

Musical listening in digital age

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Abstract: *The ear (listening) also has a history, which is, perhaps, less interesting than the musical work, its author or the orchestra, but is a very important element of musical communication. For those who listen to music, it is not something fixed in a score, it is therefore not a scriptural fact, it is not like a recorded record or a programme, but like an ‘uncertain event’, an extemporaneous fact that can come to us through musical instruments. The music listener is also a historical product of music, which has always been listened to either functionally or as an accompaniment to other social events. Music is a temporal art that does not develop in space, it is not based on simultaneity but on succession. Music must be listened to with concentration, with our mental auditory means focused towards a full reception of the music. Nowadays, in the presence of the revolution caused by the exponential growth of digital media and the Internet, there is still no scholar who feels the need or has the ability to reflect on how much today’s technologies have changed our relationship with music.*

Keywords: *music listening; music listener; recorded music; live listening; digital listening;*

Introduction

When we talk about music, i.e. the musical work, it includes the musicians (players) gathered in an orchestra, there is the concert hall, and the audience that has chosen to listen ‘in presence’, i.e. to participate in the event. However, the ear (listening) also has a history, which is, perhaps, less interesting than the musical work, its author or the orchestra, but is a very important element of musical communication. According to Hennion², when considering the ‘listening’ of music, a reversal of perspective takes place: instead of considering the orchestra that plays the scores, i.e. the music written by a musician, one pays attention to and tries to understand the ‘played’ music that comes from others, who read the score and transform it into music. For those who listen to music, it is not something fixed in a score, it is therefore not a scriptural fact, it is not like a recorded record or a programme, but like an ‘uncertain event’, an extemporaneous fact that can come to us through musical instruments. Listening sensitivity leads us to question music as something that activates and produces ‘affects’: music simply happens³. It is not a question of relying on the social origins of the enthusiasts or the aesthetic priorities of the work, but only of listening ‘as it happens’.

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² A. Hennion. 2000. "Passioni, gusti, pratiche. Dalla storia della musica alla sociologia dell’ascolto musicale". (Passions, tastes, practices. From the history of music to the sociology of listening to music). *In Rassegna Italiana di sociologia*, a. XLI, n. 2.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 265.

1. For a history of the listener

In order to talk about listening, it is necessary to consider, alongside this ‘specialisation’ studied by Weber⁴ that listening has developed as a parallel, but silent and semi-unknown history. The music listener is also a historical product of music, which has always been listened to either functionally or as an accompaniment to other social events: there is a difference between belonging to a group of teenagers listening to their music and listening to music during a liturgical service. We have learnt to take pleasure in listening to music. The concept of musical work, not event, must be considered the central category of music history. In Aristotelian terms, the object of music is constituted on *poiesis*, that is, on the production of constructs and not on the praxis of social action⁵. In historical hermeneutics, the main axiom is that at first the musical texts that are handed down, not unlike linguistic ones, remain partially misunderstood; and therefore they must be made accessible through an interpretation that studies their historical premises and implications. In every aesthetic presence behind which lies a historical vision, the consciousness of otherness is not obliterated but co-present. However, the results of a historical explanation can never fully resolve an aesthetic intuition - even if mediation is always possible in part.

Hearing music written in past centuries does not disturb the aesthetic enjoyment; in fact it is part of it. Reading fixes the well-established literal meaning, which can be handed down and which tends to form a relationship between the project and the performance that realises it and the listening that gives it categorical form: in a relationship, therefore, that should be interaction, reciprocal action and not subjection of the performer and the listener to what the composer wanted to express⁶. The musical work that the listener ‘re-composes’ in fruition is not an inadequate, abstract mode of the musical event, but a legitimate form of musical existence⁷. Music is a temporal art that does not develop in space, it is not based on simultaneity but on succession. Music must be listened to with concentration, with our mental auditory means focused towards a full reception of the music. We have to be able to understand the pattern the composer used, *i.e.* activate our memory. If we do not remember what we have already heard, we cannot connect it to what follows. This is the biggest obstacle the listener must overcome to fully understand the musical form. It is the constant practice of listening that can help us remember; even basic knowledge, however general, will help when listening to an entirely new work.

In mass civilisation, the phenomenon of the public and the public concert is of great importance: a cultured, heterogeneous group of people willing to buy a ticket in order to have access to listening. It was the common interest in music that led to the first opera theatre (in which entrance tickets had to be purchased), San Cassiano in Venice in 1637⁸.

The emergence of the audience as a central phenomenon in the cultural life of European society is linked to other cultural changes: progress in transport and communications, the ease with which artists can travel. The offer addressed to specific audiences that gather to hear a given type of music leads to the emergence of a form of ‘active listening’⁹. The public concert, unlike

⁴ M. Weber. 1961. *I fondamenti razionali e sociologici della musica*. In *Economia e società*, vol. V. Milano: Ed. Comunità.

⁵ M. Sorce Keller. 1996. *Musica e sociologia*. Milano: Ricordi, p. 5.

⁶ M. Sorce Keller. 1996. *Musica e sociologia*. Milano: Ricordi, p. 6.

⁷ Reducing a Bach cantata to its liturgical significance, that is, insisting that one is always a text and the other has performed a function (Sorce Keller, 1996, p. 11).

⁸ M. Sorce Keller. 1996. *Musica e sociologia*. Milano: Ricordi, p. 86.

⁹ H. Bessler. 1997. *L'ascolto musicale nell'età moderna*. Bologna: il Mulino.

the opera house, excludes inattentive listening and establishes a communicative relationship of great attention (even applause only at the end of the performance). A fundamental mode of behaviour between music composers and music listeners was established in the 19th century. Hanslick¹⁰ was one of the first to recognise the public concert as an important new category in the process of musical communication, showing that he recognised what was later to become 'mass music culture'. With the growing importance of electronic mass media, the circuit lost its importance to some extent and distracted and discontinuous listening reappeared. If music in the 19th century had conquered specific places and environments such as concert halls, today it can also be heard in non-places, such as in a car or shopping centre¹¹. On the emergence of the public concert as a fundamental form of musical communication in Europe, there is agreement among researchers who have analysed the social history of music in remarking that the very idea of 'repertoire' endures over time, becomes the object of an uninterrupted series of re-performances and is dependent on the existence of a concert 'circuit' requiring music that can be performed and re-performed¹². Listeners become an anonymous audience that can influence the music presented. This presupposes, and consequently tends to promote, a substantial autonomy of the composer and a consequent plurality of taste in the listener.

If the mass media tend to de-functionalise musical artefacts, it means that these are susceptible to being used in conditions that were not foreseen or even foreseeable by those who initially activated them. Music used for secondary purposes leads to a type of second-degree oral communication: aural learning from radio or record sources, rather than from the live voice of a bearer of tradition, as it would have been if orality had been first-degree¹³. This implies that musical materials that once circulated exclusively in oral form are brought into the media circuit (by recording) and thus begin a new life. There are many consequences, among them the fact that the bearers of oral cultures can take back part of their repertoire through the mass media. Circulation through records, cassettes and radio is also activated, giving new impulse to the oral tradition. The specific transformations in the very nature of sound and the possibilities of its utilisation that are made accessible by electronics and mass media have produced new terms, such as 'mediamorphosis'¹⁴ and 'mediatisation'¹⁵. These terms define everything to do with the 'electronic mutation' of musical communication, and highlight the need to analyse the impact of electronic instruments on musical creativity and the media that disseminate reception.

The observation of the activities and complex of practices that constitute the categories of 'music' and 'improvisation' in their concrete unfolding, implies listening; which, in turn, means presence and assumption of a point of view on an object that involves the entire sensory arc - watching, listening and savouring. However, it must be borne in mind that there is no such thing as the interpretive omnipotence of the observer, since personal idiosyncrasies always come into play, as if what is observed and described objectively represents events and persons that are not singular, but absolutely typical, where what is told reflects the experience made¹⁶. There is an underlying training for the perception of sounds: one learns by listening, transcribing and

¹⁰ E Hanslick. 2001. *Il bello musicale. L'estetica del sentimento*. Palermo: Aethetica.

¹¹ M. Sorce Keller. 1996. *Musica e sociologia*. Milano: Ricordi, p. 88.

¹² Compounded by the difficulty of continually setting up entirely new programmes. J.H.Mueller. 1951 *The American symphony orchestra: a social history of musical taste*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press

¹³ W. J. Ong. 2014. *Oralità e scrittura. Le tecnologie della parola*. Bologna: il Mulino.

¹⁴ K. Blaukopf. 1972. *Musical life in changing society*. Postland, Oreg.: Amadeus Press.

¹⁵ R. Wallis, K. Malm. 1984. *Bif Sound from small Peoples: the music Industry in small country*. New York: Pendragon Press.

¹⁶ D. Sparti. 2005. *Suoni inauditi*. Bologna: il Mulino, p. 48.

practising those solos that ‘speak’ to us with force and eloquence. In addition to this ability to listen, a second prerequisite of the circular process underlying improvisation is the ability to draw out information¹⁷ pointed out that one communicates more than one says. The surplus, referred to as ‘conversational scaffolding’, consists of making explicit the implicit aspects of a linguistic act. In short, in order to improvise one must be able to listen and accept what was proposed by someone who expressed something in the previous ‘round’. It is a matter of processing a prompt in a personal way, creating novelty and tension.

There are practices rigidly aimed at the preservation of a past that are being preserved. The circuit of official dissemination has an interest that necessarily shifts towards interpretation: when one hears the same things over and over again, one no longer pays attention to the thing itself, but more to the way it is presented¹⁸. Official musical life now has the sole function of administering the accumulated treasures and, in this regard, sociology has highlighted that society also contributes to individual forms of listening¹⁹, as is the case with the enjoyment of visual and literary cultural products. However, it would be a mistake to consider this tendency as an alternative to the aggregation functions of musical experiences. Indeed, all manifestations of sound also assume a character of cohesion, that is, they have a socialising effect among the members of a community²⁰. Music is no longer perceived consciously, but simply becomes an acoustic and scenic fact, thus changing into a mere filler of psychic life and the discomfort of everyday living²¹.

The path of the musical idea from the sender to the receiver cannot be reduced to these few but essential filters; decades ago, musical communication was exclusively live, sound would never have been possible without a player. Recording techniques have stepped in to fix what was once an exclusively temporary phenomenon in a collective consciousness - so much so that a new version of a musical work becomes the official one. Often the great artists of history, the great performers of today, have established themselves through the intermediation of experts, critics, journalists (the gatekeepers). At some point, the audience may hope to encounter the author's initial idea, filtered through each step of the process: only at this point will that idea be reconstructed in the subjective consciousness, with the further infinite variations it entails. If, however, one considers the passages between composer, performer, audience (geographically, culturally, chronologically), the probability of improbability is increased. If one also adds the variable ‘of today/of then’ and the variable ‘of here/of there’, the rate of creative misunderstanding automatically quadruples²².

If we also consider that ‘old masterworks’ continue to live on, *i.e.* are heard in different times and performed always slightly differently, while still being considered the same, even the interpretation of the same author is not a valid and indisputable yardstick²³. The musical work, like any text, can transcend the score itself. The score, however, sets the criteria for identifying performances that remain within the scope of the possibilities of the scheme of which they are the filler²⁴. Lissa²⁵ analysed the reception of Bach's works: while the contemporary 18th-century

¹⁷ H. P. Grice. 1993. *Logica e conversazione*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

¹⁸ T.W. Adorno. 1971. *Introduzione alla sociologia della musica*. Torino: Einaudi, p.151.

¹⁹ P.P. Bellini. 2009. *La comunicazione artistica e i suoi attori*. Milano: Mondadori, p. 179.

²⁰ M.Tessarolo. 1983. *L'espressione musicale e le sue funzioni*. Milano: Giuffrè, p. 157.

²¹ M.Tessarolo. 1983. *L'espressione musicale e le sue funzioni*. Milano: Giuffrè, p. 147.

²² M.Sorce Keller. 1996. *Musica e sociologia*. Milano: Ricordi, p.62.

²³ One such example is Stravinsky's direction of his own pieces, not considered faithful to the original.

²⁴ G.Borio, M.Garda. 1989. *L'esperienza musicale: teoria e storia della ricezione*. Torino: EDT, p. 21.

public valued the functional aspects (power and liturgical efficacy of the pieces), the following period - *i.e.* the Romantic age - focused on the expressive value (the ability to communicate human passions); finally, the 20th century saw Bach as the great architect of sound forms. Bellini's conclusion mentions 'a Bach' for every season: each period expressed a collective musical consciousness, while retaining the recognition reserved for what we call a masterpiece²⁶. The listener has an important task not only when the process is finished, *i.e.* the reception, but also at the beginning, as the work takes its first steps towards becoming a communicative strategy. It is the author, in fact, who imprints the form of the message, the mark of the one to whom it is addressed. Even in musical creation, this 'primordial imprint' can be clearly traced: being public influences the way one performs in public. Listening behaviours of the receivers is a complex path, as it tends to cross the threshold of such behaviours that can only be observed indirectly, through the mediation of symptoms or verbalisation²⁷. If the weak point is to be found in the last phase of the process, *i.e.* in fruition, interventions need to be concentrated above all in the specific field, *i.e.* in the practical application, because it is an educational necessity whose reconstruction is all uphill. There is always, in every form of communication, the effort towards otherness that does not allow itself to be said, but towards which language continually opens up²⁸.

2. Recorded music

Listening through records is really listening to a different kind of music, or rather, it is a different mention of music. The very perfection of records denounces the unreality of certain performances. It is different to listen to live music, even if it is not 'perfect'. For a long time, listening was a borderline issue between artistic object and marginal social subject. Perhaps the neglect it has been subjected to has stimulated its 'discovery'. Listening as a cultural practice and aesthetic experience (without attempting to make a hierarchy of the types of listening), trying to define methods that address an aesthetic dimension that has a central place in the listener's experience, so much so that the listener can be defined as an 'amateur'²⁹. It was Adorno who, as early as the 1930s, developed a critical analysis of the effects of the modes of production and dissemination of music on the modes of reception. In 1962 he expanded his project, considering a sociology of music as knowledge of the relationships between music listeners, as socialised individuals, and music itself³⁰. The epistemological framework adopted by Adorno is based on the ethnocentric bias³¹. It was not until the 1990s that scholarly interest turned to listening. Among these scholars is De Nora³², who takes an opposite route to Adorno, operating a shift from what music means to what it does in particular places and moments, as a dynamic material of social existence that influences the construction of subjective identity; and Hennion³³ who

²⁵ Z. Lissa. 1989. "Teoria della ricezione musicale". In *L'esperienza musicale. Teoria e storia della ricezione*, ed. by G. Borio, M. Garda. Torino: EDT.

²⁶ P.P. Bellini. 2009. *La comunicazione artistica e i suoi attori*. Milano: Mondadori, p-199.

²⁷ G. Stefani, L. Marconi. 1987. *Il senso della musica. Antologia di semiotica musicale*. Bologna: Clueb, p. 263.

²⁸ F. Crespi. 2005. *Manuale di sociologia della cultura*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, p. 27.

²⁹ S. Maisonneuve. 2004. *Per una storia dell'ascolto*. In *Studi culturali*, a.1, pp. 191.

³⁰ T.W. Adorno. 1971. *Introduzione alla sociologia della musica*. Torino: Einaudi, p.3.

³¹ Problematic in that 'real' music for Adorno is classical music.

³² T. DeNora. 2000. *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³³ Hennion defines music as performance resulting from continuously renewed mediations. A.Hennion. 2007. *La passion musicale. Une sociologie de la médiation*. Paris: Métailié.

works on the sociology of mediation and listening. Both move towards a desacralisation of music as such and a distancing from the theory of belief and legitimacy. It is only recently that musical listening has interested historians, and in the space of a decade the issue of listening has come to the centre of the reflections of sociologists and historians of culture and music. The exchanges between these two disciplines are stimulating because of the always neglected richness of musical everyday life.

The phonograph invented by Edison (1877) initially had three uses: commercial, musical and entertainment. A catalogue of repertoires was produced from which everyone could choose, according to their taste, and this choice perfected the use of the phonograph itself. Over time, music lovers defined a new universe of practices (from the existing ones). The old paradigms coexisted with the new and provided the amateur with a base of values, references, practices and starting points from which to invent a new musical universe: music and listening were redefined, not only in their format, but in their moments, spaces and modes³⁴.

Listening defines a complex mode as a device whose configuration is continuously redefined due to technical complexity. Many factors have to be taken into account to reconstruct the material situation of listening, which nevertheless remains an ideal. The listener and the ear, at the beginning of the 21st century, have changed a lot compared to previous centuries. Today's listener is accustomed to digital sound of varying duration, whereas his or her predecessor was accustomed to both acoustic - and then electric - sound of short duration, and to all the operations necessary for listening. Technical progress should lead to a more relevant (positive) aesthetic progress, but this is not possible because there is incommensurability between the two listening regimes, as each is characterised by its own aesthetics.

Furthermore, according to Jauss³⁵, the horizon of expectation has changed both in the naturalised listening mode, which has become familiar, and in the different acoustic qualities, and perhaps even different intentions and dispositions to listen. Maisonneuve³⁶, starting from the practices of amateurs, proposes to try to understand why emotion is possible, why technical presence becomes not an obstacle, but a mediation that has led to a phonographic aesthetics of listening. In this new listening, technical manipulation leaves the listener a margin of intervention with which, through trial and error, he or she develops his or her own taste. The amateur is the one who discovers through experience that the emotion results from a co-adjustment of the subject and the technique, of the technical device (needles, volume, placement of the equipment), which must not only be adapted to the situation (size of the room, time of listening), but also adjusted to his or her expectations and preferences. The listener learns to listen to music in a particular way, to make himself or herself sensitive to the qualities of the medium, to invent a specific 'aural' listening emancipated from the contextual model.

3. Conclusion

The history of the record is also the history of listening, which is a function of the devices within which it develops: the absorbed listening, as well as the listening-identity³⁷, the extremely

³⁴ A.Hennion. 2007. *La passion musicale. Une sociologie de la médiation*. Paris: Métailié

³⁵ H. R. Jauss. 1988. *Estetica della ricezione*. Napoli Guida. Jauss

³⁶ S. Maisonneuve. 2009. *L'Invention du disque. Genèse de l'usage des médias musicaux contemporains*. Paris: Éditions des archives contemporaines (EAC).

³⁷ T. DeNora. 2000. *Music in Everyday Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

competent hedonist listening of the great amateur³⁸. The a priori paradoxical encounter between the study of a mass medium and the focus on highly individualised and inventive, shared and recurring practices, leads to a reconsideration of theories of mass culture as a culture of homogenisation and passivity, and to an enrichment of traditional models of analysis of the social as a collective determining force. Listening appears as a stimulating subject for history and for sociology as a whole: hybrid and mobile, it stimulates to rethink the often aporetic bipartitions between individual and aesthetic and social group, technique and art or culture, internal and external analysis³⁹.

The structure of the major cultural industries (film, television and record industry) has remained fairly stable, despite frequent changes in company ownership and the introduction of new types of communication technologies (from 1970 onwards). During most of this period, the TV networks, the major record labels, and a considerable share of the publishing houses were owned by 12 large media conglomerates. These companies sold both software and hardware and could make connections between books, films, records, videos, so that each product helped to advertise and sell the others. The record companies followed new strategies to control the market, collaborating with small production labels. Major companies are unable to predict new music trends, which are usually unstable because teenage consumers are more influential. Levels of innovation fluctuate every time new cohorts of teenagers enter the market. To stay in touch with their potential consumers, companies look for new talent among the thousands of small rock bands playing in clubs and auditoriums in big cities. New music styles are originally always in the guise of subcultures, and become popular as soon as a new cohort enters adolescence. The success of this music derives from its ability to distance itself from adult groups and function as a symbol of teenage rebellion.

It may appear difficult to explain why in the aesthetic subject present in the musical work, the individuality of the composer and that of the listener interpenetrate: but it is precisely the difficulty of the state of affairs that forms its substance. Indeed, if one abstracts the biographical datum (of both listener and composer), it is a constituent process of identifying the aesthetic subject: in this process, the listener does not make an act of unilateral submission to the composer, nor does the opposite happen. The work constitutes a mere substratum of the ideas contributed by the receiver. And the classical idea of the autonomous subject can also be understood as identification: humanity, as Kant conceived it, is a 'universal feeling of participation' and the philosopher saw a way to the realisation of 'common sense'. But one recognises in humanity, as understood by classical philosophy, the substance of aesthetic autonomy, so the history of autonomy is linked to that of humanity⁴⁰.

Considering fruition, it can certainly be said that technology has led to a considerable broadening of the possibilities of listening to music, both music of the past and music from more distant countries. This makes it difficult to speak of taste, as taste itself has no justification and perhaps no meaning. What was once called 'taste' was meant to give order and unity to an endless plurality of styles. Taste therefore came to assert itself in the encounter between the contents of the consciousness of the collective. The freedom of the individual and individual choice itself represent an explicitation of this. Kneif⁴¹ observes that taste is not only a category of

³⁸ A.Hennion. 1982. *Les professionnels du disque*. Paris: Métailié.

³⁹ D.Crane. 1997. *La produzione culturale*. Bologna: il Mulino, p. 71.

⁴⁰ C.Dalhaus, H.H. Eggebrecht. 1988. *Che cos'è la musica?*. Bologna: il Mulino.

⁴¹ T.Kneif. 1981. *Sociologia della musica. Una introduzione*. Fiesole: Discanto.

mediumness, but also of mediocrity. Its sociological treatment cannot be meaningfully imagined today except in the form of criticism. Style in turn can be considered a privileged manifestation of the activity of symbolic representation⁴². In cultural productions, it is crucial to understand the rapid changes in popular cultures: in them, production is a moving front, in constant evolution, and the explanation of novelty and change is much more central than stasis⁴³.

To conclude, in 1969 Adorno wrote a little volume on the long play⁴⁴ collecting writings on the record as an object. After several decades, the scholar no longer states that phonographs and records humiliate music and 'petrify' it. If previously no musicians wrote music for records, this is no longer the case: records, with their content of recorded music, would themselves become works of art and not mere documentation. Every long-lasting technological apparatus is capable of keeping alive and spreading the tradition, for example of opera: an apparently simple and everyday object like the record, which at the time of its appearance constituted a cultural leap for the whole of society in its relationship with art, may perhaps be compared to the invention of photography, or that of printing. Nowadays, in the presence of the revolution caused by the exponential growth of digital media and the Internet, there is still no scholar who feels the need or has the ability to reflect on how much today's technologies have changed our relationship with music. But also on how much these tools have changed music itself, perhaps even more than the development of the record affected the music of the last century.

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⁴² M.Tessarolo. 1983. *L'espressione musicale e le sue funzioni*. Milano: Giuffrè.

⁴³ R. Peterson. 1994. "Cultural studies through the production perspective". In D. Crane (ed.), *Sociology of Culture*, Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 163-190.

⁴⁴ The Italian title is *Long play e altri volteggi della puntina* (lit. *Long play and other needle vaults*), published by Castelvecchi (Roma).

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