

## Listening to Music

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## Listening to Philosophy

Amidst the clatter and din of contemporary philosophy—a cacophony that winds in and around and through language—Jean-Luc Nancy pauses to ask if philosophy is capable of listening. Listening, of course, takes as its object sound, and sound, as the material vehicle for arbitrary symbolic tokens, is basic to the process of signification upon which language and philosophy are based. Nancy, however, is interested in sound not as object but as sense, and in listening not as the first step in a process of signification but as an activity *prior* to signification. For philosophy to be capable of listening, then, it must seize sound as sense, not as sign. This thought brings Nancy to music, for although sounds permeate our existence (as their resonance permeates Nancy’s *Listening*), it is in music that sound—sound that shapes time and space without referring to either—becomes a substantive worthy of a more comprehensive contemplation. Listening, then, leads philosophy past sound and past resonance to music as the place where sound and resonance become complete.

In the course of following this path along its various twists and turns Nancy comes face to face with one of the originary moments of phenomenology: Husserl’s analysis of time, in which the philosopher uses as his model the act of listening to a melody.<sup>1</sup> Here Nancy follows and adapts Gérard Granel’s critique of Husserl, and together they note that, in his analysis, Husserl has perpetuated a ‘forgetting of being,’ which occurs “to the very extent that he does not concentrate his ear on musical resonance but rather converts it ahead of time into the object of an intention that configures it. Sound (and/or sense) is what is not at first intended. It is not first “intentioned”: on the contrary, sound is what places its subject, which has not preceded it with an aim, in tension, or

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1. Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, trans. John Barnett Brough, Edmund Husserl Collected Works, vol. 4 (Dordrecht ; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 156.

under tension."<sup>2</sup> The consequences of this missed opportunity have deep resonance for Nancy, for they suggest that music, and indeed sound in general, is not exactly a phenomenon;

that is to say, it [music] does not stem from a logic of manifestation. It stems from a different logic, which would have to be called evocation, but in this precise sense: while manifestation brings presence to light, evocation summons (evokes, invokes) presence to itself. It does not establish it any more than it supposes it already established. It anticipates its arrival and remembers its departure, itself remaining suspended between the two: time and sonority, sonority as time and as meaning.<sup>3</sup>

And this suspension between becoming and being is, finally, what music offers to the philosopher, a form of seeing beyond sight:

Prophecy in the instant and *of* the instant: announcement in that instant of its destination outside of time, in an eternity. At every instant music promises its development only in order to better hold and open the instant—the note, the sustaining, the beat—outside of development, in a singular coincidence of movement and suspense.<sup>4</sup>

To listen to philosophy, at least as the opportunity is structured by Nancy, is to listen to it listening to music listen to itself.

But can music truly listen to itself? And, if it did, what would it have to say to language and philosophy?

### **Listening to Fernando Sor's *Fantaisie élégiaque***

Fernando Sor (1778-1839) was a composer and guitarist who spent almost all of his career outside his native Spain, principally in Paris and London. His *Fantaisie élégiaque* for guitar, one of his last published compositions, was written in memory of Charlotte Beslay, who was his student and who died in childbirth 20 April 1835. Beslay was herself a pianist who had come to the attention of Rossini; perhaps because of this the fantasy is written in a compositional register that is by turns operatic and pianistic. When all is said and done, the genre to which this fantasy belongs (and in Sor's hands the fantasy took many forms, including that of theme and variations) is the operatic potpourri. A work stretching out over some fifteen minutes, the *Fantaisie élégiaque* begins with a rather dramatic introduction (measures 1-34), "dramatic" both in its evocation of the varied instrumental resources of the opera orchestra and in the rapid shifts between markedly varied musical materials comprised by these measures. This introduction is followed by an extended soprano aria (measures 34-67), which gives way to a quasi-orchestral interlude (measures 67-82), which in turn yields to a snippet of a duet (measures 82-86), followed by a short bass aria (measures 86-100) which dissolves into a series of cadential gestures (measures 100-107). These are answered by a striking transition (measures 108-111) that initiates a return to the high drama of the introduction (measures 112-126) and an eventual arrival on an extended dominant chord (measures

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2. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 20.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 66.



There are two things striking about this ending. First, there is the juxtaposition of the somewhat pompous funeral march with the rather more subdued music that commences in measure 73. The funeral march, both in its first statement and in its recollection in measure 58, is a perfect evocation of a tragic theatrical procession, and as such is in keeping with the broadly operatic cast of the rest of the fantasy. There is a sense, indeed, that the funeral march of the *Fantaisie élégiaque* is meant to be *seen* rather than simply listened to, even if what is seen is but the image of a confabulation inspired by fragments of scenes from operas long past. The music after measure 73, by contrast, is quieter, more contemplative, and its thoughtful character is all the more apparent when, with the *forte* of measure 81, it briefly returns to the major mode. There is a poignancy here that expands with the chromatic slide consequent to the *dolce* of measure 85, a slide that culminates in the cadential gesture of measures 88 and 89.

Equally striking is what happens next. Above a return to the pulsing quarter-note topic first heard in measure 73 there appear bare fragments of melody, little more than skips between E and G. The first of these, in measures 90 and 91, is complete, and returns to E; the second, in measures 92 and 93, does not. The G that is left hanging is subsequently harmonized with a major chord—the same C major that provided temporary relief in measure 82—and the minor third E–G answered with the major third G–B. And then the music collapses back into minor, where it concludes with bell-like harmonics answered by a subdued and somber tonic chord.

Although the musical excerpt of example 1 provides only the briefest glimpse, the contrast provided by the coda of Sor's *Fantaisie élégiaque* speaks volumes. As suggested by the summary I offered above, the bulk of the work is occupied with operatic topics, presented as such: a succession of orchestral bombasts, heart-on-the-sleeve arias, and moments of light diversion, all of which conclude in a funeral march whose grandeur borders on preening self-importance. It is only with the coda that the work turns away from the projection of operatic topoi, turning its back on the musical journey just undertaken and searching for something not found therein. What this odd juxtaposition of musical materials enacts is a moment of commemoration befitting its elegiac topic. The ersatz operatic potpourri created by Sor (for there are in the *Fantaisie élégiaque* no traceable references to extant operatic works) is an evocation of countless hours spent enraptured by and later reenacting the music of the opera, hours that Sor and Charlotte Beslay shared as habitués of Parisian musical culture in the 1830s. The sudden change of compositional register in the coda is a recognition that, with Charlotte's death, these hours could be shared no more. The shift, then, is from music that is about something else—about operatic scenes, or witnessing operatic scenes, or recreating the experience of operatic speculation—to music that is only about itself. Beginning in measure 73 we can hear music listening to itself, and finally listening to itself mourning. Nowhere is this clearer than in the fragments of melody that resonate through the stillness that begins in measure 89, which summon a wordless cry of lament. And yet these fragments are not precisely wordless, for, as shown in example 2, in the published score there appear over these fragments the words "Charlotte! Adieu!" These are not words meant to be spoken, and even less are they an instantiation of a hypertrophied form of signification melding phonemes and tonal structures; these are instead words whose sense resides only in sound as it is shaped through the resonance of music.

The musical score for Example 2 shows measures 89-93 of Sor's *Fantaisie élégiaque*. It is written in G major and 3/4 time. The piece begins at measure 89 with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The melody is composed of simple quarter-note skips between E and G. The lyrics "Charlotte!" and "Adieu!" are written above the notes. The piece concludes with a cadential gesture in the final measure.

Example 2: Fernando Sor, *Fantaisie élégiaque*, measures 89-93

With this close reading of the conclusion of Fernando Sor's *Fantaisie élégiaque* I have, of necessity, shifted the focus away from philosophy and onto music: I have wanted to explore not simply the *idea* of music listening to itself, but the *actuality*. In making this shift I am motivated in part by the belief that Nancy has important things to say to musicologists, not the least of which is that music leads the listener to sound-as-sense, and in doing so presents an alternative to sound-as-signification. But I am also motivated by a belief that a closer consideration of musical practice shows how Nancy's argument falls short of what it might achieve. For instance, although the body appears throughout Nancy's *Listening*, its role is invariably that of a symbol rather than that of a full participant in coming to know sense: the body resounds with sound, but it seems to have lost its capacity to listen, to *engage with* rather than simply *accept* (or serve as a receptacle for) sound. Symptomatic of this loss is Nancy's characterization of musical rhythm: "rhythm separates the succession of the linearity of the sequence or length of time: it bends time to give it to time itself, and it is in this way that it folds and unfolds a 'self.'"<sup>5</sup> Viewed in the abstract, this account captures perfectly the function of rhythm (and more specifically meter) within musical syntax (a function I have described, in similar terms, in work on musical gesture<sup>6</sup>). But on further consideration one finds nothing in rhythm for the body, no sense of the periodic movement of the body that *incorporates* the distinctions between one moment and the next. As has much of contemporary musicology, Nancy has left the body out of his conception of musical behavior, turning it into an empty shell into which can be poured the passions inspired by sonic phantasmagoria.<sup>7</sup>

A further limitation is imposed by Nancy's regard of what counts as worthy music. In expanding on the issue of whether musical knowledge is necessary to *know* music, he writes

Musical science or technique does not by itself imply the most profound, original, or convincing musicality. To be sure, there are no examples—or almost none—of a naïve musician in the sense of Douanier [Henri] Rousseau (although his naïveté is far from being devoid of technical sophistication and *savoir-faire*), but there are many examples of talented technicians whose musical facility doesn't get beyond tepid academic compositions.<sup>8</sup>

The example of Rousseau is illuminating in its infelicity: Rousseau produced his art without the assistance or the imprimatur of the academy, but this is precisely the story of countless musicians working in the domain of "popular" or "commercial" or "folk" music. If Nancy means that Rousseau aspired to produce works worthy of the academy (an aspiration which seems probable, and which has as its counterpart efforts made by certain non-academic musicians to gain academic recognition), "naïveté" takes on the meaning of "innocent or unaware of the compositional strategies around which the academy has defined itself." As Nancy himself acknowledges, however, such naïveté does not preclude the development of an alternative set of strategies every bit as

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5. Ibid., 17.

6. Lawrence M. Zbikowski, "Musical Gesture and Musical Grammar: A Cognitive Approach," in *New Perspectives on Music and Gesture*, ed. Anthony Gritten and Elaine King (Ashgate Publishing Ltd, [in press]).

7. In this connection see Carolyn Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 505–36.

8. Nancy, *Listening*, 64.

complex as those of the academy. More subtle, but no less telling, is Nancy's deprecation of "academic" composition. Without specific examples the observation is difficult to evaluate, but just this sort of critique has been leveled against innumerable composers who failed simply by not being Beethoven or Wagner. Indeed, my central musical example—an instrumental composition of uncertain genre by a Spanish expatriate musician, written for a "minor" instrument and influenced by Italian opera—is just the sort of work that has often been dismissed by analysts and critics as having nothing profound, original, or convincing to offer to the musical world.

In the end, what is obscure in Nancy's vision/version of music is the cultural work that music is meant to do. Music can certainly be profound, original, and convincing; it can also be superficial, derivative, and dissembling. And in both cases it can do real cultural work, but of different sorts: Franz Schubert's "Der Leiermann" is unlikely to win a Eurovision song contest; Alexander Rybak's "Fairytale" is not a conclusion, or even the beginning, of a song cycle.<sup>9</sup> And who is to say that music does not listen to itself in both cases? Who is to say that resonance does not permeate the quotidian as well as the exceptional? Who is to say how music should evoke, support, or enact mourning?

### Listening to Akpafu Dirges

During the 1980s Kofi Agawu undertook a study of music in the funeral traditions of the Akpafu, an ethnic group in southeastern Ghana who numbered around four thousand during the late 1980s. The models for death and burial among the Akpafu draw on traditional and (depending on the religious affiliation of the deceased) Christian practices, and proceed in a number of stages across a day or more. Typical of these practices are the dirges that are sung during that section of the funeral rites in which the body is washed, which occurs after the death has been announced to the village but prior to the period when wake-keeping commences; notated versions of two such dirges are given in example 3. Agawu notes that, within this tradition, dirges pose challenges to simplistic conceptions of what counts as music. With respect to the delivery of the words, for instance, this can vary from singing, to a kind of *Sprechstimme*, to speaking. Performance of the dirge also involves various patterned bodily movements, in particular an agitated pacing that may or may not coordinate rhythmically with the delivery of the words. Of the two dirges given in example 3, "Itupiee" (example 3a) conforms for the most part to the rhythms of speech and has no set meter. Each of the rests between the different phrases indicates a considerable pause, a span which may be filled in with either silence or with non-verbal punctuations (such as wails, cries, or shouts).<sup>10</sup> (In thinking about sound before signification, perhaps one should also include the cries wrested from our throats at times like this.) "Okwaisa" (example 3b), by contrast, has a set meter which correlates with the ritual pacing typical of Akpafu funeral rites.

The differences between "Itupiee" and "Okwaisa" are quite evident to even the casual listener: the dirges have different words, project markedly different senses of rhythm in performance, and are organized around different tonal centers: "Itupiee" has D as its final, above which appears a raised fourth degree (G-sharp); "Okwaisa" has C as its final, and makes use of harmonizations in fourths. It is all the more striking that the Akpafu regard "Itupiee" and

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9. "Der Leiermann" is the concluding song of Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise*; "Fairytale" was Norway's winning entry in the 2009 Eurovision song contest.

10. Victor Kofi Agawu, "Music in the Funeral Traditions of the Akpafu," *Ethnomusicology* 32, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 87.

Example 3a: "Itupiece"

**Solo**

I-tu-piee o i - tu-piee sō be bo ba ka-yi ga dzō-lō-lō bo boa di bo de i - yei? I-tu-piee o i -  
 tu - piee Ka - de ma - re mi pienu du mi - ta - me Te - te ku mma ō bi ee, Te - te!

**Chorus**

Ee\_\_\_ i - tu piee\_\_\_ ka - de ma - re mi pienu du mi - ta - me Ee\_\_\_  
 i - tu piee ka - de ma - re mi pienu du mi - ta - me Ee\_\_\_ i - tu piee Ee\_\_\_ i - tu piee!

Trans.: Bathing, oo, bathing! What have we come to this long world to come and take and eat? Bathing, oo, bathing!  
 Wives of the village, bathe him for me. Our people! Ee, bathing! Wives of the village, bathe him for me.

Example 3b: "Okwaisa"

♩ = 120

**Solo**

Nna lei ya pie\_\_\_ ō-kwa-i sa? Nna lei ya pie?\_\_\_ O-kwa-i sa Nna lei ya

**Chorus**

pie?\_\_\_ O-kwa-i sa nna lei ya pie\_\_\_ O-kwa-i sa Nna lei ya  
 pie - ku-kpi sa po? Nna lei ya pie\_\_\_ O-kwa-i sa? Nna lei ya pie?

Trans.: Who will not be bathed by the sponge? Who will not be bathed by the death sponge?

Example 3: Two dirges from Akpafu funeral traditions to accompany bathing of the corpse;  
 transcriptions and translations by Kofi Agawu

"Okwaisa" as equivalent. Agawu observes, "Asked about the relationship between the two dirges, the Akpafu often respond, "Ne amē idē ne" ("It is the same thing")."<sup>11</sup> Agawu then goes on to reflect on Akpafu ideas about musical structure: "There seems to be little doubt that in the case of this pair of dirges, the response is primarily to the text and its meaning, the elements that define their social function. Singing about bathing the corpse is what matters, not whether the singing is in free or strict rhythm, or is with or without harmony."<sup>12</sup> And yet the meaning of the text does not exhaust the meaning of the dirge: the resonance of the dirge as it sounds is far deeper than the words to which it gives voice.

So what is one to make of a situation in which music is so manifestly important to the realization of a ritual, and in which the specific sounds organized by music matter so little? Or, if they do matter (in the sense that incorrect renderings of either "Itupiee" or "Okwaisa" would inhibit the performance of the ritual), how can we account for the role of sound—still in its non-signifying role—in the cultural practice of which these dirges are a part? It seems clear that music, as instantiated by these dirges, is just as much a part of the process of mourning enacted by the Akpafu as it is a part of the process of mourning enacted by Fernando Sor's *Fantaisie élégiaque*. But, going further now, how can two such different practices—one communal, traditional, and focused on ritual rather than music; the other private, stylized, and constituting through a succession of musical sounds a ritual wholly personal—be put in the same category?

### Listening through Categories

To begin to answer these questions—as well ones asked earlier—I should like, for the moment, to become much more prosaic, and to suggest how recent research in cognitive science can provide a novel perspective from which to view musical practice. I must emphasize that I do not mean to replace the rich tapestry of ideas woven by Nancy with a durable and plain cloth of "data" and "facts" but simply to sketch how that tapestry might be completed. As a beginning, let me take up the topic of categories and show how it can be used to clarify how we think about music, sound, and listening.

For the most part, the categories through which we structure our understanding of the world are not cause for a great deal of reflection. To all appearances, these categories are simply givens. A book is a book, a tree is a tree, and any equivocal cases are just a matter of insufficient knowledge. This common-sense view of categorization began to be questioned by psychologists and cognitive scientists during the 1970s, who found that the notion that category membership was determined by necessary and sufficient conditions simply did not fit with how humans actually used categories. Research since that time has shown that the categories that humans use to structure their understanding of the world—what I shall call cognitive categories—is graded through a dynamic process in which the attributes of potential category members are compared with the attributes most typically found within the category.<sup>13</sup>

As an example of such a graded structure, consider the category *BIRD*. Experimental rankings show that subjects in the United States view robins and sparrows as the best examples of birds, with owls and eagles lower down in the rankings, and ostriches, emus, and penguins among

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11. Ibid., 90.

12. Ibid.

13. I give a summary of research on categorization in chapter 1 of *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory, and Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

the worst examples. All are considered members of the category *BIRD*, but some better represent the category than others. The structure of cognitive categories is thus graded according to typicality: category members range from the most typical to the least typical, with the former securely inside the bounds of the category (robins and sparrows) and the latter in danger of being excluded from the category (emus and penguins).<sup>14</sup>

Based on the evidence provided by empirical research, it appears that typicality effects reflect in part statistical correlations of functional attributes among members or potential members of a category. It should be clear, however, that cultural knowledge also informs judgments of typicality: while robins and sparrows are typical birds in the United States, they are somewhat less typical of birds found in the rain forests of the southern hemisphere, and much depends on why the birds are being categorized in the first place. As one way to understand how cultural knowledge informs processes of categorization, Lawrence Barsalou and others have proposed that judgments of typicality rely on conceptual models. In brief, conceptual models, which are central to reasoning and inference, consist of concepts in specified relationships, pertaining to a specific domain of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> (I should note that, as I conceive them, conceptual models can be formulated independent of language, such as those that might be used to structure our understanding of emotions or musical sounds.) With regard to categorization, the primary function of the conceptual model is to supply a guide for reasoning about accepted and potential members of the category. This is accomplished through a simplified representation of category structure that incorporates knowledge about what values are most typical for a select group of attributes for the given category: the category *BIRD* is organized around a conceptual model which provides a means for deciding what sorts of things should go into the category. The attributes of a conceptual model are selected according to the goals of categorization, which are themselves informed by more global conceptual models applicable to a broad range of categorization tasks.<sup>16</sup> The conceptual model for a given category thus reflects statistical correlations of functional attributes, but conditioned by knowledge about the overall goals of categorization.

But what of music and of sound? To answer this question let us return to "Itupiee" and "Okwaisa." Again, while there are manifest differences in the constituent musical materials of the two dirges, the Akpafu regard them as "the same." I would like to suggest that their inclusion in the same category is guided by a conceptual model organized around the function of dirges within funeral rites. Put another way, decisions about which category the dirges belong in—and here I am concerned with any possible instantiation of either of the dirges, whether sung or imagined or preserved on a recording—is made in accordance with the conceptual model that organizes the category. For a Western musicologist, the function of a work is typically subsidiary to its rhythmic

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14. Eleanor Rosch, "On the Internal Structure of Perceptual and Semantic Categories," in *Cognitive Development and the Acquisition of Language*, ed. Timothy E. Moore (New York: Academic Press, 1973), 111–44; Eleanor Rosch, "Cognitive Representations of Semantic Categories," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 104, no. 3 (1975): 192–233.

15. I discuss conceptual models in greater depth in chapters 3 and 5 of *Conceptualizing Music*, and give practical examples of how musicians employ them in "Modelling the Groove: Conceptual Structure and Popular Music," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 129, no. 2 (2004): 272–97.

16. Lawrence W. Barsalou, "Deriving Categories to Achieve Goals," *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation* 27 (1991): 1–64; Lawrence W. Barsalou, et al., "Concepts and Meaning," in *Chicago Linguistics Society 29: Papers from the Parasession on the Correspondence of Conceptual, Semantic and Grammatical Representations*, ed. Katharine Beals, et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago, Chicago Linguistics Society, 1993), 23–61.

and melodic features, and as a consequence the two dirges would be put into different categories, organized around conceptual models rather different than those used by the Akpafu.

Although this notion of the function of a musical work may seem a rather coarse tool with which to make discriminations between musical works, it provides important insights into the role of music in human cultures.<sup>17</sup> In the case of the dirges, one could simply equate this function with a particular section of the funeral rites—the bathing of the corpse—but such an equation would obscure the thoroughly embodied way this function is realized. The embodiment of the dirges is manifested in the way the singers bring their words into conformance with the pitch structures of the song, in the way these words resound with or against the ritual pacing that accompanies their delivery, and in other actions, seen or performed, that provide a context for the singing. The dirges might thus be seen as part of a process of *inscribing* the funeral rites on the bodies of the participants, preserving not so much the memory of the deceased as the act of remembering a member of their community. In this connection, note the tempo that Agawu indicates for “Okwaisa”: two quarter notes per second. The pacing that would be correlated with this tempo is not the leaden-footed step used in many Western funeral rites, but a rapid movement that suggests both a need for action and anxiety about whether the action will be effective. Many of us use a similar kind of pacing when we have misplaced something important, whether a favorite book or the keys to our car, and one way to interpret its use in Akpafu funeral rites is as an enactment of a similar search for something crucial to the community that may be—and that in fact is—lost forever.

The process of embodiment I have just described is what Paul Connerton, in his work on memory, calls incorporation. Connerton, a social anthropologist, was interested in the means through which societies, rather than simply individuals, remember. Key here were commemorative ceremonies and the bodily practices associated with these, which together help to stabilize knowledge crucial to a society. Connerton writes,

Both commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices . . . contain a measure of insurance against the process of cumulative questioning entailed in all discursive practices. This is the source of their importance and persistence as mnemonic systems. Every group, then, will entrust to bodily automatisms the values and categories which they are most anxious to conserve. They will know how well the past can be kept in mind by a habitual memory sedimented in the body.<sup>18</sup>

One of the roles of music in human cultures, then, is to organize and support the bodily automatisms that are crucial to commemoration. Music is, in this context, more than sound: it is sound as a correlate for bodily movements. Here, then, is the correspondence between rhythm and movements of the body missing from Nancy’s characterization of musical rhythm: it is not that the body *itself* must ‘separate the succession of the linearity of the sequence or length of time,’ only that

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17. The notion of a “musical work” that I use here is not very heavily freighted, and serves simply as a shorthand for the articulations of musical practice acknowledged by the members of a given musical culture. For a fuller discussion of the “work concept” and its place in Western musical traditions, see Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

18. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 102.

such separations are informed by the experience of their bodily enactment; the 'self' that is 'folded and unfolded' through the bending of time is an *incorporated* self.<sup>19</sup>

Returning now to one of the questions that I left hanging above: under what circumstances could the mourning practices of the Akpafu be put into the same category as the mourning practices of Fernando Sor? The first answer is: under only the most violent of circumstances. The mourning practices of late twentieth-century Western Africa are not those of early nineteenth-century France, and to group the two together is to misunderstand both. But a second answer is: under circumstances in which we want to understand how music embodies—*incorporates*—experiences and events that are beyond language.

The notion that music incorporates the supralinguistic points toward a way to address the old question of whether music signifies. As treated by semioticians, music is an example of a semiotic system that is purely syntactical;<sup>20</sup> this perspective is similar to that toward which Nancy is drawn by Pierre Schaeffer's reflections on musical structure.<sup>21</sup> I would like to propose, however, that this view of signification is one that is too beholden to the mechanisms of representation that language exploits. The mourning practices enacted by the dirges of the Akpafu and by Sor's *Fantaisie élégiaque* show that music does signify, but through a means markedly different from that upon which language relies.

### Listening to Signification

It would not be advisable to attempt here a comprehensive review of semiotic theory, but it may be possible to set out a few points that are among the less contentious. The first is that human language relies on a system of reference in which arbitrary symbolic tokens—phonemes, written characters or ideograms, or (in the case of sign languages) coded physical gestures—stand for concepts. Perhaps one of the most important features of human language, and one that apparently makes it inaccessible to other species, is the organization of these symbolic tokens into a dense network in which symbols are linked both to concepts and to other symbols.<sup>22</sup> This network of interconnected symbols makes it possible to refer to objects and relations both proximate and distant, giving access to a system of reference with unparalleled resources for social interaction.<sup>23</sup>

The second relatively uncontroversial point is that music, with but few exceptions, does not make use of symbolic reference. And it is here that most applications of semiotic theory to music stop for, focused as they are on language, the only mode of reference they countenance is symbolic

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19. Although Nancy speaks of incorporation in just this way—"transcendental resonance is also incorporated—even, strictly speaking, it is nothing but that incorporation (which it would be better to call: the opening up of a body)" (*Listening*, 29)—incorporation remains rather abstract: the body is again a receptacle or submissive vessel rather than an agent.

20. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Advances in Semiotics (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1976), 88.

21. Nancy, *Listening*, 34.

22. Terrence W. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), chap. 3.

23. Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999); Michael Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, The Jean Nicod Lectures (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).

reference. There is, however, another possible mode of reference, one associated with the type of signs Charles Saunders Peirce called icons. Although Peirce's characterization of the icon was more than a little complicated (not least because Peirce wanted the notion to include reference to objects from the imagination as well as the real world), in the main the icon, as a representamen, needed to capture the essential features of the object to which it made reference. In some formulations Peirce characterized this function in terms of a similarity between the representamen and the object,<sup>24</sup> but it is more productive to conceive of the relationship as analogical.<sup>25</sup> In the case of similarity, both attributes and relations are shared: a pencil and a pen are similar to each other both in appearance and in function, although the kind of marks each makes on a writing surface (permanent or impermanent; of relatively consistent coloration or subject to gradation) are different. In the case of analogy, only relations need be shared: a finger is analogous to a pen in that it is an approximately cylindrical structure that can be used to trace characters on a writing surface; unlike a pen or pencil, however, the finger leaves no discernible marks on the writing surface and its 'cylinder' is firmly attached to the larger structure of the hand. The icon  thus makes reference to the human hand not because it is *similar* to a hand (for what similarities are there between this diminutive, highly simplified line drawing, rendered on the printed page, and an actual human hand?) but because the lines proper to the icon mark off a group of proportional curvilinear relationships that correlate with the outline of a human hand as it might appear against a contrasting surface.<sup>26</sup> In his critique of iconism, Umberto Eco noted that the icon relies on both culture and convention for its interpretation,<sup>27</sup> but this reliance simply reflects the role of analogy in making iconism possible: analogies, whether in the service of reference or reasoning, are invariably constrained by contextual goals that are distinct from analogical process proper (goals that reflect the conceptual models proper to the analogical mapping).<sup>28</sup>

The fundamental difference, then, between analogical reference and symbolic reference is that, in the case of the former, the token needs to share analogical relationships with the object to which it refers; in the case of the latter, the relationship between the token and the object (or the concept) to which it refers is essentially arbitrary. On its own, however, analogical reference cannot explain how music signifies: in traditional accounts of iconism the object of reference is always an *object*, the static nature of which musical practice captures but poorly. What music can capture are

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24. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), 2: 157.

25. For a research review that contrasts similarity and analogy, see Dedre Gentner and Arthur B. Markman, "Structure Mapping in Analogy and Similarity," *American Psychologist* 52, no. 1 (January 1997): 45–56. As Gentner and Markman acknowledge, similarity and analogy are perhaps best viewed as points along a continuum, although they also make a strong argument for ways to distinguish between judgments guided by these two cognitive strategies.

26. Further, we could say that the *shape* embodied by this icon correlates with the sensations we would feel were a hand to be placed on our bare back, a translation from the visual to the tactile perfectly in keeping with current work on embodied experience.

27. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 191–220, 245–58.

28. Keith J. Holyoak and Paul Thagard, *Mental Leaps: Analogy in Creative Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), chap. 1; Douglas L. Medin, Robert L. Goldstone, and Dedre Gentner, "Respects for Similarity," *Psychological Review* 100, no. 2 (1993): 254–78.

*dynamic processes*. In some cases, the dynamic processes analogized by music are easy to grasp: the ritual pacing that is a part of Akpafu mourning is one such process, for which the regularly-occurring sonic materials of the dirge "Okwaisa" serve as analogical correlates. In other cases, dynamic processes may be more subtle: to regard the highly personal and deeply somber reflection evoked by the conclusion of Sor's *Fantaisie élégiaque* as a *dynamic* process may seem contrived, but note that the practice captured by this music plays out over time, is subject to twists and turns as the reflection expands and contracts, and may, in its course, lead to sudden movements of both the body and the soul.

On the analysis I offer here, music is not beyond signification but instead signifies in a way fundamentally different from language. It does this through analogical reference, which makes it possible for sequences of sound to represent a wide range of visual, kinesthetic, and psychological phenomena. Common to all these phenomena is their dynamic character, which distinguishes them from the objects to which icons conventionally refer; also prominent is their embodiment, both in their actual manifestation through bodily movement (kinesthetics) or in the physiological processes that accompany psychological phenomena. It bears mention that music is not the only form of human expression that offers analogs for dynamic processes—the spontaneous gestures that accompany speech, as well as dance and cinema, offer similar analogs—but music is somewhat exceptional in its lack of an essential visual or proprioceptive component and in its organization of sonic analogs into grammatical structures.<sup>29</sup> Finally, it should be noted that language can also make use of analogical reference—both through onomatopoeia and prosody—although when it does so it begins to become more like music.

Analogical reference—as a mode of representation that cuts across perceptual channels and that offers a way to explain the role of the body in the construction of meaning—points to a different kind of knowledge from that on which philosophy has concentrated. This kind of knowledge is more diffuse than that captured by language but also more immediate, and together these offer an opportunity to interrogate knowledge itself. I would argue that it is just this opportunity that Nancy gestures toward when he describes the conceptual refraction that makes manifest the plurality of possible senses of a text:

It is not, and in any case not only, what one can call in a superficial way the musicality of a text: it is more profoundly the music in it, or the arch-music of that resonance where it *listens to itself* [s'écoute], by listening to itself *finds itself* [se trouve], and by finding itself *deviates* [s'écarte] from itself in order to resound further away, listening to itself before hearing/understanding itself, and thus actually becoming its "subject," which is neither the same as nor other than the individual subject who writes the text.<sup>30</sup>

### Listening to Mourning

Cognitive science is a diverse field, and its approach to human knowledge can scarcely be called unified. But here are some things it might tell us about music. First, "music" is not a single thing but a variety of different practices which often but not invariably involve patterned sound.

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29. Lawrence M. Zbikowski, "Dance Topoi, Sonic Analogues, and Musical Grammar: Communicating with Music in the Eighteenth Century," in *Communication in Eighteenth Century Music*, V. Kofi Agawu and Danuta Mirka (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 283–309.

30. Nancy, *Listening*, 35.

*MUSIC* is a cognitive category, which includes any number of subcategories (*MUSIC FOR MOURNING*), the members of which are individual musical works (which themselves may be viewed as cognitive categories comprising performances, recordings, notations, and imaginings of "the work"). As is typical of cognitive categories, all will have variable membership, organized around a conceptual model that specifies not only "musical" features but also the function of the particular type of music within a given musical culture. The category *NINETEENTH-CENTURY LIEDER*, for instance, would include Schubert's "Der Leiermann" but not Rybak's "Fairytale"; the category *EUROVISION SONG CONTEST ENTRY* would include Rybak's "Fairytale" but not Schubert's "Der Leiermann."<sup>31</sup> One of the important functions of music in human cultures—a function which is evident, in a superficial way, in the categories *NINETEENTH-CENTURY LIEDER* and *EUROVISION SONG CONTEST ENTRY*—is to contribute to the commemorations through which societies remember. These contributions may take shape as a specific tune deemed essential to the performance of a ritual or, in the case of the Akpafu funeral rites, as a representative of a class of musical works, each of which perform equivalent functions. In both cases, music often provides sonic analogs for stylized physical movements that inscribe the ritual on the bodies of those performing it, and by this means preserve the act of commemoration in sound.

The second thing that cognitive science might tell us about music is that it connects to that-which-is-not-music through analogy. Such connections are often highly imaginative and may stretch across the boundaries of perceptual modalities, but they are not unconstrained. The successful employment of analogy will establish a dense network of relationships between the domains that are brought into correlation, but "success" must be evaluated with respect to the goals of the individual employing the analogy, goals that are shaped in part by the cultural practices that inform each individual's habits of reasoning. The sonic analogs basic to a musical practice may *appear* to be immediate and natural to those familiar with that practice, but they are in fact heavily mediated by cultural knowledge. In Western funeral rites, for instance, the movement of mourning is a slow, deliberate, leaden tread; the sonic analogs that correlate with these movements are similarly slow, deliberate, and emphasize timbres with a significant degree of low-frequency disturbance.<sup>32</sup> In Akpafu funeral rites, by contrast, mourning is often accompanied by ritual pacing; the sonic analogs that correlate with this movement emphasize the rapidity of the tempo and the complex rhythmic relationships typical of human locomotion.

These contributions suggest ways to extend Nancy's insights into the kind of knowledge offered by music, for they provide a way to approach the full range of musical behavior and place embodied experience near the center of musical practice. At first glance, they may also suggest an approach that abandons much of the poetry of Nancy's prose, the enthralling allusiveness of his descriptions of the relationship between sound, resonance, music, and the self. To reason carefully, however, is not to abandon poetry but to find its source in other interstices of knowing. When we

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31. As a further reflection on cognitive categories and the conceptual models relative to which they are organized, Rybak's "Fairytale"—Norway's entry into the 2009 Eurovision song contest—would not fit easily into the category *NORWEGIAN SONGS*, not the least because it was sung in English.

32. Although it is common to characterize timbres with a significant degree of low-frequency disturbance as "dark," this suggests a further cross-domain mapping between sound and the color spectrum. It should also be noted that funeral practices in the Western tradition are not monolithic: the final movement of Johann Sebastian Bach's mourning ode "Lass, Fürstin, lass noch einen Strahl" (BWV 198), for instance, is in moderate tempo and makes use of rhythmic figuration that is decidedly dance-like.

catch music listening to itself, we may find ourselves confronting not the echo of sound but the memory of movement or the curling wraith of an image.

Listening to mourning—at least as instantiated by Sor's *Fantaisie élégiaque* or by the Akpafu dirges I have discussed—is an invitation to confront what it means to be human. To be human is, in part, to be defined by language, but it is also to be defined by what language is not, and it is in the resonance of this absence of language that the sonic analogs of music have their proper home.

### **Listening to Jean-Luc Nancy**

In the end, what music has to say to language and to philosophy is nothing definite, *and this is its greatest resource*. By "nothing definite" I mean that music is focused on the representation of dynamic processes rather than on representations of objects and relations. Where language is predicated on the illusion that concepts are firm, stable, and unchanging, music celebrates all that is changeable and transitory. And so when music listens to itself it does not hear meaningless sounds arranged in artful patterns but sonic analogs for the psychological and physiological processes associated with the emotions, for the gestures that shape our thought, for the patterned movements of dance, and for the prosody that vivifies language. Music is not beyond signification, but it does not signify in the way that language does; its philosophy is concerned not with being but with becoming.

For Jean-Luc Nancy, music offers the promise of being in itself and for itself, of sound as nothing more than sound:

Music is the art of the hope for resonance: a sense that does not make sense except because of its resounding in itself. It calls to itself and recalls itself, reminding itself and by itself, each time, of the birth of music, that is to say, the opening of a world in resonance, a world taken away from the arrangements of objects and subjects, brought back to its own amplitude and making sense or else having its truth only in the affirmation that modulates this amplitude.<sup>33</sup>

The vision offered by Nancy is seductive but ultimately untenable, for it cuts music off from the body that listens and grants music significance only by placing it beyond signification. There is an alternative to this vision, one that simply asks us to listen more carefully to music and to reckon with the cognitive processes that shape the transformation of sound into music. When we do, we will not only hear music listening to itself but also hear the resonance of what it means to be human.

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33. Nancy, *Listening*, 67.

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