

CHARMED BY GHOSTS

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It is not easy to determine the nature of music,
or why anyone should have a knowledge of it.
– Aristotle, *Politics* [Book VIII, 1339a]

Not comprehending, they hear like the deaf.
The saying is their witness: absent while present.
– Heraclitus, *Fragment* [B34]

Do we know what music is? Is it a grouping of sounds, arranged in an individual way, occurring under a chosen duration? There are definitions of course, if you turn to the dictionaries, but most of them are travesties. Why could it not just be the affection for that strange disappearance of something coming into being; the love of a soap bubble, with its eternal multitude of unique forms, determined solely by its physical condition, and heading for termination? It all depends on what kind of questions you are asking. Otherwise it is just a constant gathering, an ongoing alteration and permutation of the fundamental code of the West – the tempered scale: conservative as a natural force, something unchangeable disguised as the novelty of constant change. Some sounds are treated differently from other sounds, some structures are favored above others; one key could be «false», another fundamental. For some reason it seems to be easier to say what should not be regarded as music. It is a matter of principles, the difference between tones and sounds. However, it is accepted that birds have «songs», while the bell in the church tower is just an audio-territorial extension of the architecture.

The question of the nature of music will always arrive at the question of taste, and this is why ontology constantly sneaks ethics in as its undying Trojan horse. I will end there, too, just watch me, when the words are gone, when language and music become mutual exclusives. Music stands as a reminder of what does not exist, it is dying out at the very moment you recognize it. You have been charmed by a ghost. Harmony is a trick of memory, the temporality of forgetfulness. The twofold nature of music makes it even more difficult to grasp: its immaterial presence together with its utterly material essence: acoustics. The response is perverse – although perfectly human – namely by *emotions*, mental states, aesthetic endorphins that desperately try to dress the feelings in representations. The human body, the residence of music, is governed by the same twofold nature: the intangible representations of the mind,

and the affected flesh, the resonant organs. Suddenly music is confused with identity and art confused with economy: manufactured feelings, mass produced signals that replicate themselves until they have reached the level of universal anthems.

That story is hardly new, and it is liable to end up in the worst kind of conclusions – in sociology, and that would be embarrassingly basic. Nevertheless, it is worth asking why music was kidnapped and promoted as a sonic dress code for the modern soul. Which is actually not that modern; Aristotle's *Politics*, one of the most fundamental books in political philosophy, ends with an extensive section about the nature of music and its role in the ideal state. The reason for music being an important part of the state is that it blurs the border between labor and leisure (as tension and release). Everybody's goal is to have as much free time as possible and to do what they want; yet, everybody has to work in order to survive and keep everything going. Music is a state necessity since it gives the citizens a feeling of freedom, and thus is perfect for informing the body in society. Music must be at the heart of education, together with gymnastics (which already mimics music in movement and rhythm), as a learning process apparently free. Its nature is that of a skeleton key that will open, by means of practice, any ideological lock between your body and mind, making you produce when you think you were consuming. Music turns into «play», as Aristotle says, a modulation that announces the next step of his politics of music, which is ethics.

This is only the beginning of a history that becomes stronger as the world runs out of ideas: the assumption that music is something you consume rather than something you reflect. We have become addicted to being penetrated. This is why melodies are part of the musical tradition, while the sounds involved in making a salad are not. What is at stake is intentionality, forgetting about the actuality of resonant presence. The analogy would be that of you thinking that you are just looking at the painting, forgetting that the painting is also looking at you. In this situation, all of us are fumbling of course; we are all poor, since it is about those greedy emotions again. The reason for music becoming one of the psychosomatic principles of consumption is that emotions are recognized as an inward working, identity shaping, socio-sculptural principle. Music makes you receptive and turns into an agent for all kinds of dubious guests in your head; it's the yummy sauce to go with the otherwise chewy steak.

All power throughout history, from the Babylonians to the present, are familiar with the distinctive rhetorical mechanisms of sounds, calls, signals and music. There are religions without images, but no one without music. The ears never rest; you shut your eyes, but not your ears. You are more likely to wake

up from a sound than from someone gesticulating in front of you. If you need attention, turn to the organ that is always open: someone says «behold», but what you hear is the fanfare. Hearing requires an opening, and this is why it has been, and always will be, regarded as a passive form of awareness – as determinately intaking, with no apparent possibilities of modeling the sensations (except when trying to reproduce them). Open ears is a good thing if you are sleeping in the jungle, but ultimately it is an exposure that is secondary to your will. Hearing is thus subjected to the world, and you, the subject, are subjected to hearing. In the jungle it could save your life, in the city you develop ideological earplugs.*

Hearing might be an open window, but listening is not. One ear is open to the world, the other one is muffled. Penetration, the sociological intercourse, delights and seduces by its constantly postponed promise of climax. The Aristotelian state is not that different from ours. We have been trained and trained again by the practice of everyday life to hear away (in analogy with look away) from the fabric of our aural environment. It is not intentionally or actively ignored, just (inhearable) (in analogy with (invisible)), as noise, a non-formative input. Opening your already open ears is a step in the right direction. But that is not enough. You have to regain your awareness of material pronunciations, the silent knowledge that cultivation puts to sleep. Sensations are perceptions, and perceptions must become substantial, perhaps even instrumental, for you to experience a world of differences. Repetition must become the eternal return of the new – through your perceptions, through trying to integrate with appearance. If this can be done, then it is no longer you, but the world that has become real experimentation: the orchestra of chance and circumstance.

Listen to the world! So the cliché goes... However, that is understandably uninteresting if you remain a consumer, fully occupied by being penetrated. Aural habits, every-stinking-day habits, the mumble of existence that drowns the world. Being in the world is participating in a constant stream of sensations, with all senses. The physicality of the world comes into play, communicating with your cells, nerves, and mind. This is where it all begins, with sensing the precise. Experience is not consumption, it is the integration of levels that influence you as a physical being. It could be the awareness of the wind breeze in your hair, the feeling of an ant walking on your naked foot, grass inside your shirt, raindrops on your eyelids, the baton of the policeman, smashing into your back for objective reasons.

* As in the saying ascribed to the regrettably out of fashion philosopher Heraclitus (sleeping since 500 BCE) – «Those unmindful when they hear, for all they make of their intelligence, may be regarded as the walking dead.»

** «Things taken together are whole and not whole, something which is being brought together and brought apart, which is in tune and out of tune.» (Heraclitus, Fr. B10).

Sounds have as many angles as any possible perspective of perceptible objects, whether tangible or immaterial, like reflections of the sun. Like music the audible world is in formation and disintegration at the same moment, coming into being and passing away. Some sounds are longer, some are shorter; some have an impact, some leave vague impressions. Sounds listen to you too. Just open the window and stick out your head. Listen to the waves of traffic noises, to the car horns and engines merging with the drone of a distant airplane; doors slamming, indistinct radio chatter, a dog barking, the wind distorting the sound of kids playing, babies crying, hungry seagulls laughing at the banality of urbanity... and all those sounds with no name, anonymous sounds, sounds without origin; the acoustics of the sourceless.

Music is everywhere, but not everything is music. Sounds as such are not music, they need to have a quality. Listening is not just hearing, it is the search for that quality. This would be the arrival of my Trojan horse... that word «quality», that dubious guest. Nevertheless there is no ideality to speak of, on the contrary it is about the inexistence of norms, and the peculiar factuality of what cannot even be pointed at. Music is only the skin wrapped around the sounds, turning them into tiny tones or plump genres. Sounds love to hide themselves, while music can't get enough of promoting them. If you try to trace those sounds, and are willing to dispel the ghosts with your embodied cognition, then you are shamelessly dealing with qualities. Under the skin of music this reflexivity runs without end, in a flux of perceptual life elevating amusement to possession

Let us put an end to being penetrated. Be charmed by the ghosts, by all means, but never let them do the scalping. Yes, I am a moralist, but a moralist with a hammer. Open music, not only your ears. The ineffable quality of auditory events has always functioned as an excuse for treating music like an object, as in the text you are holding now, but classified from the outside and constantly tied to social functions. You will never win that war. Try instead to rest in the immanence of lingering developments, in the flow that blends with the singularity of absolutely unknown indications. Although you might go mad on your way, you are heading for the inside of music.** Open the door to the workshop of tonality; follow the creation of sounds before they are polished, wrapped and ready for sale. Crack music open! let the timbres fall out, with notes dead on the floor. Think of it as nothing but the shadow of your organs. Find the hole in the web. Make the decision, pack your bags, and check in at the airport of particles and light.

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