

Making Sound, Making Music

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The distinction between sound and music is widely understood as a subjective matter. Bruno Nettl (1983) discusses how people describe music as inherently 'good' without clear foundation, and shows the contextual variety with which the distinction can be drawn between the two. In this article I discuss the distinction between 'making sound' and 'making music' as two processes whose differences may be considered separately from those found between sound and music. In other words, I examine different conditions and skills involved in the two kinds of 'making', which may also contribute to the distinction people make between sound and music in the practice of art music.

The background to this enquiry comes from observations in my practice as a professional violinist working in contemporary music. 'Making sound' does not seem to promise that music will eventually be made. I am not even sure whether it is advisable that we try to make 'music'. We can instead focus on the materiality of sound and dispositions, and talk less about music, as though we are making sound art or sound installation. Should we try to make music or make sound that has arresting, expressive power? Where does the distinction between sound and music lie today?

In this article I answer these questions by examining the poetics of soft sound. My hypothesis is that soft sound offers a particular type of poetics centred around listening, and that the mobilisation of the listening experience through the volume control brings about a new relationship between making sound and making music. Salomé Voegelin's discussion about silence as a sonic condition is an example of this approach:

"Silence engages my listening in sound rather than in music, and implicates me in my hearing through its quiet demand to be heard. Such silence shifts the responsibility of production from the conventions of the composition /

the artwork onto the individual audience member, who becomes audible to herself in the contingent context of her listening practice.” (Voegelin 2010, 82)

The field of music cognition has studied the effect of ‘hearing in time’¹ as a critical factor in characterising the experience that lies between sound and music. I propose ‘hearing in volume’ as another critical factor, and illustrate its effects on making sound and making music.²

Silence

Although silence relates to an auditory state, silence is a concept with a wide variety of applications.³ Adam Jaworski (1993) studies silence as power for control, manipulation and oppression of others from a sociolinguist’s point of view. He documents how silence works and is used in varied aspects of political and social life. He argues that speech and silence form a continuum of indiscrete items, and that both speech and silence should be treated as equally valid and complementary categories. His argument sheds light on the contextual shift that silence is capable of providing: “Although silence is usually associated with the absence of communication, it turns out that in political discourse some forms of silence are capable of producing contextual effects that its use is indeed very effective.” (Jaworski 1993, 136)

1 *Hearing in Time* is the title of the book by Justin London (2004), who explores the subject of musical meter from the perspectives of music theory and music psychology. London’s work is part of a series of insightful scholarship that has informed us about how hearing works over the temporal domain in music, including Clarke (2005), Clayton (2012), Hasty (1997) amongst others.

2 My fascination with volume has its origin in Schönberg’s statement: “In a musical sound three characteristics are recognized: its pitch, color, and volume. Up to now it has been measured in only one of the three dimensions in which it operates, in the one we call ‘pitch’. Attempts at measurement in the other dimensions have scarcely been undertaken to date; organization of their results into a system has not yet been attempted at all [...]. Nevertheless, we go right on boldly connecting the sounds with one another, contrasting them with one another, simply by feeling [...]. What system underlies these progressions?” (Schönberg 1978/1922, 421)

3 I would like to thank Gesine Schöder for drawing my attention to the wider social applications of the concept.

Brandon Labelle (2010) discusses silence with a similar approach from an environmental perspective. He gives an example of how a nuanced idea of ‘silencing’ creeps in with silence, and brings our attention to the particular way in which silence ‘sculpts the social’. His example is the mobile phone ringing on the train in a carriage designated as a ‘quiet coach’:

“Silencing and silence intertwine in an unsteady and dynamic weave, where the positive effects of quieting down slip into the forceful grip of arresting volume. In one and the same move it discloses the possibility of mutual sharing while foreclosing such sharing: I hang up the phone there on the train, and give space to the movements of this public environment, and yet how do such forms of behaviour impart an elemental control onto the promise of individual presence? Silence seems to sculpt the social with an intrinsically moral hand even while aiming to give space to the promise of being together.” (Labelle 2010, 74)

George Steiner considers silence as a unique yet problematic means of communication in *Language and Silence* (1976). He observes that in the Western tradition silence is valued very differently than in many Occidental metaphysics. He cites examples of Buddhism and Taoism in which

“the highest, purest reach of the contemplative act is that which has learned to leave language behind it. The ineffable lies beyond the frontiers of the word. It is only by breaking through the walls of language that visionary observance can enter the world of total and immediate understanding. Where such understanding is attained, the truth need no longer suffer the impurities and fragmentation that speech necessarily entails. It need not conform to the naïve logic and linear conception of time implicit in syntax. In ultimate truth, past, present, and future are simultaneously comprised. It is the temporal structure of language that keeps them artificially distinct.” (Steiner 1976, 16-17; also cited partially in Jaworski 1993, 142)

Yet, Steiner considers the phrase ‘the silence of cosmic space strikes terror’ from *Pensées* (1669) by Blaise Pascal as being very close to the mainstream of classic Western feeling (Steiner 1976, 18). For Steiner, expressions through words constitute the core of language; silence relates to either the unsayable (including mysticism) or a withdrawal from the acts of meaning and express-

ing. He oscillates between these two interpretations of silence. He follows the latter when he takes a polemical view on the twentieth-century Western art in whose modernism he does not recognise the communicative powers he expects of artworks. Yet, he also has a positive view on the poetry of silence such as in Hölderlin's (Steiner 1976, 71). Steiner recognises that 'silence is an alternative' (81), appreciates its meaningfulness in some contexts, but does not consider it to be the same kind of expression when compared to the word in humane literature.

Steiner's example suggests that silence as a medium of expressive communication – rather than of affective communication – is a relatively new concept in the twentieth-century West. It seems apposite to consider Marshall McLuhan's (1964) theory of 'hot' and 'cool' media in this respect:

"There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition.' High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, 'high definition'. A cartoon is 'low definition,' simply because very little visual information is provided. Telephone is a cool medium, because the ear is given a meagre amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation or completion by the audience. Naturally, therefore, a hot medium like radio has very different effects on the user from a cool medium like the telephone." (McLuhan 1964, 36)

Jaworski (1993, 141) observes that if speech is a relatively cool medium, then silence must be even cooler; and this is why silence is generally not considered to be a suitable medium of communication.

Meanwhile, silence in music has been discussed in the twentieth century as a primarily auditory phenomenon, leading to interesting observations.⁴

4 Losseff and Doctor (2007) provide a wide-ranging overview on the topics of silence, music and their relations. Losseff's chapter "Silent Music and the Eternal Silence" in the same book is of particular relevance to the present discussion regarding differing aesthetic approaches to silent music from different historical periods and geographical locations.

What music do we hear in silence? For Theodor Adorno (2006), music had a non-sensuous element, and silent reading of the score was a legitimate mode of music appreciation. If we take him literally, music does not need to be heard at all in order for it to make sense. Just as language is more than the sounds of words, and just as language can also be read and understood silently, so it is with music. While his view raises questions about what it is to 'understand' music, it is interesting to observe that his silent reading is full of sounds that are perceptible to him.⁵ This contrasts with Steiner's idea of silence because, for Adorno, silence affects the external sound only and humans have the capacity to replace it with internally imagined sound.

For John Cage (1963), silence was not the same as the absence of sound. He discovered this when he entered an anechoic chamber and heard his own heartbeat.⁶ Cage's experience makes it explicit that total silence is not possible as a human auditory experience. If there is no sound external to ourselves in the world, our mind listens to sounds that are internal to our senses. Both Adorno's and Cage's observations suggest that the more silent 'silence' is, the more actively we can listen to sounds, as though the auditory space cleared of sound allows corrective listening to set in. They imply not only that silence retains our capacity to communicate, but also that silence encourages, in inverse proportion, a degree of complicity on the part of the listener.

What emerges from these observations within the framework of McLuhan's theory, is that the closer we get to silence, the cooler the medium and the greater the degree of complicity the listener exercises in making sense of the auditory environment becomes. A transformation happens in the *content* of listening as a consequence of changes in volume. This can be interpreted in parallel to Jaworski's 'contextual effects' that silence brings to political discourse (where the 'listener' is replaced by 'people' who experience the contextual effects), as well as Labelle's view of silence 'sculpting the social'. It also identifies the location where Voegelin's 'silence as a sonic condition' takes

5 I owe to Max Paddison (2006) for unraveling Adorno's relations to musical performance.

6 "It was after I got to Boston that I went into the anechoic chamber at Harvard University. Anybody who knows me knows this story. I am constantly telling it. Anyway, in that silent room, I heard two sounds, one high and one low. Afterward I asked the engineer in charge why, if the room was so silent, I had heard two sounds. He said, 'Describe them.' I did. He said, 'The high one was your nervous system in operation. The low one was your blood in circulation.'" (Cage 1963, 134)

place. There is a powerful transformation in the communicative content at the border of sound and silence. Figure 1 shows this schematically.

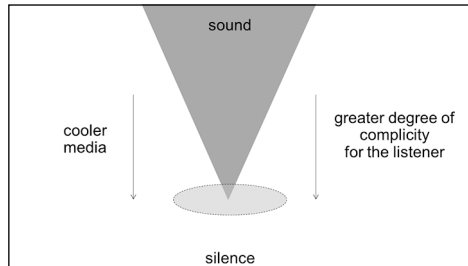


Fig. 1: Listening environment around sound-silence

Making of an encounter

Voegelin (2010) discusses how we engage with near-silences in the practice of sound art. Most revealing of her insight, from the perspective of this article, are her descriptions of listening to very soft sound. She begins her discussion with Cage's 4'33" and describes how Cage frames the emptiness and renders it visible and audible through the articulation of discursive context. In experiencing these near-silences, Voegelin observes a shift of production responsibility from the composer to the listener, as quoted above. She explains the shift as "composing silence is to build a [...] frame around the experience of these sounds" and that "it happens on the composer's wish but the desire of the audience to hear fulfils it" (Voegelin 2010, 89).⁷ She is referring to how the work 'stages' listening and makes sense as sound art by balancing this staging and perceiving the staged silence as equal parts in the experience. In doing so, she touches upon the topic of 'sonic subjectivity': how "silence makes apparent the consequences of intersubjective listening" and "politicizes sound" (Voegelin 2010, 94).

A closely related topic of inter-subjectivity in the experience of playing and listening to music has been discussed by Naomi Cumming (2000) in a very different context. Her study is on music semiotics, and her principal

⁷ In this context the word 'silence' is used to describe nearly inaudible sound or aural emptiness rather than total acoustic silence.

claim is that the subjectivities of the performer as well as the listener form a rich tapestry of musical meaning and signification beyond the work and its so-called critical interpretations. Although Cumming does not discuss soft sound, she is profoundly concerned with the production of musical experience. She uses the phrase ‘sense-making’ for the process of this production. She illustrates from a number of perspectives that the modes of engagement through which the subject interacts with the musical work become a necessary part in the sense-making.

While there are numerous discussions on the differences between the subjective experience of music and the ‘formal’ approaches to it, Cumming’s focus is on strategic details for musical experience as a means to balance and relate the two opposites.⁸ She is not merely observing the distinction and how people bridge the gap, but also thinking creatively towards the potential in which the ‘rapprochement’ could be mapped out – hence her relevance to the present discussion. She uses the term ‘encounter’ to describe the entering into “a relationship in which the humanly ‘personal’ does not hold power [...] and yet it is still possible to have the sense of being ‘addressed’” (Cumming 2000, 286).

For Voegelin, staging silence and listening to the staged silence are two ‘contingent’ acts and often contain ‘moments of coincidence’ where the two ‘meet’ (see Voegelin 2012, 110–111). This is similar to Cumming’s ‘encounter’, and both authors put the point of this collision between the work and perception at the centre of musical discourse. What is implied by them, is that the engineering of such meetings is *performative*.

The collision between the work and perception make both silence and sound expressive and communicative. It can be said that making expres-

8 The differences between experiential subjectivity and abstract musical work have been discussed from many perspectives, including the feminist’s viewpoint in Cusick (1994); ecology in Clarke (2005); and voice and ethics in Nielsen (2012). The perspectives of shared creativity have been a very productive approach in observing inter-subjectivity in action, as in Born (2005); Sawyer & DeZutter (2009); Clarke, Doffman & Lim (2013), and Clarke, Doffman & Timmers (2016). The authors who hold the perspectives of shared creativity have sociological leanings in their insights; they excel in elucidating the practices and problems involved in how people and society behave in and around music-making. While these findings show clearly the relations and interplay between subjectivity and musical work, it is often outside the scope of discussion to explore how the differences may be turned into strategy in articulating music.

sive sound and silence amounts to making music without trying to do so, because the listener fulfils the task of making music. In this sense, making music is about figuring out a communicative *potential*. Yet, making something expressive is an intention. My contention is that, with regard to the process, the main difference between making sound and making music lies in the nature of a musical design: how we design a musical encounter, and what kind of encounter it is, in order to frame this intention.

Jonathan Dunsby discusses the relation between performance and musical design as something requiring action: “musical design has to be *animated* in performance” (Dunsby 1995, 84; his emphasis). It is debatable whether musical design is what composition gives or what becomes perceptible through performance, perhaps collaboratively created; it is also debatable whether or not this culturally implied teleological expectation becomes the performer’s mission. But the unvarying fact is that the performer generates a design at some point, however abstract that may be, and must put it in motion. It is the performer’s responsibility to the music community that she enacts a design in practice – regardless of questions such as what kind of design it is (pre-conceived, improvised, borrowed, out-of-contingency, or other), or who has conceived this design (composer, performer, listener, or a set of given circumstances).⁹

The videos A¹⁰ and B¹¹ show two performative instances of the same musical work. The composition is the same but each performance is set with a different performance format. Performance A is a standard performance in front of an audience, while Performance B presents the performer sit-

9 Dunsby’s ‘musical design’ is more akin to ‘theatre’ than ‘script’, both defined by Richard Schechner (1977), because of the contingent elements that become part of the design. Schechner’s term ‘script’ describes those elements that persist from performance to performance. Schechner’s ‘script’ overlaps with the term ‘work’ (as in the work and perception). Chapter “Drama, Script, Theatre and Performance” in Schechner’s book is also significant in the present context.

10 The performance took place as part of my presentation at the international symposium *Knowing in Performing: Artistic Research as a Distinct Practice and Discourse in the Field of Performing Arts*, at the mdw – University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, on 4th April 2018. I am playing *Capriccio di una corda* (2009) for violin by Salvatore Sciarrino. The video was produced by mdw. Performance A clip shows the opening half of the piece, from 19’08” to 21’45”. See the video here: <https://doi.org/10.21939/ar-kanno-2018>.

11 The video was produced by mdw. Performance B clip shows the same opening half of the piece, from 24’40” to 27’05”. See the video here: <https://doi.org/10.21939/ar-kanno-2018>.

ting among the audience. I am the performer and my playing responds to the different environment. For example, I project much less in the seated performance, because of the proximity of the listeners around me, and also because of my reduced strength and control when playing in the sitting position. One consequence is that the seated performance takes less time because of my sensing less space. These two performances exemplify a case where the composition is the same but the musical design is not.

The question is raised as to whether the composer specifies the musical design as part of composition. My answer is that some composers do, some don't. My view chimes with Roger Sessions when he writes

“Music is by its very nature subject to constant renewal, and the performer is not in any sense either a mere convenience or a necessary evil. By the same token, the idea of the ‘ideal’ or even in any strict sense the ‘authoritative’ performance is an illusory one. The music is not totally present, the idea of the composer is not fully expressed, in any single performance, actual or even conceivable, but rather in the sum of all possible performances.” (Sessions 1950, 85)

The risk I take, is that if I do not delineate a musical design well, the listeners may hear the sounds I make but they may not hear the music. Yet, my focus in both performances is less on music, as such. In each case, I am searching for ways in which the listener's subjectivities can ‘open the door’ to the place where we can collectively make sense of the sounds as music. Figure 2 puts this understanding in a diagram.

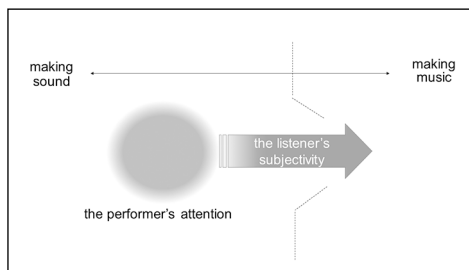


Fig. 2: Activities and locations for making sense of music

In this diagram, my attention is on making sound in order to induce a flow for the listener's subjectivity to move towards making music. The soft sound of this music is such that its acoustic energy alone may not keep this door open without the listener's subjectivity being activated.

Making an encounter between the work and perception is an art in itself. I don't think the word 'interpretation' does justice to this kind of making process, because the work in question is not known until it is experienced. Had the work been known, as in the majority of the classical repertoire, then the encounter would be set up quite differently with the performer's attention being placed closer to the process of 'making music' rather than that of 'making sound'. The metaphorical door may then open the other way, from the music side to the sound side, as if to invite the listener to the music.

John Shepherd (1991) considers sounds as vibrations and defines musical timbre as vibratory tactility. He describes how the tactility of sound, inclusive of sound and silence, generates meaning and experience that speak to our sense of identity and existence: "if it is the syntax of music, the relationship of individual sonic events as deployed in time and space, that speaks to the socially structured context of existence, then it is timbre, the essence of individual sonic events, that speaks to the core of existence" (Shepherd 1991, 91). Shepherd argues that the content is therefore always mutant, and never entirely given. For the performer who is the maker of artistic encounters, musical communication amounts to juggling contingencies that arise from each particular occasion of musical performance. My examples above gave two ways in which I handled issues of 'hearing in volume' in musical performance. There are many more. I hope that we continue to value communication and expression as significant issues in research, in artistic research, and in art.

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