

Music perception and the fluctuation of utopia

Nowadays, technologies of reproduction allow the contemporary artist not just lay their signature via the work's notation (score) but also through the "concrete sound-recording" of its performance. Thus, rendering possible its precise reproduction. Prior to the emergence of the possibility of sound-recording and reproduction, the composer was accountable mainly to the score and secondarily to its performance – i.e. the case when they were physically present during a performance or when the composed musical piece was presented by an exclusive performance from a specific musician. A new condition of musical reception has been constituted due to both the possibility of music's recording and the listener's familiarization with prerecorded musical works. Thus, for the first time the composer is forced to submit his work in the form he believes it should be heard experienced and not to hand down written instructions as to how it should be performed. Even in the hypothetical scenario in which a score is so analytically written to the extent that no margin of independence is left for the performer, the sound-product will have a unique timbre every time, simply because each performance requires a specific instrument being played in a specific space.

When music is read as a text, it is perceived differently than when it is heard. The score has to be interpreted, to be performed and finally through the instruments to be sounded as music. Even those who are most familiar with its semiographic form –those who proclaim that when they read the score, in essence they listen to music- should reconsider what they listen to exactly, since nowadays one has access to a variety of different recorded performances based on the exact same instructions. Having in mind certain versions of piano timbre and believing that by reading a score for solo piano one actually hears with precision the composer's work, it is exactly as if one is mentally interpreting the musical piece. In that way the receiver operates like a computer program, which performs or "executes" a score by retrieving from its memory the same piano note that the subject has once heard and calling for that note to "sound" mentally. Based on the frequency that corresponds to each note, the surrounding overtones are also mentally shaped, by means of a previous piano hearing. The significance of a musical performance is also highlighted by the distinctive statement of Honore de Balzac's fictional character (Gambara, the composer) in his short-story "Gambara" (1839): "Well, monsieur, a composer always finds it difficult to reply when the answer needs the cooperation of a hundred skilled executants. Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven, without an orchestra would be of no great account."

Under this condition, the concrete sound-recording that bears the composers' signature is essentially their work and all the performances that may follow are simply considered as re-performances of this work. For instance, when a composer releases an album today, they essentially certify that the particular recording, constitutes the specific form they would like the work to be heard. This recording may be distributed in multiple copies, either in a physical form (e.g. vinyl disc or cd) or in the form of digital file (e.g. wav or mp3 sound files). During the listening of prerecorded music one gets the impression that the uniqueness of the performance is absent. In other words, what is seemingly lost, is what Benjamin would describe as the aura emanating from the uniqueness of each distinct performance of the same musical work. But one can claim that today the recorded musical work's aura lies hidden in its timbre and is unveiled only for the initiated listener as a reward for his dedication. To the frivolous listener's ears, the timbre sounds mute and convinces them that the overtones surrounding the central frequency that they perceive is merely a parameter devoid of any content. Thus, for them, aura will remain invisible during the listening of prerecorded music. While the spreading of musical reproduction devices has condemned the aura, to its own death, looming out of the listening of prerecorded music, the special attention which is nowadays paid to timbre has come, almost after a whole century, to

resurrect that aura, so that it can finally gain its real immortality with the aid of its own executioner.

The following paragraph is interposed at this point with a view to clarify as much as possible in the following few lines the concept of aura which lies in the core of this text's problematic and is borrowed from Walter Benjamin. The latter, reflecting on the alterations that technology has induced both to the works of art themselves as well as to their reception, claims that "what is altered in the age of the mechanical reproduction of the work of art is its 'aura'". Aura's reception moves along two main axes: far and close – uniqueness and repetition. Following Benjamin's description: "Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction". Even though nowadays there is the possibility of a direct musical listening through devices of musical reproduction, the audience is still attracted by a concert's unrepeatability. The perception of live music is not accomplished through representation; on the contrary, it requires the listener's physical presence, the "here and now" (*hic et nunc*) of the performance. This experience feels as if it is not originated from this world, while the closer one approaches toward the locus of the performance (the musical stage) the more unworldly the event itself appears. Like the Christian believers who seek to approach the altar as much as possible, so too the audience swarm[s] toward the stage, in order to reach as close to it as possible: being aware in advance of the futility of that action since the event will always escape being fully apprehensive.

But the term "aura" had been previously used by various theosophists like Rudolf Steiner. Thus, Benjamin in his texts tried at first to deconstruct and afterwards to redefine it. Through all these years, continuing Rudolf Steiner's tradition, various new age neo-religions use this term today. To avoid any possible misinterpretation, it is of utmost importance to emphasize that I do not sympathize with any kind of reading of the term, which is based on such theories that mould their believers in such a fashion that they eventually adopt the well-known convenient critical stance against the mundane. The use of the term "aura" in this text polemically opposes such groups of people who make use of it in everyday language and are distinctively characterized by their patient opposition against any kind of technological progress, on the account of its allegedly altering effect on human nature. I approach the term based on the use Walter Benjamin makes of it and pose the claim that the contemporary means safeguard it within the new condition of musical hearing. The aura of the work of art is ambiguous and it is not in crisis simply due to the possibility of its technical reproduction but, as Adorno notes: "above all through the realization of that same 'autonomous' rule which regulates its formation". The work of art, like the altar, gets autonomized from the rest of the tangible everyday objects and when the reception of any one parameter of the work becomes differentiated, a new condition for its total reception is created.

During the listening of contemporary music, the work's timbre occupies the most eminent position. The fundamental parameters which determine the timbre of a recorded musical piece are the room of the listening, the sound system, the position of the speakers and the position of the listener. When a sound emits in a specific space certain essential features are revealed, for example, its volume. Everyone is able to have a sense of the space in which they are in, even with their eyes closed, solely by hearing. For example, a whistle or a gunshot will sound differently in a recording studio and in a large enclosed stadium. Each space has unique acoustics. The room in which each sound emits or is being recorded has an impact on it and co-constitutes its timbre. In that way we can perceive a room's dimensions, when a familiar sound is heard. The sound familiar is of great importance, in order for a certain reference to an already familiar timbre to exist, so that we will be able to perceive space's impact on it.

The listening of prerecorded instrumental music can be considered as such a case of hearing familiar sounds, a case according to which the listeners may picture the room that each instrument was recorded, exactly because they have a general sense of the natural instruments' timbre. If we listen to a prerecorded piano piece, for instance, we are able to make an assertion about the size of the room in which the recording took place, i.e., if it was actually big or small. It is possible that the listener may get the impression that the room in which the instrument's recording took place has no reverberation and, consequently, when the recording sounds from the speakers, the instrument is heard as if it is located within the same room in which one is i.e., within the room where the listening to the music occurs. Nevertheless, even though an instrument's timbre may sound as if it sounds within the same room in which the listener is currently in, they never have the impression that the performance is carried out live in front of them. And that happens because in the opposite case one would essentially have the possibility to actually see someone in person, in his/her physical presence, performing the musical work live. This possibility of perceiving the space, in which recording of instruments takes place, opens up many novel paths to prerecorded music. Let us take as an example my personal work "feeling of movement" (Creative Space, 2011): recordings of the instruments took place in spaces with quite varying acoustics and, subsequently, composition was affected in the light of the sole purpose that the transition between these spaces will be heard instantaneously.

On the other hand, during the listening of electronic music, the auditor is not capable of associating directly each sound with a timbre familiar to him/her, of which he/she can imaginatively project its development in time, based on the specific space in which it is heard. By all means, there is always a chance that an electronic sound's timbre may be similar to one of a natural sound. In that case, with the condition that it is not included within the context of a kitsch creation but resonates in a truly convincing manner as exhibiting such a similarity, it falls under the category of the reception of familiar sounds, which we discussed in the previous paragraph. Yet, in any other case, electronic sounds will have no reference to something familiar and thus the listener will not be capable of defining the acoustical parameters of the space in which it resonates. In other words, when electronic sounds -that do not struggle to imitate natural sounds- are heard within a room, it is not feasible to perceive the sound on the ground of the alternation that a timbre, which functions as a primary point of reference, undergoes, just because it sounded within a particular room.

Taking into account the above, one must acknowledge a difference between prerecorded instrumental music and electronic music. Listening to instrumental music from a reproduction device is always accompanied by perceiving the idea that the recording took place in a space and time which differs from the space and time of the current hearing, i.e., it is situated not in a "hic et nunc" but in an "illic et tunc". Reception of electronic music differs considerably from the reception of acoustic instrumental music. One of the reasons is that one always listens to electronic music through speakers, thus confusing live performance with the reproduction of prerecorded material. This confusion is overemphasized by the fact that the person who listens to electronic music has not associated each and every sound with a particular movement of the performer. For example, the performer of electronic music is in a position to change a different parameter each time by using the same button, in contrast to listening to instrumental music, in which case, when one hears a violin producing a tremolo, they have already associated the sound with the corresponding movement of the violinist. Moreover, instrumental music is performed, recorded and then the auditor by listening to the recording experiences the absence of the aura, in contrast to a live performance. In electronic music this contradistinction is absent, on the one hand, for the simple reason that electronic music is always heard through speakers, on the other hand, due to the fact that there is no immediate association with the

performer. Finally, electronic sounds do not have a reference to any known timbre and this results to an elimination of the strict distinction between the space of recording and the space of hearing.

Due to the completely subjective perception of electronic sounds, it is possible that the auditor may have the impression that he/she is located in a different space than the one in which the recording took place, even when he/she listens to the same sonic snapshot. This destruction and creation of the aura during the listening of electronic music, this tension which is produced between the “hic et nunc” (in the case when the space of hearing is identified with that of the recording) and the “illic et tunc” (in the case when the space of hearing is not identified with that of recording) is the main axis on which my composition “electronic music” (Experimedia, 2014) was based. The “illic et tunc” appears as a denial of utopia which lies “there and now” (“illic et nunc”) and restores the subject back to the conventional perception of time and space in the hearing of prerecorded music. This possibility, opened up in the hearing of electronic sounds, widens the work’s locality and temporality and opens up the path which leads to a new perception of utopia.

No matter how close one approaches works of art, they resist total apprehension and keep us at a distance. This distance from the audience that the works of art maintain, distinguishes them from the objects of everyday life. They are not received as the latter’s imitation but instead, as Artaud mentions in the theatre of cruelty, “Art is not the imitation of life, but life is the imitation of a transcendental principle which art puts us into communication with once again”. While Benjamin foresees the destruction of the aura of the work of art, due to the possibility of its technical reproduction, the attention paid nowadays to the music’s timbre renders it once again possible in the case of listening to electronic compositions. It’s widely known that the philosopher refers rather positively to the, once and for all, destruction of the aura, but what I have tried to show here is that the reception of unfamiliar sounds brings to the foreground a new possibility for its presence and absence.

The great importance attributed today to a musical work’s timbre defines for the most part musical experience. All those parameters which alter it, such as the space where listening occurs, the sound system, the position of the speakers and the listener, are those unpredictable quantities that secure an auditive uniqueness. In that way, the benjaminian aura, the “hic et nunc” of the work, appears and dissolves in each distinct reproduction of the exact same material. That new perception of space and time in the listening of prerecorded electronic music provides us with new possibilities of conceiving utopia. A utopia which is not gazed at from “hic et nunc”, while it stands strictly at the “illic et tunc”, along with its own halo, but a utopia, the proximity of which in relation to the observer and its limits are defined solely by the latter.

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