

From Absolute Music to Sound Experience

On Post-Classical Music and Horizontal Listening

Marlies De Munck

Abstract

This chapter examines the perception and understanding of post-classical (or “post-minimalist”) music and its compatibility with narrative approaches to music. The main hypothesis is that the immense popularity of this music genre is symptomatic of a music-aesthetic paradigm shift that is currently taking place, which also affects listening modes and musical interpretation strategies. Because of its deep intertwining with digital technologies – both the music itself and the listening practice – post-classical music is in line with broader cultural processes of horizontalization, driven by digitalization and resulting in the hyper-individualization of society. The main argument for this alignment is that post-classical music creates immersive sound experiences rather than any musical “content” based on musical syntax or harmonic development. By comparing two archetypal cases – John Cage’s 4’33” and Max Richter’s *Sleep* – this chapter investigates how the relationship between music and listener has fundamentally changed over the last decades. While the “vertical” listening attitude required the audience to actively reach out and interpret the musical material, the “horizontal” listening mode creates a static aural landscape to reside in. Consequently, concepts of musical meaning built on “vertical” models of meaning, especially narrative approaches, no longer seem applicable within the new music-aesthetic paradigm.

1 Music-Aesthetic Paradigms

Like every art form, music is always in transformation. The main engines of innovation are, undoubtedly, musicians. Yet musical change is also a marker of its own sociocultural age. Critical thinkers, most notably Theodor Adorno, have written about the seemingly paradoxical character of music as both autonomous and a social fact (Adorno 6). Famous is Adorno’s acknowledgement of Arnold Schoenberg’s turn to atonality as the only possible way of composing at the time, not because he regarded atonality as aesthetically better but because tonality, as a historical material, had “collapsed” by the early 20th century (Paddison 83). Even those who do not favor Adorno’s aesthetic theory may agree that transformations in and of music often reflect sociological, political,

technological, and other forms of change in society. An obvious example is the direct link between technical improvements of musical instruments and innovative compositional techniques, such as shown in the research of pianist Tom Beghin (2022). By using a replica of Beethoven's Erard piano, he discovered how certain passages in Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata took shape as a result of the heavy touch of his new French keyboard. But not just the material conditions matter, music also relates to more abstract societal conditions, such as the socio-political situation. For example, Andrew Bowie describes how, in reaction to Germany's failure to realize many individual freedoms, composers like Beethoven channeled their desire for freedom into their music (*Philosophical Variations* 25).

Many scholars have pointed out how listening practices and musical interpretation strategies transform as well. Together with the music, the expectations, imagination and musical literacy of listeners evolve under the influence of changing cultural, socio-economic, and technological circumstances. For example, James H. Johnson described how the economic rise of the bourgeoisie initiated a public concert culture with newly built concert halls and new rules of behavior for the listener, including the requirement of *silenzio*. The audience was increasingly expected to listen attentively to the musical performance. As a result, composers could count on more actively involved listeners with a longer attention span, which created room for more elaborate, autonomous musical forms. This evolution required new ways of understanding music's meaning. As Lydia Goehr argued, the emergence and success of the autonomous musical work around 1800 came hand in hand with the new, Kantian ideal of aesthetic contemplation as a mode of "disinterested attention" (*Imaginary Museum* 158). This ideal implied a belief in the autonomy of the musical work as purposeful in and of itself, as exemplified in the nineteenth century idea of "absolute music", or, in the terms of Peter Kivy, as "music alone".

Carl Dahlhaus described the rise of absolute music in the same terms that Thomas Kuhn applied to the history of science: a "paradigm shift", as it relied on a total "reversal of esthetic premises" (7). He also described how this new music-aesthetic paradigm required a new hermeneutic model to accommodate for the meaningfulness of purely instrumental music. This led to ongoing discussions between proponents of formalist, narrative and expressivist approaches to music, most clearly exemplified in the 19th century *Musikstreit* between defenders of absolute and program music. But however great the differences between the respective positions were, they still belonged to one and the same music-aesthetic paradigm. "Most scholars", Mark Evan Bonds writes, "including Dahlhaus, recognized that the conceptual dichotomy of absolute and program music was unsustainable; over time, the two extremes came to

be seen more and more as opposite ends of a conceptual spectrum” (298). That conceptual spectrum is the Romantic music-aesthetic paradigm, which, until today, dominates the main part of western classical music culture, including most theories of musical meaning.

It is within the conceptual spectrum of this Romantic paradigm that narrative interpretations of music make sense. However, I will argue that we are, in the twenty-first century, experiencing a new paradigm shift that is taking music and the listening culture into a whole new direction. I will describe this as the shift from absolute music to sound experience. Like the previous shift, this new turn is part of a larger cultural transformation, initiated by changing social, cultural, and technological conditions. More specifically, I will argue that the rapid digitalization and hyper-individualization of Western culture, which both serve as instruments and catalysts in the democratizing of art and culture, have a decisive impact on music making and on the way we listen to and understand music. One reason for considering this shift as fundamental for classical music, I will argue, is that it changes the core of its artistic significance. More specifically, purely instrumental music is less and less listened to as an autonomous source of meaning. As a consequence, the narrative approach to music loses its appeal as a hermeneutic strategy and as a conceptual basis for musical understanding.¹

There is no vantage point (yet) from which to observe the situation we find ourselves in. I am aware that this inevitably makes my thesis speculative. Yet I base it on concrete and verifiable phenomena, such as the ubiquity of digital audio technology, the increasing cultural value attached to the so-called “immersive experience” and the ever-growing presence of post-classical music on major classical concert stages and festival programs. In what follows, I first look at these notable cultural trends to illustrate and clarify the conceptual distinction between what I will call, after Italian philosopher Alessandro Baricco, “vertical” and “horizontal” meaning paradigms. In the next section I argue that classical music is going through a process of horizontalization. To get a handle on this evolution, I compare two well-known musical works that epitomize how both music and listening modes have “horizontalized” over the

1 To be sure, I do not want to claim that there is a master plan behind this shift. Indeed, one should avoid projecting an imagined purposefulness onto music history when establishing links with society and culture at large, if only because the causal direction of these links is at no point completely clear. Neither do I want to maintain that there is only one correct listening mode for each musical style or genre, or that a listener would automatically adopt the “correct” listening attitude. Still, I believe there is a degree of appropriateness between the style and genre of a musical work and the way one can fruitfully listen to it, and that this appropriateness is calibrated, amongst other factors, by the use of technology.

last decades. The chapter closes with a critical section in which I ask whether our current theories of musical meaning, including narrative concepts, are still adequate to describe the horizontalized musical experience.

2 Vertical and Horizontal Meaning Paradigms

ASMR, listening bars, virtual reality, the *Van Gogh Experience*, the *Hearing Wellness Festival*, the metaverse, ... Besides being immensely popular, these diverse cultural phenomena have another thing in common: they all promise the spectator or listener a so-called “immersive experience”. In doing so, they implicitly assume and communicate that the experience of being immersed is desirable. Digital museums and virtually enhanced art exhibitions promote immersion in artworks as a direct gateway to their essence or meaning.² The silent assumption seems to be that artworks need technological enhancement to bring them closer to the amateur spectator, who can only then fully understand them. The recent exhibition *Lights on Van Eyck* in Ghent, for example, presented a digital and musical interpretation of *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, with projections on every wall available, including the ceiling, and four large dancing robot-arms, “to discover Van Eyck’s impressive oeuvre in an accessible way” (*Lights on Van Eyck*). As the website states, digital technology was used to accentuate the bright lights and pure colors of Van Eyck’s paintings, so that “the audience will be just as amazed by Van Eyck’s work as the medieval people first were centuries ago” (ibid.). The suggestion here is that spectators today cannot by themselves bridge the historical (or other) gap between themselves and the artwork, at least not in a quick and easy way. Instead of actively engaging with the artwork by patiently analyzing it or educating oneself about the historical context of the work, the religious or other symbolic meanings that would help to understand it, digital animation bridges the gap.

A similar logic seems to underly the success of auditory immersive experiences. For example, the increasingly popular listening bars, with their high-end audio equipment and perfectly arranged surround sound systems, promote immersion as a better way of listening (Beech; Iqbal). The idea is that improving the audio quality and perfecting the listening environment helps to get to the pure core of the music, without the distraction of disturbing noises.

2 E.g., the Belgian museum *Mudia* (Musée Didactique d’Art) and the website *Closer to Van Eyck: Rediscovering the Ghent Altar Piece*. Likewise, exhibitions like *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* and *Klimt: The Immersive Experience* allow visitors to step into the (virtual) paintings of Van Gogh, Klimt, and other famous painters, to experience them “from within”.

This should result in the satisfying aesthetic experience of being completely immersed in the sounds, which explains why the immersive listening experience is also presented as a moment of “hearing wellness”, in which the listener’s comfort and aesthetic pleasure are the ultimate goal, rather than “understanding” the music. Nowadays, the technologically mediated, immersive musical experience is also ubiquitous in everyday life. The widespread use of earphones and earbuds gives listeners the impression of being constantly surrounded by music, wherever they are. Thanks to the clever use of algorithms and artificial intelligence, streaming services like *Spotify*, *Apple Music*, and *Soundcloud* can guarantee their listeners an endless stream of music to linger in, customized to their individual taste in order to avoid unwanted musical surprises. The result is a long stream of music, without beginning or end, in which the different pieces become part of a continuous soundtrack. In these immersive experiences, music becomes the auditory background of the listener’s everyday life and no longer qualifies as a “purely musical experience” (Kivy esp. 27). Rather than drawing attention to its own meaning, it loses its status as “music alone”. Adapted to the listener’s personal taste, mood and desires, and mediated by personal audio devices, it is rather the music that now transforms the listener into a “listener alone”.

As Tia DeNora pointed out, intimate musical practices are part of the modern reflexive project of the self, as music is deeply “implicated in the construction of the self as an aesthetic agent” (46). Certainly, the intimate connection between music and the construction of the self is not new. The emergence of subjectivity in modern philosophy was closely intertwined with the rise, by the end of the eighteenth century, of aesthetics, and in particular with music. These aesthetic theories, according to Bowie, “regard the experience of natural and artistic beauty and the fact of aesthetic production as vital to the understanding of self-consciousness” (*Aesthetics and Subjectivity* 2). The Romantics emphasized that the non-representational, non-conceptual language of music enables us “better to *understand* aspects of ourselves which are not reducible to what can be objectively known” (Ibid. 10, emphasis in original). The close ties between music and the subject were conceptualized within the Romantic paradigm of absolute music, which was, as Bowie writes, a reaction and answer to the crisis of meaning in modernity that followed the decline of theologically legitimated social orders (Ibid. 3–4). The aesthetic experience provided existential depth for the individual subject by creating new, meaningful relations with nature and the surrounding natural and social order. According to the Romantic scheme, the listener immersed in absolute music feels connected to an order that transcends his or her sense of individual self, and this is what makes the musical experience meaningful. In today’s immersive musical

experience, however, this scheme seems reversed. The individually customized and technologically mediated music is draped around the listener, to become part of his or her personal, immanent decorum. As such, the music's meaningfulness does not lie in the fact that it relates the listener to a transcendent order, but rather in the fact that it offers a constant confirmation of one's self-image. To elaborate on Naomi Cumming's famous formulation, the result is not so much a "sonic self", as a "sonic *self*". This shift in emphasis makes the transformation of the listening experience part of the larger cultural shift towards hyper-individualization, which is described by scholars as a matter of "prioritizing the self", rather than just "subjective self-actualization" (Degen et al. 2).³

These observations correspond to the claim of Baricco, who states that today's globalizing, digitalizing Western culture is going through a process of horizontalization. In his essay *The Barbarians* (2006), he distinguishes between horizontal and vertical dynamics as the two basic orientations in creating and understanding meaning. While vertical orientation builds on the belief in foundational depth or transcendence as the source or pinnacle of meaning, horizontal orientation seeks meaning in creating networks and experiencing lateral connectedness through such networks. Therefore, the new, "horizontal" generations are constantly looking for new experiences. By moving around the earth's surface, either digitally or by real travel, they create their own personal networks of meaning that reflect their unique, individual identities. As they are constantly on the move, their view of life is literally "superficial" in the sense that it depends primarily on the impression of the surface of things: how they look, feel, smell, sound, etc.⁴ In doing so, Baricco maintains, they storm all aspects of the old vertical culture to see if and how they can transform it into a transit zone or easy passage, to quickly experience it and then move on to the next experience. The contemporary immersive experience fits this picture

3 Hyper-individualization is a hot topic in many businesses and disciplines, ranging from digital e-commerce and traveling to health care and education. For example, by creating so-called "micro-credentials", hyper-individualized learning systems aim to document personal accomplishments and achievements, to highlight the individual's unique personality on the job market (see Frey). In his blogpost "The Shift from Personalization to Hyper-Individualization", Sarath Kumar Ganesan describes how the use of artificial intelligence "allows organizations to curate and deliver content, product/service offering specific to each individual user".

4 Baricco uses the term "barbarians" in a playful and humorous way. He expressly does not condemn the younger generations, but rather wants to point out how fundamentally different their view of the world is. According to Baricco, the new, "horizontal" generations are like a new species, which makes the old "vertical" people afraid of being overruled by these apparent "barbarians".

perfectly, since it seeks to provide a quick and easy aesthetic experience as part of the construction of the individual's sense of self.

According to Baricco, classical music is part of the vertical meaning paradigm (122–130). This means that both the music itself and its dominant listening strategies rest on the implicit belief that music's meaning does not coincide with its sounds, but is rather something that emerges from it, like a soul or a spiritual content. This corresponds to the tenor of the discussions in the Romantic music-aesthetic paradigm, between proponents and opponents of programmatic and emotional interpretations of music. As Bonds writes, the entire *Musikstreit* can be understood as the defense of music as a medium capable of being purely instrumental, yet meaningful (211–3). This was certainly the case for the aesthetics of program music, which “rested on the same premise of transcendence that had figured so large in the earlier aesthetics of idealism” (213). But it was just as much the case for the defenders of absolute music. Eminent musicians such as Franz Liszt “believed in the ability of all music, absolute or program, to elevate listeners to a higher realm of consciousness” (213). In this way music could “cease to be a simple combination of tones and become a poetic language” (qtd. in Bonds 214: Liszt). Even those who wanted to emancipate music from the burden of extra-musical meaning did not deny the ideal dimension of music. Tellingly, arch-formalist Eduard Hanslick wrote in his influential essay *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854/1986) that “we have not excluded ideal content but, on the contrary, have insisted on it. For we acknowledge no beauty without its full share of ideality” (30). The ideality referred to here makes the Romantic or absolute music paradigm vertical, as it asks the listener to relate to the music as something transcending mere sensory experience, to understand its meaning as an ideal content emerging from the sounds.

3 Two Cases of Horizontalization in Music

What does it mean to state that music, today, is going through a new paradigm shift? How can purely instrumental, classical music, be “horizontalized?” Based on Baricco's thesis, I suggest that the paradigm shift at least implies that the concept of musical meaning is fundamentally changing. Music's ideal content – whether that would be a narrative, an emotion, or a purely formalistic type of aesthetic import – evaporates and gives way to the digitally mediated, hyper-individualized immersive experience. Perhaps it is more accurate, then, to say that “musical meaning” is no longer regarded as a content or as the result of musical understanding, but that it is replaced by the intensity of

the musical experience. To call something meaningful in the horizontal sense, is to say above all that you have enjoyed it or that it touched you in some way. In keeping with Susan Sontag's famous statement, the horizontal approach to music is 'against interpretation' and focuses instead on the immediate impact of the music. In what follows, I focus on two well-known cases in which these horizontal dynamics between music and listener stand out. The first is John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), which can be seen as a significant starting point of the horizontalization movement in Western classical music. The second is the eight-and-a-half-hour composition *Sleep* (2015) by contemporary British composer and musician Max Richter. The evolution between these two examples suggests that the process of horizontalization has radicalized over the years.

3.1 *Cage's Empowerment of the Listener*

In *4'33"*, Cage cleverly exploited the classical concert setting and the accompanying expectations and listening attitude of the audience. The performer of *4'33"* complies with the traditional concert rituals by taking place on the stage and closing and opening the piano's lid before and after each of the three movements of the piece. The performer follows a score – indicating "Tacet" for each movement – and a strict timing. He turns the pages and bows to the audience (Herwitz 792). However, no "music" is played. Hence, these formal elements contribute to the effect of the piece's silence: the audience obeys the classical convention of *silenzio* and cocks their ears. As such, Cage provided a stage for the sounds that are normally filtered out during a concert. Suppressed coughing, shuffling, creaking chairs, distant noises, ... These sounds become acutely audible as the listener's attention searches for something to focus on. By highlighting random sounds in a traditional concert setting, Cage broke down the fundamental distinction between music and sound. It was his expressed desire to let sounds be themselves and no longer use them as vehicles for human emotions or ideas (Cage, "Silence" 10). Indeed, what Cage wanted was to break with the classical concept of the musical work. According to Goehr, "Cage believed that we could not overestimate the deadening impact the traditional work concept had on the listening experience" ("Explosive Experiments" 119). Instead, he wanted to open up the work concept to release the mind and musical production from the inherited dogmas of the absolute music paradigm.

To bring about this fundamental shift, a psychological transformation of the listener was needed, so that he or she would pay attention to the sounds in and of themselves and no longer regard them as a medium for a meaning or message. To this end, Cage embarked on a spiritual path, influenced by Zen Buddhism. With regard to this Eastern influence, Arthur Danto referred to a

well-known saying by Zen master Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin about the path of spiritual enlightenment:

Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got the very substance I am at rest. For it is just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters. (qtd. in Danto 58)

The aphorism shows that it is not the world that transfigures. The change happens in the observer. In the last step of the three-stage transformation the enlightened mind finds that “seeing mountains as mountains” does not involve a tautology. Throughout the process, meaning has been gained (De Munck 311). Similarly, in 4’33”, the listener learns to listen to random sounds in an enlightened way, opening up to what is heard without searching for further meaning. What Cage envisioned was a horizontal model of music, away from the Western, learned music tradition. In his Juilliard Lecture of 1952, he elaborated on the Zen master’s aphorism and stated that “[a]fter studying music men are men and sounds are sounds” (96–7). According to Daniel A. Herwitz, the ambition to perceive sound independently of our projective ears is a direct result of Cage’s skepticism about projective modes of knowing music (789). Indeed, Cage saw it as a problem that, after studying music, sounds are no longer just sounds, because “a composer uses the sounds to express an idea or a feeling or an integration of these” (“Juilliard Lecture” 97). Contrary to the romantic music aesthetic, his music is designed to break through the hierarchical relationship between sounds and meaning, in which the former are instrumentalized to function as signs. Cage wanted his music *not* to refer to anything. The sound experience he wanted to create is purely immanent, just like Zen spirituality. He wanted his listeners to hear the sounds “before one’s thinking has a chance to turn it into something logical, abstract, or symbolical” (Cage, “Juilliard Lecture” 98).

Turning away from the learned aspects of musical understanding was as much a political act as an aesthetic choice for Cage, for his music of organized sounds demanded a new, liberated way of listening: “New music: new listening. Not an attempt to understand something that is being said, for, if something were being said, the sounds would be given the shapes of words. Just an attention to the activity of sounds” (*Silence* 10).

The hierarchical relation between composer and listener was another vertical barrier to be broken down. The empowerment of the listener consisted in

no longer dictating what to hear or what to listen to. As Branden W. Joseph writes, Cage's "disarticulation of transcendent structure was understood as a subversion of power" (62). By emancipating the listener, Cage wanted to democratize the musical experience itself.

3.2 *Sleep*

Cage's "aesthetic of immanence" (Joseph 60) gave an important impulse to minimalism in music. As Kyle Gann writes, "indirectly 4'33" led to the developments from which grew the simpler and more accessible new style of minimalism" (*No Such Thing As Silence* 21).⁵ Even some of Cage's earlier works, such as *In a Landscape* (1948), already anticipated the avant-garde minimalism of the 1960s.⁶ This piece, written for solo piano or harp, shows the strong influence of Eric Satie, in particular his *musique d'ameublement*.⁷ The music embodies a state of stasis in which there is no musical development nor any clear directional intention in the musical syntax. Its delicate fabric of small melodious cells still allows for a thin layer of idealized content, as the listener is spurred on by the title to imagine a landscape. (One could easily imagine a frozen landscape by the painter Hokusai, including mountains and waters.) However, the music invites the listener to enter the landscape – indeed, to immerse oneself in it – rather than to imagine something happening in it. In this sense, *In a Landscape* is even more radically "horizontal" than 4'33" and more in line with Satie's *musique d'ameublement* (1917), which, according to Gann, might be seen as "the flip side of 4'33" – instead of playing nothing and asking people to listen to environmental sounds, Satie played music *as* environmental sound, and begged people – in vain – not to listen to it" (*No Such Thing As Silence* 76). This radically changes the perspective of the listener, who is now hearing and experiencing the music "from within", reminiscent of the third stage of the Zen enlightenment process, where the individual no longer observes from a distance.

5 However, Alex Ross remarks about Cage's pioneering role with regard to minimalism that "he showed little sympathy for that movement when it came along" ("Searching for Silence").

6 According to musicologist Alex Burns, "[i]t's been said that *In A Landscape* is one of the purest forms of minimalist music due to its single divine theme and stillness". Kyle Gann even refers to *In A Landscape* as a "protopostminimalist" work. For Gann, the term "postminimalism" refers to the repertoire of music in the 1980s and 1990s that was "on the most obvious level, a collective response to the somewhat earlier style known as minimalism" and which was "conventionally classical in format but with harmonies, processes and textures inspired by the more unconventional minimalist works that had emerged from the Manhattan and San Francisco avant-gardes" ("A Technically Definable Stream of Postminimalism" 39; 40).

7 In 1948, the year in which he composed *In a Landscape*, Cage organized a Satie Festival at Black Mountain College, where he also presented his lecture "Defense of Satie" (Nyman 1227).

With its focus on immersion in the sounds rather than on musical syntax or harmonic development, today's composers of post-classical music – also known as post-minimalism – continue this evolution of horizontalization. This relatively new genre includes the tranquil music of composers such as Max Richter, Ólafur Arnalds, Eydís Evensen, Poppy Ackroyd, Jóhann Jóhannsson, Nils Frahm, Ludovico Einaudi, Hauschka, and many others. They work with the repetitive principles of minimalism and manufacture sober, drawn-out sound chains, often performed on acoustic piano and other classical instruments, but mostly digitally enhanced or supplemented by electronics.⁸ In the program notes of a classical music festival dedicated to post-classical music, the music was referred to as a “sonic experience” (Steins). The latter term puts the emphasis on the experience of the listener, rather than on the music itself. Indeed, in most discourses on post-classical music, the emphasis shifts from the object-pole (the musical work) to the subject-pole (the experience). Compared to “classical music”, post-classical music creates different expectations. Rather than presenting a musical development as embodying or pointing to expressive or narrative content, it promises the satisfying experience of being comfortably surrounded by the ambient sounds. This music is not an autonomous “Other” to which the listener has to relate, but precisely ensures that the listener does *not* experience otherness.

This shift is consistent with Baricco's thesis that the accessibility of cultural products is a central concern for today's fast-moving generations.⁹ From this same concern, many pieces of classical music are “recomposed” and turned into post-classical music. Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, for example, were recomposed by Max Richter (2012), and Chopin's piano works were ‘reinvented’ by Ólafur Arnalds and Alice Sara Ott in *The Chopin Project* (2015). The procedure of recomposing consists mostly in the cutting up of the musical syntax, after which the isolated musical cells or themes are re-edited in loops and supplemented with electronic ambient sounds. The result is repetitive music with

8 The term “post-classical” here refers to a later development than the “postminimalist” repertoire referred to by Gann (see also footnote 6 above). Community website and online database *last.fm* defines the contemporary movement of post-classical music as “(m)odern classical music with heavy post-rock, ambient or drone music influences. As these genres are heavily influenced by minimalism in classical music, this could be said to have come full circle” (“Post-Classical Music”).

9 About his 2007 debut album *Eulogy for Evolution*, Ólafur Arnalds said: “I wanted to make music that was more or less classical music, but that would also reach a young audience. Many peers had no ears or interest in classical music. But there is so much great classical music that I wanted to let its influences be heard in my own compositions, but in a more contemporary and accessible way. I don't want to compose music that nobody understands” (qtd. in Steins).

recognizable melodic elements, with special attention to sound and atmosphere, but usually without further elaboration of the musical material. This alters the attention span of the listener, who does not need to follow the music attentively but rather savor the musical sounds. The repetitive nature of the music allows for a distracted mode of attention, not unlike what Walter Benjamin called *Zerstreuung*, as he described the mode of scattered attention triggered by the new visual media of his time (Duttlinger). Just like the digital enhancement of Van Eyck's paintings, the purpose of recomposing classical works is to make them more accessible for contemporary audiences by turning them from a musical work into a sound experience. The implicit assumption is that narrative or other "learned" interpretation strategies are only needed because classical music is too complex to be enjoyed in and off itself. Conversely, the immanent listening mode requires neither listening training nor specialized expertise or prior knowledge.

As such, post-classical music seems to offer a solution to the alleged crisis of classical music, which, on the composer's side, seems to have reached a creative impasse of ever obscurer experiments, and on the listener's side, attracts an ever smaller, privileged audience.¹⁰ Also from a commercial viewpoint, post-classical music has been hailed as the savior of the classical music tradition, as it boosted the sales figures of record labels such as *Deutsche Grammophon* and attracts young audiences to the major concert halls. Max Richter confirms that the crisis of classical music was a trigger for the major artistic turnaround in his work and career:

I come from a high-modernist classical music training, where maximum complexity, extreme dissonance, asymmetry and impenetrability were badges of honour. If you wrote a single tonal chord – even by accident – people would mock you, and concerts were more like the issuing of manifestos. I wrote a lot in that tradition, but came to feel that, for all its technical sophistication, this language was basically inert. It reached almost nobody beyond the new music cliques. I didn't want to talk to just those people. I deliberately set out to be as plainspoken as possible. (qtd. in Wallace)

An interesting example is Richter's wordless composition *Sleep*. According to *Deutsche Grammophon*, this album is the "most streamed classical record of all time" (Ross, "Doleful Minimalism"). The work lasts eight hours and is composed with the explicit intention of the listeners sleeping during its performance.

¹⁰ With regard to the classical orchestra repertoire, the feeling of crisis has been eloquently expressed by Leon Botstein, who stated that "[t]here is a nagging sensibility that we are living well beyond that authentic age of the orchestra and its repertoire" (189).

To that end, Richter teamed up with a neuroscientist, who helped him mimic the brain waves of sleep to maximize the relaxing effect during the different stages of sleep. Even though the music contains melodies and chord progressions, its slow development is not meant to be followed closely by the listener. As critic Anwen Crawford stated in *The New Yorker*, “the composition is repetitious enough to allow you to drift in and out without worrying that you’ve missed crucial developments”. Indeed, this music is meant to be heard but not listened to. Interestingly, Crawford contrasts the live experience of *Sleep* with the effect of Latin plainsong, which she also finds useful to fall asleep to. However, she immediately adds her doubt about this comparison, wondering whether it is right to use sacred music as a sleep aid, “when it is designed to bring listeners (and performers) to a state of spiritual clarity, not oblivious slumber” (Crawford). The hesitation is telling. Using sacred music as a sleep aid would indeed amount to denying its *raison d’être*, which is directing the listener to a transcendent, holy dimension. Richter’s music, however, is even better understood – or rather, better experienced – in horizontal mode, i.e., while sleeping. For Richter, “*Sleep* is an attempt to see how that space when your conscious mind is on holiday can be a place for music to live” (qtd. in Strauss). Just like with Satie’s *Musique d’ameublement*, the purpose of this music is *not* to pay attention to it. Ultimately, the music must become inaudible for the conscious mind.

At the same time, Richter also thinks of *Sleep* as a political piece. “It’s protest music against this sort of very super industrialized, intense, mechanized way of living right now. It’s a political work in that sense. It’s a call to arms to stop what we’re doing” (qtd. in Laban). Here is another interesting parallel with Cage, but also an important shift – perhaps even a contradiction. With *4’33”* and *Sleep*, both Cage and Richter respectively wanted to provide a space of stillness to empower the listener. Both promote a horizontal listening model, favoring a meditative mood over an interpretive, hermeneutical approach. However, while *4’33”* adhered to a model of spiritual enlightenment that heightens the listener’s concentration, Richter rather aims to diminish that concentration and to withdraw from the world. In doing so, he radicalizes the horizontalization process up to a point of total leveling, implying a passive listening mode. There is no need for transfiguration of the listener. Instead, the music is expected (and indeed designed) to conform to his or her personal needs. The fact that Richter relied on the input of neuroscience to adapt the music to the different stages of sleep is a perfect illustration of that reversal. The focal point of the post-classical musical experience is no longer the musical work, but the listener.

4 What to Do With Narrative Meaning Concepts?

Can narrative concepts of musical meaning still play a role in classical music today? On the one hand, it seems that the mode of distracted attention, which Benjamin attributed to the increase in industrial stimuli, has found its final completion in a perfectly adapted music genre. Post-classical music not only accommodates the need for easy and fast impulses, it even aims to compensate for the overdose of technological and other stimuli that listeners are exposed to today. On the other hand, in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936/2008), Benjamin also pointed out that the scattered form of attention is not limited to mechanically reproduced works only, since the viewer's gaze was fundamentally changed by the new technologies. Indeed, as he saw it, the aura loss that he linked to the new mass media of photography and film led to a more general change in the perception of all artworks, including the older, "auratic" works that were not mechanically reproduced. Given the rapid digitalization and individualization of the musical experience today, it seems reasonable to suspect a similar effect on the classical listening attitude and the Romantic concepts on which it is based. Moreover, Benjamin considered the stance of distraction as a tool of political emancipation, opposed to religiously inspired forms of contemplation which he found historically obsolete and politically regressive (Duttlinger 41). As we have seen, both Cage and Richter expressed similar views on the need to emancipate the listener and to free him or her from the dominant, "vertical" forms of attention where listeners are expected to actively reach out to the musical or other ideal content of the sounds. In this sense, post-classical music is not just a new movement *within* the classical music tradition, it also aspires to alter that tradition by making it more accessible and removing the barriers for the listener. In doing so, it creates the expectation of accessibility and no longer prompts the listener to develop active listening strategies to interpret the music. The effect of that might translate to the entire classical canon.

All this puts the conceptual edifice of the absolute music paradigm under pressure, including the concepts of meaning on which it rests, since they all presume the active involvement and imagination of the listener. As heirs to the Kantian aesthetics, they presume an "*as if*-mode" on the part of the listener, and a form of "disinterested" contemplation in which the aesthetic pleasure is derived solely from the perceived purposiveness of the object of contemplation. The persona theory, for example, which has been defended by a large number of scholars, claims that "when we hear an emotion in music, we necessarily imagine or have a sense of a person to whom that emotion belongs" (Cochrane 264). Likewise, the many theories that rely on narrative analysis,

ranging from plot archetypes to narrative archetypes, all imply that “the listener perceives and tracks a culturally significant transvaluation of hierarchical relationships within a temporal span” (Almén 12). Recognizing culturally significant plots and archetypes is part of the listener’s job and requires active involvement of the imagination. In fact, all these theories of musical meaning rely on the mechanism that has been described as “hearing-as” (Arbo) or as “hearing-in” (Levinson esp. 109–12). Even Roger Scruton and those theorists who tend towards musical formalism, such as Kivy or Stephen Davies, lean on this mechanism, by assuming that the relationship between musical sounds and their expressivity has a metaphorical character. Central to these views is the conviction that, when listening to music, we do not hear mere sounds. We hear the music *in* the sounds (Boghossian 50). As Scruton writes, “understanding music involves the active creation of an intentional world, in which inert sounds are transfigured into movements, harmonies, rhythms – metaphorical gestures in a metaphorical space. And into these metaphorical gestures a metaphorical soul is breathed by the sympathetic listener” (100). Even with regard to sound art, most theorists assume a “twofoldness” of the experience, which implies that it is “both literal and metaphorical, non-acousmatic and acousmatic” (Hamilton 58).

However varied the explanations for the significance or expressiveness of absolute music may be, they all assume a certain ideal dimension – Hanslick’s *geistiges Gehalt* – as a crucial part of the musical experience. If not, one has to confront the question with which Hanslick had already struggled: how can the music rise above the level of a merely pleasing play with tones, lacking deeper significance (Bonds 292)? The answer suggested by most theories is that music is “animated” by the composer, the performer and the listener, and this is exactly the anthropocentric approach that Cage wanted to oppose. By creating an experience of the sounds “from within”, he removed the required aesthetic distance for projection by the listener. The result is a purely acoustic experience of sounds, rather than the presumed twofold experience. Post-classical music, with its promise of satisfying immersivity, further undermines the aesthetic distance. Even more than Cage’s experimental music, it takes away the music’s transcendent dimension, as it functions within a technologically mediated musical practice that is customized to the listener’s individual taste and needs. The autonomy of the musical work, as a purposeful entity in itself, no longer plays a role here, as the focus of the musical experience shifts completely to the well-being of the listener. We should ask ourselves, then, whether or to what extent all those theories of musical meaning that rely on Kantian aesthetics are still relevant within the new, horizontal music paradigm. It seems that we are in need of new concepts that can account for the meaningfulness of the

post-classical sound experience. For, even if post-classical music can remedy the crisis of classical music, it is very likely that the younger generations will listen to it with different, horizontal ears.

One last question remains: is this progress or a loss? Or, to state it differently, is the loss of the vertical dimension in music, like the loss of aura, a good or a bad thing? And by extension: should our concepts only reflect actual practice or should they also resist evolutions within that practice? If the conceptual framework of a musical paradigm weighs so heavily on the way we hear and understand music, then perhaps we should also reflect on how to nurture that paradigm and keep it alive. The question is of course whether such a thing is, if possible at all, desirable. Intertwined with the contemporary pursuit of greater inclusiveness, the horizontal paradigm is more in line with the *zeitgeist*. The challenge will be to propagate the classical music canon and its vertical listening strategies, including narrative approaches to music, in a non-elitist way, so that it can attract a more diverse audience. There is undoubtedly an aesthetic empowerment of the listener in that as well.

References

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. 1970. Translated and edited by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, 1997.
- Almén, Byron. "Narrative Archetypes: A Critique, Theory, and Method of Narrative Analysis." *Journal of Music Theory*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2003, pp. 1–39.
- Arbo, Alessandro. "Some Remarks on 'Hearing-as' and its Role in the Aesthetics of Music." *Topoi*, no. 28, 2009, pp. 97–107, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-009-9053-8>.
- Baricco, Alessandro. *De barbaren*. Translated by Manon Smits, De Bezige Bij, 2017.
- Beech, Imogen. "Shut Up and Listen: The Rise of Listening Bars." *Mumbli Hearing Wellness Platform*, 9 Sept. 2022, <https://www.mumbli.com/news/shut-up-and-listen-the-rise-of-listening-bars>.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. 1936. Translated by J. A. Underwood, Penguin Books, 2008.
- Beghin, Tom. *Beethoven's French Pian: A Tale of Ambition and Frustration*. University Of Chicago Press, 2022.
- Boghossian, Paul A. "On Hearing the Music in the Sound: Scruton on Musical Expression." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2002, pp. 49–55.
- Bonds, Mark Evan. *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Botstein, Leon. "The Future of the Orchestra." *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 80, 1996, pp. 189–193.

- Bowie, Andrew. *Philosophical Variations: Music as 'Philosophical Language'*. NSU Press, 2010.
- . *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*. Manchester University Press, 2003.
- Burns, Alex. "John Cage 'In A Landscape': A Reflective Journey." *Classicalexburns*, 12 Jan. 2022, <https://classicalexburns.com/2022/01/12/john-cage-in-a-landscape-a-reflective-journey/>.
- Cage, John. "Juilliard Lecture." *A Year from Monday. New Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, Wesleyan University Press, 1967, pp. 95–112.
- . *Silence*. Wesleyan University Press, 1973.
- Closer to Van Eyck: Rediscovering the Ghent Altarpiece*, closertovaneyck.be.
- Cochrane, Tom. "Using the Persona to Express Complex Emotions in Music." *Music Analysis*, vol. 29, no. 1/3, 2010, pp. 264–275.
- Crawford, Anwen. "Music to Sleep by." *The New Yorker*, 12 Oct. 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/music-to-sleep-by>.
- Cumming, Naomi. *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification*. Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Dahlhaus, Carl. *The Idea of Absolute Music*. University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Danto, Arthur. "Upper West Side Buddhism." *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, edited by Jacquelynn Baas, and Marie Jane Jacob, University of California Press, 2004, pp. 49–59.
- Davies, Stephen. *Musical Meaning and Expression*. Cornell University Press, 1994.
- Degen, Johanna, Kleeberg-Niepage, Andrea, and Bal, P. Matthijs. "Lost in Context? Critical Perspectives on Individualization." *Human Arenas: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Psychology, Culture, and Meaning*, 15 June 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-022-00295-6>.
- De Munck, Marlies. "Random Noise, Radical Silence." *A Companion to Arthur C. Danto*, edited by Jonathan Gilmore, and Lydia Goehr, Wiley Blackwell, 2022, pp. 309–316.
- DeNora, Tia. *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Duttlinger, Carolin. "Between Contemplation and Distraction: Configurations of Attention in Walter Benjamin." *German Studies Review*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007, pp. 33–54.
- Frey, Thomas. "Hyper-Individualized Learning for a Hyper-Individualized Future." *FuturistSpeaker*, 13 Oct. 2022, <https://futuristspeaker.com/future-of-education/hyper-individualized-learning-for-a-hyper-individualized-future/>.
- Ganesan, Sarath Kumar. "The Shift from Personalization to Hyper-Individualization." *Wipro*, Nov. 2019, <https://www.wipro.com/blogs/sarath-kumar-ganesan/the-shift-from-personalization-to-hyper-individualization/>.
- Gann, Kyle. *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"*. Yale University Press, 2010.

- . "A Technically Definable Stream of Postminimalism, Its Characteristics and Its Meaning." *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music*, 2013, edited by Keith Potter, Kyle Gann, and Pwyll ap Siôn, Routledge, 2016, pp. 39–60.
- Goehr, Lydia. *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Work: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*. Oxford University Press, 1992.
- . "Explosive Experiments and the Fragility of the Experimental." *Elective Affinities: Musical Essays on the History of Aesthetic Theory*, Columbia University Press, 2008, pp. 108–135.
- Hamilton, Andy. *Aesthetics and Music*. Continuum, 2007.
- Hanslick, Eduard. *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*. 1854. Translated by Geoffrey Payzant, Hackett Publishing Company, 1986.
- Herwitz, Daniel A. "The Security of the Obvious: On John Cage's Musical Radicalism." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1988, pp. 784–804.
- Iqbal, Nosheen. "Shush ... and Enjoy the Music: How Listening Bars Have Hit the Right Note." *The Guardian*, 8 Dec. 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/dec/08/music-listening-bars-albums-high-quality>.
- Johnson, James H. *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History*. University of California Press, 1995.
- Joseph, Branden W. "The Tower and the Line: Toward a Genealogy of Minimalism." *Grey Room*, no. 27, 2007, pp. 58–81.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. 1790. Translated by J.H. Bernard, Dover Publications, 2005.
- Levinson, Jerrold. *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical essays*. Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Kivy, Peter. *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience*. Cornell University Press, 1991.
- Laban, Linda. "Exploring the Science of Sleep with Max Richter." *SXSW*, 2018, <https://www.sxsw.com/world/2018/exploring-science-sleep-max-richter/>.
- Lights on Van Eyck*, lightsonvaneyck.be.
- Mudia: Musée didactique d'art*, mudia.be.
- Nyman, Michael. "Cage and Satie." *The Musical Times*, vol. 114, no. 1570, 1973, pp. 1227–1229.
- Paddison, Max. *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*. Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- "Post-Classical Music." *Last.fm*, 3 Mar. 2013, www.last.fm/tag/post-classical/wiki.
- Ross, Alex. "Searching for Silence: John Cage's Art of Noise." *The New Yorker*, 27 Sept. 2010, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/searching-for-silence>.
- . "The Doleful Minimalism of Max Richter." *The New Yorker*, 17 Apr. 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/04/17/max-richter-music-review>.

- Steins, Robin. Program Notes. "De terugkeer van de welluidende muziek." *POST. CLASSICALMUSICINPRIMETIME*, AMUZ (Antwerp), 14–18 Feb. 2018.
- Scruton, Roger. *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture*. Methuen, 1983.
- Strauss, Matthew. "Max Richter Performs Sleep Live for Eight Hours, Sets Guinness World Record on BBC Radio 3." *Pitchfork*, 27 Sept. 2015, <https://pitchfork.com/news/61389-max-richter-performs-sleep-live-for-eight-hours-sets-guinness-world-record-on-bbc-radio-3/>.
- Wallace, Wyndham. "Liner notes of Richter, Max, composer." *The Blue Notebooks*, Deutsche Grammophon, 2018.