

Research Article

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Tuning in on the Becoming of Music

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Abstract: In this article, I explore the music-in-becoming as a dialogue. The thesis of my inquiry is that during musical composition, the composer's listening is marked by both activeness and receptiveness; actively structuring the sounding work, and receptively letting the work express itself as it takes its form. Composer and work merge in sudden moments of attunement, the sensation of coherence between the so-far completed and the anticipation of the as-of-yet unformed work. Composition is all about balancing writing as a handicraft with those rare, unexpected moments of attunement. I discuss the emerging work's invitational character and the fact that during composition, the piece seems to request the composer's attention. The audibility of the work's voice depends on the composer's ability to listen. Finally, the methodological considerations concerning sonic-artistic research show that researching sonic experiences requires competencies of being attentive, responsive, and reflective. Attentiveness is related to thorough listening experiences of the emerging music, responsiveness appears as a vital skill in a composer's dialoguing with the music-in-becoming, and reflectiveness is associated with empirically documenting the processes. At the heart of this sonic research project, I place my lived experience of composing and the intimate relation between sound and listening.

Keywords: audial experience, sonic research, phenomenology, musical composition, attunement

1 Introduction

Composing music essentially means bringing something new into the world. Compared to the visual clarity of the written score and the sonic expression of the music when performed, the process of composing it is both obvious and highly obscure at the same time. Being in the process of the music-in-becoming, with the work's continuously emerging sonic structures, does not necessarily make me capable of *accounting* for that process. When the score is finished, as a ritual, I sign the last page. Does this notion of an "I" that conducts the whole process of structuring ideas into a sounding piece reflect my innermost experience as a composer? Am I a creator or rather a midwife? Philip Barford describes the role of the composer as follows:

We not only see it being done; we act as midwives in the process. Yet when it is all finished, the conviction that the work "happened" in some objective, independent sense is strong.¹

Barford discusses the role of a composer as providing assistance to the process, supporting the music-in-becoming: "It is not so much something which the composer *does* as something which he perceives being worked out within his consciousness."² The question I want to explore in this article is exactly what is being "worked out" during composing.

1 Barford, "Urphänomen," 225.

2 Ibid., 225; italics in original.

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When I compose music, I find myself in the opposing actions of intentionally structuring a process and at the same time opening for the work itself to unfold. As the piece takes form, it *speaks* with a gradually stronger voice. What is the nature of this voice – and what does it speak of? I will explore how the composer attunes to and dialogues with the emerging work. Obviously, in this dialogue, the composer's ability of listening plays a crucial role. There is not merely one way of listening; it takes on distinctively different modes. One mode is connected to the composers' attempt to clearly express their musical ideas, the other is oriented towards the gradually emerging work itself. These two listening modes form the basis for the double thesis of my exploration: during musical composition, listening is marked by both activeness and receptiveness; on the one hand, actively forming and structuring the sounding work, and, on the other hand, receptively letting the work express itself as it steadily takes form. Thus, the core topic of this inquiry is the diverse listening experience in musical composition when the work is gradually coming to life.

My inquiry is sonic because it continuously circles around sound experiences and the musical work's emergence. With sonic experience, I understand the intimate relationship between musical sound and listening to the music. The one cannot exist without the other. Furthermore, I understand musical sound not as an object, but rather as an "event through the practice of vibration,"³ that is, the musical sound in my practice as a composer. To focus analytically on the practice of composing allows for a discussion of both the competencies of listening, the structure of the composer's embodied knowledge, and the nature of the music coming alive. For me, the aim of sonic research is twofold: first, to improve my listening and music-forming skills by refining an attentive-explorative attitude in the composition process, and second, to provide embodied, intersubjective knowledge, extracted from my lived artistic experience. Thus, I work in the field of sound studies with its focus on "contemplating sound phenomena."⁴ As is the case for artistic researchers, my reflective practice presupposes an active involvement in sharing a personal experience that "is capable of illuminating the inner recesses of [...] [my] creative actions."⁵ My main method of inquiry is the careful listening to the characters, voices, and genuine features of music-in-becoming and transforming them truthfully into both sonic expression and the written format. While composing, I try to keep track of the decisions that I make by regularly jotting down observations and self-reflections into my notebook. The discussion in this article draws on excerpts from these notebook entries, together with a few excerpts and a score sample from the composing of *Ørenslyd. Ritus V* (2019). Neither notebook excerpts nor composition description are included for purposes of exemplification; they form the empirical basis for my inquiry.⁶

2 When composing music becomes *an experience*

In my notes, I repeatedly try to capture the experience of composition as *being in dialogue*. The very notion of dialogue implies a conversation between two subjects. I describe the work that I dialogue with during composition in different ways; as that which comes "from above," as something "that approaches me (from the world)" or what I hear when listening "into the spaces of possibilities."⁷ Is the work merely different ideas in my mind seeking artistic expression or does it also have a voice of its own? My sonic experience is related to John Dewey's descriptions of the variety of experiential encountering. In his extensive and thorough exploration of the phenomena of experience, Dewey shows that experience can take on a multitude of forms. In *Art as Experience*, he argues that experience as such is an on-going, everyday activity that happens all the time. It "occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing

³ Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 3.

⁴ Crispin, "The Music Comes from Me," 343.

⁵ Ibid., 351.

⁶ My exploration is part of the research project *The Phenomenology of Audial Experience*, see: <https://www.nmbu.no/en/projects/node/38017>

⁷ Notebook entries from resp. 28.7.2019, 18.4.2019, and 19.6.2019.

conditions is involved in the very process of living.”⁸ With this as a background, he differentiates between more specific forms of experience. Two of these specifications I find relevant for my discussions. There is experience and there is *an* experience: in contrast to ongoing, normal lifeworld experiences,

[...] we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfilment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences.⁹

Musical composing is an activity of manifold elements. It is continuous work characterized by moving back and forth between ideas and realizations, between what I want to hear and what is realized in the score. It is the practice of patiently staying on track, not giving in to all the distractions that appear during work. Composing is for the most part mere routine, not unlike the work of a craftsman. In addition, a composing experience is the sensation of the piece suddenly fitting-together, of finishing a passage, with the sensation of coherence. It is the sensation of hearing something that I had neither planned nor expected. When reflecting on my decision-making process, for lack of more precise descriptions, I use expressions like intuitive awareness, sudden appearance, and inspiration. The process from initial ideas and inspirations to the completed work involves several iterations. I often struggle with fitting the various elements together in such a way that the result somehow feels coherent. In contrast to the mere crafted work of composing, a composing experience is exciting and energetic; it is a moment I describe as “finally, it feels right!”¹⁰ These moments come unplanned and often unexpectedly, and they are marked by a sensation of *Stimmigkeit*, of attunement.¹¹ The composition process is full of seemingly unresolved dissonances and obstacles. An attunement is a consonant relation between the inner and the outer ears, between imaginative and actual sounds. Attunement is the sensation of coherence between what I hear and the anticipation of what is yet to come in the oncoming parts of the piece. Such sensations of composing music coincide with Dewey’s characteristic of *an* experience.

There is a second aspect of Dewey’s elaboration on experience that is relevant for my exploration, namely his differentiations between aesthetics and art. Aesthetics is not something that is imposed upon experience from the outside, Dewey argues; it belongs “to every normally complete experience.”¹² Etymologically, the noun aesthetics relates to “perception via the senses,” whereas the adjective aesthetic (*aisthetikos*) is translated as “perceptual.”¹³ In this line of thought, listening is an perceptual skill belonging to everyday audial experiences. Thus, an auditory experience is not necessarily a beautiful or an artistic experience, it is an aesthetic experience, regardless of whether I am listening to the squeaky sound of the greenfinch, Lachenmann’s solo piece for cello *Pression* (1969–1970), or the noise from construction work. However, the way we have come to use the concept of aesthetics, it represents a continuum of related connotations; at one end we find the pure perceptual experience, at the other the experience of art and beauty.¹⁴ Dewey notes that there is no English word that comprises both “artistic” and “aesthetic” since the first refers “primarily to the act of production” and the latter “to that of perception and enjoyment.”¹⁵ In my inquiry of listening in musical composition, I define listening experiences as perceptual experiences, sense experiences, since the process of composition itself is driven by forms of audial sensitivity. Following Dewey’ ideas, the composer is a *sensuous* artist:

⁸ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 36.

⁹ Ibid., 36, 37; italics in original.

¹⁰ Notebook entry, 20.9.2019. This is an English translation of “endelig stemmer det!” The Norwegian phrase “det stemmer” is related to the verb “å stemme,” “to tune” (e.g., an instrument). Thus, a better re-writing of “det stemmer” could be “finally in tune!” or “finally attunement!”

¹¹ In Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 176, “attunement” is the English translation of *Gestimmtheit*, whereas “mood, our Being-attuned” is the translation of *Stimmung, das Gestimmtsein* (172). In my exploration, however, I find *Stimmigkeit* a more precise expression as the character of attunement relates to the sensation of the composed being coherent (*stimmig*).

¹² Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 48.

¹³ Ayto, *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Word Origins*, keyword “aesthetics.”

¹⁴ See Østergaard, “The Attentive Ear,” 50–2.

¹⁵ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 48.

An artist, in comparison with his fellows, is one who is not only especially gifted in powers of execution but in unusual sensitivity to the qualities of things. This sensitivity also directs his doings and makings.¹⁶

The activity of composition denotes a process of “doings and makings” led by auditory awareness. In my inquiry, this “sensitivity to the qualities of things” appears in the diverse forms of listening during musical composition. I will now explore these listening forms more in detail, as integral in the process of musical composition.

3 Listening as attunement

In the previous chapter, I tried to capture the experience of attunement, the sensation of coherence in the becoming of the musical work. What is the quality of listening in those moments, in contrast to the skill of listening in the continuous craft practice of composing? First, we must broaden the understanding of what we mean by listening. Several scholars make the distinction between *hearing*, as the perception of sounds and noises, of tones, timbres, and voices, and *listening* as a more attentive character, as giving one’s attention to that what we listen to.¹⁷ The distinction between hearing and listening indicates a relationship between hearing as (passively) receiving and listening as (actively) engaging. The passive receptivity of hearing could, however, also be “the vital potential for a deeply embedded and genuinely empathic understanding that brings sound into embodiment prior to the crystallization of judgement.”¹⁸ The idea of empathically letting in what is heard corresponds to my thesis, that receptive listening at work is a vital part of the composition process. Perhaps precisely this receptivity is at work in those sudden moments of attunement.

The diversity of forms of listening is widely discussed in Heideggerian ontology. Already etymologically, we find a kinship between listening and the interaction of humans and their environment. The verb listening (*hören*) is related to “belong to” (*zugehören*),¹⁹ whereas *zuhören* is a form of intently listening and *Zugehörigkeit* means “belonging.” In *Being and Time*, Heidegger develops the notion of listening as engagement in Being.²⁰ Here, Heidegger distinguished between hearing and hearkening (*Horchten*): “Hearkening is phenomenally still more primordial than what is defined “in the first instance” as “hearing” in psychology – the sensing of tones and the perception of sounds.”²¹ Hearkening can be understood as a sort of deep, anticipated listening, “already the hearkening waiting for meaning that always also can fail to appear,”²² whereas hearing for Heidegger directly connects to sensing and perception. When relating the distinction between hearkening and hearing to musical composition, I experience “sensing of tones” as central for the activity. By repeatedly listening to pitches, rhythms, harmonies, and human voices in temporal flow, my hearing becomes more like hearkening. The musical experience becomes richer, more differentiated due to a refined attentive-explorative attitude towards the composition process. Listening to the music-in-becoming might reveal moments of attunement, the ones where musical idea and realization suddenly merge.

The sensation of sudden attunement reminds me of Arthur Koestler’s retelling stories of moments of creation drawn from science history. In *The Act of Creation*, he exposes the dialectic of logic and intuition, of

¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

¹⁷ An example is found in Barthes, “Listening;” “Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act” (245; italics in original). See also Østergaard, “The Attentive Ear,” 53.

¹⁸ Crispin, “The Music Comes from Me,” 347.

¹⁹ Wallrup, “Music, Truth and Belonging,” 143.

²⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 203–10.

²¹ Ibid., 207.

²² Espinet, *Phänomenologie des Hörens*, 102; my translation of “[Hören ist nicht nur das Vernehmen und Verstehen von Sinn,] sondern bereits das horchende Warten auf Sinn, der immer auch ausbleiben kann.”

conscious and unconscious states of mind. He compares scientists' stories of discoveries to those of artists and finds a recurring pattern: what artists and scientists alike experience as moments of sudden insights are oscillations between the planned and the impulsive, between the structured and the dreamy, between the intended and the unexpected. Such opposite tendencies of the mind congregate fruitfully in those moments experienced as attunements and those of enlightenment. In the process of staying on track, holding onto the idea, the intertwined activity of the conscious and the unconscious "creates a state of receptivity, a readiness of the 'prepared mind'."²³ As I have explored in a previous article, the unconscious seems to form a foundation which the musical intellect rests upon.²⁴ Elements of deeper layers in consciousness are not (yet) lifted into the light; they are (still) inaccessible and can be brought forth from concealment and thereby made *unverborgen*, uncovered, or unhidden to use the Heideggerian term. I also regard musical composition as a process that resembles Koestler's description of creation as "two-way traffic":

One traffic stream continually moves in a downward direction: we concentrate on new experiences, arrange them into patterns, develop new observational skills [...]; and when these have been mastered by continued practice, the controls are handed over to a kind of automation, and the whole assembly is dispatched, along the gradients of awareness, out of sight. The upward traffic stream moves in the small fluctuating pulses from the unconscious which sustain the dynamic balance of the mind – and in the rare, sudden surges of creativity, which may lead to a re-structuring of the whole mental landscape.²⁵

Koestler's hinting at a state of receptivity and the readiness of the prepared mind interests me. To be receptive while composing is to be open to the as-of-yet unformed. Receptivity in this meaning relates "the genuinely emphatic understanding that brings sound into embodiment."²⁶ To be open is to have an attentive ear towards the work gradually taking its form. The distinctiveness of what I hear depends on the one hand on my ability to listen carefully to these voices, my ability to hearken (*horchen*), on the other hand, on the strength and clarity of the voices. The more attentively I listen, it seems, the stronger the voice of the piece sounds. And the further I have come in the process, the more distinct becomes the work's own voice.

Our state of being in tune (or rather being *out of tune*) with the world is extensively explored by Hartmut Rosa in *Resonance. A sociology of our relationship to the world*. The way we are in the world relates to our connectedness to the world. Rosa's thesis is that life is a matter of the quality of one's relationship to the world. To vibrate together with the world is a sensation of oneness, akin to Dewey's conception of an aesthetic experience. Such rare moments of being in resonance in relation to the surroundings are like "a *vibrating wire* between us and the world,"²⁷ Rosa argues. Here, I recognize the sensation of attunement and complementarity of activeness and receptiveness: The state of being in resonance presupposes both an open-minded person and a world that invites the person in. We are "in tune" when the wire between us and the world vibrates. In other words, "resonant relationships presuppose a kind of *mutual, rhythmic oscillation*, and therefore must also satisfy certain demands of synchronizations."²⁸ To belong to (*zugehören*) is akin to the ability to listen (*hören*). I experience the composition process as one where I seek these unique moments of "rhythmic oscillation." When they occur, I know that I am on the right track.

4 Music's inherent appeal

Let me now expand on the nature of the emerging musical work and its inviting character. In the dialogue between the work and myself, it seems easier to verbalize my part than my dialogue partner's. I ask

²³ Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, 209.

²⁴ Østergaard, "Secret Spaces."

²⁵ Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, 181.

²⁶ Crispin, "'The Music Comes from Me,'" 347.

²⁷ Rosa, *Resonance*, 8; italics in original.

²⁸ Ibid., 28; italics in original.

questions like: how can I improve myself as a good listener? What affects my state of receptivity and the readiness of my prepared mind? If I, however, want to explore the music-in-becoming as a dialogue, then my counterpart needs attention as well. In doing so, other questions emerge: what is the work's ability to bring my consciousness into a state of listening? How does the work invite me to participate in the shaping of its expressions? In my writings, I have often returned to the question of the world's *Aufforderungscharakter*, its invitational character.²⁹ When exploring the composition process, I try to capture the work's feature of request and invitation. Music seems to have this ability, under the right circumstances; it invites me to listen. Such invitations I experience not only when listening to music, but also in everyday situations. The melancholic sound of a blackbird on a late evening in spring invites me to stop my evening walk and listen; its song demands an opening of my ears. Certain sounds resonate within me, there is a vibrating wire between me and the world's events.³⁰ Here, I explore the same phenomenon occurring during the composing of music.

The sensation of having one's attention drawn to music is due to its character of attractiveness, Peder Christian Kjerschow argues. Our ears paying attention to the music and our being spellbound when listening to music are grounded both in the listener's receptivity and in music's quest for attention. Music has "an inherent appeal by which it presents itself, captures our attention and detains it."³¹ Music reveals itself through attentive listening as reality, not merely because of the listener's participating attention:

In this attitude, there is a confidence that what we encounter out there is *reality*, not something that consciousness merely reflects or predefines. There is a confidence that the world's (and the music's) meaningful *addressing* on the one hand and man's *addressed* sense of context and meaning, on the other hand, are two sides of the same coin, and that the together-ness between them is *evocative*: There is something real that manifests itself in this encounter, in the coexistence between consciousness and the world, and only there.³²

In Kjerschow's insisting on the realness of music, I hear the reverberations of phenomenology's critique of constructivism. When we – individually or culturally – are regarded as the only valid source of meaning, there is a danger that the world becomes a speechless "anything," incapable to sound with its own voice, unable to articulate itself. It is as if nature speaks with a hundred voices, but we can only hear one of them.³³ If we are the sole creators of meaning, the world is left voiceless, looted of reality status. If we happened to notice the world's voicelessness, we would take it as our task to re-assign the world its meaning and to speak on behalf of the world. A process of *Entweltlichung* takes place, the process where the world "gets specifically *deprived of its worldhood*."³⁴ When meaning becomes a question of mere social construction, Kjerschow argues, then "man is caught in his own subjectivity," without any "access to larger meaningful connections it might be part of."³⁵ His thesis is that listening attentively to music has the potential of encountering reality and thus, establishing meaningful relations to the world.

In his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Martin Heidegger elaborates on the nature of art in terms of the concepts of being and truth. He argues that art is not only an expression of the individual artist or the culture within which it is created, it also provides a springboard from which "what is at work in the work"³⁶ can be revealed. At the start of the essay, Heidegger describes the relation between artist and work: "The

²⁹ Østergaard, "Echoes and Shadows;" Østergaard, "Pendulum Dialogues and the Re-enchantment of the World."

³⁰ Nature's invitational character is also experienced by the natural scientists. For a Darwin, a Kepler or a Linné, the appeal of finches, the planet movements, and the pitcher plants was what attracted their attention and motivated their research.

³¹ Kjerschow, *Før Språket*, 25; my translation from Norwegian.

³² Kjerschow, "Det klingendes meningspotensial," 304; my translation from Norwegian; italics in original.

³³ "It is as if nature has a hundred languages, but we have become deaf to ninety-nine of them." Dahlin, "The Primacy of Cognition," 454.

³⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 147; italics in original.

³⁵ Kjerschow, "Det klingendes meningspotensial," 305; my translation from Norwegian.

³⁶ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 33.

artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other.”³⁷ Heidegger circles around the artwork as created by the artist versus the work as a “thing” with its own world-embeddedness. In the third part of the essay, Heidegger briefly examines the creative actions of the artist. Obviously, when we ask about the origin of something, we ask for how and under which circumstances it came into being.³⁸ Here, Heidegger distinguishes between genuine creating and mere making or bringing forth:

We think of creation as a bringing forth. But the making of equipment, too, is a bringing forth. Admittedly, handicraft [*Handwerk*] – a significant turn of phrase – creates no work [*Werk*], even when we contrast the handmade with the factory made. But what is it that distinguishes bringing forth as creation from bringing forth in the mode of making?³⁹

In reply to this question, Heidegger holds that the distinction between creating and making is not great enough to reveal the source of the work of art; the source is found neither in its making nor in its maker. In most things that are made, Heidegger argues, the fact of creation is lost. The van Gogh painting of a pair of peasant shoes, one of the works of art that Heidegger refers to, is not shown in the *act* of its making, merely as “the *fact* of the artist’s action.”⁴⁰ We regard and appreciate only the result of the creative process. It is not the personality of the maker that matters for Heidegger, “but the fact that some unique thing has been created, having itself an unmistakable ‘personality,’ rather like a person.”⁴¹ Since my field of inquiry is exactly this creative process and the dialogue between composer and the music-in-becoming, I come to a different conclusion. Admittedly, composing is much of a handicraft, patiently structuring the score, bar after bar. This continuous bringing forth, however, facilitates for moments of creation, moments where composing becomes *an* experience. In those moments of attunement, creating music is more than mere handicraft, mere making. Thus, one source of the work of art is found in the complementarity between “the activity of handicraft”⁴² at work when composing music and the sudden moments of attunement and *Werkegegnung* (work encounter). Even though Heidegger himself wrote poetry, he here obviously rejects the artist’s creativity as the source of the uniqueness of the work. Perhaps he regarded his writing of poems not as genuine creating, but as mere bringing forth or making.⁴³ Moments of attunement are difficult to put into words; such moments cannot merely be conceived of, they must be experienced. *The* experience of creating music is unique – and difficult to comprehend for those who lack this experience.

When Heidegger concludes that the artist does not hold the key to the art work,⁴⁴ he also ignores the artist’s individual character. It was van Gogh who painted that pair of peasant shoes, with all his personality and lived experience. The role of the artists’ genuine character and embodied knowledge is explored extensively in artistic research, not by merely exploring the work of art as a product, but by following the creation process itself. When tuning in on the becoming of the music, as I am doing in my research, it resonates with Heidegger’s claim that “we can characterize creation as the allowing of something to come forth in what has been brought forth.”⁴⁵ This idea is related to Barford’s hinting at the artist acting as a midwife in the creative process.

³⁷ Ibid., 1.

³⁸ Harries, *Art Matters*, 63.

³⁹ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 34.

⁴⁰ Stulberg, “Heidegger and The Origin of the Work of Art,” 263; italics in original.

⁴¹ Harries, *Art Matters*, 159.

⁴² Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 34.

⁴³ Pöltner, “Mozart und Heidegger,” notes that music plays almost no role in Heidegger’s philosophy and that he had “a better relationship with poetry than with music” (123, my translation from German). Lysaker, “Heidegger’s Absolute Music,” shows, however, that across Heidegger’s texts, one can find numerous musical figures (201). See also Travers, “Die Blume des Mundes,” for an introduction to and discussion of Heidegger’s poems.

⁴⁴ Stulberg, “Heidegger and The Origin of the Work of Art,” 263.

⁴⁵ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 35, 36.

5 The experiential voices in composition

Throughout this text, I use the term “voice.” What is the nature of this voice and how does it sound in the composition process? Normally, one thinks of listening as listening *to* something or someone.⁴⁶ In a dialogue, one listens to the meaning of what is said and to the often implicit nuances underneath what is said. One listens to the expectation of what has not yet been pronounced. One listens, not to “what is said or emitted, but who speaks, who emits: such listening is supposed to develop in an inter-subjective space where ‘I am listening’ also means ‘listen to me’.”⁴⁷ An acoustician would probably claim that where there is no sound, there is nothing to listen to, and that the voices sound because of their physical nature. When we talk about the timbre of a double bass, we mean the character of that instrument’s sound. The sound of the instrument, however, is just as much about the personality of the performer; what I hear is this distinctive personal way of playing the double bass. When we go to its etymological roots, the verb “to voice,” Latin *vocem*, means “to express, give utterance to.”⁴⁸ Thus, a voice is several things. It is the sound I can hear with my ears, and it is an utterance and expression of a person speaking, singing, or playing. In Heidegger’s ontology, Being has its voice if we listen carefully: “Listening to the voice of Being, we are attuned, *gestimmt*, to it.”⁴⁹ When I talk about “the voice of the work” and “the work expressing itself,” I am trying to capture the work’s individual expression. The work “calls out”⁵⁰ and with the right soundboard, I can hear its voice.⁵¹

Perhaps, the most obvious association when talking about voices, however, is the human voice. In several compositions in the past 20 years, I have explored vocal timbre and its variety of personal expression. While composing *Ørenslyd. Ritus V* for three voices and double bass, I intended to let the singers dwell on individual words or text fragments drawn from scientific, poetic, and religious text sources describing the skill of listening.⁵² I consider, for example, Helmholtz’ expression “the hearing ear” as a formulation that invites me to seek an abiding and meditative expression.⁵³ The three singers for whom I wrote the piece are skilled overtone singers. Using an overtone-like expression, the Norwegian word “Om” (English “if,” sounding “oom,” like *Om* in mantra chant) sets off the third movement of the piece. Here, the fundamental, *unisono* tone is broadened to a chord with audible overtones. In part D (Figure 1), a percussive “hao” (or rather the “o”) slowly changes to an “m” and forms, thus, the reverse gesture compared to the opening of the movement.

I have listened to this tiny passage several times; the *sforzando* entrance of the three voices, the *glissando lento*, and finally their forming of a unison.⁵⁴ Again and again, I listen to the soprano and mezzo-soprano coming from above and the tenor approaching from below. When listening carefully to the moment just before they reach the unison sound, it is as if the overtones for a short moment chaotically “jump” before they eventually emerge in the unison. In this passage, I also sense these three singers’ performance skills and longstanding expertise. I am fascinated by their ability to remain in that micro area between the dense harmony and the unison. I also realize that the linearity at this place in the score,

46 Østergaard, “Attentive Ear.”

47 Barthes, “Listening,” 246.

48 <https://www.etymonline.com> keyword “voice,” retrieved 2.6.2021.

49 Wallrup, “Music, Truth and Belonging,” 143.

50 From Latin *evocatus*, past participle of *evocare* “call out; rouse, summon.” <https://www.etymonline.com> keyword “evocative,” retrieved 2.6.2021.

51 Also, everyday objects have their unique voices, as Turkle retells in *Evocative Objects*. The objects speak to us; we hear their voices because they speak directly to our memories, our ability to remember.

52 The texts in *Ørenslyd. Ritus V* (2019) consist of excerpts from the Bible, from Rilke, *Duineser Elegien* (published in 1923), as well as from a lecture by Hermann von Helmholtz (held in 1857).

53 “[...] die Luftzitterung wird zum Schalle, erst wenn sie das hörende Ohr trifft”/“[...] the shivering of the air becomes sound not until it hits the hearing ear” (Helmholtz, “Über die Physiologischen Ursachen der Musikalischen Harmonie,” 65; my translation to English).

54 To listen to the audio file, go to <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1148703/1148704> and scroll down to *Ørenslyd. Ritus V*. Excerpt from 3. Movement. Recorded 25.10.2019 in Tieranatomisches Theater, Berlin.

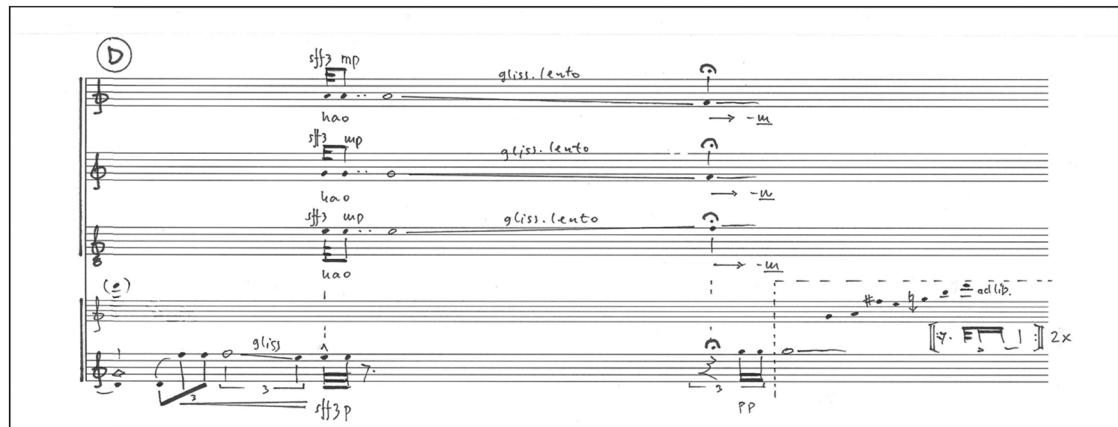


Figure 1: The first bar of part D of the third movement of Ørenslyd. Ritus V.

the three voices gradually approaching each other, does not correspond to the audial experience. In the duration of the *glissando lento*, I hear a sounding succession that does not follow linearly from chord to unison; I hear shifting harmonics and harmonies. My ears take part in a vibrational practice of music unfolding in a space with its characteristic resonance. In this tiny excerpt of one of the movements of the composition *Ørenslyd*, thus, several elements are united. At the core of this unity is, in line with Nina S. Eidsheim's exploration of music as a vibrational practice, "not only aurality but also tactile, spatial, physical, material, and vibrational sensations."⁵⁵

When I choose texts for musical composition, I listen carefully to both the meaning of the text and the words' inherent sonority. As a textual backbone for *Ørenslyd*, I use Rilke's beautiful, lamenting words: "Aber das Wehende höre, die ununterbrochene Nachricht, die aus Stille sich bildet." / "But listen to the wind's breathing, that uninterrupted news that forms from silence."⁵⁶ I cannot fully understand the meaning of these words, but the sound of them is mystical, beautiful, and very inspiring. When reading about "news that forms from silence," I imagine what kind of news that might be. Of course, texts also have their phonetic personality. Just listen to the acoustic manifold in these two sentences: "[...] die Luftzitterung wird zum Schalle, erst wenn sie das hörende Ohr trifft" / "[...] the shivering of the air becomes sound not until it hits the hearing ear."⁵⁷ Acoustically speaking, there is a big difference between "Luftzitterung" and "shivering of the air," the first with its clear percussiveness, the latter with its six vowels and melodic character.⁵⁸ When listening to the text's voices, I hear both their semantic meaning, their sonority, as well as their ambiguous meanings.

In *Listening to Music*, Martyn Evans talks of music's expressiveness rather than of its objectivity or its beauty. In his discussion of music listening as participation, he emphasizes the distinctive features of attentive activity as "that it 'expresses' rather than describes."⁵⁹ Music speaks of itself; it expresses itself. Evans admits that "beautiful" can function as an aesthetic identifier of music, but "only provided we know enough about the context of its use to take it seriously."⁶⁰ As participant listeners, we are open to the music's expressiveness, but it is the music itself that expresses itself. In other words, the music's expression is not merely the listener's construction. At this point, there seems to be a compliance between music as expressed when performed live and music expressed when coming into being during composing.

55 Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 8.

56 Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, 7.

57 Helmholtz, "Über die Physiologischen Ursachen der Musikalischen Harmonie," 65; my translation to English.

58 In German, the "z" in "Luftzitterung" is pronounced with a sharp "ts."

59 Evans, *Listening to Music*, 142.

60 Ibid., 142.

We are here approaching a phenomenological attitude that pervades my exploration of the composition process: to listen to the work's voice is to be willing to emphatically receive its *Aufforderung*, its invitation. Such an attitude is at the same time prerequisite for musical composing with its two fundamental skills: on the one hand, I receptively accept "what approaches me," but to accept "what approaches me," I must first acknowledge its realness. On the other hand, I actively seek to form music, because to give the music its shape, to let its voices sing, I must acknowledge my ability as a creative person.

6 What's new?

I started this inquiry rather boldly by claiming that composing music essentially means bringing something new into the world. What does "new" signify in this context? Is it enough that the music I compose differs from my previous compositions? Does it need to be innovative and ground-breaking in a historical context? In modernism, the quest for "the new" has been prevailing, but also widely debated. By embracing "the new," the artist could take a critical stand with the past and endorse a radical change of art and its expressions. The debate between musical modernists and traditionalists has raged for several decades and has left any deeper understanding of what exactly is new about "new art." For my part, I distinguish between musical composition as opposed to musical imitation, where the former implies an intention of not repeating the already heard, not imitating a conventional style (or my own pieces, for that matter). This distinction was introduced to me in the late 1980s by my teacher, the Swedish composer Jan W. Morthenson: "The composer must show such a critical-reflective attitude time and time again to avoid artistic recycling and stagnation."⁶¹ Contemporary musical composition is just as much about avoiding conventional clichés and thousand-times-heard-before music than creating genuine *nie erhörte Klänge* (sounds never heard before), as the German avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen proclaimed. Presently, composing seems to take place within a broad spectrum of potential expressions and musical styles. This diversity provides the opportunity to approach the creation of music not from a style perspective, but rather from a more explorative, phenomenological angle. Perhaps, what appears as new in the composition process is – akin to Barford's metaphor of the artist as midwife – the experience of a composition's birth.

Whereas much of the modernistic debate has been about how to renew the musical material and music's performance practices, the German composer Helmut Lachenmann turns the attention towards new ways of listening. A radically new approach to music, Lachenmann advocates, must come by *listening to how we listen*. Modern music is not primarily about excursions into new landscapes of not-yet discovered sounds, it is about discovering "new sensoria, a new sensibility and a new and transformed perception."⁶² By listening to our listening habits, Lachenmann encourages us to critically examine our listening ability as more than a passive reception of music. Thus, the judgment of whether music is "new" or "traditional" and "conventional" depends as much on the ears. The need for a radical new audial awareness is also emphasized by John Cage, even though he articulates it quite differently. Cage is supposed to have greeted his fellow composers with "Happy New Ears!" when entering the new year. Typically, in his texts, he speaks of "an open ear and an open mind and the enjoyment of daily noises."⁶³ Both Cage and Lachenmann turn their attention away from the musical body towards the skill of listening, both in music and as a world-opening perceptual ability.

In musical composition, there is an intimate balance between receptiveness and activeness. The Norwegian composer Lasse Thoresen discusses the question of what is new in emerging music and the composer's mental preparedness: "For whoever shall create something completely new, oblivion will be

⁶¹ Cited from Østergaard, "Secret Spaces," 12.

⁶² Lachenmann, "Hören ist wehrlos," 118; my translation from German.

⁶³ Cage, "Happy New Ears!," 34.

central. It is the quiet and empty mind – before a sounding thought breaks the silence and appears to the observing consciousness as a gift, as a small miracle.”⁶⁴ In the act of composing, I prepare myself to receive the emerging music. Aesthetically speaking, this preparedness is especially related to the audial sense: “Listening to the sound-sounding world of the mind requires *listening obedience*: letting it play, not playing itself. To create is to be led into a self-unfolding process.”⁶⁵ According to Thoresen, composing becomes a process of condensing fleeting inspiration into fixed musical forms. Once again, we find the complementarity of intentionally participating and attentively perceiving. Music-in-becoming is the emergent form; its process is “the liberation of the immanent possibilities of the musical material.”⁶⁶

7 In the end, my ears always decide

I now return to the thesis posed in the introduction. During composition, the composer’s listening is marked by both activeness and receptiveness. This can be understood as actively monitoring the transformation of ideas to musical expression, and receptively listening to the work speak with its own voice. There is a balance between skills of handicraft, steadily putting notes on paper, and paying attention to those suddenly appearing moments when the piece speaks with its own, gradually stronger voice. The composer’s listening takes place according to, first, the degree to which one listens attentively, and second, the degree to which what is heard comes from me, my ideas and experience or from the music-in-becoming. With an attention towards the evolving work, I hear a voice that gradually articulates itself. I know quite a few composer colleagues who talk about the moment when the work starts “to write itself.” This experience is also, I would think, shared by writers and other creative artists.⁶⁷

As a conclusion of my exploration, I would like to emphasize three aspects. First, I have aimed at describing the experience of *the work expressing itself* during composing. The musical piece seems to have a voice of its own; its audibility, however, depends on the composer’s ability of listening. The evocative character of the emerging piece is especially significant in moments of attunement when the piece is being worked out. Second, *listening takes on a variety of forms* during the making of music, ranging from intentional listening to certain sound combinations and tonal-rhythmic structures, to a more open, intuitive hearing. The composition process is, akin to Koestler’s description, an oscillation between the structuring process and the more impulsive, intuitive moments. Active and receptive modes of listening are both operative during composing. In line with Cage, the composer has a lot to gain from exercising the ability of open listening. Likewise, with reference to Lachenmann, the composer’s listening can be refined by critically exploring one’s listening habits. And third, the methodological considerations when it comes to *artistic research* show that researching sonic experiences requires competencies of being attentive, responsive, and reflective. Attentiveness is related to thorough listening experiences of the music-in-becoming; responsiveness appears as a vital skill in a composer’s dialoguing with the emerging work of music; and reflectiveness is associated with empirically documenting the processes. Thus, inquiring lived sonic experience of musical composition – the intimate relation between sound phenomena and listening – forms the core of sonic research. The many challenges of sonic exploration are a recurring topic in my notebook reflections. In the following entry, I try to capture the quality of the role of listening in the composition process:

When I compose, I always go back two, three, four bars to better hear passages and progresses. [...] What do I hear? What are my ears attending to? Not the exact rhythmical, melodic, and harmonic course/progress, but a kind of “gesture” of the

⁶⁴ Thoresen, “Stillheten,” 335; my translation from Norwegian.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 336–7; italics added; my translation from Norwegian.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 337; my translation from Norwegian.

⁶⁷ One example I find in Greene, *The End of the Affair*, where the protagonist, a writer of novels, admits that much of the writing takes place in the unconscious: “in those depths the last word is written before the first word appears on paper” (p. 35).

expression, giving me an idea of the course of the [compositional] process; if it develops towards something that is lingering, or towards something that is time-dividing. It must feel right! My ears must approve the result!⁶⁸

Here, I detain a form of evaluated listening, guided by an intuitive perception of the desired musical expression. Sometimes, the piece works on paper, but not when it sounds. For me as a composer, the primary goal is after all the aesthetic articulation of the musical piece. Composition is all about balancing hard craftsmanship with those rare, unexpected moments of attunement. To compose is to act and be acted upon, to participate, and be invited in. And, in the end, my ears always decide.

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