Bergsonism and Unmeasurable Time

In the Introduction to this book, we began to explore the contested terrain of the nature of the intimate relationship between music and time. Few would contest the statement that music is an ‘art of time’, but there are various ways to interpret such a view. At one extreme is the position of Philip Alperson, who argues that music’s temporality is no different from that of any other type of occurrence. Music is ‘an art whose method of presentation is progressive in time’; it has a determinate period of duration and involves an irreversible succession of events which is perceived as temporal through the use of memory and expectation.\(^1\) This position is consistent with Kant’s understanding of time as the form of intuition by which we are able to make temporal sense of perception. Music is temporal for us in exactly the same way that everything else we perceive is temporal. Here, music simply takes place \textit{in} time.

In the more or less opposite camp are those who argue that music’s relationship to temporality goes much deeper. Joan Stambaugh insists that music is not a structure \textit{in} time, but is itself a temporal structure.\(^2\) ‘The time that bounds music is not outside music itself, enclosing it as a container holds its contents’.\(^3\) Rather, time ‘constitutes the concrete stuff of music’.\(^4\) Time is not merely form, that which organises temporally the musical content. Rather, what is unique about music is that time is both content and form:

\begin{quote}
Time ceases to be a form in which something happens when the ‘content’ of this form is not separable from the form itself. When the content itself is ‘time’, time becomes the ‘happening’ itself. It is not that \textit{in which} something happens, but rather the very process of this happening.\(^5\)
\end{quote}

Stambaugh is among those who argue that musical time is time made audible. Similarly, Suzanne Langer maintains that in the same way that the ‘plastic arts’ such as sculpture make space visible, \textit{‘music makes time audible, and its form

\begin{thebibliography}{5}
\bibitem{Alperson} Alperson 1980, p. 411.
\bibitem{Stambaugh} Stambaugh 1964, p. 266.
\bibitem{Stambaugh} Stambaugh 1964, p. 277.
\bibitem{Stambaugh} Stambaugh 1964, p. 271.
\bibitem{Stambaugh} Stambaugh 1964, p. 273.
\end{thebibliography}
and continuity sensible’. Music is capable of doing this because it is a symbolic form, albeit one whose symbols are not completely distinct from that which they symbolise. Others go still further and express the notion the central purpose of music is to present ‘the image of time’; that rhythm, the organisation of events in time and the motion that results, comprises music’s very essence. Composer Roger Sessions writes:

It seems to me that the essential medium of music, the basis of its expressive powers and the element which gives it its unique quality among the arts, is time, made living for us through its expressive essence, movement.

But what kind of time is it that music presents or is symbolic of? Langer answers by arguing that:

The realm in which tonal entities move is a realm of pure duration…. it is something completely different from the time in which our public and practical life proceeds. It is completely incommensurable with the progress of common affairs. Musical duration is an image of what might be termed ‘lived’ or ‘experienced’ time – the passage of life that we feel as expectation becomes ‘now’, and ‘now’ turns into unalterable fact. Such a passage is measurable only in terms of sensibilities, tensions, and emotions; and it has not merely a different measure, but an altogether different structure from practical or scientific time.

This kind of time differs from commonsense time, from scientific, practical, clock time. Clock time measures change only as two contrasting states, before and after, the outcome of change rather than its content. The rhythm of music is like the rhythm of life: it is not a rhythm of equal measurements of time, of regular ticks of the clock or metronome, which are not genuinely rhythmic at all. Rather:

---

6 Langer 1953, p. 110.
7 Langer 1953, p. 104.
8 Quoted in Langer 1953, p. 111 (fn).
10 Langer 1953, p. 112.