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Four Different Voices Listening in Common

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Abstract. This text is an edited transcription of a round table that took place during NCMM 2023 in which participants exchanged ideas about Chapter 6 (“Listening as a construction of the commons”) of Makis Solomos’s recent book, *Exploring the Ecologies of Music and Sound: Environmental, Mental and Social Ecologies in Music, Sound Art and Artivisms*. The text contains some repetition, but this is necessary for the flow of each of the four different voices.

Keywords. Listening; commons

Introduction

Extract from the chapter (M. Solomos, 2023, p. 121–122):

“In his book *The World Beyond Your Head*, Matthew Crawford (2014) defines attention – the faculty that links us to the world – as a ‘common good’, just like the air we breathe or the water we drink. Here, we will focus on one particular form of attention – listening – and on one especially refined form of listening: musical listening. We will propose the theory that musical listening could be seen as a construction of the commons.

Recent musical history can be read as a history of listening and its various mutations. Whether it is with the ‘acousmatic’ practices of musique concrete (F. Bayle, 1993), John Cage’s experiments with the anechoic chamber (J. Cage, 1961), composition based on the ‘idiosyncrasies of perception’ by Jean-Claude Risset (1988), Luigi Nono’s ‘tragedy of listening’ (L. Nono, 1993), Helmut Lachenmann’s ‘defenceless listening’ (H. Lachenmann, 1991), Glenn Gould’s listening through technology (G. Gould, 1966), Pauline Oliveros’ ‘deep listening’ (P. Oliveros, 2005), the ‘signed listening’ project carried out by the IRCAM

(APM, undated), or Francisco López's 'blind listening' (F. López, 1997), musicians and theorists have often returned to a focus on listening (cf. M. Solomos, 2020: Chapter 3).

Within these explorations of musical listening, several trends question the classical model that culminated in Romanticism and lasted through modernity. The classical model runs thus: the subject and the object of its listening, the musical work and sound, are somehow detached from the world, and the world plays itself out within them. The work becomes a universe, and, by analogy, animates the world's conflicts and promises that they will be resolved in a kind of utopia. Hegelian idealism was the basis of this conception of musical listening, which was then magnified by Adorno's philosophy of music, especially the theory of 'structural listening' (cf. T. W. Adorno, 1962: Chapter 1). This conception of listening is a wonderful way of exploring music's capacity to move people; however, focusing as it does on subjectivity conceived as pure interiority, and suggesting that everything occurs within 'music itself', it tends to place musical processes within the sphere of the personal. Critiquing the theory of the autonomy of music, Hildegard Westerkamp writes: 'the Western aesthetic separates the experience of music from its social context. When one is moved by the music in that sense, one is moved internally, privately, as an individual' (H. Westerkamp, 1988: 71).

This conception of listening depoliticizes music. When employed in today's societies, in which common space tends to be increasingly lacking, it risks becoming the opposite of what it should be: instead of emancipating the individual, music risks becoming an instrument of control. The aim of several movements that question the classical model is surely to repoliticise listening by re-introducing it into common space. Without abandoning the impact of interiority, listening opens itself up to the world – to a world that has not been sifted by its analogical representation through the work”.

1. Free poetical reflections... (C. Esclapez)

This year, the theme of the NCMM conference is “Listening to today's music”. One of the questions suggested for reflection is: “How can music listening have an impact on society?”. This question resonates with the discussion in Chapter 6 of Solomos's book: “Listening as the Construction of the Common”. In this chapter, Solomos writes that it is necessary to “*repoliticize* listening by reinscribing it in the common space”. One reads the urgency of

going beyond the post-Romantic aesthetics or the current culture of emotion that sometimes continues to run through our contemporary ways of listening. For Solomos, it is urgent to put listening back at the heart of our political and societal project. As we know, this issue was progressively established during the twentieth century by composers and philosophers like John Cage. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, many artists and thinkers have started paying attention to our soundscapes. After the linguistic turn and the anthropological turn, the ecological turn must be established. There is an urgency to do so.

In this context, Solomos proposes that listening to music (and sound) could actively participate in this ecological turn by teaching us to build the commons, that is to say, to build spaces for dialogue, invention, and the transformation of mentalities. This conviction may seem naive when faced with today's ecological, economical, and political challenges. It may even sound very utopian. And yet, it is certainly one of the most difficult things to do: to listen, to really listen, to listen with awareness. With the conviction that listening is a powerful tool to learn to deconstruct our preconceptions, personal and collective ideologies, we understand, for example, why it is essential to continue to introduce children to music from an early age; why it is essential that concert tickets be fairly priced; why it is essential that all types of music (whatever the geographical areas or periods they come from) be represented in our concert halls, as well as in our streets and in other spaces of dissemination, including virtual spaces.

So, what does listening to music and sound teach us? But also, what does listening in general teach us? Chapter 6 offers some words, which I have decided to extract from their initial context and to consider them as *conditions* of listening, conditions of *doing together* that listening allows us to experiment with.

To listen, it is necessary, according to Solomos, to *pay attention*, to *make yourself available*, to *welcome*, to *be located*, to *be involved*.

All these words are action verbs. They are also the conditions for all forms of dialogue: between humans and non-humans or between us and our soundscapes. Listening, for Solomos, is contextual, always relative to something or someone. Listening is both internal and external at the same time. For each of these actions, one thing could also be noted: these actions are *silent* actions. They require us to be silent within ourselves. That is really difficult to do. To *really* listen, we must put aside our preconceptions, our ideologies to *listen better*. It's difficult because we always listen in relation to our references, our points of

view. On the other hand, listening creates a space where we can enter into a form of resonance. We can avoid appropriation by listening. First listen. Then try to identify in order to better understand and interpret what we have heard. Finally, talk about it. Talk to try and share what we have heard.

So, as I finished reading Chapter 6, I said to myself that what listening teaches us, above all, is silence, a silence that is not the place of oblivion, erasure, mutilation or gagging. In silence, I listen. I listen to what surrounds me: the sounds of the world, but also the sounds of my own body. In silence, I listen to ideas that come and go. I listen to the words of others. I listen and learn to receive teachings that do not come from what I know or what I think I know. In silence, I listen to other points of view. I learn to accept them. In this way, I have a special experience. I gain a sensory knowledge of the world and of beings, a knowledge made up of feelings, of density, of strangeness, of respect, humility, and humanity. Listening is supportive. It teaches us to build something in common. It teaches us about a world that cannot be smooth, global, or unitary. We then have the opportunity to remind ourselves of the values that listening could bring us if we only learn to listen better, especially to the works of artists and theorists that have placed listening to sound and music at the heart of their practices and theoretical experiments.

2. Public sound art listening (A. Nilchiani)

Among the many contributions of the book *Exploring the Ecologies of Music and Sound*, I wish to highlight the importance of the author's approach within the fields of Sound Studies and Sonic Arts, particularly in the context of sound installations and the role of sound within specific situations. The author's exploration of the interactions between these artworks and their diverse "environments" is of particular significance.

Solomos argues that expanding the concept of ecology to encompass its social, political, and mental dimensions opens up new opportunities to examine the contributions of these ecologies to musical and sound practices. This perspective offers fresh theoretical insight and a new vision. Furthermore, the concept of "Listening as a construction of the commons," as articulated by the author, aligns closely with practices such as soundwalks and urban sound installations. I have chosen to focus on three specific points related to these

issues: 1. Liberating listening; 2. Social sound art; 3. Sound milieu as a network of relationships.

Before delving into the topic of listening as Solomos develops in his new book, I would like to begin with his earlier work, *From Music to Sound, The Emergence of Sound in 20th- and 21st-Century Music*, which was published in French in 2013 and later in English in 2020. Specifically, I want to focus on the chapter entitled “Listening (Sounds)” and its first section, “Liberating Listening.” For most of the diverse practices and fields encompassed by sound art, the initial and most crucial step is listening. Beyond the aesthetic or technological aspects of these works, listening serves as both the artist’s creative tool and the primary means of communication with the audience.

“His (Cage’s) greatest invention was *large new ears*. Indeed, to be able to accept the opening up of music to all possible sounds, he tells us, it suffices to listen differently. Listen differently: let us not try to save music at all costs by taming new sounds; let us only learn to listen to them: they are already music. So the essential thing is not to articulate these sounds but to prick up one’s ears and accept them as they are, without asking questions.” (SOLOMOS, 2020, pp.83-84)

Refocusing on listening, as mentioned by Solomos, appears to be the pivotal moment in the art of creating with sounds. Despite Cage’s profound influence on many sound installation pioneers, such as Max Neuhaus and Bill Fontana, this approach to listening is distinctly discernible in Cage’s sound projects. One such project is his amplified park project for Montestella, a concept dating back to 1979 but never realized. This project serves as an illustration of several aspects of Cage’s approach to listening and interacting with the natural and urban sound environment on Montestella Hill in Ivrea, Italy.

“The aim of several movements that question the classical model is surely to repoliticise listening by re-introducing it into common space. Without abandoning the impact of interiority, listening opens itself up to the world – to a world that has not been sifted by its analogical representation through the work. One of the precursors of this shift, John Cage, explains that listening means making oneself attentive: ‘I am here, and there is nothing to say.’” (Solomos, 2023, p.122.)

Consciously and actively listening to our environment is thus crucial for the creation and reception of different sound practices, such as Max Neuhaus’s “Listen,” Hildegard Westerkamp’s “Soundwalks,” and Pauline Oliveros’s “Deep Listening”. Learning to listen as

an intentional practice and the creative process of generating sounds from attentive listening are essential aspects of urban sound art.

This brings me to my second point, another facet of this analytical approach that we find in the chapter on listening and the concept of “communication in society” is the social and public practice of sound art. This practice is fundamental for the French composer and sound artist Nicolas Frize who immerses himself in the environments of hospitals, jails, factories, and archives, exploring the way these spaces are inhabited by the histories of the people within them, all through the medium of sound.

I would also like to mention the approach of American sound artist Christopher Janney, renowned for his Urban Music Instruments (such as sound stairs) in public spaces, and his concept of “social foil.” This concept involves creating structures that encourage people to interact with each other in a playful and creative manner through sounds.

“What I call a ‘social foil’ catalyz[es] people in a social setting to interact with each other creatively.” (Janney, 2019)

Although Janney’s sounds usually do not consist of environmental sounds, the behavioural and interactive aspects he fosters through his artwork align seamlessly with this context. This leads me to the question: is the inherent nature of sound within artwork a prerequisite for its social quality?

The final point, and one that holds great relevance for urban sound art, concerns the three entities involved in the act of listening: the subject, the object, and the (sound) milieu.

“The sound milieu can be thought of as a network of relationships that causes the listener and the musical work/sound to emerge; but it is a network whose relationships are not pre-determined, and which are themselves produced by the processes of listening.” (Solomos, 2023, pp. 124-125)

By conceiving of a sound milieu as a network of relationships that is not predetermined but is generated through the processes of listening, I was thinking of social interactions with a broader audience, as opposed to the audiences of concert halls. Therefore, my question revolves around the “limitations” of this network of relationships, especially in the context of listening in a public space.

3. Listening as a connection to the everyday through sound (R. D. Wanke)

Solomos's book *Exploring the Ecologies of Music and Sound* presents a wide range of complex arguments that can be challenging to summarize. However, if we narrow our focus to Chapter 6, entitled "Listening as a Construction of the Commons", we can clearly see the author's significant capacity for critical thinking and his talent for drawing insightful connections. In this chapter, Solomos introduces the idea of describing a part of recent music history as a history of listening. This concept allows him to establish a connecting thread that links various figures in the music world, ranging from Jean-Claude Risset and Luigi Nono to Helmut Lachenmann, Glenn Gould, Pauline Oliveros, Francisco Lopez, and Hildegard Westerkamp.

Right from the beginning, Solomos eliminates any ambiguity by stating, "[h]ere, we will focus on one particular form of attention – listening – and on one especially refined form of listening: musical listening" (p. 122). Solomos isn't interested in revisiting the debate surrounding the myth of the aesthetic attitude (Dickie, 1964); instead, he aims to address the heart of the matter: how can the quintessential example of subjective and introspective listening, namely musical listening, be a means to (re)construct the commons?

To answer this question, Solomos draws upon Crawford's suggestion (2014) of reconnecting listening as a form of attention to the external world and viewing the environment as a contributor in the formation of the self. This idea has resonated with prominent figures like Tim Ingold, Gernot Böhme, Francisco Varela, and Alva Nöe across various disciplines, including anthropology, philosophy, and cognitive sciences. It has also played a central role in music practices within the field of sound ecology. Solomos focuses specifically on a relatively new artistic genre, soundwalks, and examines Hildegard Westerkamp's work *Kits Beach Soundwalk*, a piece I was not familiar with. However, after listening to it, I instantly grasped the essence of Solomos's reflection. Upon reading the text alone, Westerkamp's composition might initially appear as a conceptual work where the instructions are integrated into the piece itself, creating a self-contained and self-referential artwork. In reality, it's quite the opposite, and Solomos effectively highlights that "[Westerkamp] makes us listen to her listening" (p. 131). The significance of Solomos's analysis lies in his identification of a perceptual journey that Westerkamp invites us to undertake: "taking us from the everyday to the most artistically refined craftsmanship, without severing our connection to the everyday" (p. 133).

I'd now like to introduce a new perspective for consideration: is the connection to the "everyday" possible only with real-world sounds and, by extension, electroacoustic sound that resembles real-world sounds? In *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989), there is a reference to Xenakis's *Concret PH* in which Xenakis's small sounds are described "as metallic, like needles". Here, once again, there's a connection to elements from the real world. What if the independent and detached "world of sounds" – to use Roger Scruton's expression (1997) – could create a common milieu for listening? Can it create a situated listening practice? When we think of composers like György Ligeti, Giacinto Scelsi, and Xenakis himself, who were pioneers of the idea of sonic masses, we are compelled to reflect on the potential for sound itself to serve as a common ground for engagement. This has been the central focus of my research over the past decade, and Solomos, through his analyses in his 2023 and 2020 publications, provides a rich array of captivating examples.

Solomos mentions, for instance, the case of noise music that establishes a connection to everyday spaces through the "presence" and materiality of sound, creating a sort of physical existence. Several artists, such as Alvin Lucier, Pauline Oliveros, and Jacob Kierkegaard, have ventured into exploring how sounds, their presence, and movements within physical spaces can establish a link to our daily lives.

Sounds, by their very nature, unfold over time, often echoing the temporal rhythms of natural processes. Within various musical contexts, sound patterns embody Gestalts and kinaesthetic principles, guiding us towards a profound connection with the world (Wanke, 2023). However, as Solomos wisely points out, there remains a persistent risk of falling into solipsism, self-referentiality, and excessively subjective practices. In this context, I appreciate how Solomos's book illuminates the essential paradoxes inherent in certain contemporary practices within the realm of sonic arts. The book calls for a departure from the myths of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the notions of universal centrality and the autonomy of the artwork. Instead, it encourages us to look ahead to the future of sound and music as powerful means of connection that are deeply rooted in specific contexts and politically charged. The challenge before us is twofold: on one hand, to uncover new musical and sonic experiences capable of re-establishing our connection to the agency of everyday life and, on the other, to devise innovative approaches to interpreting the music of the past from a new perspective – one that is communal, political, and integrated into our daily existence, rather than detached and solipsistic.

4. Sound, *Ritornello* and *autonomisation* (S. Ferraz)

“Listening consists in the co-creation of a subject (the listener’s intention) and an object (the musical work, the sound) – subject and object to be taken in their phenomenological sense.” (Makis Solomos, 2023, p.144)

...and almost at the same level of what we can call a listening system.

In his book, Solomos, at several moments, alludes to a very important and interesting idea: the idea of autonomy or the process of autonomy (“autonomisation” in French) of sound. But what is meant by the process of autonomy? It would be worth thinking about this procedure, and perhaps distinguishing between autonomy as a process and independence, or even alienation, individualism, and solipsism. To understand autonomy in the sense of breaking down levels and hierarchies of relations and interactions, in a brief but important passage in the book, Solomos quotes the cognitive scientist Francisco Varela, who “defended the notion of autonomy, but he defined it as a living organism’s ability to be shaped by the interaction with its environment.”

While reading the book, I became somewhat focused on this idea, because autonomy is one of the main situations that emerges in what Deleuze and Guattari define as the concept of *Ritornello* in *Thousand Plateaus*. Solomos understands this relation very well. With the concept of *Ritornello*, Deleuze and Guattari create a generative model of territories. From what they call “means” and “rhythms”, ways of designating the first moments of a territory, Deleuze and Guattari show how in this movement even the more insignificant components can jump from the position of modulated to that of modulator. A component ceases to be a simple element within a system and becomes autonomous: to exist without having to be under the judgment of the elements that generated it.

Thought of in this way, autonomy refers to the moment where a component of a territory ceases to be subordinate to that territory, having then the power to modulate the whole territory, to put the territory in check and even to collapse the territory. This is perhaps what happens with sound: from being the first component to arising from the act of playing instruments and singing, sound becomes the primary component, one of singular importance and the very subject of music. Music becomes synonymous with sound and vice-versa: let’s listen to a sound.

What lies in this autonomy is that music, melody, musical rhythm, harmonies, and other such previously central elements now have to coexist with what was only the almost, or even totally, abstract channel that made such elements perceptible. With autonomous sound, listening to sounds, in the street or in a forest, is no longer listening to an environment, but to the music of an environment in which the channel of expression becomes the expression itself.

Once it becomes autonomous, sound makes room for the characters that interact with it, and sound arts are born. Sound arts include sound artists and the ways of listening to sound outside the context of music, but also musical listening, meaning listening that identifies moments, that identifies sound qualities, that relates them, and that listens to the flow of transformations of an environment under its sound aspect.

To listen (*écouter*), which initially concerned music and was implicated in the comprehension of musical objects (chords, harmonies, melodies, musical figures) during the twentieth century with the prominent presence of sound as the main material, comes to be guided by various dimensions of what we can call “sound”: from acoustics, or listening to harmonics, to sound roughness and smoothness (since 1970, all sound devices have interfaces to control sound colours), to a mechanism of domination through the different sound weapons and communication gadgets developed and distributed around the world.

In his book, Solomos maps this passage’s broader implications, comprising the political, the collective (social) and, above all, the poetic dimension. In this sense, it is important to think about the process of “autonomy” of sound – *autonomisation*. Autonomous is no longer restricted to the instrumental or even electroacoustic music or sound. With the development of sound communication technologies, it starts to cross all domains of music and life from ethnomusicology, historical musicology, historical practices, composition, pop music, soundscape studies, soundwalks and everyday life.

When we read “sound”, it is important to understand that it is not a decision from the musical world, separate from the rest of the world, which puts it in a central position, but a field of interactions between several domains: technologies, politics, neo-colonialism, modes of sound communication, other arts and the presence of sound in those arts, and the importance of the environment in everyday debate. It is in this sense that it is said sound becomes autonomous: it starts to cross several domains, undoing previous paradigms where sound was only the support of music, the support of speech. We are faced with a change of

focus from the meaning to the significance, to departing from the significance to dealing with new meanings pertaining to sound. This is an interesting but also dangerous change of focus that attests to the fact that musical studies have become more and more scientific, less and less musical and poetical.

It is at this point that I believe we need to pay attention to and read the “notion of autonomy” instead of the everyday meaning of autonomy. And Solomos acknowledges that, which is why I propose to close with the epigraph that opened this short reflection:

“Listening consists in the co-creation of a subject (the listener's intention) and an object (the musical work, the sound) – subject and object to be taken in their phenomenological sense.”

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