

The Listener's Interpretation of Music: An Experience Between Cause and Effect

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For *Music Now* at Ohio State University. The 13 short pieces in the examples are 13 short answers to my question: "Under what circumstances will an acoustical event turn into a musical event?" They were composed and performed by the 13 participants in Music 838.

To begin with, I shall have to ask for your acceptance of the following two points: If not specified otherwise, I shall use for the duration of this lecture the term *composer* always to speak of a person who not only wants to but also knows how to compose Music. The term *listener* will not refer to a person who happens to have a radio on while doing something else but to a person who for one reason or the other is intent on listening to some music. It is the relationship between the work of such composers and the reactions of such listeners which alone interests me today, and which alone warrants serious investigation.

Two listeners, happy and elated, are leaving a concert hall, where they had heard a composition which was new to both of them; after a few minutes of silence while walking together, they start a conversation. "I liked the piece," says one. "So did I," says the other. "Except," says the first, "where the oboe brings up the second subject. That didn't sound right to me or beautiful." "But it wasn't the oboe," retorts excitedly the other, "it was the clarinet. I thought it rather a good idea at that point, and I don't think one can call that a second subject."

At the end of that conversation, which lasted quite a long time, the two partners agreed in a bad mood that they *simply* didn't speak the *same* language, nor about the *same* thing. The situation itself could be analyzed as follows: One look at the score of the work discussed would show whether it was the oboe or the clarinet which played at the crucial moment. By further analysis it is possible to clear up the question whether one can speak of a second subject, or whether the composition was built along lines which do not work with "subjects". But nothing seems to help to decide whether the composer did at this point the right, the beautiful; whether the composer had a good idea here or not.

When, after looking at the score, our two listeners have agreed that it was the oboe that did it, and that it was, if not the second subject, at least the second section of a division in that composition, they still are stuck with one of two questions. The one question would be: Was the entrance of the oboe a beautiful musical moment or not? This question implies that the term "beautiful" has been accepted as a word to be associated with an invariable meaning. In spite of the fact that many, many people live and act and speak and judge on the assumption that the word "beautiful" has a meaning accepted by everybody as part of *a language common to all*, this assumption proves wrong every time it is investigated. Words like good, beautiful, efficient, etc. have never passed the examination for acceptance in *a language common to all*. Because never was there any chance that different persons would associate the same meanings with these words, except by special agreement in each case.

The other question would be: Why did one of our listeners consider the entrance of the oboe at this point a good idea, and why did the other dislike it?

Now, this is the important question because it directly deals with the difference of opinion and not with the music. As long as listeners believe their likes and dislikes to be part of the music, they will sooner or later find themselves in a situation in which they reproachfully have to state that nobody speaks the same language. If, on the other hand, they admit speaking of one and the same music but of several different reactions, the discussion on the reactions may create what will eventually become *a language common to all*.

In other words: At a given moment *the language* considered *common to all* is able to pave the way to an agreement on the *facts* which have happened and could have been perceived. But to agree in terms, understandable to all, on the effects which such perceptions may have on the perceiver, *a language common to all* must be looked for, found—if necessary, be invented.

My conclusion: A serious conversation on the subject of the effects which an event had can *create* a language common to all. A conversation on the subject of the *causes* for these effects can get along with the *traditional* language common to all.

Assuming that the two concert-goers we overheard meet again, and that their inclinations to come to a correct evaluation of the event they witnessed are of a serious trend, we may continue their conversation like this: “There was,” says the first, “something rough in the sudden entrance of the oboe.” “Yes,” says the other, “but I enjoyed at this point, what you call roughness, as a surprising contrast, which seems to me to be the musical idea here, rather than the relative sound value of the chosen instrument.” “Well,” concedes now the first, being a very well-disposed person, “if you consider *contrast* to be a musical element, then I shall have to listen once more to the composition, including *contrasts* in my field of musical perception.”

Thus, just for instance, and, as I admit, in a rather simplified way, the term *contrast* may become a word of language common to all, describing a musical cause for a listener’s reaction, and more important than the professional-sounding controversy on the question, whether it was an oboe or a clarinet.

A composer causes an event, which reaches me, the listener, in an acoustical way, causing me to have an experience. My reaction to the experience causes an effect which I can communicate to myself and, if I find words for it, to others.

And the other way around: The communication of my reaction permits you to deduce from it my attitude toward an experience, of which I maintain that it was caused by a composer’s work.

In both directions we get to a certain point where the relationship between the composer and the listener seems to be a very close one. At that point, namely, where we have put the word *experience*. Up to this point, it is the composition alone which is the event caused by the composer. For simplicity’s sake we assume the piece is correctly played. Whether the composition is heard or not does not change the matter up to here. But from this point on the listener is on the job. And (depending on how much of the event is experienced), *the listener* will be the cause of the effect which can be communicated to the listener or, if words are found for it, to others. The relationship between the composer and the listener is the closest at the moment when the composer cannot do anything anymore, when the work is being performed, and

when the listener still can do everything, that is, let as much as possible of the event become an experience. That is the moment in which the new can become venerable and the old can become fresh: where the unheard of is heard and the unknown taken cognizance of; where private possession can turn into common good. I am speaking of that moment which lies between real life and artificial commotion, in short, of the moment of art.

The responsibility for it, that such a moment be fertile and worthy of all the questions and wishes attached to it, rests of course with the composer as much as with the listener. It is absurd that throughout the history of music and its social functions, the word *genius*, frequently applied to composers, never yet has been applied to a listener. But I shall offer you a reason for this negligence.

All who write about music, biographers and critics, with all too few exceptions, use their talent as writers in order to report about *themselves* and what *they* looked like after having had an experience, instead of reporting their *experiences* in order to prove that they have *some* talent to hear and listen. It is this literature, which condescendingly teaches the listener, haughtily informs the listener, and surreptitiously declares the listener to be unable to have experiences. Thus, listeners learn to consider themselves to be dilettantes, misguided by respect for what they are told to be professional knowledge and language.

In fact, of course, the listener alone is competent for the personal experience. The listener is not responsible for the composition which causes the experience, and is not entirely the master of the effects which the experience causes. But the listener is completely and absolutely free in the matter of personal experience. I shall soon elaborate on this claim. For such a panegyric in praise of the listener's freedom wants some qualification, not to speak of the necessary apologies to the composers.

But first let us listen to some music. The thirteen short pieces you'll hear tonight are 13 short answers to my question: "Under what circumstances will an acoustical event turn into a musical event?" There are several possibilities as to how one could introduce the pieces. One could speak of the original form, of the methods of composition applied therein, of the question of notation which was a problem here and there, and of many other aspects most fascinating to the professional, if one is really curious to know more than one knew up to now. But there is nothing in this music which could not be *heard* even without *any* introduction. In fact, this music is first of all that which can be heard, music for performers and listeners.

This being a lecture and not a concert, please listen to the music in a special way: Try to postpone any musical and aesthetical criticism, any formal judgement, any evaluation of the compositions to some other time. Try to hear what actually happens. Sounds, sound constellations, sound movements, silences. While registering attentively what happens to your ear, try to find out, how much of what you hear becomes an experience; and then, how this experience you make affects you.

<i>Group 1</i>		
<i>me?</i>		Raymond Sidoti
	violin, flute, carinet, bassoon, pedal tympani	
<i>blotches and points</i>		Bill Schirmer
	piano, flute, clarinet, trombone	
<i>events</i>		Rose Liddell
	percussion and reader, male voice, female voice, bassoon, recorder, flute	

One need neither be a philosopher nor a psychologist in order to understand that the terms pleasure, joy, satisfaction, etc., (when taken by their simplest and most general meaning) describe a frame of mind which is the result of having had one's wishes fulfilled or one's questions answered. Even one who is happy still *wishes* that everything would remain as it is. And the one who is eternally dissatisfied *desires* continual change. (In any case, there would be neither pleasure nor enjoyment if there weren't wishes and questions.) Even a displeasing answer is better than none, because whoever desires uncertainty simply does not ask questions.

Of course this also goes for such cases in which it occurs to me only at the instant of fulfillment that I had harbored a desire without, up to this moment, having been precisely aware of it. Or that I suddenly get an answer to a question which I never, not even to myself, had dared or succeeded to formulate.

Most people develop their wishes and desires out of experience. They wish to be something *too*, to have something *too*, to experience something *too*. Few people invent wishes and desires. If they do, one speaks of them as those who possess imagination and a talent for having ideas. If such a person also presents an example for the fulfillment of the invented wishes, then that person can be called the author of a work of art. And if the example is produced by musical means, then the author, who invented the wishes, is a composer of music, and the example for the fulfillment of these wishes a musical composition.

The composers find pleasure in that they first invent a wish or a question and then compose for themselves a fulfillment or an answer. The listeners to whom the composition is played can find their pleasure if they now find or invent wishes and questions for which this music means fulfillment and answer. The listener's pleasure depends on just the same talent for imagination and for having ideas as the composer's pleasure, and the title *genius*, or some less abused equivalent suitable to 20th century taste, is actually waiting to be granted to deserving listeners of music.

As soon as the listeners have understood the work which was heard as a function of wish and fulfillment, of question and answer, of problem and solution, even though the understanding is based on the wishes and questions which the listeners contributed, they then are ready for the next step in the process of appreciating the music. Now they look at the wishes and questions which they had to contribute in order to make the composition a fulfillment and an answer. And now the listeners decide whether they like their new acquisitions or dislike them. That, at last and after all, is what produces the effect which the listening to music has on the listener.

In short, I maintain that the composer causes the music and the listener causes the effect of the music. In between lies the experience of the listener, consisting of a mental activity, which is looking for pleasure. This attitude of listening to music, diligently

active between cause and effect, is neither the analysis of the composition nor the criticism of its effect. To listen in such a way to music requires neither a professional musical terminology nor an aptitude for sociological diagnosis.

<i>Group 2</i>		
<i>albanese</i>	trombone, percussion, Moog	Thomas Horazak
<i>numbers</i>	bassoon solo	Charles Lipp
<i>contrasts</i>	piano solo	Stephen Montague
<i>y</i>	soprano, flute, clarinet	Paul Godwin

It is at this point where the language common to all occasionally seems to be inadequate, and where many music lovers, who wish to communicate their firm and honest opinions on some musical experience, hesitate and then come up with the apparently apologetic remark: "I do not really know anything about music, but . . . etc." They mean that they do not know the professional terminology. Would they really believe that they do not understand anything about music, I think they would remain silent. In fact, no musical experience can be described in professional language. This technical vocabulary is irreplaceable only when we attempt to explain how and by what means the experience was brought about. And that is a job for musical and psychological analysis.

The job of the music critic would be to estimate which merit a musical work has, first, as compared with the general situation of music, and second, as to the impact it has or might have on the musical public's listening attitude. The merits of older music can be deduced, with some qualifying reservations, from the living interest in them of society. The merits of a new musical composition become perceivable by the degree to which society has to widen the horizon of its interest in order to find pleasure in listening to this music. It is an assumed privilege of music critics to pass speculative judgments on the value of such horizon-widening experiences, and to pass their opinions on to the public. But one should know that the interest of society, which those critics try to represent, is not their object, but rather their goal, their loot. Their opinions, therefore, on the value of progress in the arts are never quite free.

The freedom of a person to have an *own opinion* is not disputed. But this does not justify the assumption that the person made use of that freedom when the opinion was adopted, nor does it justify the belief that a freely maintained opinion could be free of inevitable consequences. The law in several civilized countries declares the personal opinion of a witness to be incompetent and irrelevant when the purpose lies in finding the truth. Honesty reflects on what a person actually knows, not on what that person could have known. Assuming now that you in all honesty make use of your freedom to form an opinion on some experience, we could say with other words that you apply to the experience all that you know. But not more than you know, if you are honest. Doubtlessly, honesty is a credit to a person. But the more a person knows, the more credit the honesty deserves.

As long as listeners of music ask whether they liked or disliked the composition, the listeners alone are competent for the answer. And unless I want to change these listeners and their attitude towards listening, the listeners' decision is not open to dispute.

But should they ask whether it was a good composition, which they liked or disliked, then they propose to separate the information on themselves from the information on the work. That is, they propose to criticize the *cause* for their experience separately from the *result* of their experience, namely the effect it had on them. Here, I believe, a dispute, a discussion, a controversy will prove fertile and interesting. For the quality of a composition and the methods of making an experience are subjects which, though limiting the freedom of opinion, give unlimited scope for adding knowledge instead of merely using it.

The line of reasoning which I try to communicate to you here was set into motion some time ago, after the first performance of a controversial piece by a well-known young composer. During the excited conversation which ensued immediately, and in which the composer, a man of terrific temperament, took part, I noticed with some dismayed astonishment that even those who had liked the experience started to look for “the reasons why” in the score, instead of looking into themselves. In the score, of course, they found the facts that caused the experience, but not the experience which they liked and which actually was the subject of the discussion. They had sacrificed their experience for its cause, and confused the interpretation of the listener with the analysis of the work. Either one is of importance, but to confuse them always leads to some boring disaster. As music is never meant to encourage boring disasters, the listening audience is requested to avoid the confusion.

	<i>Group 3</i>	
<i>trio: in the shadow of mt. doom</i>		Jim Ravan
	moog, bassoon, recorder + etc.	
<i>waves</i>		Helen Myers
	violin, clarinet, bassoon, trombone, piano	

If, after the performance of a musical composition somebody asks the question: “How is it that the piece had such and such an effect on me?” you may safely assume that the person who asks had, in some way, found pleasure in listening to the music. Whoever enjoys an event is much more prepared to investigate the causes for one’s satisfaction than one who withdraws, being disappointed, annoyed, or bored. One who is pleased exclaims: “I like that. I want it again. What was it and how did it come about?” While the displeased listener only remarks: “I did not understand it. It was bad. It was nothing. How can anyone dare to offer me such a thing as music?” Without, of course, elucidating what was meant by the expression “such a thing”.

Under the impression of a series of musical events it is occasionally helpful, in order to clarify one’s relation to the experience, if one asks oneself a few questions. The first question: “Was it something?” can be answered by one of only two words, either “yes” or “no”. In case the answer is “no”, one means to relegate what happened into the realm of dreams and hallucinations, or one means to express by it the desire to escape the effort of understanding.

If the answer is “yes”, one can go on asking the second question: “What was it?” This question implies that the event possesses a real existence apart from the impression it has made on the questioner, and that the answer should define that real structure of the event. The question does not imply that the vocabulary for this answer has already been created, nor that the real event necessarily falls into a category previously known and named. In art and science that which is already known usually is not asked for

again. The question “What was that?” thus constitutes in such a context a demand for an act of searching and inventing, rather than of recognizing.

“In what way and by what means did the series of events constitute a coherent context?” is the next question. One frequently hears how after the performance of some new music, listeners complain: “All I heard was a series of disconnected events which did not make any sense”. These listeners should investigate whether they do not use the term *connection* in a too limited way. In music, contrary to language, it is not the connection which makes sense, but it is the sense which creates the connection. Therefore, these artificial connections do not have to imitate the progress of causal, evolutionary, or dramatic connections.

The next question, and for today the last I have time to mention, is “What did the music intend to mean, and how does that compare with what it actually meant to me?” This is really the listener’s question and the composer’s question and, last not least, the question which the music itself asks the listener. For this is to be remembered when one seriously means to speak about art: Works of art do not possess the kind of reality which forces people to take cognizance of it for the sake of their lives. They are not necessary unless one needs them.

This need is a creation of the mind. At the risk of being reproached for exaggeration through simplification and accused of attempting gross flattery, I’d like to express my opinion as follows: Music is initiated by a need which listeners created in their minds. Music takes this need seriously. If listeners occasionally neglect or even ridicule their creation, the need, no wonder if then serious music seems to them to be needlessly aggravating.

There are three kinds of music for three kinds of listener:

1. First the music which reorganizes already established music elements into new patterns. This is music for the listener who enjoys the status quo, and looking at it from different angles.
2. Second there is the music which enlivens old patterns with new musical elements. This is music for the connoisseurs, the listeners who enjoy looking at themselves from different angles.
3. And last, but not least, there is the music in which *new* musical elements create *their* new patterns. This is music for listeners who are still conscious of the fact that, after all, *they* had once created the need for music in their minds, and who now are happy and gratified if this need is met, in that at last they *can* hear what they *never* had heard before.

So everything is nicely organized, and everybody could find whatever anyone likes. The only difficulty seems to be that usually you are not quite sure to which category you belong and to what kind of music you are listening. And if you confuse the three kinds of listener and the three kinds of music, your judgment will inform us of the confusion and not of the music or the effect it had. Now everybody has the ability to want something. So you can want to look at the status quo, at yourself, and at something new. You can, if you want to, adopt all three attitudes towards listening to music. The adoption of the attitude most suitable to the music in each case will guarantee the maximum of pleasure and the necessary minimum of understanding. To

find this attitude demands a certain effort, a certain elasticity, and a considerable sense of humor. The pleasure in seeking and finding the suitable attitude, and the critical evaluation of the conditions under which it could be adopted, enable you, if you so wish, to pass the very important judgment of a listener on a musical composition which you heard.

<i>Group 4</i>		
<i>dialogue</i>	trombone, two male readers, female reader	Stanley Schumacher
<i>en passant</i>	flute + piccolo, recorder, clarinet, snare drum, voices	David Chase
<i>reflections in a coffee pot</i>	flute, recorder, trombone, piano, conductor, tape, coffee	David Gunn

The listener's interpretation of music refers to an experience *between* cause and effect. The experience is the pleasure in the *cause*. The *effect* is the expression of your approval or disapproval of this pleasure. *Your* criticism is *its* communication. (Provided that you are not a person who happens to have the radio on, but a person who for one reason or another is intent on listening to some music.)