CHAPTER 4

Schutz’s ‘Vivid Present’ and the Social Time of Music

What can the philosophical tradition of phenomenology offer a materialist investigation of musical time? There are several possible claims for its usefulness. The first is that phenomenology is perhaps the tradition which has most prioritised the study of time. As a philosophy which concentrates on the nature and quality of experience, time is not, for phenomenology, merely one area among others to be explored. Rather, since it is an elemental feature of all experience, temporality holds a central place in all phenomenological investigations.¹

Secondly, the subject of time is perhaps particularly suited to being addressed phenomenologically, as doing so brackets the thorny ontological questions concerning the reality or existence of time. Arguably, time is best considered as a phenomenon, so that its noumenal status can safely be ignored. Husserl’s phenomenological ‘reduction’ amounts to a ‘suspension of judgment’ about the real world, while phenomenology aims to be ‘an account of our experience of the world which does not presuppose the existence of the world’.² Schutz explains that this is not achieved:

by transforming our naïve belief in the outer world into a disbelief, [or] by replacing our conviction in its existence by the contrary, but by suspending belief. We just make up our mind to refrain from any judgment concerning spatiotemporal existence,….we set the existence of the world ‘out of action’, we ‘bracket’ our belief in it.³

Leaving aside the question of whether such a methodology is universally applicable, it is surely an appropriate starting point for all questions about experience, those for which ontological answers do not seem pressing, amongst which time and music are obvious examples.

¹ As evidenced by the focus of many phenomenological classics, see Husserl 1964; Heidegger 1978.
² Miller 1984, pp. 182, 196.
³ Schutz 1966, p. 5.
Thirdly, and also in relation to methodology, not only are ‘naïve beliefs’ and commonsense perspectives about the world bracketed by Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, but all aspects of thought which come under the heading of the ‘natural attitude’, including theoretical and scientific ones. In relation to music, phenomenological thinkers have argued that ‘traditional forms of thought that have “visual” tendencies may prejudice an investigation into auditory things’. The primacy of notation in the Western tradition may constitute such a distortion. ‘Instead of trying to cast music in a spatial form, which is visually oriented, we [phenomenologists] let it speak in its own form’.4 Bartholomew suggests that musicological procedures such as Schenkerian analysis may lead us to prioritise structure in our listening and analysis, again relying on spatialised representations which render the music static, effectively denying its temporal element.5 For Smith, music should be understood as ‘a continual becoming, in which the modalities of present, past and future are brought together not spatially only but as the emergence (ek-sistence) of the musical phenomenon’.6 In an argument that has a bearing on the organisation of the temporal aspects of music, rhythm and meter, he notes that what Husserl described as the ‘mathematicisation of nature’ took place in music theory long before it took hold of the physical sciences, tracing its origins to the Middle Ages with the rise of a metaphysics of number and a preoccupation with proportions, when musical thinking came to be ‘based on a mathematical model rather than on an experiential one’.7 Phenomenology attempts to rectify these distortions by urging a return to the sounds themselves, by making ‘sound as such’ primary. In a genuinely phenomenological method, it is claimed:

only sound emerges as a proper phenomenon for phenomenological analysis. All else, including ‘meaning’, is bracketed. Only sound is thematized.8

This brings us to the final claim as to why phenomenology can provide unique insights into musical time. Phenomenology regards sounds as phenomena as more immediately and thoroughly temporal than other objects of experience. Husserl described the way in which our experience of a visual object is built: we intend its identity, he argued, from a manifold of perceptions. In visual

4 Smith 1979, p. 17.
5 Bartholomew 1985, p. 327.
6 Smith 1979, p. 16.
7 Smith 1979, p. 93.
8 Smith 1979, p. 100.