

Ways & Sounds

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C O N T E N T S

Part One: THE STUFF

What is it to Listen ?	1
A Paradox around Identifying “What” Music is	2
What is it that Musicians Do?	4
“Musician” in Three Attitudes	5
Structure, Composition and Sociality	10
Anthropogenic Sound	12
Personics	14

Part Two: STRUCTURES

Composing from the Inside Out	19
Composing from the Outside In	23
Interactive Structure:	
Monological & Dialogical Organization	27
Interactivity	
Monological Structure	
Dialogical Structure	
Rippling Inaudibilities	
Irresolvables	
Notation	38
Metacomposition	46
Metacomposition in Eurological Practice & 4’33”	49
The Jam Session’s Metacomposed Interactions	51
Metacomposing the Jam Session	
Links & Foundations	
Adorno’s Jam Session Expertise	
Social Philosophy of Polyrhythm	
Repetition, Connection, Continuity	
Metacomposition’s “Paltry Stock”	
Provincially Cosmopolitan	
Mycelium to the Forest	

The Garden of Free Improvisation	69
Blank Boundaries	
How Free is Free?	
Free: Not Easy	
Free Association	
Hybrid Strategies: Composing for Improvisers	77
The Conduction Synthesis	84

Part Three: OTHER THOUGHTS

The Electronic Trickster	91
Musician	
Producer	
Ghosts & Specters	
Flipping the Archival	
Instrument	
Soundscape	
The Sociality of Rhythm	123
God's Eye View	
Microbeats	
Better Behaved Metrics	
Hyperrhythms in Waiting	
Inhabited Rhythm	
Hearing	137
& Some Coda Considerations	139
Related Reading	145

Introduction

Most of what transforms sounds into “music” are not the sounds by themselves, but the weave of human activities directed toward those sounds. These include ways of listening, ways of imagining, ways of generating sounds, ways of coordinating people, and ways of conveying information within that process.

When people, especially musicians, talk about “musical structure” they usually mean how the sounds are organized, but there are other structures in play, even more fundamental, that affect our understanding and interpretations of what we hear. These structures are less often spoken of, and more often taken for granted, if thought about at all. What kinds of structures are these? And what are their roles in the “putting together” — in the composing — of a musical event?

This series of essays was written irregularly in chronological sequence between 2011 & 2018 and came to gather themselves into three sections. Part One, *The Stuff*, opens a reexamination of some of the most commonplace language and assumptions regarding music.

What roles are played by listening — or by musicians? Should we restrict our notions of “music” to dictionary definitions such as “a pattern of sounds intended to give pleasure to people listening to it,” or should the term *music* more comprehensively denote a complex

of sound-focused activities subject to multiple, sometimes contradictory, considerations?

Does the conventional, European derived, paradigm of musical composition, where a single composer designs a fixed, repeatable arrangement of sounds, encompass all possible varieties of compositional action, or might another model help cultivate a more inclusive, more “non-centricized” frame of reference?

How credibly can musical sound be depersonalized, anonymized, disembodied, whether that be through John Cage’s more erudite notion of “sounds in themselves” or through the aural carpeting marketplace designation of “music” as an inert consumer object? If we instead recognize person as real and inseparable from musical sound, what would we hear?

Part Two, *Structures*, explores a language regarding composition based in interaction, in the structures of possible social relations among musical participants, and in how musical information, how musical thought, may be communicated while a music is emerging into sound. These together help constitute an ecology of composing. The *act* of composition, the choosing among sounds in the assembling of a sonic image, can be variously situated, each circumstance affording divergent opportunities and circumscriptions. These conditions yield very different sonic events, and each may require distinct recalibrations of recognition, listening and interpretation.

To do this called for repurposing some of our most familiar ways of talking about music, for example, emphasizing “music” and “composing” as, first of all, actions and recasting the noun “composition” as *interactive matrix*. Neologisms such as *dialogical and monological composing*, *metacomposition* and *personics* were invented to invoke a web of understanding potentially more true to what actual-

ly happens in music than do current status quo assumptions about musical structures.

Part Three, *Other Thoughts*, extends from the previous sections to muse over that still recently arrived elephant in the room known as recording, its multiple transformations of our experiences and conceptions of music, as well as a few of the implications of that frequent extrasonic musical actor, rhythm.

These essays evolved cumulatively as a process of discovery, at first simply in order to clarify my own thinking for myself. But, as they evolved, I also recognized that the questions pursued here wouldn't necessarily have to be unique to my particular experience, that other people might likely also be contending with them in their own ways. Here, the adventure approaches possibilities for more public imaginings and discussion, at which point this turns invitation for you to wonder as well.

1

What is it to Listen?

Sound that proposes music invokes expectancy; and expectancy bathes the possibility of music with the light of attention, with a consent to wait and a willingness to meet. A moment of music accomplishes a tenuous and very fragile consensus within which participants transform what they hear while becoming themselves transformed. A dedication to listening such as this might open a transport into altered states. And conversely, far more than any other predisposition, it's indifference that's most capable of dissolving such gatherings, such doings, as music. When cast beyond the reach of caring, musical sounds disperse into incidental noise.

2

A Paradox around Identifying “What” Music is

Edgard Varèse beautifully defined music as “organized sound;” and people commonly speak of “making” music and of compositions as “pieces” of music, as if “music” were some kind of solid, stable, autonomous object — which it really isn’t. Even if a musical recording can be embedded in a tangible media device, as it so often is, the “music” is no such object.

As an action, music engages listening, imagination and sounding. There’s a networking of relationships and interactions among perceptions, imaginings, feelings, calculations, sensuousities, social cooperations and techniques. But, without what’s ordinarily considered “the music” — which is to say, its sound and *sonic image* — there’d be no musical activity whatsoever. Sound plays to music as do air, wood, water, metal or skin to sound. At the same time, despite this pivotal indispensability, these sounds depend absolutely on the nurturings of musical action in order to exist as music at all.

Music is something that *happens* to sound; and the actions that are *also* music spin themselves around, over and in sounds. Sound harbors musical activity's focal transportation hub. Everything orients toward and through this. Yet, even though actual sounds are so immediately palpable, "the music" isn't residing *exactly* in these "sounds in themselves" (and neither can we do without them). Action, imagination, relationship, all so enmeshed with sound, inseparably and together, collaborate the event we call music.

3

What is it that Musicians Do?

Listeners who aren't generating or sounding music themselves nevertheless *compose* music. In other words, listeners *do* "put music together," as only they themselves can make sense out of the sounds that they hear. To actually invent and initiate musical sound reciprocates by listening out loud.

Musicians serve as advocates for sound entities and their allied silences. They act as liaisons who introduce sounds to expectancy and midwife music into audibility. They work around corners of the heard and the not-heard. They have to listen wide in both directions. They're bound to practice multiple allegiances through having to coordinate the contrasting (and often disparate) interests of sound, craft, imagination, and listeners. Yet, this position doesn't leave that much room for impartiality because musical actions can't become so hypothetical as to turn abstract. They really have to make a difference or they'll just get lost (and if they're not cared about, they aren't going to matter, anyway). Musicians commit to actual sounds and their consequences.

4

“Musician” in Three Attitudes

Amateur — professional — artist.... These clichéd identifiers get thrown around so much that they can distort just as easily as they might clarify. But, even though any cliché tends to sleepwalk its way into stereotype, layering the conventional amateur vs. professional opposition across the relatively anomalous positions that might be dubbed “artist” can begin to map just a few of the attitudes inhabited by a range of musical practitioner.

Musical listening, for example, can be understood as amateur. It’s consensual. It’s voluntary. And the word amateur itself means “one who loves.” Love can’t be compelled. And enthusiasm, (which means “having become inhabited by a god”) can’t be bought either. An amateur attitude reaches as far as pleasure can — and then some. People generate musical sound when they feel like it, and they don’t otherwise. Shared enjoyment would best identify the prevailing destination of this mode of relationship. But there are also other relatively unconditional, “gifting” practices of music that reach well beyond these immediate, amateur concerns with a “good time,” such as musics that actualize devotion, solidarity or medicinal intent.

In contrast with the consensual communities that can be developed through amateur activity, professional music participates in market relationships that are bounded by “no pay, no play” interactions. These install a firewall between musical practice and the more unconditional loves that move an amateur; and the insulation introduces a wider range of options stretching all the way out into the mercenary.

A professional filter enables the role of musical *fonctionnaire*, where sounds are generated on the basis of external demand. To purvey sounds this way isn't really any less legitimate (or mundane) than any other job; but as a reductionist exercise of professional attitude, it marks where the professional departs most from the motivating concerns of either amateur or artist.

But in general, the impacts of professionalism figure a lot less narrowly and are often much more complicated than this. When music's actually able to attract resources such as income, a demand (as well as an opportunity) evolves for more labor intensive cultivations of craft and capacity that can enlarge everyone's conception of what's possible to achieve musically.

Artists draw on components of both amateur and professional orientations while reaping the contradictions. An artist is a highly intensive amateur who allies the unconditional enthusiasm of the amateur with the discipline and skills applied by professionals (although most of these were probably invented by amateurs and artists in the first place). Amateur and artist may both willingly volunteer their responsibilities toward music; but, while an amateur might regard professional standards of adequacy as an easily disposable option, an artistic disposition aspires instead to invent and contribute well beyond what would ordinarily be standard, passable, adequate or necessary.

Artistic attitude differs most importantly from either professional or amateur in that artists work more for the music than vice versa. And such a potentially exhaustive commitment can wax pretty costly in terms of time, energy and labor. Musicians therefore often turn to the professional sphere not only in order to support themselves (which is a professional value), but to support the music (which poses an artistic one).

But it's pretty difficult to separate these two in practice. Despite that, the differences between professional and artistic attitude aren't really trivial. Push come to shove, the strictly professional has finally to prioritize personal gain over the music itself, whereas an artist chooses to act first as a music's accomplice (with all the problems that might include). And it's not that individual musicians don't change hats all the time just to stay in motion either. It's more a matter of being clear about what's really important in each instance.

Given that plenty of creatively mediocre work can manage to thrive perfectly well in a professional sense, professional activity by itself isn't necessarily a reliable indicator of any music's "quality" or "value" (whatever these words might mean). A lot of serious creative work has long persisted and continues to evolve well off the professional grid without at all qualifying for the sort of dilettantism that such a non-market or "amateur" status might imply.

These attitudes describe a repertoire of roles, different constellations of priorities, rather than fixed personal identities. And whatever conflicts arise among these are even more likely to be lived as individual experiences than they are interpersonally. In practice, actual musicians often inhabit various — even contradictory — amalgams of these alternate fields of intention (any of which might shift on a day to day basis).

The components of whatever mix could as easily support each other as conflict. Amateurs who get paid are suddenly functioning professionally (which might not at all affect how they love what they do). Amateurs or professionals may (or may not) play with the degree of care that derives from artistic attention. The boundaries among these three scales of value are porous and pretty apt to fluctuate.

The spectrum that stretches from amateur to artist begins with an amateur's personal joy in the doing of music (maybe even regardless of how the music sounds). And everyone — absolutely everyone — starts here. The more artistic scale of this spectrum doesn't at all eliminate these joys, but augments them with a growing dedication to the welfare and life of music's sound in a way that develops beyond personal indulgence into a reciprocal dialogue and responsibility. Professional activity offers a vehicle capable of either supporting or abusing what's achieved along this spectrum — as well as delivering varying mixtures of both at the same time.

• • •

The presence (or prospect) of a listener — the pressure and pull of that focused waiting that could be called expectancy — activates a musical arena with restless, destabilizing, gravitational currents that each sound has to address upon entering into music. Neutrality's not an available option. Musical sounds assert amid uncertainties that always promise opportunities for failures. They have to dance among vagaries of attention, among she-loves-me-she-loves-me-nots, among with-its and not-with-its, among persuasion, seduction, resistance, distraction, defiance. Worlds are already in motion. Sounds already present their own character. So do listeners. There isn't any blank slate from which a musician may begin.

Even a musician who happens to be composing in isolation at a particular moment is therefore never really alone or asocial, working “only for oneself,” because, as a community language and project, music’s mode of address is a constitutionally convivial and public one. Musicians inevitably engage beyond “self” in their responsibilities to the sound entities and unsounded motions with whom they’re collaborating. This fulfills a symbiotic partnership that furthers music’s evolution and continuing subsistence.