. This category of familiarity might also contain pieces and genres that one considers “favorite”. The difference between cliché and favorite will be pleasure, though as Rosen notes, overfamiliarity can *lessen* the specific pleasure of engagement if one requires a piece to “solicit [one’s] attention”.³⁰

2. A piece that is genre-recognizable but specifically unknown (60% familiar, 40% strange), with many details that are unfamiliar but within the listener’s unitary language enough to be enjoyed. This might be a familiarity quotient that many music listeners enjoy: music that is familiar enough to confirm existing tastes but new enough to stay interesting.

3. A piece that is substantially unfamiliar (30% familiar, 70% strange), but in a dialect related enough that the listener recognizes it *as music*. This may be what a given listener regards as “new” or “experimental” music: initially disorienting but possible to learn through exposure and cultivation of receptive tools through social and media education. (I would posit that Rosen’s initial experience of Bartok could be described as somewhat like this.)

4. And truly foreign music (5% familiar, 95% strange), that may be familiar only through external structures (like context: radio, CD, venue, presence of friends) but not through specific aural information. This is music that one might not initially recognize as music at all. (In the twentieth century, there have been many experimental musics that have fallen in this

³⁰ Ibid., 3.

category for many listeners, only to attain canonical status some years hence, when listeners' familiarity and thus pleasure-potential had grown.)

A listener's experience of a piece — or any portion of a piece — of music will always evidence a certain familiarity quotient, which itself is temporal: it may change frequently through a given listening or remain relatively stable. Familiarity can be mapped onto orientation and thence onto positionality.[how are you using positionality? In 265A we set up a critique of Gramsci on positionality and suggested another definition. I'd be interested in how you use it here] When a given sound is familiar, I know *where I am* based on the clues it provides. When I see around me landmarks — buildings, topographical features, and other physical clues — I am oriented in space. I know where I am to some degree (based on the same kind of familiarity quotient as described above). Likewise, “soundmarks” — musical clues that indicate genre, style, culture, grammar, content — are the currency of orientation while listening. Note Rosen's description of his visceral response to the unfamiliar Bartok quartet: “It made me physically sick; I remember quite clearly a feeling of nausea.”³¹ Nausea is a perfect physiological description for the experience of disorientation, and Rosen's story describes the process of his path from disorientation to orientation to pleasure. Pleasure is a consequence of orientation. What remains here is to map the process of perception of sounds such that the mechanism for that orientation is revealed. This map will lead to a discussion of some varying subjectivities that arise in a generalized music listener.

Buddhist phenomenology as a map of perception and the arising of the sense of self

Music usually refers to sounds of some kind, and sound implies the sensory experience of hearing. Hearing can be casually distinguished from listening by the implied intentionality of

³¹ Ibid.

the latter. “I hear traffic outside” is different from “I am listening to the cars go by”. The first suggests that sounds appear in consciousness unbidden, and that I can be aware of them without needing to consciously turn my attention toward them. The second implies that I have made the choice to turn my attention to a given sound, or that I have chosen the sound itself, as we do with some music: “I am listening to Bach”. I will use “hearing” to refer to aspects of sound-reception that are autonomic or involuntary (in humans that are not hearing-impaired), and “listening” to refer to those that require intentional engagement. This parsing mirrors the distinction made in western theories of perception between those which involve concepts (“epistemic perception”, or “seeing that”) and those which do not (“non-epistemic perception” or “simple seeing”).³² As concepts (ideas, ideology, personal history) all color perceptions, it is useful to separate the two, and investigate the process whereby given sensory information is colored by conceptual information.

Buddhist epistemology, which I assert is a proto-phenomenology arising from the detailed observation of the perceptual-cognitive process, offers an empirically-grounded model of perception and cognition that will serve to highlight the process whereby sense data leads through complex associational chains to concept and meaning. The Buddhist model, though ancient, is a more useful map of perception than many western models precisely because it has been the foundation for a formal system of embodied mental cultivation (unlike more speculative western philosophy), and as such has been tested and refined by practitioners of meditation and inquiry for over 2500 years without substantial methodological invalidation. The aspect of Buddhist teaching unpacked here is not religious — it does not require belief or adherence to a “Buddhist” cosmological framework. It is a set of labels for aspects of experiential process that overlap in many ways with western scientific method, especially in

³² Daniel O'Brien, "Epistemology of Perception," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Bradley Dowden (2004).

its exhortation toward individual experimental verification of claims.³³ The theory is set out in one of the world’s most detailed phenomenological models, the *Abhidhamma*, a reference manual to inner states that applies the tradition’s psychological and ontological insights to the mapping of perception and cognition. It was laid out by Buddhist commentators in about 300BCE, 200 years after the Buddha.³⁴ These and other early Buddhist teachings, preserved in the voluminous Pali Canon, describe momentary sensory experience in minute detail with the intent of revealing the underlying patterns behind every conscious experience, which are identified as impermanence (*anicca*), unreliability (*dukkha*), and the absence of a consistent self (*anatta*).³⁵ The apprehension of these three basic qualities — said to be present in every moment of conditioned existence — is considered to lead directly to realization of the “unconditioned”, or *nibbana* (*nirvana* in Sanskrit, literally “unbinding”, as a flame is unbound when its fuel is exhausted). The process of inquiry that leads to this apprehension is called *vipassana*, which translates as “seeing clearly”.

The Buddhist model that will be most useful in a discussion of perception, meaning, and subjectivity is a structural understanding of momentary sensory experience called “the five aggregates” (*pañcakkhandha*). The *khandha* are descriptors of elements of conscious experience that arise in the moment of sense contact. There are teachings that the *khandha* arise simultaneously, and teachings that they arise sequentially. Here I will treat them as

³³ The charge toward direct experimental confirmation is enshrined in the famous Pali word *ehi-passiko*, often translated as “to be seen for oneself [through direct experience]”.

³⁴ See Bikkhu Bodhi; Anuruddha, *A comprehensive manual of Abhidhamma: the Abhidhammattha sangaha of Ācariya Anuruddha* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society/Pariyatti 1993).

³⁵ Known as the “three characteristics”, they are the most important of the fundamental insights in Theravada (literally, “Way of the Elders”) Buddhism, which is the form practiced in Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka, as well as in the growing Insight Meditation tradition in the west. The Theravada tradition uses the Pali language, a variant of Sanskrit, and the technical Buddhist terms in this essay are mostly in their Pali forms.

simultaneous aspects of a moment of autonomic perception, specifically hearing. The assertion of simultaneity prefigures Heidegger in his account of “thingness”:

We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things — as this thing-concept alleges; rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-motored plane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves.³⁶

Though they are discreet events, the experiences of the five *khandha* arise together as one experience of a thing/moment. The list of the five *khandha* is as follows, with examples using music as the sense contact. The map is generalizable to any sensory contact including thoughts and emotions, which are considered to be the sense data of a non-differentiated heart-mind (*citta*), a receptive sensory organ like the eyes, ears, skin, etc.³⁷

1. Form (*rūpa*) — all physical experience, including the sensory information from the five physical senses. Example: air pressure changing on the ear drum, sensations in the ear canal, firing of the auditory nerve.³⁸

2. Feeling (*vedanā*) — simply whether a given sensation is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Example: the pleasure or pain caused by any sound in the moment of hearing it,

³⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Collins, 1971). 26.

³⁷ This doctrinal list requires using conventional English words in slightly different meanings than in casual usage. To reflect that specificity, I will capitalize words that refer to specific elements of the list, like “Perception”.

³⁸ The Form *khandha* refers specifically to the subjective side of matter: the act of coming into contact with things through a “sense door”. In this sense it challenges Heidegger’s description of “thingness”, in which he asserts that the “thing itself must be allowed to remain in its self-containment”, not making it “press too hard upon us”, which a purely sensory theory might do. See *Ibid.* The Theravada model of the five *khandha* makes no claim about the inherent reality or materiality of forms, though it does reveal the lack of self, satisfaction, and permanence in every conditioned thing via the teaching of the three characteristics. A later Buddhist school, *yogācāra* (“mind only” or “subjective realism”), would maintain that only the mind (*citta*) is objectively real, creating for some time a dialectic with the *mādhyamaka*, the emptiness-based school of Nagarjuna. The two schools later merged, considering the mind-only teaching to be a skillful method (*upaya*) to take on as part of the training in deconstructive perception.

whether through volume, timbre, or other conditions (including learned preference).

Satisfaction? Bliss?

3. Perception (*sañña*) — the bare quality of recognition via memory. Perception is where semiotic association manifests, as the mind compares incoming information to its store of personal historical referents and makes connections, as well as familiarity quotient. Example: the recognition of the sound of a piano key (but not the inner naming of it as “piano”, which happens in the next aggregate), or the recognition of the opening note or chord of a familiar piece.

4. [Mental] Formations (*sankhāra*) - thoughts, emotions, comparison, analysis, etc. Everything that can be said to happen in the heart and mind that is not the other four *khandha*. Example: tracking the progress of a familiar piece of music, or the comparing that arises hearing a familiar piece played by a new ensemble, or any of the thoughts of judgment or critique that arise in listening. Also thoughts of self and position and all other psychological experiences. Thoughts triggered by hearing can give rise to other thoughts in associational chains, or can give rise to emotional response, which produces its own *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *sañña*, etc.

5. Consciousness (*viññana*) — the “knowing” that accompanies any sense information. Consciousness in the context of the *khandha* does not refer to more personal aspects of sentience (like the sense of “I”, or the various types of awareness), only to the one-to-one apprehension of the sense object. Example: hearing the opening E-flat chords of Beethoven’s *Eroica*, I know that I am hearing. (All other aspects of recognition, interpretation, pleasure, analysis, and subjectivity belong to other *khandha*.) Consciousness identifies whether a listener is conscious (aware of hearing or actively listening) or unconscious (unaware of hearing, even if sounds are present, as when unconsciously tuning out ambient music in a department store). [conscious and unconscious are usually linked in current critical theory with hegemonic

structures of western liberal social contract states. You might want to develop ‘awareness’ in contrast to the constraints and repressions of ‘consciousness’.]

This reading of the process of perception and recognition is a structuralist phenomenological model, which attempts to map some relevant aspects of a moment of sense contact.

Deconstruction and other strategies — every strategy, in fact — arise as *sankhāra*: in the never-ending flowering of associational chains. Critique of power in all its forms, including in the structures and use of music, consists completely of *sankhāra*: thoughts and emotions, context and intertext, discourse, ideology, and the self. [I would need to carefully discuss with you how you are using these terms before I could accept that they are all equally open to *sankhāra* – and of course I would need to achieve a better appreciation for *sankhāra*] The *khandha* happen immediately upon sense contact, and all contribute to the *sankhāra* “I”. Humans tend to identify with all of the *khandha*, taking their content to be real and then interpreting that content such that a consistent self is affirmed. The Buddhist teaching of *anatta* (“not self”) challenges that interpretation, but without affirming or denying *anatta* it is still clear that identification happens. Listeners identify with the body, or Form (“I am here”), Feelings (“I like it”), Perception (“I’ve heard this before”), Formations (“I’m a fan of this style”), and Consciousness (“I’m listening”).

Familiarity, pleasure, subjectivity, positionality

As discussed above, familiarity (via *sañña*) and pleasure (via *vedanā*) particularly support the sense of self, and when both are strongly present — a high familiarity quotient and substantial pleasant Feeling — conditions are ripe for the arising of a strong sense of self (“Bach is king!”; “we were won over by the exquisite balance of his symmetrical patterns”).³⁹ Familiarity

³⁹ Rosen, *The Frontiers of Meaning: Three Informal Lectures on Music*: 5.

without pleasure also creates self, but in opposition, manifesting as passivity (ignoring) or active rejection (expressing dislike or resistance to a style or genre).⁴⁰ Familiarity is closely linked to consistency, since in order to recognize something it has to sound relatively consistent between hearings, and a music's consistency gives it its familiarity quotient as familiar and unfamiliar sounds mix in predictable amounts. Familiarity and consistency are also markers of temporal positionality: knowing where I am in time. Familiarity is governed by memory and arises as Perception, and consistency is the sense that moments of past experience are similar enough to each other as to hold a common identity, which we can call "the sense of object constancy", the necessary support for "the sense of subject constancy" (with both being possibly illusory because impermanent, or *anicca*). Both perceptions claim truthfulness through identification with the *khandha*, but cannot prove the reality, solidity, or consistency of either subject or object.⁴¹ The maintenance of a stable sense of self, even if undecidably illusory, requires perception of some degree of subject constancy, which can thus be gained through listening to music that is consistently familiar and pleasurable, triggered by both present-time sensation (acoustics, giving rise to *vedanā*) and positive relation to the past (recognition, or *sañña*, and associational chains, *sankhāra*). Music that gives enough evidence of consistency that the perception of subject constancy is not

⁴⁰ And a genre can certainly be a tool of hegemony, as can a musical grammatical device, as discussed above, and so appropriate to be resisted. Consider the stereotypically dramatic music that accompanies action scenes in movies. Those timbres and rhythms become learned, and the associational chains that tie them to the heart pounding, the tense musculature, the riveted eyes are also learned. Soon, that music is effective in producing exactly the responses that the industrial entertainment industry needs its consumers to experience. And we don't have to like it for it to work. We just have to recognize it and respond. Resistance to these emo-acoustic triggers is difficult — they're deeply learned — so abstention from blockbuster movies may be called for. The ideology of tonality, however, is so embedded in global culture now that escape from it is futile. Resistance to the ISA of tonality, of course, happens throughout the experimental music world, turning New Music series' into possible Temporary Autonomous Zones (see Hakim Bey).

⁴¹ Of course, object relations theory as a model of infant development does not question the thingness of objects (hand, toy, mother...) in the way that phenomenology, both western and Buddhist does.

challenged supports a strong sense of self, while disorienting music (that does not demonstrate consistency) challenges the stability of the self. When content is disorienting enough that consistency is undermined, a listener may transfer attention to another (more familiar or consistent) field of content in order to maintain subject constancy (like read the program notes, or just stop listening and turn attention to some other sensory information).[a lot of this is dependent on earlier definitions that I am not confident about. OR about words such as Kanda/sanna/ etc of which I need greater comprehension]

Positionality exists before listening, and manifests through intention (hearing vs. listening, and *why* one listens), context (where and how one listens), and ideology (*sankhāra* that fix one's subjectivity in relation to hegemonic power). Position, orientation, and disorientation all are words that describe a spatial relationship near or far from the centers of security, power, and stable identity. Position also describes a listener's historical stance, often unconscious, but through education often conscious (or self-conscious). Subjectivity is defined by relationship — of the self to a dominant discourse — thus subjectivity is the self (the sense of “I”) plus position in relation, located through opposition. With fluctuating positionality (as the social forces that surround a given act of music consumption change, along with the somatic, psychological, and intellectual aspects of listening), three temporal (and temporary) subjectivities are created, called subjectivities because they often arise in discourse, in this case in relation to institutional music of a common genre or grammar, which most western music is.[why always concerned with self in discourse? Why with opposition? My ignorance no doubt]

1. “Initial subjectivity” (IS) in the intentional listener is grounded in the reason/context for listening (“I’m at the club to hear Esperanza Spalding”). Initial subjectivity in the unintentional listener is grounded in social context (“I heard Neil Diamond playing in the car

next to me”). Initial subjectivity is what meets sense contact, and is both the cumulative result of all previous “momentary subjectivities” and prepares the ground for each new one.

2. “Momentary subjectivity” (MS) is the sense of self and position that arises concomitant with a moment of sense perception (“I love how she’s playing that bass!”).

3. “Cumulative subjectivity” (CS) is the sense of a continuous self and position called “me”, which is the result of perceiving the stream of momentary subjectivities as sequential and continuous (“I always love coming here — they book the best bands.”).

CS and IS are the same, except that CS orients toward the past (it is a result) while IS orients toward the future (it is a precondition). All 3 describe a present-moment phenomena, so while they are temporal in that they describe a listener’s relationship to the past and future, they necessarily arise in the present, as all subjectivity must. As sense contacts flow in, orientation, via familiarity, pleasure, and associational chains, or disorientation, causing the attention to compensate in some way, appear in some amount (familiarity quotient), solidifying momentarily as a new CS, which is the initial state for the next incoming contact. The process of listening to music triggers these subjectivities in ways that are historically determined (via social context, personal history, associations, ideology) such that like language, reception of meaning depends on the history and education of the listener, including all the idiosyncratic association chains they bear. However, socialization around a given musical style is not as consistent as it might have been in many communities in the past, so the range of education and associations is correspondingly vaster. Simple tonal sequences do carry extremely wide consistency of use, and persist in contemporary western music of most kinds, so these sequences carry the power of familiarity for a huge number of people. That familiarity makes them sources of consistency, orientation, pleasure, and subjectivity for listeners to many genres of music.

The use of a Buddhist phenomenological framework for unpacking perception may be useful in an ongoing discussion of the mechanisms by which music imitates, expresses, invokes, or creates meaning of many kinds. The benefits of the semiotic method for music analysis are in revealing the ways that music is like spoken language, carrying meaning in every statement and sound, whether perceived as directly referential or not. And as a balance to the insufficiency of semiotics to chart the relative affective experience of music listening, phenomenology proposes that meaning does not lie in the work itself but in the moment of receiving it, with all the associations and context that moment implies. Deconstruction of the endlessly intertextual moments of music listening will reveal endless associational chains, the movement of discourse and resistance or identification, and the infinite unknowability of any music's "meaning". Subjectivity and a sense of self are the constantly re-arising products of the act of listening, and music, perhaps *because* it resists direct linguistic or logical meaning while still remaining understandable, is the perfect vehicle for the arising, solidification, and celebration of that self. In the Buddhist framework, the self is seen through as ontologically unstable (impermanent, unreliable), and so an inquiry into the processes of identification may naturally turn toward seeing that instability more clearly. Music listening can aid this core deconstruction through self-conscious cultivation of disorientation and the unfamiliar. The destabilized listener can then allow the listening experience to become one that challenges the reified self and tilts the heart-mind toward the dangerous freedom of selflessness and non-preference [I like where this ends up. Just wish in a way the essay were more about this ending than getting the discursive pinned down.]

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