Lyrical Bodies: Music and the Extension of the Soul

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Throughout its history, music has resisted subsumption under the prevalent categories of time and space. This resistance evidences, for example, in the development of musical notation. From the earliest beginnings musical notation has included concepts which, although referring to space and time as we know them, cannot be wholly understood within their confines. Examples of these are the gesturality of Gregorian chant notations, the notions of “rising” and “falling” common to our understanding of melody, and the “stacking” of polyphonic melodies in musical space. In contrast to these experiential metaphors of early practice, modern musical notation is supported by the notion that music unfolds against the background of a purely homogenous temporality and spatiality. Music here appears as an object that calls for description in architectural and mereological terms, evoking as it does a combination of Aristotelean and Euclidean forms of space-time. The starting point of the exploration will be the notion of the sound body (corps sonore), which has been analyzed by Jean-Luc Nancy in terms of the soul. As van Maas argues in the second part of the chapter, the analysis of the soul is the key to understanding the new “liquid” or “lyrical” negotiations of space and time that currently take place in society (Zygmunt Bauman, Brian Massumi). This point will be illustrated with examples ranging from musical modernism (Olivier Messiaen, Harrison Birtwistle) to popular culture (Frank Sinatra, Miles Davis, Michael Jackson).

Listening: From Identity to Place

Where are we, when we listen to music? This question, which Peter Sloterdijk formulated in an essay from 1993, captures one of the key issues in contemporary music philosophy.¹ At first sight, it seems an odd question to ask, for the obvious answer is: within earshot of the music. In a concert hall, we are spatially close to the musical performers, and when we listen to recordings we are in the vicinity of loudspeakers. Even when we hear a song in our mind, we imagine ourselves to be close to that virtual music. So why, in the first place, is it important to ask the question of “where”?

As Sloterdijk writes in the philosophy of the 1990’s, there has been a considerable increase in attention for the ear. This new interest, which has gone through another surge about a decade later, is according to him, an effect in the field of mediality and the senses, and of the discourse on the “end of metaphysics.”² The decline of this key discipline, Sloterdijk argues, challenges the privilege it had accorded to visual phenomena and experiences.

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¹ Sloterdijk, Peter, “Wo sind wir, wenn wir Musik hören?” in Peter Weibel (ed.), Der Aesthetische Imperativ: Schriften zur Kunst (Hamburg: Philo & Philo Fine Arts, 2007), p. 50-82. The question is a variation on Hannah Arendt’s “where are we when we think?”

Now that philosophy is moving away from such classical metaphysical themes as light, contemplation, inspection, and form (eidos), it needs new concepts, models and figures to articulate its thinking. One source for this renewal is the domain of the aural.

Sloterdijk claims that the aural implies an epistemology which differs from the visual in that it involves a different spatial distribution of the knower and the object(s) of knowledge. According to him,

The seeing subject stands on “the edge” of the world like a world- and bodiless eye in front of a panorama - Olympic contemplation and optical theology are just two sides of the same coin. By contrast, thinkers who understand being (Dasein) on the basis of the facts of hearing, would never have considered the removal of the spectator-subject toward the imaginary outer limits of the world because it belongs to the nature of hearing to arise no different than in the mode of being-in-sound. No hearing person can believe to be standing at the edge of hearable things. The ear knows no opposite position, it does not develop a frontal “view” of removed objects, for it has “world” or “objects” only insofar as it is among the acoustic events - one could also say: insofar as it hovers or dips in auditory space.3

The philosophical turn toward the ear, then, implies a spatial redistribution and redefinition that ultimately affects the whole of our understanding of the world, the subjects that live in it, and the way world and subjects interrelate. This interrelation Sloterdijk articulates by means of two diametrically opposed subject positions. On one hand, he envisages a “deep acoustic” according to which the subject may choose to radically withdraw from its dialectical dealing with the world by completely shutting itself off. This acoustic “sunkennes” (Versunkenheit), which he also refers to as enstasis (as opposed to ecstasy), is in itself a vital concept for our understanding of both inspiration (Beseelung) and “being-in-itself” (in-sich-Sein), Sloterdijk writes.

On the other hand, the acoustic realm offers a way to understand subjectivity according to a profound trembling, that is, according to a “deep psychology” that takes an extension of the soul as its point of departure.4 Locating the origin of this second approach in the early nineteenth century, Sloterdijk contends that “Hegel for the first time articulates the idea that a still completely empty [unborn child’s] soul that is devoid of experiences and passions and that therefore is undetermined, is penetrated in a decisive and

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