

TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF TIME-CONSCIOUSNESS IN MUSIC

The task I have set myself in the following pages is the examination of certain problems concerning time in music from a phenomenological standpoint. Husserl's treatment of time carries on from that of Hume and Kant in the sense that, like them, he sees that our awareness is not merely successive. There is something in the very structure of consciousness which enables us to go beyond the moment, to stretch the span of the "now." Without this capacity there would for us be no such thing as unity, identity and continuity of perceptual objects. It was with our awareness of ordinary sensible objects that Hume's and Kant's epistemology was mostly concerned. Moreover their analysis continued the stress on visual awareness characteristic of the western tradition. Kant's step forward as far as his analysis of time was concerned was to see time as the formal structure of *all* our experience. All that we can ever experience is seen through the lens of time. Kant, however, was equally concerned to show how our temporal consciousness entered into the constitution of the *real* world. He encounters difficulties on this score in so far as temporality is built into the structure not only of our experiences which claim

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to be objective but also into that of our merely subjective awareness. The problem of “reality” does not arise for Husserl in that the phenomenological method itself explicitly excludes this consideration. He is at one with Kant, however, in treating temporality in terms of the structure of our consciousness and, like Kant, insists on the importance of retention in perception. He goes on to specify that temporality is in common the form for not only perception but for phantasy, imagination, memory and recollection as well.

Husserl’s writings on time are contained mainly in his *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* delivered in the years 1904 to 1910, in the collected manuscripts entitled *Zeitkonstitution als formale Konstitution* (Manuskripten C in the Husserl Archives at Louvain), *passim* in the *Ideen* and also in his *Erfahrung und Urteil*. He throughout insists that objective time is not a phenomenological datum. With Bergson he agrees that the lived “now” is not a point in objective time. His phenomenological standpoint enables him to tackle the central metaphysical problem about time—how, in spite of the successive-ness of our experience, we are able to experience co-presence and continuity, without resorting to Kant’s alternative, the principle of causality and its attendant categories. As far as time is concerned intentionality serves not as a link between consciousness and the world but as the very momentum which leads consciousness onwards. Husserl was emancipated from the atomistic analysis of mental contents to a greater extent than was Kant. In fact his approach to consciousness is close to the “stream of consciousness” language of William James. To summarise, the “constitution” of time is of special importance to Husserl in his programme of avoiding psychologism. No less important for him was the avoiding of the opposite approach, that of those who were concerned with “objective” time, something which must remain outside phenomenological survey.

A phenomenological exploration of time in music is of interest for the following reasons. The temporality of the “givenness” of music as phenomenological datum is so patent that it would not be an exaggeration to say that immanent phenomenological time is the special domain of music. Music is intrinsically temporal. As Schönberg writes, “In a manifold sense, music uses time. It

uses my time, it uses your time, it uses its own time.”¹ Furthermore music is a sphere in which talk of a “transcendent object” is particularly inappropriate, that is to say, it lends itself to the immanentist analysis of phenomenology. Then the peculiarity of the musical “now” is even more than the peculiarity of the specious present or “now” with which philosophers busy themselves. The language of modification or “shading” can be illustrated even more effectively in the shifting kaleidoscope of musical sound than in the visual realm. According to Husserl every perception of a temporal event is impression, retention, protention and fulfilment. One has only to think of a single note or chord in a musical score to realise the import of what he says. Each musical excerpt is large with the past and full of the future... And yet here “past” and “future” have a special sense which we have yet to determine. Any musical sentence trails a comet’s tail and has its own horizon. The elements of disappointment and fulfilment are part and parcel of aesthetic experience in music, the tension being heightened by very reason of the temporality of music. But this is to anticipate. How are we to begin analysing time-consciousness in music from the phenomenological standpoint?

Let us say I am “timing” *Anakreon’s Grab* by Hugo Wolf, with a view to including it in a Lieder recital. It “uses its own time” so that if, in singing it, I go against this prescription it means I am singing it “out of time”—this may be the case even though the total time taken is the same as when I sing it at the “proper” speed and in the “proper” time. Furthermore the whole song evokes past time in virtue of its Hellenic theme. Cutting through all these one could say also that it has a virtual space and time of its own which is not synchronous with any of the senses of time mentioned above. The virtual space of a musical work is something easier to understand perhaps in a work of symphonic dimensions. But even a short Lied cannot be denied this feature. The paradoxical thing about the virtual time of a musical work, however, is this—it is precisely this which gives it its “timeless” character, which makes us feel its out-of-the-world character. We would need at this point to distinguish between the different genres of musical composition.

¹ *Style and Idea*, pp. 40-1.

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The spatial element in a *Gesamtkunstwerk* such as an opera is not only virtual but actual. Programme works which evoke a kind of archetypal landscape (and which good programme work does not?) suggest an unboundedness of space and time which is of the essence of the music.

This element of unboundedness seems to be integral to the nature of music, especially to certain musical phrases. The long drawn out violin note typifies it. But shall we say that the Handelian perfect cadence denies it? Is tonality in general a kind of limit to the winging-to-distance potential of music? The cadence in the tonal composition is the tight-held kite. The atonal phrase is the kite adrift. And yet the tonal phrase shorn of its context sounds just as unbound as does the atonal excerpt, shorn of its own context. In fact the musical phrase illustrates the contextualist theory of meaning better than the language of words (here now I am thinking of musical forms other than opera, oratorio and Lieder where the sung speech is part of the music). No sphere illustrates better than music does the relevance of what was and what will be to what is. Codas are obvious examples of this. A recapitulation, or a variation, is an instance of incapsulation of as unmistakable an order as in the sphere of historical events.

There are, however, certain more technical problems to which attention must now be turned. In his work *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness* (Lectures given in Göttingen, 1904-5) Husserl writes of primary remembrance or retention as "a comet's tail which is joined to actual perception." This raises an interesting problem in the case of the audioperception which is musical perception, for here the past perception, one could say, is as much the body as the tail of the comet. This in turn carries an implication concerning consciousness. The whole concept of the exposition and development of a theme would seem to presuppose a unitary consciousness capable of extending beyond the musical phrase or sentence. In the text Husserl is concerned to stress the difference between primary remembrance (as "joined to actual perception") and secondary remembrance (e. g. remembering a melody heard long ago). The latter, he maintains, is running through a melody "in phantasy," hearing "as if." A theoretical problem arises at this point as to where the line can be drawn, if at all, between the "just past" which is

encompassed in what Husserl calls “primary remembrance” and what may have been heard, say, half an hour previously, e. g., the opening bars of the first movement. Another way of presenting the same problem is to ask whether the distinction between retention and reproduction (in Husserl’s use of this terminology) can hold in the case of musical apprehension. Let us take an example. What happens when halfway through Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony I am “reminded of” the Fate knocking at the door motif? It is not the comet’s-tail-effect of adjacent passages nor is it a repetition, a reproduced phrase. I am just “reminded,” whether through a melodic or rhythmic resemblance.

One concept of Husserl’s that may fit here is the concept of “modification.” He says “Every actual now of consciousness, however, is subject to the law of modification. The now changes continuously from retention to retention... each retention in itself a continuous modification which, so to speak, bears in itself the heritage of the past in the form of a series of shadings.” “Shading” language has significant overtones for Husserl in view (or passing over into) retentional consciousness. A shadow after all is rooted in a concrete object. A shading nucleates around a main shape.² There is no doubt, though, about Husserl’s general intent in the passage under discussion—he is anxious to stress both the continuity and the seriality of the retentions. What happens, again, when new thematic material is introduced? Retention is still called for, indeed it is *stretched* for otherwise I shall not be ready for the final movement when it comes (in the sonata or symphony example).

The epistemological import of Husserl’s view point comes in this sentence “We have then characterized *the past* itself as perceived.” The question then arises, wherein lies the pastness of the past? Can there be any pinning down of this if we treat all “given” contents as possessing a common character as immanent? He himself goes on to say “Obviously the meaning of ‘perception’ here obtaining does not coincide with the earlier one.” He then makes an interesting point about the “now” in the case of music. “Apprehensions here pass continually over

² Husserl’s point about the nucleus of any particular noema can be illustrated from musical embellishments, i.e. the note around which the embellishment centres is its nucleus. “Shading” language could be applied here too except that this word has specifically *visual* associations.

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into one another and terminate in an apprehension constituting the now: this apprehension, however, is only an ideal limit." This is the concept he offers parallel to what other philosophers have called "the specious present." The peculiarity about the "now" in music is that until the final note is sounded, indeed the last reverberation faded beyond hearing, the music is, so to say, in transit. The razor's edge of the "now" in musical experience, it will be readily admitted, is particularly, if not intrinsically, elusive. But is the "now" really the focus or not? Is this the "figure" to which all else is "ground"? Or rather is the *theme* the focus, the central "beam" of intentionality which the listener "follows" and the performing artist carries out? This suggestion that the temporal "now" in music moves through the thematic "now" finds an overtone in the following passage: "We find many streams, inasmuch as many series of primal impressions begin and end. However, we also find a connecting form, inasmuch as, for all, not merely does the law of the transformation of the now into the no longer and, on the other side, of the not-yet into the now function separately, but also something akin to a common form of the now exists, a likeness generally in the mode of the flux."³ The "thematic now" as I have styled it, is identical with what Husserl calls longitudinal intentionality (*Langs-intentionalität*) which, he says "goes through the flux, which in the course of the flux is in continuous unity of coincidence with itself."⁴ What he calls "transverse-intentionality" ("if I orient myself on a sound, I enter attentively into 'transverse-intentionality'")⁵ is particularly applicable to the complex sound, say the chord or orchestral cross-section of sound.

When Husserl insists that there can be no such thing as the perception of a first, no such thing as the perception of a last temporal event, this lends itself to an interesting contemporary interpretation. Husserl's point is that every experience of a temporal event gives itself as demanding an endless progress and regress. Writing in a letter to Peter Yates (August 4, 1953) John Cage, the American composer, says "... And the path we are is not a path, not a linear but a space extending in all direc-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

tions. Because it is no longer a case of moving along stepping stones (scales of any degree) but one can move, or just appear to, at any point in this total space." This infinite extendedness can be expressed either in spatial or temporal terms. It is this which lends music its "horizon" quality in an overall sense. Each phrase too, of course, has its horizon, its halo of possibilities. On the noetic side, the relevant intuition is what Husserl calls "expectational intuition" ("an inverted memorial intuition"). He says: "In general, expectation lets much remain open, and this remaining-open is again a characteristic of the components concerned." It is of the nature of protentions that they are not all fulfilled. In the *Vorlesungen* (par. 24) he puts it in this way, that protentions allow the possibility of otherness or nothingness. This would mean that the element of shock or surprise integral to a particular composition was built into the range of possibilities which constitute its protentions.⁶ But arising out of all this comes another question. Is infinite extendedness compatible with direction? The issue is in part a matter of determinacy and indeterminacy and of special pertinence in the context of the difference between tonal and atonal music. The determinacy which governs a tonal composition operates according to the laws of grammar of music or at least according to a logic of its own nucleating around the traditional grammar of music (I make this qualification in view of, say, the use of consecutive fifths by Debussy). Aleatory music, however, operates according to no such rules. Take, say, John Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* composed in 1951. In this work everything that is heard is unexpected. This is what Cage calls composition by indeterminacy. And yet in so far as all compositions by indeterminacy are different from each other this surely means that each has a certain determinacy, that it would matter if this sound or that were not there. There is a fluidity about such compositions which gives them an improvisatory air. They are highly mobile. It is after all not for nothing that Cage composed the score which accompanies a well-known documentary film of Calder mobiles. The composer of electronic music has a choice of "directions." There is method in his procedure, so that what sounds indeter-

⁶ Likewise in *Erfahrung*, par. 7, 1; par. 8, 10 he speaks of unacquaintedness as always a modus of acquaintedness.

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minate is actually determinate. Nucleus or theme language, however, may be inappropriate to some of the compositions just as it is inappropriate to certain collages. In these cases focus and fringe is a matter not of theme and development but what "happens" now versus the just now and the just to come. Determinate indeterminacy is to be found in the other arts as well, especially in literature among writers of the stream of consciousness school. The musical intentionality of apparently indeterminate compositions is, it would seem, present nonetheless in a disguised form. The more indeterminate it is, however, the less "parallel" the noetic movement of consciousness towards it may be. This sense of distance, of unintelligibility or unexpectedness is perhaps what lends it enchantment to the ears of the initiated.